

**Between Choice and Chance:
Shaping History or Being Shaped By It
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Last night we hosted here in the Sanctuary one of the leading Biblical scholars in the world, a man who himself recently moved to Jerusalem. It was a remarkable evening, as James Kugel addressed the age-old question of “why are the holidays early this year?” and proved to some consternation that even things we think of as central features of Judaism – such as Rosh Hashanah as a new year and time of judgement – are probably post-Biblical innovations.

As Pesach approaches, with its famous Four Questions, Kugel is known, amongst other things, for outlining Four Assumptions we make, that take an ancient anthology of texts and turn them into what we know of now as the Bible. One of his “assumptions” is that the words written so long ago were meant to apply for all time. We don’t actually know if this was true, in terms of original intent. In some cases, clearly it was not. But what makes a scroll into Scripture is the idea that its message resonates even now. It is the assumption of ongoing meaningful-ness that lifts these words into the realm of the sacred and the spiritual.

This night, in the midst of so many newspaper columns and talk-show hosts focusing on events in Israel, centering on the status of an ancient and still growing city, I will turn to two of my favorite Hasidic

masters in the art of the psycho-spiritual reading of the Torah. That approach is one which asserts that the words in the weekly portions before us are not about “them,” and “then,” but about “us,” and “now,” that what makes the Torah holy is the tale it tells not of history, but of our story, of what goes on in our lives...and our souls.

We begin at the beginning of Leviticus, the first word, in fact, as we look not at content but context: the scribal tradition – the *Masora* -- of writing a single letter in a slightly smaller way. The opening word of Leviticus – the one which gives the work its Hebrew name – is *Vayikra*. The word means “And He called,” meaning, presumably, that God called to Moses. And, according to a Masoretic mandate passed down through the ages, the final letter of the word *vayikra*, the *aleph* at the end, is written in a smaller size than the other letters.

We are never given the reasons for these occasional scribal variations. We just inherit the tradition, and are left to wonder, and to come up with reasons of our own.

Here, then, enters the first of the two Chasidic commentaries I will turn to tonight. Rabbi Simcha Bunem of Przysucha writes that “even though Moses attained the highest level, he never became impressed with himself because of it. He regarded himself with a humble spirit. Like a person who stands on top of a high mountain, to whom it does not occur to magnify himself because of his high position... Moses knew that his exaltation was an account of God... Even though God summoned him

and brought him up to the heights, despite all this he remained modest and humble – a small *aleph*.”

What a lesson to take, from a simple change in the font!

Inspired by Simcha Bunem, I have my own take on the tiny *aleph*. It is this: that here we have, in the diminution of the *aleph*, a reminder of how thin is the difference between two words: *vayikra* and *vayikar*. *Vayikra* means “to be called,” intentionally, directionally, for a purpose. Stretching the Hebrew a bit, *vayikar* would have meant “it occurred, it took place, it happened.”

Here, then, we discover, through the smallest change in a silent letter, the marginal difference between purpose and accident, between meaning and randomness, between choice and chance.

A world away and in different words, Robert Kaplan, in the most recent issue of the *Atlantic*, makes much of a very similar distinction. Kaplan refers to Sir Isaiah Berlin’s 1953 lecture on “Historical Inevitability,” in which Berlin “condemns as immoral and cowardly the belief that vast impersonal forces such as geography, environment and ethnic characteristics determine the direction of world politics.” Berlin – and Kaplan – argue against the view that “nations” and “civilizations” are more concrete than the individuals who embody them, or that “tradition” and “history” are “wiser than we.” Kaplan goes on to contrast a defeatist kind of determinism against an idealism based on individual moral responsibility. In our hands, Kaplan argues, is the power to shape

history, to shake off the past, to take charge and change course and, I suppose, take hold of our own destiny.

Kaplan uses this approach to analyze United States military policy in the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, in ways which I find both interesting and not entirely convincing. The basic distinction, though, between action and reaction, responsibility and inevitability, between *vayikra* and *vayikar* I find of great use, especially as I look at the week that was in Washington, and Jerusalem. Two capital cities, if you will, the capital that is our American home, and the capital of our Jewish heart.

I speak, now, not just of the superficial but still serious question regarding the timing of the announcement of new housing construction in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood in East Jerusalem: was this a deliberate message, or a badly-managed mistake? Was the timing choice or chance? Was it on purpose, or did it just happen?

No, while I want to know the answer to that, still, there is, I think, a deeper issue here. It is the larger question of how to balance the forces of history and ethnicity that propel us towards suspicion and confrontation, with the possibility to act, to choose, to decide to bring about a different kind of future.

Before leaving the world of realpolitik, before ascending to the heights of idealism and abstraction, though, I do have a few comments on the diplomatic contretemps itself. These comments may be somewhat

more political than spiritual, but I believe the message – and the perspective – is important.

Remember, of course, that we have the power... we choose how to frame these issues. Few people would argue that the timing of the announcement was not very bad, that Israel's actions last week were unproductive, unwise and embarrassing to the United States. And I am *not* among those American Jews who think that every American criticism of the Israeli government means either hidden antisemitism or the end of the world as we know it.

But. As uneasy with the current Israeli government as I am, even understanding and partially sharing our own government's sense of frustration and anger about delays and diversions as I do, still there seems something disproportionate and distasteful in the response.

Three things to consider. First, that during the very same time period – either during or moments after Vice President Biden's visit, the Palestinian Authority, in their own current capital of Ramallah, dedicated a square in honor and unveiled a statue of Dalal Mughrabi. Who was she? She was a terrorist who, in 1978, captured a bus, tortured and terrorized her victims, and killed 38 Israelis in cold-blood. Men, women, children... Where is the American condemnation of this? If it's there, and I missed it, where's the press coverage? Because 1600 homes, whether you agree with the construction or not... homes can always be taken down. Territory can change hands, apartments are not

permanent, borders can change. But 38 lives cannot be brought back. Where's the condemnation and the anger over that?

Also at the same time, over the course of the past week, the Hurva synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem was rededicated. It was, before 1948, the single most important functioning synagogue in Israel. It was simply destroyed by our current friends and allies, the Jordanians. No Jews were allowed into the Old City at all under Jordanian rule, and no Jewish places of worship were left untouched. Now the Hurva synagogue has been rebuilt, to the best replication that memory and scattered photographs can provide, and I am very much looking forward to seeing it this summer. But on the occasion of its rededication, Hamas and Fatah alike outdid one another in lies and fabrication, claiming that "the Jews" were now going to destroy the Al-Aksa mosque – which is half a kilometer away, expel all the Arabs from Jerusalem – even King Abdullah made that claim – and they called for a day of rage and a gathering at the Mosque, which in the past has served as a precursor to an intifadah. All of this is deliberate and cynical misuse of religious symbolism for political purposes; a low-level State Department communiqué urged calm, but no press reports had the Secretary of State berating President Abbas for 45 minutes on the phone.

Finally, a bit further away, over the past week or so in Nigeria, hundreds – maybe thousands – of Christians – again, men, women and children – were slaughtered by Muslim neighbors in the northern city of

Kos. These were hundreds of actual and deliberate deaths, not accidental or tragic by-products of no-win defensive maneuvers. Where are the riots in Europe? Where are the protestors stopping traffic and chanting slogans and pounding on cars outside the Nigerian embassy? Where are the university boycotts, and deligitimization campaigns. On any given week there are things in the world far, far, far worse than the actions Israel takes. Even when we disagree with, are angered by or even disgusted by the actions of Israel's government, let's keep that in mind as well.

And yet...and yet. Are we to remain flotsam simply floating on the tide of history, buffeted by forces outside our control, and beyond our ability to affect? Yes, the accusations against us are wildly exaggerated, and yes, our enemies are real, and do not wish us well. But there are things we can do, and hope they will work. And if they do not work, at least we will know that we tried. We tried again and again, did everything we could, maybe even until such a utopian time comes when the rest of the world joins us, and says "*dayyeinu.*"

And now the second Chasidic teaching, a lesson, from the S'fat Emet, Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger. The second verse of Leviticus reads: "*Adam ki yakriv mikem korban L'Adonai;* when a person from among you brings a sacrifice to God..." The S'fat Emet writes: "this means that a person needs to offer to God his or her innermost strength and desire.

And this is the meaning of the teaching in *Pirkei Avot*: ‘Make your will nothing in the presence of God’s will.’ It is as if your own will becomes the sacrifice. And somehow, through this offering, you are able to bring all your deeds close to God. Now we understand the meaning of ‘from among you,’ as implying that this is all accomplished by means of submerging yourself into the larger totality of the Jewish people.”

The sacrifice... is one of our will, and our desire. It is to a larger cause, the cause of our people.

But what could be more in service of the totality of the Jewish people... than our survival as a people? [And Israel’s survival as a Jewish state *depends on* a political solution to this conflict.] And what could be a larger sacrifice... than a compromise even in the place where sacrifices once were offered? A surrender about something so central to Judaism, no. But a creative compromise whose provisions have yet to be imagined, yes.

My friends, these are words I never thought I would say. No Israeli government has yet said them. I might be wrong; the stakes are high; I reserve the right to change my mind about what I am about to say. But when even Ariel Sharon once said that the time has come to share this land, somehow, some way, something is going to have to be done... to share part of Jerusalem as well.

I don’t want to see that happen. I don’t know how it would be possible. God forbid the city is ever divided again as once it was. [This

neighborhood in question, undoubtedly, will remain part of Israel even after any accord is reached. It should not be considered nor treated as a settlement.] And no solution is even remotely possible without continued full access to all holy sites by members of all and any faith – a situation that has happened only under Israeli rule, never under any other power.

But someone needs to say the words out loud, unpleasant as it may be. There is no solution to this conflict... without a compromise of some sort, in some part of Jerusalem.

Other things are complete non-starters. Palestinian refugees returning to their homes inside Israel is simply not happening, and anyway, why should Israel have to host so many Arab refugees... while a future Palestine expects to have no Jews at all inside its borders?

And other issues can be resolved. Water sharing can be arranged, and desalinization will someday provide a different kind of solution anyway. Borders can be adjusted; clearly some of the settlements will be kept, even as some other land is given away in compensation.

But Jerusalem... We can't just wait, work everything else out, and talk about Jerusalem last, hoping that peace and neighborly feelings will have some magical momentum of their own. That will just undo any other progress that is made.

The problem with those apartments? It's not just a question of timing. Even though there are things the Palestinians do that are far worse, and they are not called on the carpet for it, still, right now, if there

is *any chance* of negotiation... right now, at this moment, in this atmosphere they should not be built at all.

I consider Jerusalem...a part of my heart and my soul. I have lived there for two years. I will be travelling there, now, seven times in the next three years. When I come back to the city after an absence I feel... I truly feel as if I am coming home.

What is the sacrifice we will have to make, that will bring us closer? Which piece of land will it take, to bring about a land of peace?

Is it possible? Can we do it? Can we make that choice? Or is it, simply... too much to ask? Beyond *dayeinu*. Will we just muddle on, and wait to see, what history brings, and what happens not by us, but to us?

In just a little over a week, we gather at our tables for a Passover seder. There, at the end, past the wine stains and bleating goat, past *Chad Gadya* and *Adir Hu*, is the line we return to, year after year: "*L'shanah Ha'Ba'ah B'iyerushalayim*. Next year in Jerusalem."

What kind of year will it be? To some degree – and more, perhaps, than we realize most of the time – to some degree that is in our hands, and up to us.

There is but the smallest difference, between acting with purpose, and being acted upon. When we remember that we always have a choice, it is only then we discover, that not everything in our lives is left to chance.

The difference is razor-thin. The aleph is silent and small. But it makes... all the difference in the world.

Shabbat Shalom.