

“Tefillah v’Tza’akah: Praying and Geschreiing”

Shabbat *Lech L’cha* November 5, 2022

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Today we read *par’shat Lech L’cha*, in which Abram/Abraham emerges as the complex figure who will become the emblematic leader of the enterprise we now call Judaism. Today is also 11 Cheshvan on the Jewish calendar.

Twenty-seven years ago tonight on the Jewish calendar, 12 Cheshvan, following the very same Shabbat Torah reading, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was murdered in Tel Aviv by a right-wing extremist. A young man went on Israeli television a few weeks before, holding the insignia he had swiped off the Prime Minister’s official Cadillac. He declared on camera, “we got to his car, and we’ll get to him, too.”

The assassin is still in prison. But that other young man is now head of an Israeli political party that identifies itself as the heir to right-wing extremist Rabbi Meir Kahane. He did very well in this week’s election, almost guaranteeing himself a ministry in the new government of the once and future Prime Minister, Bibi Netanyahu.

No one denies that the Koach Party received its votes democratically. No one disputes the fact that they represent the will of a growing segment of Israel’s population. No one thinks Israel’s election was rigged, stolen, or conducted in a way that denied any minority access to the polls. The Koach Party is for real. Meanwhile, Rabin’s party, the party that built the State of Israel, barely qualified to sit in the Knesset.

We who love Israel – we who rely on it to be the central point of identity for the Jewish people in our historical era – we find ourselves caught between praying and “geschreiing.” Crying out, that is. Shouting “gevalt.”

We want Israel to be the heir to Abraham our patriarch, strong and courageous, principled and self-reliant. Sharing the land, yet claiming his own share and refusing to be bullied or scared away. Covenanting with the one God and committing himself to what would become the prototype for a Torah that makes universal Godliness possible.

That is the picture of the imperfect but admirable Abraham we meet in this parashah. In order to seal his contract with the God who is the standard of social ethics, he submits to the mark of circumcision, but more importantly, to the demands of that call to ethical existence. We are not proud of everything Abraham does, especially when he sometime sees injustice and does *not schrei gevalt*, but in the main we see him as better than most of us, and as the best of his time.

The Talmudic tractate *Ta’anit*, literally, “fast days,” records the tradition wherein ancient Jewish communities would stage hastily called public services of fasting and repentance in order to plead to God for rain when it was apparent that a deadly drought was upon them. The Rabbis, i.e. the Sages of the Mishnah, remember various liturgical poems and pleas that were recited during those emergency worship ceremonies, some of which we still use during Yom Kippur, Selichot, and even the daily liturgy.

On page 17a of that tractate, the Sages quote a liturgical plea known as *“hu ya’anenu”* “May God likewise answer us,” beginning with the telling line, “May God who answered Abraham our Father, likewise answer us.” Not that we are as deserving of God’s response as Abraham was, they might say, but that we have no alternative but to ask on our own behalf. It is a matter of life and death.

Says the Talmud, some believe that this prayer should be concluded with *Baruch Atah Ado-nai, shome’a tefillah*, “Blessed are you, O God, who hears prayer.” They base this argument on the fact that in the Book of Samuel, we read “And Samuel said, ‘Gather all of Israel to Mitzpah, and I will pray for you,’ using the term “pray” (*tefillah*) for this intense moment. Others believe the prayer should conclude “Blessed are you, O God, who hears our outcry,” *shome’a tz’akah*. This is because in the very next verse we read “And Samuel cried out to the Eternal for Israel.” They recognize that “crying out” might have been the only method of prayer deemed effective by the anxious Samuel.

And likewise with respect to that same poem’s reference to the erratic – some would say fanatic – figure in Biblical history, none other than Elijah, *Eliahu ha-Navi*. “May the one who responded to Elijah on Mount Carmel, likewise answer us.” There, say the Sages, you would expect the Bible to use the word *tz’akah*, “crying out,” to refer to Elijah’s histrionic mode of getting both God and his fellow Israelites’ attention. But no, say the Sages. The most Elijah is allowed to say is *aneini, Ado-nai, aneini* – “Answer me, God, answer me,” which, they say, is a sufficient expression of crying out.

Yes, I would add, but without losing one’s composure or true sense of purpose.

As we studied this Talmudic passage in my class this week, even while I had in the back of my mind both the Israeli elections and the historic anniversary of Rabin's assassination, I shocked myself by remembering a salient detail of the moment before the killing. When I share it with you, I think you'll find it remarkable as well.

Rabin had finished addressing a crowd of several hundred thousand Israelis who had hastily assembled that night to call for a final push toward realizing the terms of the Oslo Agreements. Rabin himself had been the key figure in effecting Israel's violent pushback to the first Intifida, the Palestinian civil uprising. He had infamously said, "We will crush their bones."

Rabin was a military man all his life. His culture, his orientation to Israeli identity – and Jewish identity – was shaped by the military worldview. Now he was risking his political career and even his life to effect territorial compromise.

As he concluded his remarks, someone handed him a piece of paper with the lyrics to a song known to everyone in the crowd *except* Rabin. The song was "Song for Peace," or *Shir La-Shalom*. It had been written in 1969 as an anthem to be sung by a military choir to commemorate those fallen in battle. However, it was intentionally composed as an *anti*-commemoration. It scoffed at saying Kaddish for the dead. It cast doubt on the glorification of military heroism. It rejected the idea that "victory" was a meaningful term in the context of war. It questioned the notion that one could "pray" for protection in battle, or for anything at all, for that matter.

Several army chiefs disallowed its performance under their command, including Ariel Sharon. *Galei Tzahal*, the army radio station, refused to play it.

It became the anthem of *Shalom Achshav*, Peace Now, and all of their fellow travelers. That's why everyone in that modern reincarnation of the Talmudic emergency life-and-death public fasting ceremony knew the song except the old general on the podium. He needed the words.

The song's verse calls on people to quit thinking that we can bring about peace simply by praying and hoping. "Don't say the day will come. Bring the day!"

And the chorus declares, "Therefore just sing a song for peace. Don't whisper a prayer, a *tefillah*. Better just to sing a song for peace, with a great, loud cry, a *tz'akah g'dolah*."

Do you hear it? Does the lyricist know what he's done? He's used two synonyms for prayer in the Mishnaic lexicon as if one were the contradiction of the other. Don't offer *tefillah*. It won't do any good. This is life and death! Instead, offer *tz'akah*. Schrei gevalt! Cry out at the top of your lungs! Wake yourselves up.

Risk everything, like Abraham of old. Leave the comforts of everything you knew and thought to be true. *Lech I'cha* from your ironclad self-definition that precludes making "peace" with your enemy by any means other than by running him off his land and crushing him in battle.

The great warrior sang the song, eschewing one kind of prayer for another, calling on himself and his nation to substitute *tz'akah*, "crying out," for *tefillah*, the quiet hope that God would intervene and relieve us of our responsibility to own our destiny.

He folded up the paper and stuck it in his shirt pocket. The EMTs found it there, bloodstained but still readable.

He never gave up on Israel, or the Jewish people, or the dream of peace, or the fate of the world, and neither should we. He was pitifully far from perfect, and he did not always *schrei gevalt* when he should have. But he was better than most of us, and the best of his time.

On the eve of the 12th of Cheshvan, as Shabbat *Lech L'cha* departed, he died trying to lead his nation across the river to a new place, a new way of doing things. A new way of praying and acting, called for by this unique time of life and death.