

Parashat Mikketz  
16 December 2023

### **Shedding Tears**

I would like to share with you two poems this morning – poems that reflect the ongoing tragedies and feelings of these last two months.

Write my name on my leg, Mama  
Use the black permanent marker with the ink that doesn't bleed if it gets wet,  
the one that doesn't melt if it's exposed to heat.

Write my name on my leg, Mama  
Make the lines thick and clear  
Add your special flourishes so I can take comfort in seeing my mama's handwriting when  
I go to sleep.

Write my name on my leg, Mama  
and on the legs of my sisters and brothers  
This way we will belong together  
This way we will be known as your children.

Write my name on my leg, Mama  
and please write your name and Baba's name on your legs, too  
so we will be remembered as a family.

Write my name on my leg, Mama  
Don't add any numbers like when I was born or the address of our home  
I don't want the world to list me as a number  
I have a name and I am not a number.

Write my name on my leg, Mama  
When the bomb hits our house  
When the walls crush our skulls and bones our legs will tell our story,  
How there was nowhere for us to run.

This first poem was written by Zeina Azzam, a Palestinian-American poet and current Poet Laureate of the City of Alexandria. Her poem, “Write My Name,” has gone viral and has been shared all over social media.

And now, the second poem.

What are you doing outside, girl  
Your feet haven’t found rest  
Wounded bird, return to me and come back to your home

Listen to the sounds  
The thunder on the roofs of houses  
Keep safe from the storm  
Return to your home

The midnight moon is high  
Light on the branches of the tree  
Let your soul hear a small tune

There, a wormwood plant  
There, a soul is trembling from the cold  
A shaded window and closed blind  
Return to your home

The midnight moon is high  
Light on the branches of the tree  
Let your soul hear a small tune

Raise your eyes to the sky  
Dawn is soon breaking  
A bird is already awake  
Return to your home

These words were written by the masterful Israeli poet Dahlia Ravikovitch. While this poem and song was written in 1981, it has become one of Israel’s current anthems. Its melancholy and somber tone fits the collective grief, and the hopeful ending marks the yearning for our loved ones and hostages to return home. I first heard this song on Tuesday evening at a Hanukkah

gathering at the Israeli Embassy. The song was sung by Shirin Herzog, wife of Ambassador Michael Herzog.

I share these two poems because at their core are two young children – children whose lives are turned upside down. Of the many topics and conversations we have had since Oct 7, there is one that we have not yet had, and that is the loss of innocent lives in Israel AND in Gaza.

When I was in Israel two weeks ago, I broached this subject with a few individuals. For most people, the responses I got were not apathy but rather an inability to have the conversation at this moment in time. I get it. Personally, I also felt this way. Having visited Miri and Amir at Kibbutz Nahal Oz several times, having stood by the border fence with my children, and having seen the family safe room, I felt violated. More than any previous terrorist attack, this was personal. For weeks, thinking about them brought tears to my eyes. Visiting and speaking with Israelis, I also internalized the fear many people are feeling. And when people are frightened, the Darwinian instinct is to focus on yourself. That's what you are supposed to do. You have to decide, are you going to fight or flight. We are not wired as human beings, in a moment of fear, to start thinking about anyone else. And yet, perhaps it is now time to begin this conversation.

Let me pause for a moment and be very clear about what I am saying and what I am not saying. I am not saying that Israel is somehow guilty or to be blamed for the deaths of Gazan civilians. I believe, with every fiber of my being, that Israel is fighting a just war. The presence of civilians cannot make conducting a just war impossible, nor do civilian casualties make conducting a just war unjust. It can't. This is the nature of Gaza. I don't want to micromanage each bomb and analyze whether it was or wasn't necessary. I trust the IDF knows what it's doing. I know IDF soldiers and their steadfast commitment to *Ruach Tzahal* – the IDF Code of Ethics. But there is a difference between conducting the war and our concern for the consequences of that war.

Rabbi Donniel Hartman recently spoke about the nearly two million Gazan civilians who are now homeless or wounded. There is no justification, he said, for Israel to ignore the humanitarian crisis. It shouldn't be that the United States has to remind Israel to make this crisis part of its agenda. Bear in mind that Israel is capable, uniquely capable, of setting up field hospitals in any corner of the world within 24-48 hours. Capable of trauma surgery, complex trauma surgery, in areas of devastation without water or electricity. Imagine the message it would send if Israel set up three or four field hospitals in Gaza and began treating civilian casualties. Fighting a just war cannot make us immune to claims of justice, and justice also applies to civilians in Gaza.

Over the course of this week, I found myself drawn to the writings of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein. Rav Lichtenstein escaped Nazi occupation and came to the United States in 1941. He earned his rabbinic ordination at Yeshiva University and his Ph.D. at Harvard. After serving as the head of the yeshiva at YU, he made Aliyah to Israel in 1971 and for forty years led a major orthodox yeshiva (Yeshivat Har Etzion) in Alon Shevut (an Israeli settlement located in the Judean Hills). I am sharing some of his biographical information as context for an essay he wrote in 1973, part of a symposium on war ethics among Israeli halakhists. Rav Lichtenstein pointed to several costs that Israeli society bears during the course of war. He noted the terrible toll in the loss of life to Israeli soldiers and civilians and also the equally clear price paid for the death of the "enemy [and those adjacent to the enemy], who are also created in the image of God." Finally, Rav Lichtenstein notes, "War damages the soldiers, both individually and societally," drawing upon the rabbinic commentator Ramban that the souls of naturally upright individuals are corroded by war. He emphasized in that essay: "Most important is that a person going to war should know that they are not entering a world with a different set of values from their usual values."

One could imagine these arguments being offered by a pacifist, someone who saw the spiritual costs of war as so great to advise against waging war altogether. Yet Rav Lichtenstein insisted that it was the national duty of his students to protect their country. The moral challenges facing soldiers did not exempt them from their civic duty; they only imposed the extra obligation that each soldier, and by extension, the country, fight each war consistent with Jewish values. The necessity of war cannot eliminate the ability to feel the pain of human suffering. The pursuit of peace must also stand at the top of the scale of values; as Rashi wrote, *שהשלום שקול כנגד הכל*, peace is as valuable as everything else put together.

We are now reading the final third of *Sefer Bereishit*, the tangled web of relationships in Jacob's household. Parashat Miketz opens with Joseph in prison only to be liberated and ascend to a position of rank and authority. With famine threatening the land, Joseph's brothers are forced to confront the man they previously sold into slavery. Joseph might not have been recognizable, but he most certainly recognized his brothers. After an initial harsh encounter, something changes within Joseph. He looks at his brothers, at their faces, *וַיִּסָּב מֵעֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּבָּךְ* – and he turned away from them and wept. According to the 16th-century rabbinic commentator Ovadia Seforno, Joseph wept out of compassion toward his brothers. Yet, at this stage, Joseph is not prepared to lower the screen of deception even slightly – not only before his brothers but even in his own mind. Eventually, with the passage of time, Joseph comes around, reveals his true identity and publicly sheds tears in front of his brothers. We, too, surround ourselves with barriers, preserving and protecting our individuality and independence, our inner reality; we, too, live in a state of perpetual restraint. We must learn from Joseph how to overcome our restraint and allow the spiritual essence within us to have its say (Rav Aharon Lichtenstein on Miketz). We, too, must shed tears of compassion.

Outside the Israeli Embassy on Tuesday was a small but noisy pro-Palestinian protest. There were dozens of Metropolitan Police officers and US Secret Service officers. Never in my life had I felt so anxious as I did that night walking through that protest. The slurs and phrases being hurled were disgusting. I kept my head down and walked quickly to my car. Walking around DC on Tuesday was also the first time I encountered an abundance of pro-Palestinian graffiti. I kept thinking that if I had a can of spray paint and a little morechutzpa, I would change the slogan “Free Gaza” to say, “Free Gaza...from Hamas.” Wouldn’t that be an interesting counter-protest? It would be a reminder that this war is not against the Palestinians nor against Gaza. This is a war against Hamas, a terrorist organization whose ability to threaten Israel must be eliminated. Amir Tibon recently said, “I don’t want revenge in Gaza. I don’t feel any satisfaction upon hearing that civilians are killed there now. I’m as sad as one can be over their deaths. But I know that when Hamas came into my community on that morning, it knew EXACTLY what would happen in Gaza the next day.” It is abundantly clear that Hamas does not care about Gazan civilians. That is *their* moral depravity. The Jewish people, the State of Israel, values life – the lives of innocent children, the lives of innocent seniors, the lives of innocent people – within Israel’s borders, within Gaza, within Judea and Samaria, and everywhere an innocent human heart throbs.

I would like to conclude with one final poem – a poem by Rachel Goldberg Polin, mother of hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin.

There is a lullaby that says your mother will cry a thousand tears before you grow to be a man.  
I have cried a million tears in the last 67 days.  
We all have.  
And I know that way over there  
there’s another woman  
who looks just like me  
because we are all so very similar  
and she has also been crying.

All those tears, a sea of tears  
they all taste the same.  
Can we take them  
gather them up,  
remove the salt  
and pour them over our desert of despair  
and plant one tiny seed.  
A seed wrapped in fear,  
trauma, pain,  
war and hope  
and see what grows?  
Could it be  
that this woman  
so very like me  
that she and I could be sitting together in 50 years  
laughing without teeth  
because we have drunk so much sweet tea together  
and now we are so very old  
and our faces are creased  
like worn-out brown paper bags.  
And our sons  
have their own grandchildren  
and our sons have long lives  
One of them without an arm  
But who needs two arms anyway?  
Is it all a dream?  
A fantasy? A prophecy?  
One tiny seed.

May everyone, please God, speedily and safely return home.