

But Why Would We Go Back, Abba?

March 9, 2019

The Jewish Center

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It's very special to be back here at The Jewish Center.

When I envisioned this sabbatical, I knew in the back of my head that there might be a cost. And I thought to myself: Maybe over the course of the year, I'll lose a few members. I just didn't think I'd lose half my staff! Andrew said he wanted to make some changes in his first year as president, and boy he wasn't kidding. Who's going to go next, Mario?

Rest assured: I'll have more to say about Rabbi Zirkind and our Chazzan a little later.

I'm happy to report that Rachel and the kids are doing great. And if any of you are planning to be in Israel this week, you can come cheer for Rachel at the finish line of the Jerusalem marathon.

I wanted to share with you a snapshot of what life is like in our little Yishuv. For the record, it's important to know that a Yishuv is not the same as a moshav or a moshava. But don't worry, if you confuse the terms, one of the locals will be happy to give you a lecture on their differences....

This wasn't known to me when we first arrived in Israel, but it turns out that basically nothing in the country happens unless it's on a WhatsApp group. Obviously each shul has one – or 11 – as the case may be. Of course there's one for each of the kid's classes and youth groups and busses and the local Maariv minyan that happens in the park next door to our house and on and on.

Just to give you a little flavor for what goes on, I thought I would share with you a few messages that I've received. Many of them are in Hebrew. They're unedited. I've just done a little translation.

From the baseball coach: Hi! Reminder again that it is chilly and perhaps if you have tight fitting thermals for pants and shirt it could be recommended. (for the record, it was 60 degrees that day!) Also: this is a very make shift field so parents should bring folding chairs if they want to sit

Are you missing a rooster? It's loose on Derech Avot - hurry it is moving in the direction of Rav Tsanani's house. (He's the local shochet.)

[From a 4th grade parent] How could they have assigned pages 71 *and* 72 in the math workbook? Didn't they have just a chumash exam last Tuesday?

This Shabbat is our cholent event. We are still in need of volunteers. No experience necessary.

Breslev netz minyan. Grand kiddush. Shabbat morning. Bnei Akiva 5:55AM.

And those were just this week....

It's a beautiful community. We've felt welcomed since the moment we arrived and it will be hard to say goodbye. Which brings me to my topic this morning...

I want to return with you for a moment to a well-known passage in the gemara.

The gemara wants to know the answer to a very simple question: Why is it that on the holiday of Purim – quite unlike Chanukah – we don't recite Hallel?

And the gemara concludes with two answers (Megillah 14b)

רב נחמן אמר קרייתא זו הלילא
רבא אמר בשלמא התם הללו עבדי ה' ולא עבדי פרעה אלא הכא הללו עבדי ה' ולא עבדי אחשורוש? אכתי עבדי
אחשורוש אנן.

R. Nachman says: Really we do say Hallel on Purim. It just doesn't take its classic form. We don't say chapters of Tehillim. We read the Megillah. It's Hallel in disguise.

Rava says: It makes sense [to recite Hallel on Pesach] and say "The servants of Hashem sing praise" and not the servants of Paroh. But when it comes to Purim, how can we say "The servants of Hashem sing praise" and not the servants of Achashverosh? We are still servants of Achashverosh.

And it's not an entirely academic. Let's say you were someplace where there was no Megillah. According to Rav Nachman, maybe you should read Hallel. If the Megillah is just the substitute, in its absence, you can go back to the original. Whereas Rava says there's simply no such obligation.

And it's Rava's answer that I want to understand. Writing hundreds of years after the story of Purim, what could he possibly mean when he says

אכתי עבדי אחשורוש אנן

We're still servants of Achashverosh?

What I'd like to suggest is that in many ways, the book of Esther is a kind of proto-Zionist text. As I've talked about in the past, the Megillah is a thinly veiled critique of assimilated Persian Jews:

- The characters in the Megillah have Persian names
- They attend Persian drinking parties and they've become comfortable in Persian culture.
- They dress like Persians: Haman has to be told that Mordechai was Jewish; there was nothing special about his appearance
- Even when Mordechai puts on sackcloth to mourn Haman's decree, Esther wants him to change because he looks too conspicuous.

The author wants us readers to recognize the fate that can befall those who remain in the diaspora when they could be returning to the land of Israel.

But this year I have a slightly different perspective.

Who are the heroes of the Megillah and what makes them heroic?

Of course the answer is that Mordechai and Esther are the heroes because they are conscientious objectors.

- Mordechai bucks the trend. Everyone bows to Haman, but not Mordechai
- Everyone follows the protocol that you only have an audience with the king when you're summoned, but not Esther

At a moment in history when quiet complicity was the prevailing ethic, the heroes of the Megillah speak up and make their voices heard.

To put it in contemporary parlance, the heroes of the megillah are Jews who are willing to be counter-cultural. And that's the whole message of the book: If you're willing to stand up and remain Jewish – even when it's unpopular, even when it's dangerous – you can emerge as the victor.

But what's amazing to notice is that the metric for Jewish victory is a galus metric.

Triumph in the Megillah means – we survived. In the face of a threat that would have meant the end of our Jewish existence, we didn't disappear. And so we celebrate the counter-culturalism of the heroes. If you resist the threat of assimilation – if you stay true to your Jewish roots – you can survive, too. And you can push the Jewish story into the next generation.

For Jews in exile, the litmus test for Jewish triumph is an affirmative answer to the question: Did we survive?

And that's why Rava insists we can't say Hallel on Purim. It's not warranted!

Hallel is reserved for those moments in Jewish history when we achieved something:

- National independence
- Kabbalat Ha-Torah
- Rededication of the Temple
- A return to the land of Israel

Just surviving – is insufficient!

אכתי עבדי אחשוורוש אנן

We just returned to the status quo ante.

It's a diaspora book about a diaspora story that celebrates a diaspora victory.

My message to you this morning is that what constitutes the ceiling for the diaspora Jew is the floor for the Jew of Israel.

The citizen of Israel doesn't say *how am I going to survive and remain Jewish?*

The citizen of Israel says *how am I going to build up the Jewish state?*

The public discourse in the diaspora is always around Jewish continuity. How do we keep the next generation in the fold? But when that's not your biggest concern, the world – and the Jewish world – becomes your oyster and the sky's the limit.

To be clear, survival shouldn't be taken for granted. And it absolutely beats the alternative. But we're living at a moment in Jewish history when we can imagine something more ambitious.

And that's why – for the purpose of sorting out who celebrates Shushan Purim – the definition of a walled city is tied to Yehoshua bin Nun. Neither he nor the land he conquered have anything to do with the story. But as the gemara writes, using Yehoshua as the bellwether helps us keep our eye on the prize. If as a result of the Purim miracle we can sleep soundly at night in the diaspora, we should at least be dreaming of a time when we can return to Israel.

A few months ago, Henry and Golda Rina Rothman were in Jerusalem and were kind enough to invite me out to lunch. They suggested we meet in the Shalva Café, which I admit I had never heard of. I knew a little about Shalva and the wonderful work they do with kids with special needs, but I didn't know much more. Turns out the whole café is run by men and women with special needs.

And it turned out, while we were having lunch, the head of Shalva, Kalman Samuels, happened to walk by. The Rothmans introduced me and he sat down to join us. He asked if I'd heard of the Shalva Band and then proceeded to tell me an amazing story....

The Shalva Band is a group of talented musicians with disabilities: Two of the singers are blind; the keyboardist is visually impaired; and the drummers have Down's Syndrome and William's Syndrome. And they were so talented, that they were selected to appear on a show called Hakochav Ha-Ba, the rough equivalent of American Idol. Every week some of the performers are eliminated and some advance. The winner goes on to compete in Eurovision – which is actually hosted this year in Israel because last year's winner was Israeli.

Fast forward to a few weeks ago. Sure enough the band kept advancing each week... until it was announced that they had advanced to the final round. Had they won, however, they would have moved on to Eurovision itself – which would have required performing on Shabbat. Some of the members of the band are observant; some are not. When they couldn't find an accommodation, they decided to pull out of the competition. It was more important, they understood, to embrace an eternal Jewish value than compete in a talent show.

It's an amazing story. And it would be hard to imagine it happening anywhere but Israel. But now I want to step outside the story and think about how it was received. To my mind, it's a kind of metaphor.

In the diaspora, this is where the story ends. What a beautiful Kiddush Hashem: young people putting the value of Shabbat ahead of a place on the world stage. And of course this is all exactly right. From our galus orientation, we can't do better. The Shalva band is counter-culturalism at its best.

But in Israel, it's not the end of the story. It's the beginning. Now there's a renewed interest in the national conversation about special needs and disabilities and glass ceilings. And there's a great sense of curiosity and excitement about where the band is going to go from here. The diaspora's finish line is where Jewish life in Israel begins.

So what about the question, “But why would we go back, Abba?”

Well I can’t speak for anyone else in my family, but I’m coming back because I’ve gathered months-worth of material for my sermons and it would be criminal not to share it.

But when I conjured up the title of this talk, I did it with the knowledge that the question would always be stronger the answer. Speaking personally, the difference is that at least now the question’s front and center. Yes, we have lots of work still to be done in America. And yes, there are lots of good reasons why we’re not moving to Israel tomorrow. But is there a good reason why we’re not moving there ever?

We should all feel proud about how much we do for Israel – both personally and communally. But we also need to walk around with a sense of aspiration that includes a vision of our Jewish lives in the Jewish land. It’s not just that life is too short for complacency. It’s that the Torah demands that we be Jewishly ambitious.

Did you ever notice how many seminal events in the Torah take place on a mountaintop? It’s not an accident that we call the move to Israel “aliyah.” If we don’t see ourselves as moving forward and moving upward, we’re not moving at all.

Religious Zionism surely means something different today than it did 100 years ago. But the moment it stops being ambitious is the moment it stops being relevant.

So allow me to suggest two take home messages.

The first is to take the issue of aliyah off of auto pilot and make it live. Maybe there are good reasons to stay right here. And maybe there are good reasons to move to Israel. I guarantee that, whatever the answers, engaging the questions will be elevating.

The second, is take the orientation of Israel and import it – to whatever extent possible – into our diaspora lives. By that I mean an orientation of never being satisfied with good enough. We should always be pushing our Jewish selves to the next level.

A great nod to counter-culturalism would be to challenge the prevailing notion of Jewish continuity. When a wonderful Jewish organization touts how much it’s doing to keep Jews in the fold, we have to say, “that’s great, but it’s not enough! What about Torah and Tefillah and Chesed and Shabbos and Israel...” I accept that these are hard questions to ask in the diaspora – but the moment we stop creating expectations is the moment we beat a path to obsolescence. Yesterday’s ceiling has to be tomorrow’s floor.

וְהַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה נִזְכָּרִים וְנַעֲשִׂים בְּכָל-דּוֹר וָדוֹר, מִשְׁפָּחָה וּמִשְׁפָּחָה, מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה, וְעִיר וְעִיר; וַיְמִי הַפּוֹרִים הָאֵלֶּה, לֹא יַעֲבְרוּ מִתּוֹךְ הַיְּהוּדִים, וְזָכְרָם, לֹא-יִסּוּף מִזֵּרְעָם

These days of Purim, the Megillah promises, will never cease to be remembered and will never cease to be celebrated. But maybe the way we celebrate them will change.

- If we do our part to lead ascendant Jewish lives
- If we make ambition a cornerstone of our Jewish discourse
- And if we prioritize a living Zionism that leads us back to the Promised Land

Then maybe we can sing Hallel on Purim after all.