

We Must Continue to Live – Parashat Shemot 5784

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I wasn't so surprised to hear the news that Israel was withdrawing some troops from Gaza. It doesn't mean the war is ending and it is far from guaranteed that these withdrawals will be permanent. But it makes sense. Israel's army is made up largely of reservists, folks who had to leave families and jobs to join their units and retrain before joining the fight. Their families, the Israeli economy, the fabric of society cannot afford to have them on the front lines forever.

Anecdotally, we already knew it to be happening. Some of you were here a few weeks ago when Ido Naaman, the Israeli *shaliach* from B'nai Tzedek, spoke to us about his experiences in Gaza. Ido's unit was called up shortly after October 7, and he returned to the US about 7 weeks later. On Sunday, I learned that Matthew Goodman, a multi-generational part of the B'nai Israel family, had returned to Washington after spending nearly three months with his unit in Israel. The return of these soldiers does not signal the end of the war, and they may well be called back. But we can imagine the joy their families felt in knowing their loved ones were safe.

I know that for Ido and Matthew, the experience of returning from battle was surreal and difficult as well. Ido reported feeling uneasy seeing people sitting in cafes and life looking a little too normal in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Matthew is still adjusting, but his mother told me how tough it has been to see people celebrating usual life moments while the war is still raging. Even in Israel, there was a barbecue celebration on the base, and Matthew felt he couldn't participate; it didn't feel right for him to experience joy while his peers were still enduring the hardships of war.

We aren't on the front lines, but we may feel it, too. I think of words from the medieval Spanish poet Yehudah Halevi: "לבי במזרח ואני בסוף מערב", My heart is in the East, but I am at the furthest point in the West. "איך אטעמא את אשר אכל ואיך אערב", How can I taste the food I eat? How can I experience sweetness" while Zion is ruled by foreign armies?

I understand that feeling of distance and longing every time someone asks me, "How are you doing?" I want to say, "Fine." Except I am not "fine." The world is not "fine." And yet life is moving forward and we can't, we don't want to miss out.

The Etz Hayim *humash* references a beautiful *midrash* from the Talmud. We read at the beginning of chapter 2 this morning that "A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and she had a child." We know the rest of the story. We know that child is Moses; and we know the man and woman to be Amram and Yocheved, even though they are not named until chapter 6. But there's a problem. Moses is not their firstborn child. Moses has an older sister, Miriam, and older brother, Aaron. So why does the Torah not mention their births in between their parents' marriage and the birth of Moses?

A modern critic would point out that there are multiple authors and sources. But that is not nearly as interesting or creative an approach as *midrash* provides. On the words: “A certain man went,” the Talmud asks: “להיכן הוא הלך?,” where did he go? He went after his daughter’s advice.” The Talmud cites an earlier tradition: “Amram was a leader of the generation. When he heard Pharaoh’s decree to cast newborn male children into the Nile, he announced: ‘This is all a waste of time!’ and he went and divorced his wife. Upon seeing this, the other Israelite men went and divorced their wives as well.

“But Amram’s daughter Miriam pushed back. ‘*Abba!*,’ she said, ‘your decree is more harsh than Pharaoh’s.’ [This comparative thinking may sound familiar to those who know the Passover Haggadah really well.] ‘Pharaoh’s decree concerns only the boys, but your decision affects would-be boys and girls. Pharaoh’s decree is only for this world, but yours extends to the World to Come as well. Pharaoh is wicked, so we don’t know if his decree will succeed; but you are righteous, and it is certain that your plan to separate men from their wives will surely succeed!’

“Upon hearing Miriam’s case, Amram went and reconciled with his wife. And, following his lead, all the other men went and reconciled with their wives as well.”

And this was the beginning of the redemption. Redemption did not begin when Moses went back to Egypt. It didn’t begin with the Israelites groaning and recognizing something was not right. Redemption began with the commitment our ancestors made, despite the circumstances, that they would live their lives. It is an imperative that would eventually find its way into Leviticus: *vachai bahem*, God gives us the Torah and commandments so we should live by them. I mentioned last week that hundreds and hundreds of years of Jewish history have demonstrated that assimilation is not an affective tool against antisemitism. And shutting down the economy, shuttering our communities, capitulating to the gloom of the moment is not an effective strategy in wartime. We have to keep living our Jewish lives with as much confidence, pride, and joy as we can muster.

In a few weeks, my son Ethan is going to graduate from High School. At JDS, the capstone of graduation is a three-month trip to Israel. I can understand the fear and reservations some parents have, and I could never judge another person without standing in their shoes. I admit, too, that no decision is final until it is final. But for us, it feels relatively straightforward. Ethan is going to Israel because ... he can. The trip will be different because of the war, and I am firm in my assertion that teenagers shouldn’t do “solidarity missions.” But the attraction of this trip is that it is not just a visit. It is an opportunity to *experience* Israel, *volunteer* in Israel, *live* in Israel. And that’s what this moment of crisis calls upon us to do: to live our best lives.

It feels strange to go on living when so many other lives are still placed on hold, but that is part of our responsibility as Jews. We have to help Israelis, too. In the coming week, we hope to be able to announce a new partnership program to support Israelis who have been displaced from their homes to resume their lives in unfamiliar surroundings. I am so proud of the members of this congregation and others who have gone to Israel to volunteer so that life can continue despite the diminished work force.

In response to antisemitism as well. ... I’m thinking of a story from Elie Wiesel about celebrating Simchat Torah in the concentration camp. They didn’t have a Torah scroll, but a community leader

determined that because children represent the embodiment of Torah and Torah values, the people could dance with a child. Adjustments were made, but even in those horrific circumstances, life had to be lived, rituals had to be observed, if only so they would not be forgotten. The Nazis would not be assisted in their effort to separate Jews from Judaism.

Today as well, we must be vigilant. We must report even minor incidents of antisemitism, lest they become normalized. We must pay attention to security. And equally important, we must commit to living Jewish lives. We must double down on Jewish education, even and especially beyond *b'nai mitzvah*. We must commit to supporting Judaism's particularistic traditions while also working to see Judaism's universal values of justice and equality realized for all. We must teach our children *why* Judaism matters, and do everything we can to safeguard and protect our ancient heritage.

That's the message Miriam imparted to her father so long ago. Redemption is not only in the hands of our leaders. Redemption will not be achieved solely by the brave men and women on the battlefield. Redemption cannot even be delivered by God alone. Redemption will come from us, from ordinary people making the commitment to live as committed, connected, resilient Jews. *Am Yisrael chai*, the People of Israel shall live. Shabbat shalom.