

Winners & Losers

ROSH HASHANAH I 5777

OCTOBER 3, 2016

RABBI PHILIP S. SCHEIM

Tractate *Ta'anit* (24a) of the Babylonian Talmud tells of an incident in the career of the sage known simply as Rav, who visited a town that was experiencing severe drought. *זיפרז רב* – Rav did what sages in those days were accustomed to do when weather was problematic. He decreed a fast, which, because of his piety and learning, and because of the efficacy of the fast itself, should have brought an end to the drought. But, we learn, *רחין ז' ל* – the rain did not come.

Undoubtedly disappointed that he was unable to help effect the necessary rain and alleviate the people's distress, Rav went to shul to pray. A *shaliah tzibbur*, a prayer leader whose name we will never know, not one of the important, influential leaders of his time, stood at the *Amud*, and began his repetition of the *Amidah* prayer, and something remarkable occurred. *געד אינ* *חנ* – This anonymous prayer leader chanted the words *געד אינ* – the words that describe God as the One who “causes the wind to blow,” and, immediately, heavy winds began to blow. He chanted *מבד צינ* – “Who causes the rain to fall,” and, instantaneously it began to pour.

Rather impressive to be sure. Rav, the great sage, deemed worthy of intervening with the heavens on behalf of a distressed community, accomplished nothing, while an unknown prayer leader just had to say the words, and, on the spot, nature changed course. Rav, amazed to say the least, asked the *xeiv gily*, the prayer leader: *מאי עבדך* – What's the story here? What have you done that has made you so worthy, in the eyes the Almighty, to save the people? Why should you, a nobody, get to change nature, while I, an important leader, a leading scholar, accomplish nothing?”

The man's answer was simple. "I teach reading to young children. When a child struggles with his learning, is unable to focus on his lessons, and, as a result, may act out – I have a fish pond, and I use the fish to capture the interest of the child. I then get his attention and put him at ease until he is ready and able to learn to read."

This story takes up all of four lines in the printed Vilna edition of the Babylonian Talmud. Not a lot of space for a story of monumental significance. Who performed the miracle in this story? Not Rav, not the *Amora* who founded the Babylonian Academy of Sura, whose learning was legendary both in Babylonia and Israel. Rather it was our anonymous teacher, who insisted upon the right of every child, rich and poor, easy to educate and more challenging to educate, who insisted on the right of every child to learn to read and to understand the texts sacred to his or her people – it is our unnamed teacher, who did what it took to capture the heart and the imagination of even the hardest-to-reach child, it is he whose prayers miraculously changed the course of nature, and rescued the people from distress.

Ruth Calderon offers her interpretation of this Talmudic story. She writes:

When God is distant, He withholds rain, and His thirsty children must try to penetrate the sealed skies. The sages of the Talmud are on the lookout for a man who will be able to break the vicious cycle of drought and divine withdrawal, to teach the God of dryness to be gentle. They seek a man who can bring down rain by redeeming God. A competition for this role sets in between a simple schoolteacher and Rav, an esteemed member of the rabbinic elite. The local scholars know Rav's limitations all too well: His name and his reputation stand in the way of any possibility for real efficacy. His mind is clouded by a preoccupation with such thoughts as "how do I compare with others" and "who could be greater than I am." Only failure will release him once and for all from these honor wars. In contrast, our teacher is

humble and anonymous. The battlefield where he proves his strength is entirely internal. He raises fish in a small pond behind his house even in times of drought, against all odds. He is a hero because he does not dismiss a challenged child as a lost cause. Rather, he leads him to water.¹

So what does all this have to do with the American election campaign? You know, many of my American rabbinic colleagues have expressed feelings of envy towards me, because I am not restricted in what I say today by IRS regulations. Several have asked me if we plan a post-election shul membership special, for those who may choose to move to Toronto, depending upon what happens on November 8th.

It is instructive, in our story, how ego and status are unappreciated by the Talmudic text, and how it is humility, and out-of-the-limelight acts of kindness by one whose name, history never bothered to record, that saved the day, and indeed, the nation of Israel. So too, what my American colleagues cannot say this morning, but I will, one who proclaims that “I have a good brain,” and one whose ultimate source of advice is himself, does not reflect a model of leadership that can lead a nation struggling on so many levels, to a better day.

Our story also teaches us the critical importance of offering that loving hand of support, of direction, to the weak, to those with disabilities, to those whom society, for whatever reason, has not favored. One who mocks those with disabilities, one who calls those who oppose him “losers,” does not meet even the minimum standards reasonably expected of those qualified to lead.

The Jewish people knows, through its long and challenging history, what it means to be bullied, what it means to be considered losers, undesirable, unworthy of acceptance into the greater community.

¹ Ruth Calderon, *A Bridge for One Night*, pp. 4-5

In a dramatic Midrashic text, God, we are told, chose to identify with those deemed losers, leading to His lenient judgment of the people on Rosh Hashanah.

“On Rosh Hashanah God judges this people and exonerates them. [How do we know?] בשעה שאני נוצח - אני מפסיד – The Holy One Blessed be He says: ‘When I win, I lose. ובשעה שאני נצוח, אני משתכר. : And when I lose, I win.’ ”

What does God mean? “Look,” God reasons, “I won over the generation of the flood. I defeated them. I had the last laugh. They drowned! But don’t you see? I really lost. I destroyed an entire generation. And when the Israelites fashioned the golden calf, and my anger was so great that I wanted to destroy them, every last one of them, and again show humankind where the power in this world really lies, what happened? Moses turned to Me and said: למה ה' יחרה אפך בעמך “Lord, why are You so angry at Your people? Why do You want to destroy them? Don’t You realize how bad it will look? Are You sure that’s what You want to do? Why not forgive them instead? After all, they’re only human!”

“And so,” God continues, “Moses defeated Me. He won. He was right. I lost. I didn’t get My way. But when I lose, I win. What did I win? The people of Israel, who, thanks to Moses, I kept alive. And that’s why, on Rosh Hashanah, I am so hesitant in seeking vengeance for sins committed against Me. Because when I lose, I win.”²

Clearly, God’s experience, as suggested in the Midrash, is ours as well. For us, as well, sometimes losses become victories, and victories, losses. We are conditioned to view the world in terms of winners and losers, a conditioning reinforced by the dysfunctional election campaign to the south. But maybe there are better ways of viewing the world, beyond checking poll results every hour to measure our

² *Pesikta Rabbati* 40:2

popularity or lack thereof.

Maybe our Midrash, maybe our own experience teaches us that winning and losing are far from the be-all and end-all of existence. True, they may have their moments, but if winning and losing were the ultimate defining categories of the universe, well – for one, we wouldn't be here. Through most of history we could have been seen as the losers – as defeated, physically weak, small in number, homeless, downtrodden. We are here because, no matter what the outside world tried to tell us, we understood that staying power in history was determined not by one's momentary victories or defeats, but by one's core values, one's spirit, one's determination, one's faith.

Let's start with Jerusalem, the eternal capital of the Jewish people. Founded almost exactly the same time as Carthage was another capital of great significance, the city of Carthage, the center of the Phoenician empire, a world power of the mid-second millennium before the common era.

I have a question for you. When was the last time you visited Carthage? Probably not in the last two thousand-plus years, since it was destroyed. And we are able to visit Jerusalem as often as we wish. By all popular criteria, back some 2500 years or so, Carthage was the winner – it was powerful, its very name made people tremble. And Jerusalem was the so-called loser, a military afterthought, anything but the center of a feared empire. It was the tiny capital of a tiny people.

But Jerusalem was founded on eternal values. The ארון, the Holy Ark was its center. Torah was its charter. It was destined to remain a Jewish city throughout the millennia, even when subjugated to foreign rule. Its Jewish presence, its Jewish heart, its Jewish population was always there.

In the world of the year 800 BCE, two cities come to mind, Carthage and Jerusalem. One was the commercial and military center of the world. The other was a militarily

weak, and economically irrelevant religious center. Interestingly, both of those cities would come into conflict with Rome towards the end of that millennium. Both would suffer military defeat and experience the flames of Roman destruction. But only one would prove to be indestructible. Only one had the potential to overcome its adversaries, to survive, albeit tattered, albeit bereft, into eternity.

Going back some 2000 years, to the period of Rome's preeminence, reminds us that we were not perceived as history's winners of those days either. One need not be a world-class military historian to realize that the Jews were no match for the powerful Romans.

But let me ask you another question. How often, today, do you hear Latin spoken? In how many countries is Latin the official language? How many people speak it in the streets of the world? How many daily newspapers are published in Latin? How many popular novels are written or translated into Latin today? Latin is the world's pre-eminent dead language. So dead that it is no longer used in regular Catholic worship.

But look at Hebrew. Always studied, always revered, always read, the Jewish language of prayer, of sacred text. It was in 1881 that Eliezer ben Yehuda stepped off the boat that brought him and his family to the land of Israel, and told his family how, from that moment forward, they would speak only Hebrew, a language that had not been spoken since Biblical times. As a result, today, for millions, Hebrew is מאמע-לשון. Dozens of daily newspapers, thousands of books each year are published in Hebrew. Would an objective observer in the first century have imagined that Latin, the language of Rome, would die, and that Hebrew, in the twenty-first century, would be the language in which millions of Jews would read, write, converse, argue, dream?

No. Winning and losing are not what they seem. It is the core value-system and not

the surface strength of a people, a person, makes the ultimate difference, something that we Jews, the inheritors of Jerusalem, the preservers of the Hebrew language, understand very well.

Such is the message conveyed in this morning's Haftarah reading. The story of Hannah is the story of one perceived in her time, and in her own mind as a loser, having had to endure childlessness in a society and in an age when a woman's worth was measured solely in her ability to bear children, and having had to endure the taunts of Peninah, her husband's other wife, who had successfully borne several children.

Year after year, we read how Hannah approached the altar of God and prayed for a child. On one of her visits, the focus of today's Rosh Hashanah reading, Eli the Priest was watching Hannah's unusual behavior in prayer (I Sam. 1:13) – “Now Hannah was praying only in her heart; וְקוֹלָהּ לֹא יִשְׁמַע – only her lips moved, וְרַק שִׁפְתֶיהָ נִעוֹת – but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk.” Hannah corrected Eli's unkind and unfortunate misunderstanding, telling him (1:15): “I am a very unhappy woman וְאֶשְׁפֹךְ אֶת־נַפְשִׁי – and am pouring out my heart to the Lord.” Eli quickly changed his tune, blessed Hannah, and prayed that God would grant her wish. And, true enough, within a year, Hannah did give birth to Shmuel, to the future Prophet Samuel.

Our sages³ derive appropriate prayer conduct from Hannah's actions in our reading. The words came from her heart, only her lips moved, her voice was not heard – actions misunderstood by Eli, but understood by our sages, who recognized that Hannah was on to something – that the ideal way to *daven*, to pray, is to articulate the words in a very soft voice. God does not need us to shout, He hears our silent prayer, and that our prayer must be heartfelt, reflective of *kavannah*, of feeling, of

³ TB *Berakhot* 31a-b

emotion, of intent.

Hannah, initially misunderstood as a “loser,” a poor, unhappy, childless woman, ends us the singular force who taught us how to *daven*, and showed us how the very act of prayer could become the antidote against despair, and help us fashion our roadmap to a better day.

Finally, a reflection on Shimon Peres, whose death last week saddens us as we enter a new year. Twenty years ago, at the annual convention of Israel’s Labor party, after having lost three elections, and until that time, the only Labor leader ever to have lost an election, Shimon Peres made the mistake of posing a rhetorical question before an angry, frustrated audience. His words: “They say I am a loser. Am I a loser?” And the audience resoundingly responded: “Yes.”

Yet this man, the last of the founding generation of Israel’s leaders, so often faced with defeat, with humiliation, with biting criticism – today, is so deeply mourned throughout Israel, throughout the Jewish world, and throughout the world at large, by friends, and even, in some cases, by supposed enemies. So profound was his passing felt on a global level, that U.S. President Obama ordered all flags on government buildings to be lowered to half-staff, until sunset this past Friday, the day of the funeral.

Without question, notwithstanding his failures as a politician, his career was impressive, and critical to Israel’s emergence as a strong, vibrant entity. Among his accomplishments, the founding of Israel’s Navy, Israel’s armament industry, Israel’s nuclear development, the spearheading of the rescue at Entebbe as Minister of Defense, the rescue of Ethiopian Jewry, and the groundwork leading to Israel’s primary position today in high-tech research and development; his career culminating in a highly successful term as President of the State of Israel.

Yet for much if not most of his seven decades in numerous leading roles in Israel,

Peres did not achieve the popularity that his resume should have merited. But that didn't deter him one iota. Call him a loser, criticize his determined efforts to reconcile with the Palestinians, minimize his enormous contributions to the state – none of that mattered, he would not be deterred. The dreamer in a better future for Israel and her neighbors, for Jews world-wide would not relinquish his dream. Herzl's adage – *אין זו אגדה, אם תרצו*, if you want something badly enough, it will not be fantasy, you will make it real – was for Shimon Peres, a core belief.

The Perski family had left their native Wieszniev in Belarus in the 1930's, making *Aliyah* when Shimon was eleven years old. Three years ago, on *Yom HaShoah*, President Shimon Peres spoke of his hometown:

After the war, I learned that on Sunday August 30th, a dark dawn had come upon my hometown. The Nazis who had seized it ordered the Jews to pack their belongings and present themselves at their doorsteps. The SS officers passed by striking them and told them to proceed towards the synagogue. The Germans shot down those who tried to escape. The rest reached the synagogue which was made of wood. The doors were locked. All were burned alive. That was the last day of Rabbi Zvi Meltzer, my grandfather, my mentor. He was consumed by fire with his *Tallit* on his head. That was the last Jewish day in Wieszniev. Not even a single Jew remained alive.

On a return visit to his hometown, years after the war, Peres noted:

Not a Jewish mark remains. Not a house, not a synagogue, not a school, not a cemetery, only a heap of stones. As I stood there, the last Kol Nidrei prayer emitted by my grandfather's sweet voice rang in my ears. My lips murmured the *Kaddish*.”⁴

⁴ *Israelnationalnews.com*, 19 April 2012

President Peres concluded his remarks: “This is the essence of the existence of the State of Israel. Israel is a defense shield, a safe haven and a great spirit. Had the State of Israel existed during those days, I am convinced that things would have been different. We have paid a high price but we have not lost faith.”⁵

Shimon Peres was part of that great generation of Israel’s founders, who helped lead a badly wounded Jewish people back into a world of expectation and hope, that taught us how accomplishment can overcome adversity. Just as that nameless teacher thousands of years ago, opened the mind and heart of a floundering child, just as Hannah taught us how to pray, so too Shimon Peres and his fellow founders of the State of Israel taught us to believe in ourselves and our potential to accomplish great things, and that loss, challenge and disappointment need not deny the ultimate possibility of victory, achievement and success.

In the words of our *Mahzor*, we pray: “וּבְכֵן תֵּן כְּבוֹד .. לְעַמְּךָ – Bestow honor to Your people... תְּהִלָּה לִירְאֵיךָ – praise to those who revere You – וְתִקְוָה לְדוֹרְשֵׁיךָ – hope to those who seek You, רְעוּבָה לְאַרְצְךָ – joy to Your land, וְשִׂשׂוֹן לְעִירְךָ – gladness to Your city. The righteous who witness this will rejoice, the truly good people in our world will be glad, וְחֹסִידִים בְּרִנָּה יִגִּילוּ – those of faith will celebrate with song.”

⁵ ibid.