

Shabbat Tekumah, The Shabbat of Rebirth

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A few weeks ago, my son Ethan asked me to list all the special Shabbats during the year. I don't know exactly why he was asking; it might have been for one of the Jewish teen trivia contests he participates in; or maybe it was for Nissan Madness. (If you want to know what Nissan Madness, you have to ask Ethan; but I think I by saying that, I may have increased the chances that he will run home as fast as he can as soon as the service ends!).

Anyway, when I made my list, I left off Shabbat Tekumah. I had never heard of Shabbat Tekumah. I thought I was missing something, so I asked a few colleagues, and none of them had heard of Shabbat Tekumah either. Has anyone here ever heard of Shabbat Tekumah? Well, guess what? Today is Shabbat Tekumah! Happy Shabbat Tekumah!

Shabbat Tekumah is the Shabbat of Rebirth. It is a relatively recent designation for this Shabbat between Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, and Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel Independence Day. And I hope that by the end of my remarks, you will agree that this Shabbat is worthy of the name. Say it a couple times: Shabbat Tekumah. It doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, but with practice. ...

Let's understand the way the calendar works. Yom HaShoah was observed for the first time in 1951. The Knesset knew it needed a day to memorialize the victims of the Holocaust, but it wasn't clear when that should be. For a couple years, the Israeli Rabbinate observed a Holocaust remembrance on the 10th of Tevet, in December, because that was already a fast day. The Knesset considered the 14th of Nisan, which was the day the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising began. But the 14th of Nisan is Erev Pesah, and we know what Passover preparations are like; and, besides, Holocaust remembrance doesn't really fit well with even the most boring of *seders*.

They settled on the 27th of Nisan, a week after Passover ends. This period of Sefirat HaOmer is traditionally a time of quasi-mourning for Rabbi Akiva's students, who were said to die during this season. 27 Nisan creates a powerful trajectory because one week later, on the 4th of Iyar, we mark Yom HaZikaron, Memorial Day for Israel's fallen soldiers and victims of terror; and the day after that, the 5th of Iyar, is Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel Independence Day. The narrative of destruction to rebirth mirrors the *sefer* narrative of slavery to Freedom. It makes sense why someone would designate this Shabbat in the middle of that trajectory as the Shabbat of Rebirth, Shabbat Tekumah.

The Israeli way of remembering is special. The full name for Yom HaShoah is Yom Hazikaron LaShoah VliGevurah, Memorial Day for Holocaust and Heroism. Heroism is key. It's different from International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which is on January 27. International Holocaust Remembrance Day was established by the UN in 2005; and January 27 was chosen because that is the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau by the Red Army. International Holocaust

Remembrance Day recalls how the world swooped in to rescue helpless Jewish victims. Of course, six million of their brethren had been murdered before the world finally woke up.

But our Holocaust Day is different. On Yom HaZikaron LaShoah v'liGevurah, we remember heroic fighters who joined Mordechai Anilewicz's quixotic attempt to fight back. Their rebellion was quashed, but their courage to exercise Jewish agency was never forgotten. Israel Memorial Day, which we will mark on Tuesday, is also a sad day in Israel. But it is very different to die while wearing a Jewish uniform. It is different to die while defending a sovereign state. It is even different to be killed in a terror attack in the Jewish homeland than like the helpless victims of the Shoah. That's what "Never Again" means on Shabbat Tekumah. It means that Jews will never again be denied agency to shape our destiny. Shabbat Tekumah celebrates the return of the Jewish people as agents of history.

Today is Rosh Hodesh, so we read a special Haftarah. But the Haftarah designated for Parashat Metzor (which is the Haftarah I chanted at my bar mitzvah) draws an interesting parallel to Shabbat Tekumah. That story from Second Kings centers around four lepers who were dwelling outside the gates of Samaria. For the Bible, leprosy is associated with death. People afflicted with the white skin disease were sent outside the city and "left for dead."

The irony, though, is that these four lepers were the safe ones. The city of Samaria was under siege by the Arameans and the people inside were starving. The lepers were starving, too, so they set out in search of food. When they found an Aramean camp, they hoped they might beg for mercy from the soldiers there. But they soon discovered that the camp had been abandoned. The lepers take food and then alert the city leaders that the siege is not being enforced. The Israelites plunder the Aramean camp and disaster is averted.

Think about that story in light of this amazing week of national rebirth. A city saved by four individuals who were left for dead. A people rises up from apparent destruction. A miracle works itself out through the actions of ordinary human beings. The people celebrate; but we know their victory is not the end of the story. The Israelites will fail again. There will be highs and lows, and throughout the vicissitudes of history, there will be prophets and other leaders reminding them that might does not make right. They, we are a people destined to live by certain values, commanded to follow divine laws. Agents of history are burdened with great responsibilities – responsibilities not shared by the victims of history.

On Wednesday, we will celebrate 75 years of Israel's independence as the homeland of Jewish agency. Megillat HaAtzmaut, Israel's Declaration of Independence enumerates the great responsibilities of that endeavor. "The State of Israel..." it says in part, "will be based on the precepts of liberty, justice, and peace taught by the Hebrew Prophets, [and] will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens, without distinction of race, creed, or sex. ..." Democracies bear a burden to protect all their citizens, regardless of whom citizens vote for in any election. They bear a responsibility as well towards non-citizens who live with non-permanent status under non-permanent military rule.

The responsibilities of agency are immense, and they extend even beyond the Jewish state. It is difficult to exaggerate the degree to which our Jewish community is more settled, secure, and politically

powerful than the European Jewish communities of the early 20th-century. Our success is directly attributable to the existence of the State of Israel. The modern State of Israel gives us power ... and a clear responsibility to use that power to protect those members of society who don't share what we have, whether it is:

- Immigrants looking for refuge within our borders,
- Citizens of color still suffering from historic and systemic injustices,
- The poor and other disadvantaged individuals.

We are agents of history with a mandate to repair and improve our world. Representative of the Hebrew prophets referenced in Israel's Declaration of Independence, we must hear the words of Micah: "הגיד לך אדם מה טוב, God has told us human beings what is good, and what Adonai demands. כי עם עשות משפט, It is only to do justice, ואהבת חסד, and to love kindness, עם אלהיך, and to walk modestly with Your God."

That is the message of Shabbat Tekumah, the Shabbat of Rebirth. 75 years after the establishment of the modern State of Israel, our responsibilities as agents of history and partners with God continue. Shabbat shalom.