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Parashat Shmini

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“Where’s Your Prophecy Now?”: Jerusalem, Democracy and Us

1.

Every morning, I am up early

Jerusalem is just waking up and I’m on the streets with the people who are carrying *tallitot* to go to morning minyan, services, 6 AM

The bakeries are opening but I have to find the Syrian synagogue Asher told me about, one of a precious few where they still use the Maqam system, one of the rare communities where the hazzanim and kahal are so educated, they change all the melodies of the service depending on the week, the parasha, the month¹

A singing place,

I am kind of out of my mind with excitement

Not only that, but when I get there

This room is like nothing I’ve ever seen

Stone on the outside, of course, Jerusalem stone

But the inside, the walls are covered with decorative murals: beautiful, dusty greens, stars, vines, celadon, ochre, the ceiling is aqua and there’s dark, decorative woodwork covering the whole eastern wall with ornate cutouts, inlaid flowers made of mother of pearl

The space is compact, ornate – it’s like entering a jewel box

I’ll be in the women’s section

To be honest, from time to time, it’s kind of a relief to know no one but no one is going to ask me to do anything, so I can pray next to an eighty year old woman who I swear has a direct line to heaven

I love how they talk during services, just like us, kids in and out

¹ [Ades Synagogue of the Halabi Community](#)

And their rows are also arranged in a square, with the bimah in the middle, just like ours
But here, people are leading from all over the room, it's fantastic
On shabbat morning I even see a little boy who can't be more than five
Taking a part in a psalm, leading a few lines from his seat between the two men who look gargantuan on either side of him

I love how there's no more than sixty people at any time, but, like us, the force of their voices makes it feel like there's way more
How a few sing really loudly and out of tune
How one hazzan often takes a part much higher, bringing us all up
And I love how, one of the best hazzanim, from one of the side benches, while chanting a breathtaking series of piyyutim, is simultaneously gesturing, emphasizing his musical notes with a small cup of coffee in his left hand the entire time

And then, just then, they launch into a melody, they are chanting something
But it is unmistakable, it is a melody I know, so familiar
It is ours, I know it from our shabbat

And it is here, so far from home, in a jewel box in the middle of Jerusalem, up in the women's section, where I don't know a single soul, I recognize a melody
Or, more accurately, a melody recognizes me
It is almost a physical realization: It is ours, it is all of ours (!)
And so it is mine

2.

There are so many stories I could tell you about Jerusalem, stories that would invariably connect the religious, jewish, symbolic, personal, political, and intellectual, matters of the heart and soul. Stories of the many times when something in that city reached past all my habits and defenses, past all the gates, and reminded me of who I am.

It is not that these moments don't happen in America, in California
Please, it's my job to make these moments –

It is just that in Jerusalem, they happen with such force and frequency, a
person might be forgiven for forgetting everything else going on there,
so strong and real is their pull

3.

My first night in Jerusalem I dream that about seeing a rainbow at night
I see all the colors, the whole thing, just at night
When I wake up I google "night rainbows" and it turns out sometimes the
light from the moon can generate a colorful halo or something
But in my dream it was a proper rainbow
I still remember the red against the night sky

When I saw my friend R. Rani Jaeger the next morning he told me,
"It's a sign. The rainbow is the sign of the covenant. We're going through
darkness here. But you saw a sign of the covenant even in the darkness."

You see, I have arrived in Israel smack in the middle of a major historic
moment, even for this country which has no shortage of historic moments

I've arrived in the middle of the *hafganot*, the protests, which are still
continuing as we speak

A huge part of the country are taking part

Not just the far left or the usual suspects

The center, people in unions, military, smaller towns, one in five in the
country are out protesting, week after week, every Saturday night

It is clear many feel it is a war for the soul of the country

Emotions are running high

Although what has instigated the protests is a struggle over the check
and balance between the supreme court and the political coalition
currently in power, there's a larger sense that there's more on the table

I see people crying at the protests, fasting, I talk with the older generation, people especially distraught at the trajectory of the country they sacrificed their whole lives to build
They don't have the words to describe their disappointment and fear

Even from many in the center, there's a larger sense that Bibi and his coalition especially, famously, the brutes Ben G'vir and Smotrich have gone too far.
There's an undeniable tipping point, the question is which way we will tip
People are waking up
It's an awakening

It's a huge battle, not nearly over, as soon as Israeli independence day passes, Bibi and his coalition may yank the country back on a one way street, irreversibly, towards a "theocracy"

We could end there, I could just tell you to get involved
That would be more than enough for one shabbat
I could tell you that and I am telling you that
But if you want to end there, you picked the wrong rabbi

4.

Miriam, Moses' sister is a prophetess
And according to the rabbis, she spoke her mind

You see one of the many ways Egypt oppressed us
Is Pharaoh kept couples apart
No babies, see
No hope
No future
So Pharaoh would wake up the workers in the middle of the night, earlier and earlier to work
So they could never be home
not unlike migrant workers today,

Midrash says, "They used to sleep on the ground."²

Miriam's father, we learn, Amram was so degraded by this, that he took things even further
Divorcing his wife

But the rabbis say that little Miriam, precocious and honest
Confronted her father saying, "You're worse than Pharaoh! He just *physically* separated you, you have made the separation binding, forever!"

So, the rabbis say, Amram went back to his wife (!)

Little Miriam, see, they say she had the strength to say all this because she had a prophecy

She said to Amram, "You have to be together, my mother is destined to give birth to a baby who will save all of Israel!"

So that when her brother Moses was born, and the house was filled with light

Her father Amram, rose, kissed Miriam on the head and said, "Your prophecy has been fulfilled."³

It would be sweet if the story ended there

However, three months later, after Pharaoh commanded all the boy babies be thrown in the Nile

And Miriam's mother was forced to Moses in a basket in the river

Not knowing if her son would live

² Shemot Rabbah 1:12

³ Shemot Rabbah 1:13, 1:20, 1:22

The rabbis say Miriam's mother struck Miriam on her head, saying,
"Where's your prophecy now?!"⁴

This is why, the rabbis say, Miriam stood there on the banks of the river
watching Moses in the basket as he floated away⁵
They say she wanted to know what would become of her prophecy⁶

But see that makes it seem as if Miriam just wants to be *right*
But I believe it's not *just* that she wants to be right
She also believes Israel can be saved
See there's a lot riding on this prophecy
It has to do with the future of all of Israel!

And yes, this prophecy is personal
It has to do with her parents, yes
Better to be kissed than struck, in more ways than one
This prophecy is personal, yes
Miriam wanted to know what would become of her baby brother whom
she loves

But there's more:
Because the *midrash* says that when Moses was crying in the basket
The very cries that, you will remember, that will attract the attention of the
Egyptian princess thus saving his life
When Moses is crying – *this is in the sources* – it's because he thought,
"I may never again see my sister *who is waiting for me.*"⁷

⁴ Shemot Rabbah 1:22

⁵ Exodus 2:4

⁶ Shemot Rabbah 1:22

⁷ Shemot Rabbah 1:24

Moses is not crying for his life, see
He is not crying for his mother or father
He is not even crying for his sister *b'chlal* / in general
He is crying for "*My sister who is waiting for me*"
See, he is crying because of her prophecy of hope
Because she has not given up
Because she dares to have a prophecy at all
Because someone is standing on the banks, even now, her cheeks
burning from being struck
Someone is still standing / וַיִּתְצַב
Someone (!) is still waiting to see
What will become of him, what will become of it all⁸

5.

In this moment when so much is on the table
When the future of Israel itself is like Moses in the basket
Precarious, crying out

I'm asking: Do we in America have the courage to be Miriam?
I'm admitting the plain truth that we are not in the basket
Still, do we in America even have the courage to *stand*, not leave the
shore for a second
To keep our eyes on what's happening
To hold fast to a prophecy, the highest prize, even when all evidence is
pointing to the contrary?
Even when the situation seems dire?
Do we have the strength to tell the truth about the severity of the
situation?

When I return home I have another dream: I'm in the home of a rabbi
friend of mine, who has children about my age. We are sending one of
their daughters into the army. She is beautiful, like my daughters. She has

⁸ Exodus 2:4

her hair piled on top of her head and she is wearing her uniform. It's time to tell her to go.

"But, that's impossible," I say in my dream. "We can't let her go."

How dare I offer any prophecy when it is neither me, nor my baby in the basket?

When I myself am only standing, at a distance, on the shore?

With the world as broken and violent as it is, how dare I say anything other than the physical safety of another person's sweet Jewish children is more than enough?

6.

I've been putting it off

It is an hour away by car and that is really far away in Israel

I've been putting it off but it is the reason I came to this country so it is getting to be time

I have to go to the cemetery where my friend Daveed Ehrlich, z"l is buried
Many of you know, he died at the beginning of covid and so I could not visit his grave until now

He loved stories so my plan is to sit next to the grave and tell him about the past few years, which were, as you know, at the very least, eventful

But, see, I am picturing an American cemetery, like the ones in colonial Massachusetts where I grew up, rolling hills and grass and quiet, pastoral

However, when I arrive, I realize my miscalculations

There's no grass here, we're in the desert

There's no space here, everything is crowded

And of course, it is not empty, I am not alone as I imagined

There are groups of mourners

Families and husbands and young people

Because the people who died here – some died young

I see a woman walking towards me
I'm trying to find the grave
I ask her in Hebrew if she knows where the section is that I am looking for
"You should know where you are going," she tells me
She is right, of course, but this is not very helpful

As she walks away I summon compassion: Who knows whom she came
to visit and under what circumstances?
See, it is not entirely peaceful here
There is the unmistakable feeling of tragedy hanging in the air:
The young man with the motorcycle helmet playing a song in front of a
grave not far from where I am stationed
The crowds around certain graves,
The fatigue
The sun beating down on us all

I find Daveed's grave at last
And then I do what I came to do, what the tradition tells me to do
I sit down on the tiny path way between the stones
And I cry.

7.

I start to wonder:
What if Miriam had saved Moses' life, made sure he was pulled from the
river Nile, physically safe
But abandoned her prophecy?

Are we in danger of doing the same when we consider Israel?
That is, under the demanding, unrelenting need for safety, have we let
our prophecies tarnish and atrophy, to the point where they have
contorted and morphed almost beyond recognition?

What if Miriam had saved Moses' life but abandoned her prophecy?
I think: Moses would still be in the palace, and we would still be enslaved.

8.

Let's get some things out of the way:

There's no question that these demonstrations are critical and this current battle needs to be won, no easy feat by any stretch of the imagination
I could not be more supportive of the demonstrations
But to answer to the call of leaving the narrow place

Even creating the conditions and winning new elections are not enough.
Getting rid of Bibi is not enough. There are fundamental tensions that must begin to be seriously addressed and discussed.

The stakes are too high to just change leaders and then go back to the way things were.

9.

I am invited to join a protest at the Knesset, so of course I go, joining the hundreds who are gathered outside.

This is not just a group of the regulars
I see a couple velvet kippot
I meet the submarine commander who is leaving his voluntary service in protest, breaking a massive taboo
I see a whole orthodox girls' school, en masse, wearing skirts past the knee and singing patriotic songs

And then, in a moment that blew my American mind
I realize the main action of this protest is going to be *davening mincha*, the afternoon service, complete with chanting the Torah and Haftarah for Rosh Chodesh

And at first I am delighted
For once, I don't have to somehow separate my holy, jewish way of being aside when dealing with a national concern

I can just listen to the words of Torah right here, chanted beautifully, in front of the Knesset

There's no separation between religion and state and it feels so good, so right

But then I started to look more closely

And I think about how my activist friend was completely incensed about the recent law the ultra orthodox were trying to pass mandating that hospitals only serve matzah during passover

I thought the law was harmless, even a little funny
But he said, "What if someone is not Jewish? What if they're not practicing? What if it makes them sick?! The religious extremists used to be satisfied with keeping a jurisdiction in their neighborhoods. Now they want to control us all." I understood it was religious coercion.

And I realize that the very thing I delight in about this protest outside the Knesset

The thing that makes this protest "mine" is the same thing that makes it "not belong" to others

I am thinking about the price of my comfort

There is no question that the dominance of Jewish religious thought, symbolism, practice, prayer, religion, spirituality, in Jerusalem in everything, on the street names, on the menus, even as it is unequally prioritized and funded, there is no question it creates a depth and resonance in Jewish experience and life that is unparalleled, possibly in history, and to propose to make any change to that equation will have serious consequences, no question, there will be a loss

But as I started to look more closely at the people around me

I wondered about what "invisible" losses we were already incurring

I noticed that women, that whole girls' school, and men are all praying this service *together*

Since praying separately by gender is a big deal, a big topic of conversation and no one here at the Knesset seemed to care I was scandalized, how was this possible? (!)

Breathless, I asked my friend, an Israeli rabbi. "Did you see?! They are all praying together!"

But he did not think it was a big deal at all. He just shrugged, "It's outside. Doesn't matter when we're outside. And, after covid, some things have started to shift."

And while that idea of things "starting to shift" brought me hope As I looked closer, the whole situation was starting to give me pause

If it was allowed for women and men to pray together, why was it not similarly allowed for women to lead any part of the service?

What did it mean that this version of jewish religious life was the "acceptable" version to be practiced in the public square at the exclusion of any others?

I'm not a purist, I already told you it was powerful for me to pray at a traditional synagogue. It's not my 'every day' but there's lots of different holy ways to pray. I want to see more kinds of prayer, not make all the prayers look like mine.

But I started to ask myself: What does it mean at the *demonstration for democracy* that no women are leading the service? Does it relate to the underrepresentation of women in the Knesset? I'm asking for a friend.⁹

⁹ Note the incredible work of [Yael Yechaeli and 50/50](#)

And once I started looking around, I couldn't stop seeing who I didn't see

I know people can present in many ways but I didn't see anyone who looked like the people who were at my Sephardi synagogue that morning

Maybe it was different in Tel Aviv, maybe all the Sephardim were there
Maybe I am just an American and didn't see things properly

But I then started to remember the amount of derogatory comments about Sephardim I kept hearing that week, how they vote, what they all want in their leaders

It just sounded like racism to me, I think I even said so, but I'm an American, what do I know

Still, I couldn't help but wonder, in these protests, why did everyone look like they lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan?

I kept hearing that this protest had the allegiance of the center, religious zionists

But how is it that all the religious zionists who comprised the middle also looked Ashkenazi?

Or was it that I just didn't know what I was seeing?

See, once I started looking, I just couldn't stop seeing who wasn't there

My friend told me that the big protests are in Tel Aviv

"You have to understand," she told me

40% of Jerusalem are Israeli Arabs

30% is Ultra Orthodox, they vote with Bibi

That only leaves 30% to protest here.

Her words rang in my ears

And I can't help it, I am an American, if we want a big, winning coalition, why would we not work like crazy to engage Arabs, Palestinians, don't we need the votes?

Why was the occupation, arguably one of the most central and divisive issues, the red line, off the negotiating table?

I mean I understood what I was told, that if we engaged the Palestinian causes this kind of coalition would then lose the center but still, looking at the basic numbers, I can't see how the future of Israel does not intimately involve thousands and thousands of Arabs and Palestinians. 40% of Jerusalem!

I thought of what one of my Israeli rabbi friends told me in a honest moment a few years ago:

"It is hard when Americans come over here and yell at us."

I think of the baby in the basket

I don't say anything.

10.

But I keep hearing one question, a last question, everyone frames what's going on with the same question and I think it gets to the heart of the matter:

Achim or lo achim?

Are we brothers and sisters, are we siblings, or not?

Achim or lo achim?

Are we loyal, devoted, will we protect each other or not?

Achim or lo achim?

The way they ask this question makes it seem like the answer will determine everything

But my American brain keeps feeling that only having these two choices is just too limited –

The first choice, "Brothers" is very intense

And the only other choice, "Nothing" is also very stark

So I ask, tentatively, a few people, "Can't there be something else, something in the middle?"

One Israeli friend patiently explains to me that this question relates to military service

And you simply cannot have another choice if you are responsible for one another on the battlefield, because there, it's brothers or nothing.

But my stubborn, American, raised in a flawed-though-it-may-be-democracy brain will not let it rest

Even though I'm afraid to say it to my Israeli friends –

Their babies are in the baskets after all

They comprise the rainbow in the darkness

Even though I am afraid to say it –

What if being a Jewish state could evolve into something where Torah, religion is prized but kept separate from government function? Where Jewish culture, calendar, language were the official markers but never at the discrimination of others? Where each citizen had a vote, where the rights of all were inalienable, where the occupation was a non starter and the way to accrue power was to make broader and stronger coalitions, not just with Jews, but with anyone?

In the words of academic Menachem Klein from this week's Ha'aretz:

"Another possibility, which hasn't yet been tried, is to find a *Jewish theological and historic basis for sharing sovereignty with non-Jews*. [This is the] challenge that now awaits the opponents of the [system that currently exists, the system of] 'Jewish supremacy.'"¹⁰

I have come to believe that the only way forward is to create a kind of relationship and loyalty that broadens what it means to be a brother or a sister in this Israeli family –

¹⁰ Menachem Klein, "Israel's Rule Over the Palestinians Has Created a New Judaism," Haaretz, April 8, 2023.

What I am saying is that if I am currently being counted in the brothers and sisters of the state of Israel, and I hope I am, I vote to expand the family, to redefine it. With humility, I vote for including our cousins.

And if that position excludes me from the family, then I respectfully question who gets to be a brother or a sister. Because if we're down to an ethnic, self identified group, increasingly connected to a singular practice of Jewish tradition, one that only accepts the current, increasingly violent reality at the exclusion of any new ones, that situation no longer describes 'brothers and sisters,' that sounds more like the reality show survivor. And I'm an American, I might not know much but I know how that show goes: By the end, there's only one person left.

11.

You know, after Miriam stands on that shore waiting to see what will happen to Moses
We don't see her again for many verses
Really we don't see her for the whole story

Maybe she sneaks over to the palace and whispers the stories of freedom and dignity in Moses' ear, we don't know

We just know that when the children of Israel – and all the others – left
Remember no one was getting carded at the shores of the sea, anyone who was ready to leave could and did go –
When we all finally, famously, impossibly
leave for good

We find Miriam standing right there, again, at the shores of a sea

And you know, one of the rabbis says that that very place at the end of the Nile
where Moses was put in his basket

That spot meets up with the Red sea (!)

So that it is possible Miriam was *standing* back at the *exact same place* –

11

Either way

It seems that her prophecy,

The one she refused to abandon,

even when it looked not only wrong but foolish, dangerous

her prophecy has been fulfilled (!)

And so, Miriam starts to sing

because now it is undeniable

Something new, a new kind of people has just been born.

¹¹ Shemot Rabbah 1:21, "And she put the child (Moses) inside (the basket), and laid it in the "suf" by the river's bank" (Ex. 2:3). R. Eliezer says: *It was the Red Sea, because the Red Sea ("yam suf") reaches as far as the Nile.*