

Shabbat Ki Tavo 5784
Each of Us Has a Role in History
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Shabbat Shalom!

I'm finally ready for the big holiday that's almost here - Passover. For me, I'm usually not emotionally ready for the big Jewish holidays *when* they occur. I could always use some more time...like several more months. Having said that, given that it's fall, I finally feel ready to dwell on the timeless teachings of springtime Passover.

So let's start with Pesach. After all, our Parsha does.

Parashat Ki Tavo delivers an astonishingly brief summary of Jewish history. In ancient Israel, each Jewish farmer was to bring their first fruits - Bikkurim - to Jerusalem's Temple as a sign of gratitude; they must each recite this passage in Hebrew, which refers to the *Passover story* as a synopsis of Jewish history. We also know it as a core text of the Passover Haggadah, and it begins - *Arami Oved Avi*:

Pay attention to how I read the subjects of each sentence:

[Each farmer] shall then recite as follows before the LORD your God: "My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation.

The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us.

We cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression.

The LORD freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents.

He 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, O LORD, have given me."

If this paragraph were part of my English paper in grade school, my teacher would make it bleed with red ink. The subject shifts from singular to plural to singular again. My teacher would rightly say, the subject must be consistent. But with the Torah, where teachers see grammatical errors, the rabbis find wisdom. Here's my take: me to we to

me. The Torah wants *my* story to connect to *our* story, and then *our* story to inspire *my* story. Our personal stories should be part of the Jewish communal story. And then, our Jewish family story should influence our personal stories. *Me to we to me.*

Jewish History is impacted by certain famous figures along the way: Abraham, Moses, Queen Esther; Herzl, Ben Gurion, Golda Meir. But Jewish History is equally impacted by ordinary people like us, who made invaluable contributions ourselves even if our names are not known to the history books.

In about two weeks we will commemorate the first anniversary of October 7th. On that Monday - and again on the Hebrew Yahrzeit of Simchat Torah - we will all take the appropriate time to mark the deep sadness of that day, which must not be minimized. But today I want to recall another anniversary of sorts - that of October 8th. I want to remind us of the inspired response by the Israeli people when their brothers and sisters in the south and north were in danger and needed help in the worst possible way. The internal Israeli response toward caring for displaced Israeli families - both materially and emotionally - was immediate and overwhelming. And it was not the Israeli Knesset that led the way, nor the Israel Defense Force. But it was very ordinary Israeli people - people whose names we likely do not know - who were each a Shamash and led the way through so much darkness. As we look back toward one year ago, let's not forget the collective unity that existed in that moment and lasted for a while, though it no longer remains. Let us also remember the endless courage and extraordinary generosity of spirit of ordinary people.

A few weeks after the war began, the Times of Israel highlighted some of these unsung heroes and their efforts. They write: "Around 15,000 Israelis have answered the clarion call of movements that metamorphosed overnight from activists against the government's divisive judicial reform proposals to coordinators of a massive infrastructure to rescue and support fellow citizens in distress." That team of people, assembled at a moment's notice, "subsequently evacuated 3,000 citizens from the Gaza border communities, 200 of them under fire."

"The Civilian Operations Center at Expo Tel Aviv, which began operating the next day, is run with military precision. At a massive underground parking lot, hundreds of volunteers were unloading donated equipment, unpacking and sorting it, and repacking it into boxes for transport all over the land. In the women's [clothing] section, for example, signs stuck to the floor were aligned with boxes for 'long skirts and tights for religious women,' or 'women's pajamas,' or scarves, hats, socks, or bras."

"One of the most remarkable first steps taken by the Civilian Operations Hub was to create a space where some 2,000 volunteers from the high-tech sector could use their

skills to identify missing and kidnapped Israelis, now known to number more than 200. Chava Rotman of Building an Alternative said, 'For 10 days, we were the only contact point for families to find information about their loved ones., The high-tech unit...used artificial intelligence to try to identify the missing, with volunteers going through hours of video material, frame by frame, looking for clues, and identifying hundreds of people who were missing or dead so that their families could be updated. Rotman said 'We did facial recognition, matching social media with visual material from different scenes and used AI to identify clothes. We even identified distinguishing marks like tattoos because some of the bodies had been decapitated. The high-tech people came here and invented new algorithms to find out where the missing people were and were able to whittle the names of thousands of missing people down to a couple of hundred. The unit was now handing the job, and the software, over to the state to continue the work.'

"Lawyer Galia Scherf was working with a team that was distributing *shiva* kits. She explained, 'Bereaved people need two things, equipment for a *shiva* that can be attended by hundreds of people, and psychological support. Sometimes people are sitting *shiva* for more than one person. Entire families have been murdered.' Volunteers call the bereaved, send people to make up minyans where necessary and connect them with the not-for-profit Bereaved Parents Circle."

"Yariv Wegrzyn said he came to volunteer. He said, 'It's not hierarchical here. Lots of people are coming with amazing abilities. People can't understand how 15,000 volunteers left their homes to manage the country.'" Again, these are ordinary people who changed lives and made important contributions to Israel's history in a critical moment. They understood that each of them has a role to play in creating their own story because they are invested. And their story is our story. One does not need to be famous to be a hero. One just needs to answer the call when the moment arises. These are people who internalized the beginning of Parashat Ki Tavo - Me to we to me.

That's my own language of a key lesson from the Parsha. Perhaps one of Israel's greatest Hebrew poets from the 20th century had the same idea but used different words. Shaul Tchernihovski was born in Russia that was harsh, dark, and cold. He later moved to Israel, a land he imagined to be radiant, bright, and warm. This poem called "*Omrim Yeshna Eretz - They Say There is a Land*" - part of which I will read - imagines someone in this reborn Israel encountering a legend from the past: Rabbi Akiva.

אומרים ישנה ארץ

ארץ שכורת שמש

איה אותה ארץ
איפה אותה שמש
ארץ בה יתקיים
אשר כל איש קיווה
נכנס כל הנכנס
פגע בו עקיבא
שלום לך עקיבא
שלום לך רבי
איפה הם הקדושים
איפה המכבי
עונה לו עקיבא
אומר לו הרבי
כל ישראל קדושים
אתה המכבי

They say: There is a land,
a land drenched with sun.
Wherefore is that land?
Where is that sun?

A land where shall come to pass
what every man had hoped for,
Everyone who enters,
had met with Akiva.

Peace to you, Akiva!
Peace to you, Rabbi!
Where are the saints?
Where is the Maccabee?

Answers him Akiva,
answers him the Rabbi:
All of Israel is sainted,
ATAH HAMACCABI You are the Maccabee!

The poet's message is that each of us is the Maccabee, the hero of the Jewish story. Jewish History is made by names we know, like Akiva. And also by us Maccabees, with our own hands.

Shabbat Shalom.