

Temple Israel Center of White Plains
White Plains, NY

דרשה פרשת ויצא – ניו יורק תש"ע סופי

Dvar Torah Va'Yetze Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum

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Take two people, a Moroccan and a German-French, give them an egg, oil, and a frying pan, ask them to make an omelet, stay with them, watch them and then taste. They will be different. I know, I've tasted both. When my Moroccan grandmother makes omelets the kitchen fills-up with stories, smells and spices of Casablanca, it always tastes rich and greasy. When my French grandfather makes one, the kitchen fills up with the simplicity of a village boy from Alsace-Lorraine and the omelet is plain and simple. Same ingredients, such a different taste.

Now take Ya'akov in Parashat Va'yetze, our Portion. One can read it as the story of an independent man carrying his father's blessing, meeting God and his promise, on the way to create his destiny. One can also read it as the story of a torn child, running away from his deceived family, dreaming an unstable dream that reflects his confusion, desperately seeking for companionship in God. Same ingredients, such a different taste.

Two weeks ago I spoke of filling the voids between us, Jews in America and Jews in Israel, with our authentic voices. I chose to speak very delicately so I could put-up a gate through which we would later enter. Today, as our third father arrives at Beit-El, the gateway to heaven on the border of two cultures, I want to enter the gate we have put-up two weeks ago. I want to share with you one of the noticeable differences I experience. It will, of course, be a generalization. As every generalization it may be totally unconnected to individuals sitting here and in Israel, but it focuses on the core of our cultures and their structures. I truly hope it will not offend, but rather open a discourse, and I really want to hear your thoughts about it. That's why I'm saying it now, when we still have much time to explore and talk about it.

America is an amazing country: it's beautiful, it's wide; it seems to be full of mannerly civilians and courteous people; it seeks for wisdom, knowledge, truth, and is able to respect them; systems function and seem so well-organized. -- Unlike in Israel, Americans live by well-defined criteria. There is a way of doing things right here. Your Board meetings with 45 people function right! Every member knows what he/she is in charge of, and is respectful of other member's liabilities. Social occasions have a dress code and you won't find everyone around you, sitting in jeans at the Opera. There is a set of criteria; there are do's and don'ts, defined successes, and failures. And so people can aspire to succeed, according to the criteria.

Now, how different can it be in Israel?-- If America is a success where is Israel on that scale? Well, in Israel that scale of success and failure does not exist. -- Israel has many historical successes and many devastating failures, but we approach them in a different way. Because in Israel, the distance between success and failure is sometimes separated by a hair's breadth. We Israelis learned from a very young age that success itself can be failure, going uphill may sometimes turn out to just be the opposite.

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Take the Yom Kippur war, for example, an outstanding military victory, with no other precedent in history. Yet for Israeli society it will always be conceived as a downfall. While our parents came back from the war victorious, they knew how many of their friends would never come back, they knew they had killed, they knew the horrible taste of war, the price of victory. And since most of us served in the IDF, many of us are familiar with that understanding and know it well. Go into blogs from the past week discussing the advanced negotiations to return Gilad Shalit home: when he comes back, 'בעזרת ה' God willing, will that be a success or a failure? We never forgot him, he will be back - but what will be the price? Will other soldiers be kidnapped as a result? Or, will soldiers now know that wherever they are the state of Israel will not abandon them? Will parents whose children's assassins will be freed see that as a failure of public opinion or as its victory? There is no right answer. Unlike a linear scale of success and failure, the fragility of the existence of Israel leaves us not with a line, but with a circle, success and failure can sometimes be almost at the exact same point. Two different models, none of them is better than the other, they are just very different.

Our sages teach, in the Babylonian Talmud (Ktubot 12b): **ברי ושמא – ברי עדיף**
Meaning, when you face certitude and doubt - certitude is preferable to doubt. A concept introduced in property laws, but that over the years became an idiom. It seems to me, though I may be totally wrong, that our worlds are different like certitude to doubt. American culture is a world of certitude, there is right and wrong, there are criteria, there is a language of success and an ambition to speak it - while the Israeli culture is the world of doubt, which cannot have a scale. A world avoiding success and criteria, always dealing with its costs and undermining its existence. A world intrigued by the ordinary and attracted to the impediments of life. Our sages chose between certitude and doubt, and taught that certitude is preferable, but this appears in Babylon Talmud. Whereas the innovators of Hebrew culture such as Berdichevsky wrote over and over again that to them, **שמא עדיף** *doubt* is the one to be preferred, and it is their voice that echoes in the streets of Israel.

What does it mean to live in a world of **שמא**, *doubt*? I think it is best explained through music. Western music usually has a defined beginning, middle and end; it usually has a theme, and a crescendo, hinting that there is some form of **גאולה** *salvation* or **התגלות** *revelation* in the story. Middle Eastern music can be a magical melody sung over and over again, with no ending, and no *salvation*. When thousands of people gathered once a month on Thursdays in the streets of Cairo and other cities to hear Um Kultum's new song, they were waiting for an enchanting complicated repetitive melody, that could last for an hour. Like a Hassidic Niggun that never ends, even after you stopped singing; Like "El Nora Alila" in Nei'ila, a quiet plea in a sophisticatedly simple melody. Israeli music, theater and movies can often be like that, a different Jewish sound track to existence.

As an Israeli visitor to this culture, through a community that is extremely warm and truthful, sometimes I miss the presence of what may here be defined as failure. A natural and simple lesson of life teaching us that we can work hard, yet the outcome may be different than we expected. Sometimes I miss saying an Israeli Dvar Torah, which may have no point, no beginning and end, may feel untrained for salvation, unable to be redeemed, stuck between the verses yet knowing they are the only thing

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to cling to. Like a commentator sitting in his study, writing down a reflection next to a verse, and then moving to the next one. I do know that it exists here too, but it seems to me that in America it is not part of the culture. I ask myself all the time where do people here relax, where can they cry for their failures, talk about their despair, fall, stop smiling, stop being nice, sob and pray, **שמוא**. Yet, for the first time in my life, I also see how as an Israeli I'm frightened of success, I discover that there should be a scale with criteria in order to create a functioning system and society; I learn not to be afraid of the linear concept of success and to admit its significance in the world, **ברי** .

Going back to Ya'akov's dream in Beit El, I want to suggest that we read his dream as a message to the two largest Jewries in the world. On his way from one country to the other, between Canaan and Haran, Yaakov learns that on God's stairway there are two sets of angels opening the way to two directions, height and depth. Two sets of different motions that contribute to the moral and spiritual traffic of this world. Both of them are crucial and answer different needs of humanity. We are the two sets. The two large Jewries are different; one of them goes up the stairway exploring how to build a durable structure in human architecture, the other digs deep into the foundations and struggles with the potential collapse of all structures. Both of them enable us to touch the Divine in different and complementary ways, and God, says the Torah making sure we understand, God is standing on that stairway, forever approving both motions.

There were always two motions in our heritage: two stories of creation, two trees in the center of Eden, two beginnings of the year (Rosh Hashanah and Pesach), a written Torah **שבתב** and an oral one **תורה על-פה**, the **פרשה** portion and the Haphtarah - as my friend in Israel, Rabbi Dani Segal, taught me, our sages made sure we constantly live with two voices.

Our third father Yaakov, is the father of Duality, receiving a blessing from his father with his voice, and his brothers' hands; building a nation with both Rachel and Leah. We meet him at the beginning of our portion fleeing from his duality, and then meet him at the end of our portion, standing in Machanaim, which in Hebrew can also be translated as *the place of diversity*, finally acknowledging his dualities on the way back home. There were always two motions, and so the Jewish world will forever have two centers, two different Jewish soundtracks echoing to each other. We too, have to arrive to Machanaim, acknowledging our different qualities and their roles, and on this week of Thanksgiving, thanking for them.

Last Wednesday, for the first time ever, a woman was arrested in the Kotel because she was wearing her Talit. That young woman, Nofrat Frenkel, is a (conservative) Masorti member of our congregation in Kfar Saba. It happened after Rabbi Ovadia Yosef declared that women wearing a Talit are stupid, and after his statement that a man who sees a woman donning Tefillin at the Kotel should give her two slaps and kick her out. The fact that Israel's police arrested Nofrat at the Kotel for putting on her Talit is unperceived and dangerous. So in half an hour, in Israel's time, after Shabbat is over, Masorti congregants and hundreds of other Israelis will be marching in the streets of Jerusalem, opposing the increasing religious coercion in Jerusalem. This is a moment when your **ברי** *certitude*-quality is needed. A scale defining what is right and what is unacceptably wrong, defining how we win this battle and enable thousands of

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Israelis who have come to hate Judaism find their way back to a moderate, tolerant, and Zionist one.

I dedicate this Dvar-Torah to Nofrat Frenkel, and to all Israelis fighting for the freedom of Jewish religion in our country. Woman soldiers of the IDF fighting to pray in a synagogue at their base when their commanders forbid that; brides and converts fighting to immerse in the state Mikvehs which are locked before them; Masorti communities fighting to have a building in which they can gather and pray; Noam Masorti youth fighting to be recognized as a youth movement by the state of Israel.

I dedicate this Dvar Torah to all of them, marching in the streets of Jerusalem not only for themselves but for every conservative, moderate, Zionist Jew in the world who is part of the story of Israel. Today my legs are here, but by God, in half an hour my soul will be marching with theirs in Israel. I pray that yours will, too. I also pray that you will forgive me if needed, and share your thoughts with me regarding us. May we teach our children to talk with each other with delight and with no fear.