

Rabbi Noa Kushner

Kol Nidre 5784

זֵית טָרַף בְּפִיהָ: A Torn Olive Branch in her Mouth

1.

I was in Jerusalem last spring

And I had the honor of sitting with my teacher Avivah Zornberg, a great teacher of Torah, who will be joining us in May

But in order to get there I had to turn down Esther haMalka Street to find the cafe which made me think of Esther in the book of Esther and if she really was a queen or a prophetess or both

and this cafe happened to be named "Pesto," but it might just as easily have been called Rachel after the biblical matriarch like the cafe a few streets over

Or Ephraim like the son of Joseph

Which is the name of the cafe on the street after that

Or Caffè Hillel after the great, open hearted teacher – maybe you see what I'm getting at

To be Jewish in Israel is not something in a discreet box tucked away somewhere that probably requires an appointment like it is here

Instead

The language and symbols of Jewish life are everywhere, in this conversation, on the sign in front of that building, on this person's clothes, tangled in his hair style, or hers,

What I'm saying is that our torah, culture, symbols are not only on the proverbial menu, Jeremiah is the name of my favorite salad.

This is why I was and was not surprised when

Last summer when I returned to Israel, this time with our whole family

And we spent an entire shabbat

Absorbing melodies in a traditional Syrian synagogue surrounded
by murals of fruit trees on the walls and in front of an ark covered in
flowers made of mother of pearl

– one of the few places in the world where the piyyutim change
each week, depending on the Torah portion and the season –

That is why I wasn't surprised when

The next day, when Michael went to the laundromat near our hotel

The president of the same synagogue was the manager of said
laundromat

And since he recognized Michael from shabbat they had a
conversation

And the president told Michael a story about a man who came to
this same synagogue a few decades ago,

And how he was so altered by the experience,

His center of gravity so shifted from that one shabbat –

He left his life in New York and moved to Jerusalem

Purchasing a home across the street from the synagogue,

where he still lives to this day

See these kinds of things are not so unusual in Jerusalem, not so out
of the ordinary

A person can prioritize their life around the needs of their Jewish
soul

In any case Michael and the president

Spoke together in the laundromat

About shabbat and tradition and being Jewish in America and Israel

And how to repair what's been torn apart at the seams

They were talking about a shirt, but they could have just as easily

been talking about democracies

2.

Israel is undergoing a sea change

Something has opened up in the country that is so massive in scale
so far reaching

things will never return as they were

It is not possible

For many months now, hundreds of thousands of people are
pouring into the streets

And what began as a protest against the overreaches of the current
governing coalition, a coalition the likes of which the country has
never seen

A coalition which includes extremists,

A coalition which normalizes right wing ethno-nationalists –

This protest has now gone much further, gaining in popularity

Raising core questions regarding the overall priorities and identity of
the country

Fighting for democracy in Israel, a democracy many feel is under
siege

When I was in Jerusalem last spring, I saw people crying at the
protests, praying, fasting, I spoke with the older generation, people
especially distraught at the trajectory of the country they sacrificed
their whole lives to build

My friend tells me a story

She was watching the news with a woman in her 80's

A pioneer, someone whose sacrifices to create and build the state of
Israel cannot be over exaggerated

As this older woman saw the news stories careening into darker
territory

The kind of narrowness and polarization that has become more and more common

She said, quietly and simply,
"When we formed this country
This is not what we had in mind."

That night she joined the protest and, like many others, has continued protesting for the past 38 weeks.

I get up early the day after Rosh Hashana and go to Fremont, to the Tesla factory

No I am not getting a new car for 5784

Rather, Netanyahu was slated to talk with Elon Musk there, demonstrators were gathering out front, and I was not about to miss it.

See, even here, Netanyahu cannot escape.

In an unprecedented wave of protests around the globe, even Americans, along with many Israelis

Are out in force, hundreds on this particular early morning

I choose the Tesla factory because I imagine that's where the most Israelis will be and I'm right.

I happily don't hear any English.

I park illegally on Innovation Way,

partly in solidarity with my Israeli brothers and sisters, who I feel would do the same

And blend in with the crowd

The Israeli flags, a hallmark of the protests, are in full display

A sea of hundreds of people gracing the Tesla entrance, chanting

"Democracy," full throated, on behalf of Israel, a sight I never imagined I'd see

A few of the Israeli flags graze the top of my head as I stand

And I'm reminded of the feeling of being under a huppah, a wedding canopy
Only this wedding, this covenant is with the future of Israel

3.

You might not know but there's a giant in our tradition, named Og.
Og shows up over many generations in midrash.
The epitome of brute force and self-interest.
Not an altruistic bone in his big body.

Why am I telling you this? Because there's a midrash that says that, in the Noach story, as the flood waters are rising, rising
Og approaches Noach and begs Noach to save him and let him come on the ark.

Og says to Noach, "I'll be your slave for life."

It's interesting
He doesn't appeal to Noach's righteousness, or even Noach's compassion
Og appeals to Noach's self interest, he appeals to Noach's need for self-protection.

And in a moment of weakness, or ego, or fear, or maybe it was a power grab, or maybe all of the above,
Noach makes a deal with the giant, letting Og hang on to the ark from the outside.

Some say Og rode on the roof.
Some say he hung onto the gutter.

But wherever Og was, in the sources, it says Noach punched a hole in the ark and fed the giant every day through that hole¹

What I'm saying is that Noach doesn't just make one choice once to keep the giant, *Noach punches a hole every day.*

*I'm saying Noach makes a deal to feed that beast of power and self interest every day.*²

4.

Since the founding of Israel

There were always very good reasons to postpone the internal issues of society: questions of gender equity, the unequal and oppressive hierarchy between ashkenazim and sephardim, the challenges posed by all nature of religious separatists, LGBTQ rights, just to name a few

You see, there was always a crisis to attend to so that, for example, the rights of the Arab-Israeli population would have to wait, women would have to wait

The alarm bells were always ringing, alerting everyone to the very real possibility of another war, another attack

So that the increasing encroachment of the religious right's demands on the civic majority was never top priority

Better to stay protected in the ark, keep the status quo than rock anything inside the boat

And so, with the exception of a vocal and tireless left that has been trying to get the Jewish world's attention for decades,

All these tensions, more

¹ Pirke de Rebbe Eliezer, 23:8

² Deuteronomy 3:11, Pirke deRabbi Eliezer 23:8

Were often postponed to be addressed another day

Who ever thought, in the words of David Grossman, we never imagined – that “our enemies [would] come from within?”

But whether it was due to world wide trends of populism,
Or it was in response to globalization, and the hyper-individualism
that accompanies it

Parts of the religious right in Israel started to swing even further to
the right

Voting religious extremists into the the kneset who don't even
pretend to want the country to be democratic.

In the words of author Yuval Noah Harari: “There is a group of
zealots in the government. They [think] they know the way to
redemption, they require unlimited power, and [they believe] any
means to that power is legitimate.

He continues,

“The moderates [of this ruling party] think they can ride the tiger
without being swallowed.”³

But we know

Riding the tiger, feeding the giant, we see it in our torah, it amounts
to the same end

We see how easily we become beholden to these giants

Our priorities beginning to revolve around their needs

Until the entire country, its very democratic foundations, are at risk

³ Yuval Noah Harari, “Bolsheviks, Khomeinists and Now Bibi: How Israelis Can Stop Netanyahu’s
Messianic Dictatorship,” Ha’aretz, August 31, 2023.

5.

Rabbi Benny Lau, a respected figure and leader of the religious right
But also someone who is respected by progressives for his political
activism

And his "outspoken advocacy of LGBTQ inclusion in Orthodoxy."

Rav Benny, as he is known,

After witnessing the movement of so many fellow religious Zionists
to the far right

Wrote an impassioned plea on social media a few months ago,
saying:

"In years gone by we've always been faithful to the democratic
institutions of the state

A thick wall has always divided us – as well as most other Israelis –
from religious extremists who support terror and have no use for the
pillars of democracy

"However, I mourn the fact that this wall between us and religious
extremists is *collapsing*

"And shamefully, *another wall has been built in its place:*
a wall *separating* the religious population from the State of Israel
and its democratic institutions."⁴

And as *this* new wall grows higher and deeper, Lau wrote, "we will
soon approach the abyss, and there [he said, the religious extremist,
Jewish assassin of prime minister] Yitzchak Rabin,

⁴ Judy Maltz, "What Right Wing Religious Zionists Tell This Liberal-Orthodox Rabbi About the Judicial
Coup," Ha'aretz, September 1, 2023

There at the bottom, Yigal Amir and his smile awaits us.”

6.

So as not to bother the fundamentalist men who ride the same bus
A bus driver recently demanded that some women boarding
cover up and sit in the back

It got captured on video

Now this is not new, sadly, this has been happening for years

It started at the kotel / the western wall, and now the phenomenon
of segregation has expanded out, including buses where
worshippers might be *going* to the kotel.

I am sorry to say it is not new

But what the bus driver said *is* new

When pressed, he defended his actions saying, “The existing laws
are not relevant.”⁵

You see

The driver understood, he interpreted, following the examples of
those in governmental leadership

that the laws protecting public space and citizens of Israel

Were now secondary to his understanding of religious law and his
prerogative to enforce that religious law

Because this is where feeding the giants has led us

And of course, if rights are being trampled

If the government is heading towards a stronger version of ethno-
nationalism, many minorities are affected

⁵ Or Kashti, “Separate, Not Equal: Religious Women Against Gender Segregation in Netanyahu’s Israel,”
Haaretz, August 18, 2023

Arab Israelis and Palestinians, already under extreme pressure
become that much more vulnerable

And while there is a Palestinian presence at the protests, Arab-Israeli
speakers

As recently as last summer, Palestinian flags were being confiscated
by Israeli police at the same protests.

And, since it remains unclear if, this massive, historic movement
This internal-Jewish conversation
will take the matter of the Occupation under its wing
The fate of many Palestinians still hangs in the air

And given that Palestinians are subject to
A different court system,
Are under the surveillance of the Israeli army – who answer first and
foremost to Israel,
Since Palestinians are subject to check points that keep them from
hospital visits, work, family
As well as potential removal of basic rights like freedom of
expression

While none of “this excuses terrorism, for which there is no excuse”⁶
While the challenges facing Israel are nothing less than existential
And while the path forward is unclear and difficult, to say the least

I cannot imagine fighting for a democratic Israel without addressing
the Occupation
This is not only my moral impulse, although it is surely that

⁶ Language from T’ruah

But I am also making a rational argument:

We cannot make more and more concessions to extremists
The giants who promise their extreme loyalty
if only we make the state of Israel a little more extreme in return
If only we include this hilltop, condone this act of violence, extend
one more border
A little further
We cannot change one more law depending on who it serves or
doesn't
And then rationally wonder why Israel is not the democratic
stronghold we want it to be

7.

I always thought the olive branch was the sign of peace
But recently I learned that it was the Greeks who described it as
such,
which then became a Christian idea and until very recently,
I just assumed it was an everyone idea

But for the rabbis the olive tree was not a sign of peace
In fact the rabbis wonder out loud why the dove even chose that
kind of tree
They don't seem to have that reference altogether
Instead, they wonder why the dove couldn't have chosen a more
fragrant, sweeter tree

*I mean is there anything more Jewish than blaming the dove for her
choice of tree?*

“Why wasn’t it a nice cinnamon tree?” They ask. “Or a balsam leaf?”⁷
Why did the dove pick such a bitter tree?

But their point is not only culinary
You see, they also notice that this tree, this branch
Was not a cultivated, photo-ready, lovely sprig like we picture it
today
The phrase Torah is uses is ⁸וְהָנְהָ עַל־הַזַּיִת טָרַף בְּפִיהָ
And here, she came with an olive branch *torn* in her mouth
And it is that seemingly extra word
The olive branch that was טָרַף / *torn*,
That reminds the rabbis of the time
When Joseph’s brothers told their father that Joseph was torn apart
by a wild animal (!)
טָרַף / *torn apart*
As if to say this branch was not meant to be photogenic,
domesticated or peaceful

Rather, we are beginning to understand
This olive branch was torn off the tree by that dove
as if she didn’t care how she got it,
Bitter, torn, it didn’t matter

See the rabbis are articulating a temptation, one based in fear
That we, like Noach,
Who famously does not seem want to leave the ark, keeps making
excuses to stay
That we like Noach

⁷ Genesis Rabbah, 33:6

⁸ Genesis 8:11

would never want to accept the terms of a new freedom, or a new world

We would never leave our arks either

Because the branches that the doves of the world bring us, that is
The opportunities the world offers us for real change, real redemption

Maybe they are not fragrant enough,

They are not pretty, not cultivated enough

So better to stay inside this nice, warm, okay a little crowded,
but still, it has kept us safe so far (!) ark

The rabbis are putting words to it:

Better to eschew this supposed proof from the dove and to wait in
the ark, like Noach did

Rather than accept that it is time for us to go, it is time for something
new

8.

But see, the midrash does not stop there

After they discuss the torn nature of the olive branch

There's a line in the midrash that I will think about for the rest of my
life

R. Berekh yah says, "In tearing that olive branch, the dove *killed* the
tree [that it came from]. *And it could have been a great tree.*"⁹

What tree? The rabbis never say.

The conversation just stops

Believe me, I looked for more –

I went crazy,

⁹ Genesis Rabbah 33:8

What does this mean, "The dove killed the tree!?" "It could have been a great tree."

I think the rabbis are pointing out another temptation, this one even more fundamental and dangerous than the first

That is, when it comes time to make a decision to leave an ark
That is, to exchange an old world for a new one
In order to enter the new world
We will in all likelihood have to sacrifice what might have been a "great tree" somewhere else

You see, all real choices, all choices require sacrifice, yes, curtailed possibility
All real choices invariably require something torn (!), perhaps ripped (!) off what might have been

Adolescents and zealots, they will always tell us,
"Just wait here in the dark a little longer, there is a great tree out there somewhere and if you take a branch now, if you leave now, you'll surely kill it."

But this kind of stasis, this postponement of living in exchange for a perfect fantasy that never arrives, is a self inflicted death sentence

Yes, we can sit in the dark and wait in the ark for the great imaginary trees to grow somewhere we can't see
We can wait and have faith in the current government in Israel will figure it out

We can be faultless, still, perfect and quiet in the ark we've kept

acclimated to the compromises we're already been making for so long

We can keep company with those who refuse to acknowledge the groups of hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people outside week after week

We can keep company with those who are frightened by the tearing apart of any early zionist dream, who guard it ferociously, no matter how remote or anachronistic it now seems to be

Or we can be detached, so pained from years of painful news about Israel altogether,

We can decide, that since Israel cannot be that moral paragon, that "great tree"

Because Israel has disappointed us

Because of the Occupation or any number of things

We will put our attention elsewhere

And ignore any number of messengers of change that come our way, any kind of invitations

But if we don't respond in this moment

Whether motivated by loyalty or despair

– It doesn't really matter which – *because it all amounts to the same end*

The ark stays intact

And, like it or hate it, the state of Israel will continue to steer slowly yet deliberately away

And any island of democracy will be further and further out of reach

However, there is a better way.

I think the dove is onto something

See the dove knows

She knows that redemption is *always ripped and sometimes even a little bitter*

The dove knows that any real change, any redemption always means giving up on some perfect dream, some "great unrealized tree" without guarantee of success

The dove knows: If it means we can leave the ark, and become a part of a living story

Then there's no question! We choose the branch! We choose redemption, no matter how difficult!

There's no question! We're the kind of people who hold onto that imperfect branch for dear life.

You see

Right now there are *hundreds of thousands of Israelis*

The equivalent of ten million demonstrators in America who have been marching for almost 40 weeks

There are signs and videos, and apps and theatrical demonstrations with sets and costumes

There are messages ranging from the biblical to the blasphemous

There are speeches and songs that will break your heart in two

There are marches for miles and more flags than you can count

There are children and doctors and academics and blue collar

laborers and military: Mossad and captains and pilots and

submarine commanders – all doing the previously inconceivable, refusing to serve

A democratic, non violent uprising the likes of which *no democracy has ever seen*

It is thrilling and historic

The very future of the country, our Israel, and any hope for

Palestinians is at stake

What I'm saying is that the torn branch is right in front of us (!)
It is not perfect, it never is
We can't say what will happen
But the dove is hovering in our window, holding the branch in her
beak
It is her invitation to leave the ark
The only question is whether or not we will take it

9.

The Sfat Emet once taught that we are all scattered around the world
because
We each have access to a different piece of the truth
That is, it is possible we each have truth the other needs
And that is why we are scattered, to collect these truths and offer
them to each other¹⁰

We here in America have a different piece of truth
That we can offer to our brothers and sisters in Israel

When Biden and Netanyahu met earlier this week
President Biden said, "...without Israel, there's not a Jew in the world
who's secure."
And while he meant it as a form of solidarity
While it might even be true, it sounded, at least to me
Like something we'd say back in the old ark
And I thought, "Israel must be – more than a bomb shelter for Jews."

You see, I don't want people to say without Israel, no Jew is secure

¹⁰ Sfat Emet, Balak (paraphrase) The tablets are broken – this is why we are dispersed, to collect the tablets.

I want people to say that Israel, responding to the demands of her citizens,
has made the incredibly difficult and courageous moves to be on the forefront of democracy

I want people to say that Israel is a Jewish model for how to courageously avoid what seems to be, in many other countries, including our own, a one way street to autocracy and authoritarianism

That Israel works to be a paradigm of equality and dignity for all her citizens
Not as a far off myth, but as a priority *right now*

A Jewish place where Torah, Jewish religion is prized and treasured but kept separate from government function and civic spaces
Where people still move to live across the street from treasured synagogues,
but don't set up their synagogues in the streets

Where Jewish culture, calendar, language are the official markers but never at the discrimination of others
Where each citizen has a vote,
where the rights of all are inalienable,
where the occupation is a non starter
and the way to accrue power in the government or anywhere in civil society is to make broader and stronger coalitions, not just amongst Jews, but with anyone

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 this sounds American that is because this is the piece of truth I was sent to bring to the table
The truth I am required to bring, as it is the only truth I have

And if you think what I suggest is dangerous for the future of our Jewish state, that it will undermine our history or our safety or its character or our character, I understand
I don't say any of this lightly

The quality of Jewish expression and holiness and culture and life in Israel is one of the greatest miracles of my life
It is one of the greatest miracles of our lives, one I have and will work to guard and keep
And I trust you will, too
It is just that I, along with many Israelis, just can't abide by what is happening any longer
I cannot wait for a great pretend tree that never grows
I cannot keep feeding the giants
And so I will take whatever branch is on offer

And even if you fundamentally disagree with me, I still hope you will join the demonstrations, we'll be sending information
And even if you hate my idea, I hope we can discuss it, argue, work together
You see, outside of the ark, from where I stand in this new world
These kinds of conversations are not only permitted to take place, we are *obligated* to have them

You know, it's funny

After Noach sends out his hand and takes that dove,
Takes the torn message of redemption from her beak
He still doesn't leave the ark

He doesn't yet realize there are rainbows out there
And that's just the start, there's a whole new world,
One of new covenants and promises
One that will surely need to be reinterpreted for this moment
But a glorious world all the same
We could say it is a world that's just beginning

But Noach waits, he sends the dove out *one more time*
The ark is known, it's safe, so he wants more proof, he wants a
guarantee

But this time, see, you know what happens after Noach sends out the
dove?
She doesn't return

We don't know where she went
All we know is that she went out somewhere in the new world
Leaving Noach no real choice but to follow her