

Shabbat Terumah 5784
Joy and Pain Together
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Shabbat Shalom.

Rarely are people entirely happy or completely sad. Even in our most joyous moments - celebrating a wedding, Bris/baby naming, or Bar/Bat Mitzvah - amidst our smiles, some of us briefly shed a tear when we think of our loved ones who cannot join that day. And even in our moments of deepest sadness - a funeral, for example - it's not uncommon for the bereaved, even with damp eyes, to laugh for a moment recalling a funny story with their loved one. Our hearts are wide enough to hold more than one emotion at a time. Wide and deep.

Our Torah reading today, Terumah, begins an entirely new section of the Torah. Over the next few Parshiyot, we are given a blueprint of the Mishkan/Tabernacle, the portable sanctuary that accompanied the Israelites through the desert from Egypt to Israel. It was the physical space where G-d and Israel were most visibly connected.

The first Mishkan item to be constructed is the Aron Kodesh, the holy ark. It's listed first because of its spiritual importance and physical centrality in the middle of the Mishkan. It was kept in the Holy of Holies, toward the center of the sanctuary, and the Mishkan itself was physically the center of the entire Israelite camp. This ark was covered with gold inside and out to show the deepest love and respect for its contents, the holy tablets that contained the ten commandments.

Perceptive readers of the Torah might ask, which set of tablets? Recall that there were actually two sets of tablets inscribed with the writing of G-d. Think back to the story of the golden calf, which we will read in two weeks. Moses receives the tablets from G-d on Mount Sinai and descends the mountain to witness the Israelites worshipping an idol in the form of a golden calf. Enraged, he smashes the tablets to bits. To make a long story short, Moses convinces G-d to forgive the Jewish people, and G-d agrees. To demonstrate this forgiveness, G-d grants Moses a pristine set of *new* tablets with the ten commandments, and the journey continues. Readers understand that it was this *second* set of tablets that was preserved in the holy ark.

But what happened to those broken shards from the first tablets? While the Torah never answers, the rabbis of the Talmud do not forget about them, and they imagine that the broken fragments were preserved and kept in the same ark alongside the whole tablets.

In the words of the Talmud, *Luchot Vshivrei Luchot Munachin Ba'aron*. Both the tablets and the broken tablets were kept in the ark.

This means that in the heart of the Israelite camp - physically and spiritually - sat brokenness and wholeness...together. Pain and healing. Rupture and repair. Betrayal of G-d and forgiveness by G-d. G-d did not want the Israelites to forget their lowest moment even when they achieved their peak moment of closeness to G-d. Both sets of tablets were kept together.

The Mishkan with the ark at the center was a physical structure that met the spiritual needs of the Israelites then, but not now, as we connect to G-d in permanent sanctuaries, like this one. Nevertheless, today the Torah's Mishkan with the ark as the center serves as a powerful metaphor. It symbolizes each of us, with our own heart in our own center. Each of our own hearts contains shattered pieces and whole ones, as it were, brokenness and completeness. We should not erase our own moments of pain simply because we have accumulated moments of joy. Instead, both emotions should stand next to each other, and we should sometimes experience both as appropriate, even at the same time.

Our Jewish tradition wisely equips us to feel both joy and pain in the same moment. In the time of the Torah, the day the Mishkan was inaugurated - what should have been a day of unsurpassed joy - was also the day when the High Priest Aaron's two sons died when they offered a foreign sacrifice to G-d. Joy and pain.

Even today, Jewish ritual life prepares the heart to hold both feelings at the same time. For example, at the Passover Seder, the festive meal when we celebrate our freedom, we take our wine - symbol of joy - and pour some out during the 10 plagues to recall the suffering of the Egyptians. Joy and pain.

Next, we are all familiar with how a Jewish wedding concludes, when on this day of overflowing joy, the groom smashes a glass to recall the loss of Jerusalem and its Temples. Joy and pain.

Finally, at every Shabbat service, there may be individuals and community celebrating joyful life cycle events, like today's Bat Mitzvah. And in this same room at the very same time, there are individuals and community mourning the passing of a loved one, saying Kaddish or offering hugs to the newly bereaved. As Rabbi Sharon Brous observes, "The walls of this building (this Synagogue) are strong enough to hold this much joy and this much pain."

It is through this lens that I wish to look at an important event in Israel this week.

As we all know and feel, Israel was shattered on October 7th, and it remains so ever since. Around New Year's Day, a social media post in Israel gained traction when it wondered, How can today be January 1st when it's really October 86th? These days have been almost entirely bereft of light and good news. However, earlier this week, Israel finally had something to celebrate.

Israeli special forces rescued two hostages from Hamas captivity in Gaza in a very complex overnight operation. Fernando Marman and Louis Har had been abducted from Kibbutz Nir Yitzhak on October 7th and were most recently being held in an apartment building in the very crowded Southern city of Rafah. The joint operation special forces acted on specific intelligence and reached the apartment in the middle of the night. They killed the terrorists guarding the hostages and hugged the two hostages with their bodies to protect them from the ensuing gunfire. All these Israeli soldiers put their lives on the line to bring home their Israeli brothers. Once on the aircraft evacuating home to Israel, the soldiers checked on the pair, asking if they were cold in the winter night. One of the hostages answered, "it is warm in our hearts." This was the moment when two families were given new life. But even then, nobody forgot that not everybody was home safe.

IDF spokesman Daniel Hagari later said, "Even this morning, we don't forget for a moment that 134 hostages are still being held in Gaza." To the remaining hostages, he continued, "if you can hear me now, we are very determined to bring you home and we will not miss any opportunity to bring you home."

This was a pivotal event not only for these two families, but for all of Israel and the Jewish people, to show that Israel is doing all it can to bring the hostages home. And for these two individuals, Israel fulfilled the verse in the book of Jeremiah, "*VShavu Vanim Legvulam*, your children shall return home."

That's the joy, which we should absolutely celebrate. But we must also note that it came at a great cost. Thankfully, no Israeli soldiers were killed. Very sadly, though, many innocent Palestinians were. The Gaza Health Ministry said at least 67 people were killed in the raid.

Let's make some things very clear. The health ministry is part of Hamas, which cannot be trusted and has an incentive to exaggerate the casualty number. Many of those killed undoubtedly were Hamas terrorists themselves. Other civilians were killed by Hamas

fire, not Israel. But whatever number is left of truly innocent civilians, a number we will never know with certainty, it's far too many. It's a tragedy, and it makes me deeply sad.

I know that Israel must do everything it can to free the hostages. As well it should, including rescue missions like this one. I know that Hamas intentionally hides hostages and themselves in residential areas to maximize civilian casualties. I know that, like Bret Stephens writes, Hamas is responsible for *every lost life, Israeli and Palestinian*, since October 7th. I know this and I believe this...and still I'm sad. I simply wish there were another way. It's joy and pain.

In the name of justice, Israel must do everything it can to eliminate Hamas and bring home the captives. And it must do everything it can to minimize Palestinian casualties. Indeed, it does exactly that. Former Israeli ambassador to the United States Michael Oren writes: "Israel's efforts to reduce civilian casualties, often at the expense of our own soldiers' safety, are well documented." Then he quotes the internationally recognized urban warfare expert John Spencer, who says: "despite the unique challenges Israel faces in its war against Hamas, it has implemented more measures to prevent civilian casualties than any other military in history." This is true, and it's also true that no innocent people should lose their lives in this war. Israel is fighting a just war justly; I just wish it didn't have to.

In holding both emotions in my heart at this time - joy for the release of the hostages and sadness for the loss of innocent lives - I return to the image of the ark, holding both the pristine tablets and the broken tablets. The ark was large enough to hold both, and our hearts are large enough to feel both. I feel a small sense of comfort in knowing that the Jewish tradition provides a map for passing through this ongoing trauma. May all the hostages return home soon, for our hearts are so heavy with pain.

Shabbat Shalom.