

Shabbat Ki Tavo 5783  
Voices from Israel  
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Shabbat Shalom.

What begins with promise sometimes turns perilous.

I was reminded of this when I reread the first verse of our portion today, Ki Tavo. It reads  
וְהָיָה כִּי־תָבֹא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לְךָ נַחֲלָה וַיְרַשְׁתָּהּ וַיֵּשְׁבֶתָ בָּהּ:  
It shall be when you enter the land that Hashem your G-d is giving to you as a heritage - that is, Israel - and you possess it and settle in it..." (Dt. 26:1). We are talking about the ritual of the first fruits ceremony, called Bikkurim. Every year in ancient Israel, all farmers - basically everybody - would bring their first fruits, which were the most precious ones, to the Temple in Jerusalem. They would leave them with the priests as a thank you to G-d for giving them the land of Israel and a bountiful crop. Each person would recite a special passage as well, recalling their dramatic swing from Egyptian slaves to free citizens in Israel: "G-d brought *us* to this place and gave *us* this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Wherefore *I* now bring the first fruits of the soil which you, Hashem, have given *me*" (Dt. 26:9,10).

What a cause for celebration! Indeed, the Talmud in Mishna Bikkurim paints the picture of when the ritual was observed:

*An ox would go in front of [the marching farmers], its horns bedecked with gold and with an olive-crown on its head. The flute would play before them until they would draw close to Jerusalem. When they drew close to Jerusalem they would send messengers in advance, and they would adorn their first fruits. The governors and chiefs and treasurers [of the Temple] would go out to greet them. All the skilled artisans of Jerusalem would stand up before them and greet them saying, "Our brothers, men of such and such a place, we welcome you in peace."*

That must have been quite a sight almost 4000 years ago.

Today I want to consider that verse anew and read it for 2023:

וְהָיָה כִּי־תָבֹא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ

It shall be when you enter the land that Hashem your G-d is giving to you as a heritage, and you possess it and dwell in it..." (Dt. 26:1).

Thank G-d, today we have a homeland in that very same place, the State of Israel, the land of our heritage that we possess and dwell in. And we have Jerusalem as a Jewish capital. But if we were to enter Israel today, at this moment, what would we see and what would we hear?

What begins with promise sometimes turns perilous.

We all know that Israel is going through an extremely difficult moment. We read the sobering articles and see dispiriting photos in the news: Netanyahu, corruption trial, judicial reform, Members of Knesset making inflammatory statements, serious challenges to democracy, and more. It's a really difficult time for those of us connected to the Jewish state. But the true test of friendship is not just sticking by a friend when things are good, but especially when things are hard. That's why we have to talk about this.

I read commentaries by Rabbi Daniel Gordis. He is an American rabbi who made Aliyah many years ago. He recently wrote a post with the title: "Many American Jews desperately want to help. What can they do? They could start by telling the truth." He continues: "This is a broken, hurting, frightened country. Does that not sit well with some American Jews? I don't know, but that doesn't make it less true. But here's what I do know. Israel is changing right in front of our eyes. Especially now, it would be nice not to be alone. The first step towards that would be to have those who love us and who want to support us let us know that they know exactly how fragile and how dangerous things have become. Anything else is simply not true—and perhaps even worse, leaves us feeling abandoned when what we need is precisely the opposite."

Today, I want to bring Israel to us. I want to share with you the conversations happening among Israelis. The hard news and the international headlines, they truly are important, and we either know what's happening or can read about it on our own. But I want to go beyond the headlines to expose us to the important voices and responses of Israelis themselves.

In preparation for this sermon, I emailed some Israelis whom many of us know personally or whose blog posts we may read.

First I want to share the insights from our good friend and beloved Rabbi Vernon Kurtz, who was the senior rabbi here for 30 years before moving to Jerusalem a few years ago. He writes: "We Israelis are living in a divided society where politics, in the form of judicial reform and the activities of the present government, seem to be tearing us apart. There is very little discourse between the two sides. Families are divided and have

decided not to talk politics with one another and we live in echo chambers. Depending on what side you are on, it is expected that you will read certain newspapers, watch certain stations on TV, and receive your news feeds from certain internet sources (sounds very much like the current situation in the US, doesn't it)?"

I would add that his comparison to the US is instructive. Obviously the situations in the two countries are not identical, but there are parallels. Our own experiences here should lead us to react to headlines from Israel with empathy and without judgment.

One of Rabbi Kurtz's good friends is Rabbi David Golinkin, a leading Conservative rabbi in Jerusalem and head of the Schechter Institute. He has visited this congregation and taught here many times. He writes that Israel's most significant challenge is a lack of Jewish unity. He begins with a rabbinic teaching: "What will lead to the future redemption? [*Midrash Tanhuma* teaches]: 'When you will all be one bundle. In life, if you take a bundle of sticks, can you break them all at once? No. But if you take one stick at a time, even a child can break that.' And so you find that the Jewish People will only be redeemed if they become one bundle." Rabbi Golinkin urges us to become *agudah ahat*, one bundle. He concludes: "We will only be able to solve our major problems if we work together as one united people."

Unity, of course, is connected to comm-unity. Many of us in our own community here get our Israel news from the Times of Israel website, and we are likely familiar with the name of its editor David Horovitz. He reminds us of something that has fallen out of the headlines: "The most potent hope for Zionist patriots would appear to be the *vast national protests* — that they continue relentlessly, that they do not allow themselves to turn violent or to be goaded into violence, that they strive for inclusivity under banners to protect democracy, foster unity and protect our common home."

I wanted to hear the perspective of someone who has attended such a rally over there, so I asked Jeff Kopin for his insight. Jeff is a Beth El Shabbat regular who also recently acquired Israeli citizenship. When in Israel, he attends these protests on Saturday nights, and he describes them like this: "Attending a protest in Jerusalem is a unique experience. The protest begins well after Shabbat exits to give Shabbat observers ample time to arrive. Thousands of people of all types attend—kipot of all styles, secular, students, seniors, Haredi (yes, some Haredi), leftists, rightists and everyone in between. The protestors carry hundreds of Israel flags. After 10-15 minutes of warm-up chanting led by energetic young people, typically three five-minute speeches are given. Women took center stage at the protests we participated in. At some protests a politician may speak but usually it is a teacher or a physician or the mother of a soldier. Normal people sharing their stories and their strong beliefs about a democratic and Jewish Israel that respects minority rights. Following the speeches, the assembled sing

Hatikvah, a moving experience by any measure. Following the anthem people peacefully go home to get ready for their work and school week. עם חופשי בארצנו.”

Also in attendance at some of these rallies is Joel Chasnoff, a Chicago-born Israeli comedian who performed on this Bimah this summer. Not only is he funny, but he offers deep insights into life in Israel. He shares the following: “Even though I align myself with the protesters, I do feel that the other side might have some points, [even if I find some of their leadership] repulsive in many ways. At the end of the day, one point that [they have] is we need to have a Jewish state. Now I think what [some of them] want is way too extreme, but on the other end of the spectrum, a lot of the protesters want a modern progressive liberal state just like Canada or Australia or Belgium. And at some point you got to ask, Well, what makes Israel any different? What makes us special? Is it simply that we get our day off on Saturday, not on Sunday? Or is there something more to the Jewishness of the country that we're sort of throwing away right now or ignoring but that in the long run is the whole reason we're supposed to exist in the first place?”

Chasnoff is open minded enough to see that the side he opposes has a point worth considering deeply. Like him, I wish all people have their own convictions to believe in their side, whatever side that is, while being open to listening to those who vociferously disagree. That would be great progress.

Nobody in Israel is a *fryer*, Hebrew for "sucker." Nobody thinks that things will magically improve. At the same time, Israelis cling to hope because that has given them life in other dangerous moments of Israeli history. Many times, Israel has faced threats from external enemies and withstood them all. This time, however, the divide comes from within. Yet Israelis speak of emerging to a brighter future somehow, someday. And because these Israelis maintain hope, I do too. I share these voices with you to lift our optimism as well.

Here's Rabbi Kurtz again: “Two items give me hope: the current situation has opened up important discussions concerning Israeli civil society. If we can get to some measure of agreement, this will augur well for the future. It is also important to realize that the symbol of both sides of the debate, as seen at countless demonstrations, is the Israeli flag. Hopefully in the near future we can rally around it for good purposes and bring shalom, peace and wholeness, to the country and society.”

For me personally, what gives me hope is that time after time, against all odds Jews have made their way from darkness to light.

Finally, here is Rabbi Donniel Hartman of Jerusalem's Hartman Institute talking about the same theme: “There is a government which is advocating for an Israel that half of

Israel and 90% of North American Jewry wants nothing to do with. But Israel is not defined by its government alone. People have a voice.

It's one thing to turn your back on the Israeli government. But we're out there marching. We waited 2,000 freaking years to have this country. Could you wait three more years [until the next elections]? Because if you stand up and you don't walk away, there are partners in Israel who are looking at you and who feel encouraged by you. We can build it."

For supporters of Israel everywhere, let us not pretend that things in Israel are rosy; far from it. But equally so, let's not underestimate the resolve of ordinary Israelis to make things better through hope, through protest, and through Shalom.

Shabbat Shalom.