

Shabbat Vayakhel 5782 - My Favorite Israeli Poem
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Shabbat Shalom!

We're going to do something different today. Every week Rabbi Schwab or I talk about Torah, which refers to itself as a "Shira," a poem, for the people Israel. Today I want to speak about my favorite "Shira" of the land of Israel.

I was 17 years old when I spent the summer in Israel with Ramah Seminar. This being Ramah, we had Hebrew classes while there. One day our counselor Ronit shared with us a poem called "Oranim," or "pine trees."

It was written by an early Israeli poet named Leah Goldberg, who was a literary giant. She was born in 1911, and she grew up in Russia. Goldberg picked up Hebrew at an incredible pace, and began keeping a diary in Hebrew when she was 10 years old. She made Aliyah to Israel in 1935, which was a difficult time to be there. She would later receive the cherished Israel Prize, and her books and poems are widely known.

Let's take a look at this poem, written in 1954:

(Read it in Hebrew and English)

The author utilizes the metaphor of a pine tree to express the tension of feeling split between two homelands. Recall that the life of an immigrant to Israel was harsh, especially in the late 1930s. While she longed to fulfill the Zionist dream, she also missed the place of her birth. She felt at home in two places, and the pine tree expresses that because it is the one thing that links her old home to her new home: pine trees grow in both places. I share a couple insights from a website called "textologia."

In the first stanza, she places herself in Israel recalling all that she misses about her home in Russia.

In the second stanza, she places herself in Russia and describes the pine trees cloaked in snow and ice, which of course cannot happen in Israel.

The pine tree spans from the ground to the sky, making visible birds who make their homes in both places. The third stanza finds her imagining that perhaps the birds understand best the tension about being home into distinct worlds - soaring through the

sky and resting on the ground's tree branches. This is her way of saying she misses Russia but also finds herself drawn to Israel.

She speaks of roots in the fourth stanza, forces pulling her downward. A pine tree's pine needles are also uprooted, carried by the wind, and planted in a new location. Like how she relocated too, solidifying her shared identity with the pine tree.

I am really not a poetry guy, but this image of birds hovering through the sky, at home in two worlds and in no world at the same time, really stuck with me. Because I too fell in love with the land of Israel and felt drawn into its orbit of passion and meaning. I too felt a sadness leaving Jerusalem and returning to the United States, but I could not and cannot bring myself to leave here and make Aliyah. I know I am not the only one who feels this way. Thus I feel I have two homelands, for I am comfortable and at home in both places. I also feel I have none because there is no one place that means everything to me. That tension and solitude is captured by the birds floating through the sky.

In all honesty, I would not have remembered this poem with this image were it not for what Ronit did next. She took out a boombox - remember those? - and played the song for us to hear. The melody was soulful and beautiful, the perfect complement to perfect words. "Who sings that?" I asked. She answered, "Ahinoam Nini." "Who?" "Ahinoam Nini." Or "Noa" for short. I had never heard of this singer, but when I got to Tower Records later that summer, I bought her CD and was totally captivated by this amazing and unique singer.

Noa has quite a story herself. Because she will be performing on this Bimah in just 3 weeks, I wanted to speak about her today. She was born in 1969, just one year before Leah Goldberg passed away. Noa is an incredible Israeli singer, songwriter, percussionist, poet, and composer. She represented Israel years ago at the Eurovision song contest. Noa was born in Israel to a family of Yemenite Jews, but grew up in New York City and went to Ramaz High School, before returning to Israel at 16.

Noa herself feels the same tension, I am led to believe, that Goldberg does. I think that's why Noa selected this poem to breathe music into. For Noa, her roots are in Israel and the United States, but the painful split is still the same as Goldberg's. If we have ever felt a longing to live in Israel, we share her story.

Noa took Goldberg's poem and added one more verse in English. (Read Noa addition)

Goldberg lovingly recalls mountains topped with snow in Russia, while Noa pictures snowy mountains around New York. She speaks of what must be a favorite radio station in New York, FM 93. And then she paraphrases the last line of Goldberg speaking of roots in different places, in the US and in Israel. Note that her home in two places is also reflected in her singing in both Hebrew and English. Check out the song “Pines” on youtube after Shabbat. I can’t promise she will sing that song at her concert, but I can assure you tickets are still available!

Falling in love with Israel, despite all its many flaws, is a wonderful rush that seems to often end in heartbreak. Either we are so swept up by its aura that we move there, but then we miss our home and loved ones in America. Or we are deeply influenced by Israel, and miss it dearly while we live here. Our hearts are in two places, expressed best by those fluttering birds.

A simple question: “Where is home for you?” Imagine how complicated that would be for Moses to answer. He was born in Egypt in the royal palace, but that was not home because he left the palace to defend his brethren Israelites from an Egyptian taskmaster. He had to run away to Midian, but that was not home because they were neither Jewish nor Egyptian. For the rest of his life, he trekked through the desert hoping to fulfill G-d's promise of the people returning to Israel, a place he felt was home though he had never been. Most sadly, he never arrived. He looked over the Jordan River and could see the land with his own eyes, but his feet never touched the holy earth of Eretz Yisrael. Jewish history is filled with these painful tales of never feeling fully at home where we live, and always being drawn to our family home in Israel. Without that longing to return home, Zionism would never have taken root on any side of the sea.

Shabbat Shalom.

אָרן / לָאָה גוֹלְדֵבֶרֶג

.כָּאן לֹא אָשְׁמַע אֶת קוֹל הַקּוֹקֵיָה

,כָּאן לֹא יַחְבֹּשׁ הָעֵץ מְצַנְפֶּת שְׁלֵג

אָבֵל בְּצֵל הָאֲרָנִים הָאֵלֶּה

.כֹּל יִלְדוּתִי שְׁקֵמָה לַתַּחֲיָה

— — צִלְצוֹל הַמְחֻטִּים: הִיָּה הִיָּה

,אֶקְרָא מוֹלְדוֹת לְמַרְחֵב הַשְּׁלֵג

,לְקֶרַח יִרְקֶרֶק כּוֹבֵל הַפֶּלֶג

.לְלִשׁוֹן הַשִּׁיר בְּאֶרֶץ נְכָרִיָּה

— אוֹלֵי רֶק צְפוּרֵי-מִסֶּע יוֹדְעוֹת

— כְּשֶׁהן תְּלוּיּוֹת בֵּין אֶרֶץ וְשָׁמַיִם

.אֶת זֶה הַכָּאֵב שֶׁל שְׁתֵּי הַמוֹלְדוֹת

,אֶתְכֶם אָנִי נִשְׁתַּלְתִּי פְעַמִּים

,אֶתְכֶם אָנִי צִמְחִתִּי, אֲרָנִים

.וְשִׁרְשִׁי בְּשָׁנֵי נוֹפִים שׁוֹנִים

The Pine (translation: Natasha Gordinsky)

Here I will not hear the cuckoo's voice,
here the tree will not wear a snowy hat
but in the shadow of these pines
my entire childhood was revived.

The sound of the conifers: once upon a time
- "homeland" I name the snowy planes,
the greenish ice which chains the stream
the language of poetry in a foreign land.

Perhaps only the passing birds know -
as they dangle between earth and sky -
this pain of the two homelands.

With you, I was planted twice
with you, pines, I grew,
with my roots in two different landscapes.

(Noa: But I remember those snow-capped mountains
And a song on FM. 93
Oh my darlin', I have grown with you
But my roots on both sides of the sea)