

Parashat Beshalah

Reflections on this Past Year in Israel

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Princeton, NJ on February 3, 2025.***

Exactly one year ago this week, my colleagues and I at Machon Schechter were invited to Kfar Azza by our student Anati Elkabetz. Anati assembled an exhibit on the life of her daughter Sivan ז"ל. Until that moment, I had resisted what I had dubbed 'October 7th voyeurism.' It was enough that missions from North America were arriving each week. But now, the invitation was personal & meaningful. Anati and her husband Shimon lost their daughter Sivan and her boyfriend, Naor Hasidim. Sivan and Naor lived in the young adult section of Kfar Azza which is on the periphery of the community – a short walk from the border with Gaza. On October 7th, Kfar Azza was one of the hardest hit communities – 70 Hamas terrorists attacked from four directions killing over 100 residents – mostly young adults. As Anati and Shimon took refuge in their shelter, their daughter Sivan sent messages of concern about her parents' safety as she and her partner were desperately trying to protect themselves from the onslaught. On that day, a year ago in February, I will never forget that morning of our visit – just five minutes after we arrived, piercing air raid sirens went off as we ourselves fled to the nearest shelter; I will never forget the devastation we saw around us – a banner in front of each cramped kibbutz home displaying the name and picture of the young adult murdered in each unit; and then of course the profound feeling that resonated deeply for me – I kept imagining to myself, my God, this is what Chaim Nahman Bialik must have felt like when he visited Kishinev after the pogrom of 1903 and authored his epic poem, "City of Slaughter":

קוּם לךְ לךְ אֶל עִיר הַהֲרָגָה וּבֵאתְ אֶל-הַחֲצֵרוֹת,

וּבְעֵינֶיךָ תִּרְאֶה וּבְיָדְךָ תִּמְשֹׁשׁ עַל-הַגְּדֵרוֹת

*Arise and walk through the city of slaughter and come into its yards,
And with your eyes, you will see & with your hand, you will touch . . .*

On that day, I bore witness – and in those moments understood as only one could – standing there in that devastated place – precisely what we, living there in the State of Israel, were fighting for and living through.

If ever there is a *parashah* that reflects the emotions of an Israeli from these past sixteen months, it is *Parshat Beshalah*. The *parashah* masterfully weaves together a rich tapestry of emotion as a nation is born: joy at impending freedom; second thoughts as we face a barren and brutal landscape; uncertainty as we are about to cross the Reed Sea; triumph as our Egyptian pursuers meet defeat; unbridled joy as we dance with Miriam; and lest there be rest for weary, we are confronted by the fear of a murderous onslaught of Amalek. God knows well what is in store for this nation. And so God takes precautions: leading them on a circuitous route to avoid those who will seek to do them harm. We are told:

וַיִּסָּב אֱלֹהִים | אֶת-הָעָם דְּרֹךְ הַמִּדְבָּר יַם-סוּף

So God led the people round about, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds.

Despite the Divine update of the route on WAZE given the hazards we are about to face, the danger cannot be avoided. God knows this well and perhaps that is the reason that we are told at the end of verse 18:

וַחֲמֹשִׁים עָלוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

The Israelites went up armed.

Ramban comments: Even though God led them roundabout, they were still fearful of running into Phillistines who lived in nearby cities. So they went prepared for war. Some say it means that they left Egypt defiantly relating to themselves as redeemed rather than as fleeing slaves."

וַטַּעַם וַחֲמֹשִׁים עָלוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לומר כי אע"פ שֶהִסֵּב ה' אותם דְרָרָה מְדַבֵּר הוּא יֵרָאִים פֶּן יָבֹאוּ עֲלֵיהֶם פְּלִשְׁתִּים וְיִנְשְׁבוּ הָעָרִים הַקְּרוֹבוֹת לָהֶם, וְהָיוּ חֲלוּצִים כְּמוֹ הַיִּצְאִים לְמִלְחָמָה. וְיֵשׁ אוֹמְרִים (ראב"ע) שֶשֶׁפָּר הַכְּתוּב שֶיִּצְאוּ בְיַד רָמָה וְחָשְׁבוּ לְהִיּוֹת גְּאוּלִּים, וְלֹא הִלְכוּ בְכַדְמוּת עֲבָדִים בְּאֶרֶץ חֵיטִים:

The danger is unavoidable – and so rather than facing it as fleeing slaves, we will face it as a proud, redeemed nation.

For the past 486 days, we Israelis have been fighting an existential war. Far from being some distant conflict playing out in the media this has been our lives – day in and day out. Simply turning on the radio in the morning and hearing Aryeh Golan utter those haunting words at the start of each day, *'hutar l'firsum'* 'it is permitted to announce' followed by the names of those soldiers killed on the previous day. My daughters, Rachel 19 and Shira 17 have been to far too many funerals of friends. This past April, Rachel drafted into *Khir Gevulot* – a combat unit of the IDF – and was trained as a sharpshooter. She is now ensuring the safety of 150 humanitarian trucks daily as they head into Gaza. My heart dropped just about six weeks ago when she shared that her unit was being called into Gaza. At the last moment, it was cancelled – but just the thought of my child serving in Gaza made my heart skip a beat. And indeed for dear family and friends this has been their reality – my nephew Idan Schneider, a sergeant in the elite paratroopers unit, has been in and out of Gaza with great frequency; a dear friend's son serves in an elite unit that sought traces of our hostages.

And as I wrestled with what I wanted to share, I had the gift of sitting with my Wexner classmate, Jenny Bayer-Gamulka – Jenny shared a moving, touching and heart-rending story that took place this past Yom Kippur. Jenny and Dani's son, Avi was serving as *shaliah tzibur Kol Nidre* evening. Their son Noam (who had already served in Gaza), instead of preparing spiritually for the holiest day of the year, needed to prepare physically and mentally as he was called up to serve in Lebanon. That evening, Noam came at the beginning of services to say a tearful goodbye to his family – and his south Jerusalem community of *Yedidya* stood as witness. As Avi stood at the *amud*, he turned to hug his brother. Noam was about to embrace the greatest uncertainty of his life and so too his family – defending the Jewish people, citizens of the State of Israel; and as Jenny shared with me – always that concern hovering over that moment of parting – would this, God forbid, be a final goodbye? Thankfully, Noam served his people proudly & yes, returned to the safety of his family. And yet, there are those – many – who have not returned and will not return . . . our dear colleague Eliot Goldstein, as many of you know, coordinated efforts to advocate for the release of his family, Hersh Goldberg-Polin z"l. Eliot and Rebecca invested every ounce of heart and soul in the Herculean effort to bring Hersh Home. Eliot wrote, "For me, and it may be as hard for you to hear as it is for me to say, the story of Zionism for the past 76 years is full of heroic tragedy . . . our

family is now part of this narrative. This has become my story. My children's world is shaped by it. My ideology is challenged by it. My heart and mind are still out of alignment. And yet, there is some powerful learning from our tragic loss. . . Our hearts are badly broken but our spirit is not. We will fight and advocate and protest and teach for what is right. We will fight for the remaining hostages. [Eliot wrote me yesterday and asked that I remind you, "We have 79 left to bring home. Thanks for raising our voice . . . it matters that the Wexner community is waving the flag."] We will fight for Israel to do what is right. We will fight for the Torah's values and *Pidyon Shvuim* to be pursued. We will lead with the Torah of Love. Many of us feel Hersh's death can serve as a catalyst for a Revolution. May it be a revolution of compassion. A revolution for good. A revolution for responsibility." And my daughter Rachel's friend Shahar Fridman z"l who fell in battle – left an ethical will: "Know that the greatest quality a person can have is the ability to make another person happy. Open your ears to the needs of others and open your eyes to their pain. Try to smile as much as possible even when it's hard. Pay attention to the small people who fall in the corners of the eye." And of course, juxtaposed to the seemingly endless pain is the triumph of return – the return of our hostages. Just in the past couple of weeks, we have been privileged to rejoice in the return of Emily, Doron, Romi and Liri, Naama, Daniella, and Karina; Agam, Gadi and Arbel; Yarden, Keith and Ofer . . .

As the Israelites battle Amalek at the close of the *parashah*, there is a notable moment when Moses' hands grow heavy – and Aaron and Hur save the day as they come to his aid.

ואֵהָרֹן וְחֹרֶן תָּמְכוּ בְיָדָיו מִזֶּה אֶחָד וּמִזֶּה אֶחָד וַיְהִי יָדָיו אֲמוּנָה עַד-בָּא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ:

Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set.

I want to express my deepest appreciation to many of you who have been the Aaron and Hur of the State of Israel. We have felt the love and support in innumerable ways. And you are doing this quite literally, until '*bo ha-shemesh*' – until the coming of the sun. And for those who have been less supportive, I ask you to think again. The founding of the State of Israel was a full throated rejection of passivity and quietism. Given the utter failure of emancipation and Enlightenment, it was a recognition that the Jewish people needed a state of their own and an army of their own. *Va'chamushim alu Bnai Yisrael*. The Israelites went up armed.

Our teacher, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg sensitively reminds us, "The creation of the state was a deeply human act, flawed in a thousand ways: by deaths of the innocent in battle; by military miscalculations that led Jews to blow up a ship full of blockade-running Jews, drowning hundreds accidentally; by sending untrained survivors fresh off the boat into battle where they were mowed down by the hundreds; by the creation of hundreds of thousands of Arab refugees; by the expulsion of Jews from Arab lands. Such flaws are inescapable wherever humans operate. To take on responsibility is to take on the guilt of redemption . . ." (Yitz Greenberg, 380, *The Jewish Way*)

My choice – and the choice of fellow Israelis is embracing this imperfect *geulah* – ensuring the survival of our people, being lovingly critical when we fall short, recognizing the dangers we face, and being prepared.

I conclude where I began – with the precious soul lost on October 7th – Sivan Alkabetz z"l. Her dear father, Shimon, a talented musician wrote a song wrestling with his personal mourning. The piece is entitled *L'olam lo Od* . . .

הכי מפחיד זה הגעגוע
איך לא היית איתה
היא רק רצתה שתגיד הכל יהיה בסדר

לעולם לא עוד אמרו לנו הורינו
לעולם לא עוד הבטיחו מנהיגינו
לעולם לא עוד אמרנו לילדינו
רק העולם כבר לא עוד עבורנו

נשארנו לבדנו

*Most frightening is the longing . . .
How you were not with her at the moment of terror –
She only wanted you to say that 'everything will be OK.'*

*Never again – our parents would say to us.
Never again – our leaders promised us.
Never again – we declared to our children.*

*Only the world is no longer for us . . . We are left alone.
Most frightening is the longing – the longing . . .*

May we all know better days ahead as a people, may we continue to support each other's arms, and may every single last hostage return Home to Israel.