

My Shoes in Israel: Returning with Three Questions
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A wise man once said: “Before insulting someone, try walking a mile in their shoes. That way if you insult them, you’re a mile away. And you have their shoes.” (Jack Handy)

If you laughed, raise your hand. If I just insulted you... give me your shoes.
We laugh for all kinds of reasons. Sometimes it’s because within our jokes, there are truths.
We laugh because the truth, we know, is that walking in someone else’s shoes is so very hard. Maybe impossible.

This week our Torah puts us in some very uncomfortable shoes. It’s a story that many of you know well. Some may know it from reading it each year. Others may know it as “Act One” of an amazing technicolor musical. Yes, they are different, but they open with the same theme: the power of brotherly hatred.

When Joseph blurts out his dreams to his brothers, about how they bow down to him, he shows absolutely no interest or capacity for empathy. We know this because we’re told after he tells the first dream that they hated him. But he does it again. He just didn’t have a clue of what it was like to walk in the shoes of his own family, his brothers.

That’s the part of the story we know best. Those are the shoes we try on year after year. But there’s another encounter in the story this week that I find most puzzling. It’s about a walk that Joseph takes. His brothers are out in the field, and his father says, essentially, *go find your brothers*. So he goes. He gets lost, and he bumps into someone— what the Torah calls an *ish*, not exactly a person but a quasi-Divine being.

This godly being asks Joseph a question: *Mah t’vakeish* — “what is it that you’re seeking?” Joseph answers: *et achay anochi m’vakeish*, “I am seeking my brothers.” Imagine this moment in between the question and Joseph’s answer. How long does Joseph sit with that question before answering? We don’t know. We only know that he has an answer for it, but really, as we’ll soon learn, the question wins the day.

The question endures— he lives with it his whole life. He sits with it in the pit, he sulks with it in prison, and he weeps with it all the way to the palace of Egypt. We call the Torah a “tree of life” because we live with it, and it lives with us. This week, stepping into the shoes of Joseph, I’d like for us to confront that question.

Last month I visited Israel, along with three other leaders from our community. When I decided to go, I confronted the core question, *mah t’vakesh*. I heard that question everywhere, asking me why we were going? For some, they were asking, “why in the world would you go there now!” and for others, it was a genuine, “what are your goals?”

My goal was to be present and to help establish a meaningful, long-term relationship between our community here and the people of Kibbutz Nir Oz, with whom we have a number of relationships. None of us can know what it’s like to walk in the shoes of those who are caught up in this war: the shoes of those families we met who on October 7th whose loved ones were killed, brutalized, or abducted; the shoes- or bare feet- of hostages; the stiff boots of reservists called up. I find it even more of a stretch to

imagine what it's like to be in the shoes of any one of the millions of Palestinians who just want to live freely; who every day have no idea if they're going to die from a bomb, or a raid, or what. Perhaps it's never been harder for Jews, especially Israeli Jews, to do that. *Mah t'vakeish*, what was I seeking? At the heart of my decision, *et achay anochi m'vakeish*, I was seeking the connection to my brethren, my people. I was going for them, and for us. If the adage is true, that "the shortest distance between two people is a story," I was going for our shared story.

I'm not planning on showing many images tonight of what I saw or learned. On Sunday morning we'll do much more of that. Instead, tonight I want to share with you just one image. I want to speak frankly and from my heart; nothing overly polished, just a reflection on being there, and, most importantly, being back.

These are my shoes.



Without context you look at them and see a lot of dirt. I look at them and see dust and ashes. I look at them, and I feel the ground underneath them. I walked through maybe a dozen or more homes— crime scenes, really— which were ransacked and mostly burned to the ground.

You've probably seen these images; it's different to breathe them, to smell, to feel them.

Through these shoes I felt the crunch of the rubble and broken glass from picture frames. I felt the ruffling of torn children's books, and toys that were broken or melted together; I felt the stickiness of half-dried puddles of blood. After leaving one of the houses, I felt something on the sole of my shoe— a clump of dog hair. I thought I'd stepped around it, but there's no way to avoid all of the destruction.

Before entering each home, we learned a bit whose it was. In each of the homes, there were remnants of what people loved. Not the most expensive stuff remained— all of that was looted—but the sentimental things. Stuff that carries memories.

When we left, I realized these were the only shoes I had. I had to wear them the rest of my trip.

I tried to brush them off as best I could before I went to the hotel in Eilat where all the families were living. Walking into the hotel was quite a scene; hundreds of people all over the lobby. The best way I could describe it is, it felt like a waiting room *and* a shiva *and* a playground *and* a hotel lobby. It didn't feel like a home, that's for sure. But it was very, very much alive.

It was at the hotel, perhaps more than anywhere else, that I felt the response to the question *mah t'vakeish*, what are we seeking? *Achay anochi m'vakeish*, "I'm seeking my people," my other "siblings" in this House of Israel that we talk so much about liturgically but rarely clarify.

We sat with families and individuals, all of whom had loved ones who were killed or abducted. And they wanted to talk to us— or, I should say, the ones who spent time with us wanted us to listen. We did. We listened to their grief, their anger, their vulnerability, their exhaustion. It was not all tears. They were also leaning on humor, some of it, as we know from our history, can be dark.

I learned this the hard way, in the first five minutes of arriving there. We had brought them a few boxes of their pomegranates from the kibbutz. Walking across the lobby I accidentally dropped one, and it exploded all over the floor, 613 seeds and all. It's not lost on me— and I'm sure wasn't lost them— that the Hebrew word for pomegranate is *rimon*—also the word for *grenade*.

Can you imagine what that was like to be in my shoes at that moment? Silence in the lobby— you could hear a pin drop. Until, suddenly, everyone burst into laughter, on my account. I’ve never felt so much relief from being ridiculed shamelessly by dozens of little kids. Now, if, hearing that, you don’t know whether to laugh or cry, then I think you have a good sense of the chaos. But it didn’t keep them from playing, from shooting Duke basketballs with me into my manmade hoops.

Last week, during the ceasefire, as hostages were released, I was following the names, obsessively, asking “are Z’s nephews on this list?” or, “I see N’s mom, but where’s his dad?” Or “what about S, whose pregnant wife I was just talking to— whose beautiful little girls just giggled at me?” Now when I see them or their loved ones on the news, I don’t feel like I have any better a sense of what it’s like to walk in their shoes than before my trip. That has not changed. What has changed is how I see my own shoes: as a Jew.; an American; a Rabbi; perhaps most challengingly, as a human being. What has changed is how I grapple with the questions of these identities.

When the 20th c. novelist and poet Gertrude Stein lay on her deathbed, facing the ultimate unknown, she turned to her life partner Alice B. Toklas and asked her, “what is the answer?” Toklas sat there unable to say anything. Stein said, “In that case, what is the question?” Now, having been home a month, reflecting on all the steps I took, I want to return to this question, *mah t’vakeish*, what are you seeking? Thinking about the encounter between Joseph and that being, it dawns on me that the Hebrew *mah t’vakeish* can also be translated, “what are you asking?” Or, better yet, as Stein’ “what is the question?”

Standing in these shoes, listening to American Judaism, with the echo of just a few days of Israeli discourse, I feel so lost. Do any of you? I feel we are lost because, in part, we don’t know *mah t’vakeish*, what to make of all the questions that we’re crashing into all at once. I would like to try to name just a few of these questions, which are and have always been fundamental to American Jewish identity.

Question 1. What is Jewish peoplehood?

When we say *Am Yisrael*, the Jewish people, who do we mean? When we offer blessings for life cycle events, we talk about Beit Yisrael, the House of Israel. To what extent do our spheres of obligation extend to those in other countries? To those of other denominations, including ultra-Orthodoxy? I don’t know “the answer,” but I know that we have many different views. For some, the talmudic dictum, *kol Yisrael arevim zeh lazeh*, that “all Jews are responsible for each other,” really reflects the core part of their Judaism. For others, the strict notion of peoplehood is nebulous, even jarring; terms like, *am segula*, God’s chosen or “treasured people,” have little to no resonance. Or perhaps they do but fall secondary to other identities of selfhood, in this culture of increasing fluidity.

This is the age-old tension between Universalism and Particularism in Judaism. In this moment of war, Jewish particularism is pushed to its limits by the state of the Jewish State. Take this question into October 7th....

Question 2. Am I safe?

The rise of antisemitism and Jew-hatred in America is indisputable. We’ve seen the data, but more than that, we’re feeling it. We are being offended personally, professionally— micro *and* macro-aggressively.

We find ourselves having to explain to our why people hate us. Perhaps more alarmingly, they are explaining it to us. Some of us have lost friends and colleagues. Jews are hiding their *tzitzit*, tucking their Jewish stars under shirts. *What is going on here? How’s this possible, in this nation that- at least we thought- offered Jews unprecedented safety?* If we are not safe in America today—where bigotry has

been given, and may again be given, the sanction of the most powerful office of the world, the White House—then where can we be safe? Where will we go? Take *this* question into October 7th....

Question 3. What's my relationship with the State of Israel? If “all the people of Israel are responsible for each other,” what is my responsibility to the State that houses 46% of Jews worldwide? After October 7th this question could no longer be ignored or dismissed by anyone who identifies with the Jewish story. What is our obligation to keep Jews safe? If all that's “out there” being told is the warts of Israel, what's my obligation to speak about its remarkable merits? Not only technologically, but of far greater import, the social and civic progress?

Inextricably we must ask: what are our Jewish obligations to keep human beings safe in a State that calls itself Jewish? How can Judaism survive with a semblance of integrity given the inhumanity of the occupation, the unapologetic dehumanization of Palestinians? How do we find our “moral voice” in this time of war, when many of the Israeli leaders of this war include the likes of Itamar Ben-Gvir, who calls for Palestinian genocide? Is it morally and ethically possible to fulfil an obligation the State of Israel that deletes the mitzvah of saving Palestinians lives? And when we speak out, do we do so in public, or just in private? (See Question #2, the rise of antisemitism.)

There are more than three questions, but I do believe these three we must face now, because they've been facing us all along. The war is changing every day. Today, I want a ceasefire. Tomorrow, ask me tomorrow. But these questions, they aren't going anywhere.

What does it mean to be a part of the Jewish people?

Am I safe?

How do I relate responsibly to Israel?

When I got home, the first thing I noticed when I got out of my car was my shoes. You can imagine what I wanted to do with those shoes. And I did just that. Before even touching the front door of my house, before hugging my family, I took them off and I threw them in the trash. (Maybe with some choice words, best spoken in Yiddish). I don't know why. I just did it.

And now, in these shoes, I am more confused about American Judaism and our obligations than ever before. Perhaps that unbecoming of a rabbi to say—and not the greatest Chanukah gift—but it's the truth. I really don't know. However, I will say this—and not as if to wrap this all in a bow, but to affirm a belief that I kindle with every Chanukah candle we light this week. I do have faith, a leap of faith, that if we ask, *mah t'vakeish*, if we learn how to return to the questions that we do share, then it's possible to discover a pathway forward that makes us proud of who we are, in our own shoes. We absolutely can shape a future that is brighter than the present day.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon – May this be God's will, for us to fulfill.

Amen.