

Sacred Spaces

*On the Occasion of the Eightieth Anniversary of Leo Gans' Bar Mitzvah
In Celebration of Yonatan Cohen's Bar Mitzvah in Zichron Ya'akov*

Ki Tetze 5779

I.

It seems altogether fitting and appropriate that our community celebrates with Leo and Eva this morning, on the occasion of Leo's 80th anniversary of his bar mitzvah.

I say fitting for two reasons: Parashat Ki Tetze is the ultimate Bar Mitzvah parshah, or anniversary to celebrate a Bar Mitzvah, as it has more mitzvot than any other parshah in the Torah, with no fewer than seventy four, or, for those mathematically oriented in the congregation, just under one out of every eight mitzvot in the entire Torah is found in this week's parshah.

Secondly, about six thousand miles from here, and just a few hours ago, we are celebrating, along with Alysa and Amir Cohen, the Bar Mitzvah of their dear son, Yonatan Shaul, whose incredible smile we can feel all this distance away.

It feels like such a special confluence of events to be marking bar mitzvah's spanning such a length of time- the pasuk in Tehillim teaches us that the lifespan of a man is seventy years, and in cases of special strength, eighty years, **ימי שנותינו בהם שבעים שנה, ואם בגבורות שמונים**, and so, to be able to connect these two celebrations is no small matter.

When I think of Yonatan, the truth is that I can't remember a single time when I saw him and he was not smiling. He is the very embodiment of the mishnah in Pirkei Avot, **הוי מקבל כל אדם בספר**, **פנים יפות**, to greet each person with a pleasant, really adorable face.

We were able to send, thanks to Yonatan's grandparents, a gift for Yonatan this morning, the Sefer Ha-Chinuch, which discusses not only the seventy four mitzvot in this week's parshah, but all of the mitzvot in the Torah.

We know that Yonatan will make Alysa and Amir, and his entire family, very proud by observing these mitzvot in his own very sweet and endearing way. And we, of course, want to thank Alysa and Amir for contributing to sponsoring kiddush this week in Yonatan's honor.

II.

For Yonatan, and for all of us, Leo's life has so many lessons.

It was just this past November when Leo, as well as Ken Hartoch, honored all of us by speaking about his experiences when he was just about Yonatan's age today, of the terrible events surrounding *Kristallnacht*, and his family's harrowing route to survival.

This chapter of Leo's life reminds us to take nothing for granted.

Leo celebrated his Bar Mitzvah just a few months after arriving in a new country, right here in the United States, after having fled Nazi Germany. Yonatan Cohen read his Bar Mitzvah parshah just one month after arriving in a new country as well, but the circumstances could not have been more different. Yonatan celebrated his Bar Mitzvah in the Jewish homeland, in a country that did not even exist when Leo became Bar Mitzvah. And so, for all of us, we should pause this morning to reflect on how much the Jewish people have to be grateful for at this time.

As we read this morning, **זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים**, we remember that, from the very beginning of our national journey, the Jewish people have always had enemies, those who sought to destroy us.

But, even more importantly, we also read this morning of our obligation to remember something else about our departure from Egypt. Twice, in the span of a few verses, the Torah teaches us that we must remember that we were once slaves in Egypt, and the Almighty had compassion on us to take us out of our period of national degradation in Egyptian bondage.

Therefore, Hashem commands us to take care of those who have less—the orphan, the stranger, the impoverished person, **וזכרת כי עבד היית**, **בארץ מצרים על כן אנכי מצוך לעשות את הדבר הזה**.

In this way, we fulfill not only the mitzvah of tzedakah, or of the agricultural laws pertaining to tzedakah, but equally, the mitzvah of **והלכת בדרכיו**, acting in a Divine fashion, by showing compassion on those in vulnerable places, as Hashem showed compassion on us.

And, in a deeper sense, acting with compassion is also part of remembering the attack of Amalek, for they singled out the weak for violence, as we single out the vulnerable for assistance. If they were **אכזרים**, agents of cruelty, then we must be, as the Talmud describes us, **רחמנים בני רחמנים**.

And this, in a very real sense, has been the lesson of Leo and Eva's remarkable union.

A man who very much can look back across eight decades, at his own bar mitzvah, and say, **וזכרת כי עבד היית במצרים ויפדך ה' אלוקיך**, that he was in a very dangerous and desperate situation, and that the Almighty redeemed him from that danger, and enabled him to spend so much of his life caring for those who have less, and engage in philanthropy for so many worthy Jewish causes, both locally, and in Israel, and especially right here in the shul, we can all certainly say that Leo has made good on

the mandate and responsibility for those who have been the recipients of Divine compassion to manifest similar magnanimity on others.

And so, it is for us this morning to say thank you, not merely for the support, especially when the shul needed it the most, but most especially, for the lesson of what it means to support one's shul.

III.

As we're all aware, I'm certain, a terrible tragedy happened this week in Duluth Minnesota, and authorities are still investigating the cause of it, when the Adas Israel congregation, the 3rd Street shul, which dates back to the late 19th century, was burned to the ground. During this week when we remembered the heroism of the firefighters of September 11th, we saw more heroism from fire fighters in Minnesota, who rescued the Sifrei Torah from the shul, at great personal risk.

It was heart rending to read the articles with quotes from people whose great grandparents were active in the shul, and to read of the terrible destruction that was wrought only to a physical structure, but to the House of God, and to the soul of a community. Each person interviewed spoke with intense pain and sorrow of the loss of their sacred space.

All too often in life, it is only when we lose someone, or something, or some place very special, that we truly appreciate what it is that we have. As we approach this most sacred time of year, it is so important that we

take a moment to reflect on our beloved shul, and what it means to us and to our community.

I think of all of the people- Avi and Ben and Josh and Adira and Tom and Steve, and each and every one of the CSS volunteers, who give so much of their time and energy, whatever their family and work obligations, to make sure she is fully safe, and for all CSS members, Avi asked me to remind everyone about the evacuation drill tonight, which we will all participate in next Shabbat as well.

I think of Jon and Steve and the entire medical committee making sure that all of our medical equipment is up to date and ready in case anyone, God forbid, ever needs help quickly.

I think of all of the people, Emma and Ilana as committee chairs, and Shevy, and Boaz and Raz, our new Shlichim, and all of our wonderful group leaders, who work so hard with our children every single week, and Abbe, of course, with Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, to ensure that their formative years are filled with wonderful memories of shul, that their Judaism can be exciting and positive and uplifting and engaging, and meaningful, so that, as they mature, they will come to appreciate the profound sense of meaning that is part and parcel of the life of a committed Jew. And in this category, I've got to include Michael, with his camera, always ready to take a picture of it all.

I think of Shira Wetrin going around delivering welcome baskets to our new families, along with Ben, of course. Their work has been

extraordinary, and we have, thank God, added thirty five new members this past year.

I think of Allen working so hard on the shul's finances as treasurer, and Ruth and Shmuel in the Sephardic minyan, and Sigi and Effie and Ryan Richmond in the daily minyan, and Ryan again with seudah shlishit, and Henry and Daniel Wetrin and Steve once again with the building, Bob and Uri and the entire board, whose tireless efforts are hardly ever known to the rest of the congregation.

I know how truly blessed we all are to be part of a community where people love their shul and are there for her, so that we can all emulate what Eva and Leo have done for this congregation for so many decades.

Our rabbis taught us, **אם אין קמה, אין תורה**, if there is no sustenance, no financial support, we will not succeed in our mission to build a Torah institution of quality and substance, that illuminates our minds, touches our hearts, strengthens our spirits, and above all, can be there for us when we need her the most.

As we formally launch our Yom Kippur appeal over the course of the next month, we ask that you give as generously as possible so that our beautiful shul can be all of those things, for ourselves, for our children, and, as Bob always reminds us, for generations yet unborn. Let everyone participate, **איש כמתנת ידו**, everyone in accordance with their ability, for we each have a share in this sacred space.

IV.

Eva and Leo, we wish you a mazal tov on this momentous occasion.

Most of all, we thank you for living up to what a Bar Mitzvah is all about, of assuming responsibility as a full member of the Jewish community. For Yonatan, halfway across the world, we have every confidence that he will live up to the title, Bar Mitzvah, the one who is commanded, and executes, but you, Leo, have actually done it.

And now, it is our turn, it is our responsibility, to receive the baton and carry it forward into the new year which now beckons just over the horizon, and into the future. We cherish and respect the lessons of your remarkable life, and they constitute our road map into the future.

With unflagging faith in He who delivered you from the raging fire that consumed the country of your birth some eight decades ago, we move forward. We hope that, one day, we will be able to say that we made you proud.