

Bring Back Our Boys
Korach 5774

I.

In just a few moments we are going to say something absurd.

After we have a chance to recite our personal Mussaf prayers, the Hazan will lead us in the *"tefilah shel tzibbur"* the prayer of the community, the repetition of the *amidah* and we will recite the *kedushah*. We will turn to God and proclaim, *"Kevodo Male Olam - God's glory fills the universe."* Seconds later we will ask *"Ayeh M'kom Kevodo - Where is the the location of God's glory?"*

Which declaration is true? Is a life of faith about seeing God's presence fill the universe? Or, is a life of faith about searching for God? Asking, pleading, to find God's presence? Which approach animates Jewish prayer? How can they both be true?

II.

This week has been a hard week for the Jewish people. Three yeshiva students are still missing, having been kidnapped in a terribly cruel way, and along with Ayal, Naftali, and Gilad, their parents, siblings, families, classmates, and friends are also emotionally in captivity. Indeed, the entire Jewish world is united in concern, anxiety, worry, dread and prayer.

Tens of thousands have gathered for prayer vigils at the Kotel. At other cities in Israel, massive gatherings of Jews from across the religious and political spectrum have convened to pray for the captives, and demand their release. School children have organized recitations of the Book of Psalms. High school students have organized Torah learning projects in the merit of the captives. Israelis of every religious background and ideology have found ways to express their concern and their support. Massive quantities of food have been donated to soldiers conducting search operations. Normal life in Israel this week has come to a halt as prayer and acts of solidarity have filled the central stage.

And fortunately, unlike the situation in the past, we now have an army and a government that can act to protect Jews. This means that in addition to prayers and raising voices of conscience, the Jewish people has responded to the kidnappings through politics as well. The Israeli government and the Israeli opposition each have their own political worldview with which they make sense of unfolding events, and in light of which they advocate for various policies. And, despite the discomfort and division that politics causes, it is a blessing that Jews have the opportunity to face our challenges, politically and not just spiritually.

III.

But for those of us who are not decision makers in the upper echelons of the Israeli government and who are not currently serving in any capacity in the IDF or in Israel's security establishment, this week has represented a tortuous confluence of supreme anxiety and a sense of supreme helplessness and impotence. We are so very worried about our boys, and we have so little that we can do for them.

IV.

However, we do have the capacity to make a difference and understanding that is both empowering and imperative.

First: Our public and visible solidarity with the State of Israel is of strategic value to Israel. A robust turnout at the communal vigil this coming Monday afternoon - details are in the bulletin - will send a message to Washington and to Jerusalem that Americans of good-will, Jews and non-Jews, are united in demanding the immediate release of the three captives. If 300 people turn up, that will be one message. If 3,000 turn up, that will be a very different message.

AIPAC is flying me to Israel in July, on their first-ever rabbinic mission to Israel. They aren't bringing me to Israel because of me. They're doing it because of you. Because they see ASBI as possessing unmet potential to be a source of support for Israel. Support and activism that is crucial for Israel to thrive and to flourish.

On Friday morning, I participated in a conference call for American rabbis, convened by the RCA, with Racheli Frankel, Naftali's mother. She told us that during a meeting she had taken part in earlier on Friday morning with the Prime Minister, she was told that the government of Israel is doing everything it thinks it needs to do in order to find the three captive boys. They can do that because of international support for Israel's intelligence and military operations, and that international support is something that we create when we publicly and visibly express our solidarity for Naftali, Ayal, and Gilad. I'm not endorsing the policies of the Netanyahu government. If they ever hand me control of 61 seats in the Knesset, I'll make some big changes. But, it is so very important that government is doing what it thinks it has to do, in order to find and rescue those boys. We here give the Israeli government the freedom to act in the way that it believes it has to act.

V.

But the spiritual response, the recitation of psalms, the large gatherings for prayer are also significant and imperative.

The challenges to the efficacy of prayer are well known. If God wants something to happen, my prayers will not change it. If something is not meant to occur, why should my prayers change the decision of a perfect God. Indeed, it is often quite hard to see an impact in the real world from our most fervent prayers. Responses to these objections and questions are also well known:

Prayer is a tutorial in how to feel as a Jew in the world. I don't pray what I feel, I recite *tefilot* that teach me how a religiously sensitive Jew ought to experience the world.

I pray to express and articulate my own vulnerability. I pray to express and articulate, and concretize my yearnings for a different and better world.

I also pray to demonstrate my worldview. All people wish and hope. Remember what it's like to throw a bowling ball down a lane. When the ball leaves your hand, there are a few seconds where you wait to see where the ball will hit the pins. Will you get that sweet spot? You squint your eyes, tilt your head, and try to will the ball, through the force of your own hopes and wishes, to strike the pins at precisely the correct place. Newtonian physics tell us quite clearly that once the ball leaves our hand, the outcome has been determined. But there is something deeply human about feeling that our thoughts and wishes must have some correspondence on the universe outside us. Even atheists squint their eyes when they go bowling. To be a monotheist, is to believe and experience the world in such a way that I understand all of the different forces and drives that are at play in the universe to have one source and one address. Prayer is the wishing and hoping that all human beings do, elevated by a philosophical stance that understands there to be a fundamental unity in the world. Prayer furthermore, asserts that the source of that fundamental unity, God, is sympathetic, caring, and an ongoing source of *bessed* in the world. Prayer asserts that truth and reinforces belief in that truth.

VI.

In the Torah portion that we read this morning, we hear how Korach was able to form a coalition of disparate factions, each one with its own agenda. Korach, it seems, wished to usurp the honor and role of Aaron, the high priest. He is depicted in the Torah and in rabbinic literature as cynically utilizing claims of religious equality, to mask his own power-hungry ambition. Datan and Aviram, are even more cynical. They make no pretense of representing any ideology or belief system. Rather they baldly maneuver for Moshe's leadership position.

But there are also 250 other Jews who, from all appearances, are sincere. As Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, depicts them, their desire to have an active role in the religious rites of the tabernacle was so strong that they were willing to risk their lives to serve God in this way.

According to Malbim, the 250 had leadership positions within their families and clans, but could not tolerate their exclusion from the decision making process surrounding Moshe. They wanted to serve and they wanted to influence national policy, and they couldn't see how to do that if they weren't in the "situation room" with Moshe. Indeed, their treatment is different. While they are killed, they are not swallowed up by the earth, but are consumed by a fire from heaven. The fire-pans that they used are considered holy. They must be disposed of with care. And, unlike the deaths of the others, these 250 sincere victims inspire a second round of rebelliousness from elements of the population who are indignant at their deaths.

These 250 men couldn't tolerate being outside the immediate circle of action and leadership. The only way they could imagine exercising leadership, was to have a formal leadership role. If they couldn't offer fire in the *mishkan*, if they weren't discussing policy with Moshe, then there was no other way to connect to God, or to shape their community, or to impact the world.

VII.

We must avoid this mindset - especially during a time such as this one. We aren't in the Israeli government, we aren't in the opposition, we aren't serving in Tzahal and we aren't in the security services. But our *tefilot* and our activism still have meaning and still create ripples that grow into waves and that can dramatically shape the world.

On the conference call with Racheli Frankel, she noted that the sense of *ahdut*, of unity that has been perceived this week in Israel has been palpable and has moved far beyond the level of cliché. The Haredi community, she said, has been "amazing." The Hiloni community, she told us, has been "amazing." People have been sending love and support in all kinds of ways, and praying in all kinds of ways. That momentum, she told us, has to be maintained. And she asked us, American rabbis, to do what we can, to sustain that momentum, to reinforce through our speaking and teaching and through educational initiatives that spirit of unity, of *bessed* and of good will, which gives meaning to this tragic situation. None of us know, she told us, what will happen to those three boys. But we can't miss this opportunity to build on this transformative momentum. If the terrorists had known, she concluded, the degree of solidarity and unity and mutual care, that the kidnaping would cause, they never would have dared carry out their evil act.

VIII.

Seeing God around us and searching for God are not paradoxical. They are the systole and diastole of religious life. We seek a unified address for all of the causes and effects and forces and drives that we encounter. We perceive that unity - *Kevedo Malei Olam*. And we seek to understand and make sense of God's inscrutable ways - *Ayeh Mekom Kevedo*.