

What I Learned from Covid-Binging

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I have a Covid confession to make...During the countless days, weeks, and months of being mostly homebound; When one Blursday ran into another, and weekdays became almost indistinguishable from weekends, I too binged on Netflix. Not just Netflix, but a little Hulu here, a little HBO there. To my surprise we do have an AppleTV account, and an Amazon Prime Video account...who knew? I'll tell you who knew...my kids knew! "We've always had HBO Max, Abba!" If you say so!

Now, to be perfectly honest, I also have read more books for pleasure in these past several months than ever before; taken more walks and family hikes than we ever did before the artificial, brick and mortar entertainment venues became inaccessible. But I am perfectly aware that binge watching a show or a series is perhaps the definition of what the Sages called *bittul Torah*; a waste of time that could otherwise be spent studying Torah. So in my finely-tuned rabbinic mind, I decided that I would carefully curate the shows I spent time having my brain sucked into. I decided that I would become a connoisseur, a doyenne of Israeli television. Rather than watching the dubbed versions, I listened carefully to the original Hebrew dialogue, expanding my Hebrew vocabulary with each episode. And I felt that I was also maintaining a connection with *Eretz Yisrael* and *Medinat Yisrael*, even though I have never felt Israel more inaccessible to me than I have during the pandemic. So, you see, I rationalized my binging!

I must say that for a very small country, the cinema and television production is remarkably well done; artful, poignant, sophisticated, raw, and emotional. I consumed *Fauda*, *False Flag*, *When Heroes Fly*, *Hostages*, *Prisoners of War*, *Tehran*, *Valley of Tears*, *The Red Sea Diving Resort*, *Our Boys*, *The Spy*...Even as you hear the words of these titles, maybe you can detect a certain theme; a common denominator in what these programs grapple with so deeply. Each one, from their own unique perspective, and from various eras in the history of the Modern State of Israel contend with the complexity of the Jewish people possessing lethal force; What does it mean for Jews to have a formidable army; a legendary—almost fabled—security service; the most advanced, powerful technology able to inflict crippling damage on any of Israel's enemies. Not since the Bible have Jews been considered a mighty people. But that same Bible teaches "*Lo v'chayil v'lo v'choach, ki im beruchi amar Hashem Tzeva'ot,*" Not by might nor by power, but by My spirit said the Lord of Hosts." (Zech. 4:6) That same Bible teaches *Ve'chitetu charvotam l'itim, va'chaninoteihem l'mazmeirot*, They shall beat their swords into ploughshares—what was once used to kill people will now be used to feed them, *Lo yisa go el goy cherev ve'lo yil'medu od milchama*, "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." (Is. 2:4) Now don't get me wrong. Thank God the Jewish people finally have the ability to defend ourselves. Thank God for Israel's incredible Army; thank God for the modern heroes of the Jewish people, the men and women of the IDF who protect our holy land, and the single-largest population of Jews living anywhere in the world. Thank God for the sense of security that Army provides, far beyond its borders, guaranteeing that Jews will always have a safe haven if the dark clouds of persecution find them in some other place. But these films and programs sensitively and poignantly expose us to a side of that power that we don't often see or think about: The toll that it takes on soldiers to engage in ferocious combat; The reality of prisoners of war and torture;

the loss of comrades and friends; the almost crippling fear of combat and operations deep in hostile territory; the meaning of a civilian army returning to “life as normal” after their terms of service conclude; the realities of clandestine forces being embedded for extended periods of time in enemy countries, leaving behind spouses, parents, and children who know little to nothing about the top secret movements of their loved ones. All of this is integral to the defense of the Jewish state. All of this, in a sense, is the price that is paid by so many who stand guard over us, over the Jewish people within the borders of the State of Israel and far beyond them.

Our parasha this morning is the source of a Jewish religious practice to this very day. Though there are four scriptural citations for the mitzvah of *tefillin*, it is the mention in Parashat Bo that the Talmud understands as the source for placing the *tefillin* worn on one’s weaker arm, rather than one’s dominant arm. So a right-handed person wraps *tefillin* on their left arm and hand, while a left handed person wraps *tefillin* on their right arm and hand. I invite you to look once again at the *chumash*, at the very last verse of the Torah portion. It is on page 393 in the Etz Hayim, Exodus chapter 13, verse 16. It will help you to understand what I am about to say if you can actually see it with your eyes. Referring to what would become the ritual of donning *tefillin*, the Torah says, *ve’haya le’ot al yad’cha u’letotafot bein einecha*...they will be a sign upon your hand and a symbol between your eyes...The word for hand *yad’cha* is misspelled, so to speak. There’s even an asterisk, at least in the Etz Hayim, drawing attention to the strange spelling. Rather than *yud-dalet-chaf sofit*, which is the spelling of *yad’cha* we would expect, the word ‘your hand’ is spelled *yud-dalet-chaf-hey*. Now of course, there are no misspellings in the Torah, and every variant in the scroll is there to teach us something. So what are we to make of this bizarre alternative spelling of ‘your hand?’ Rav Ashi in tractate Menachot in the Talmud argues that it is spelled this way because it’s actually two different words; *Yad*: hand, *kei-ha*: weaker. From this alternative spelling and interpretation, Rav Ashi rules that *tefillin* should be placed on the *yad keiha*, the weaker hand.

So every morning, when I put on *tefillin*, my attention is drawn not to the dominant, controlled dexterity of my stronger hand, but to my weaker, somewhat less-limber arm. The strong arm is always associated with the arm of God. *Ki be’yad chazakah hotzi’acha mei’eretz mitzrayim*, with a strong arm I brought you out of Egypt, God says. *B’chozek yad hotzi-anu Adonai mimitzrayim mibeit avadim*, we recite in the Passover Haggadah, with the strength of God’s hand we were brought out of Egypt the house of bondage. Our human strength is to be defined and curtailed by holiness, virtue, the sacredness of life, and the ultimate desire not to have to use force to solve our problems. Isaiah’s messianic vision of a world where nations beat swords into plowshares and never again know war does not imagine that there will never be a disagreement; that all strife, disputes, and discord will be eradicated from the world. The prophet Isaiah acknowledges that that’s all part of human nature....his messianic vision instead is that those conflicts won’t be resolved with violence! Instead, they will be resolved peacefully and justly for all involved.

Sixty years ago this week, Dwight D. Eisenhower, the 34th President of the United States, and former Supreme Allied Commander in World War II, concluded his second term in office with a farewell address that included a caution to the growing military complex. The former five star general who received the surrender papers of the German High Command only 15 years earlier, said:

“A vital element in keeping the peace is our military establishment. Our arms must be mighty, ready for instant action, so that no potential aggressor may be tempted to risk his own destruction...American makers of plowshares could, with time and as required, make swords as well... We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications...The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.”

The State of Israel also understands the precariousness of great power. From its strict rules of *Tohar ha'neshek*, the precise conditions of when a soldier is authorized to use lethal force, to the rigorous self-scrutiny and inquiry of the IDF, to the political and spiritual demands of being a military presence in the West Bank along with daily encounters with Palestinians, this is an army that is highly attuned to the moral dimensions of its operations, as our American forces are, may God bless and protect them. It is also acutely aware of its effects on the Israeli psyche and soul. Just watch one of those heart-wrenching Israeli dramas for a bird's eye view. Who can forget Prime Minister Golda Meir's immortal words at London press conference: “When peace comes,” she said, “we will perhaps in time be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons.”

Tefillin are a reminder that God continues to be ‘wrapped up’ with the Jewish people. Placing *tefillin* on our weaker arm should sensitize us that when we experience conflict, we should strive to solve our problems whenever possible not with force, but with the pursuit of peace; not with violence, but with compromise and reconciliation. We Jews are certainly not pacifists. Neither human life nor Jewish life is cheap or expendable. But as a people of Torah, a people of holiness—whether on conventional battlefields or other domains of conflict in our lives—we must always moderate *chayil ve'choach*, brute power and might, with *ruach Ha'Shem*, the infinitely more powerful spirit of God.

Now, what to watch next? I am open to your suggestions...