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Dvar Torah for Beshalach / Tu B'Shevat

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Beshalach / Tu B'Shevat: Awe, Grumbling, and Finding a Place to Live in Between

Ariel Pollock Star '04 | BronfmanTorah | Beshalach / Tu B'Shevat 2017

Ariel Pollock Star (Bronfman '04) recently made aliyah from Cincinnati, Ohio to Be'ersheva, Israel with her husband and two small boys. They are all slowly acclimating to a life of Hebrew and giant hummus tubs. Ariel's background is in education, sustainable business, and food, and she is currently working on establishing the first local organic baby food company in Israel, [farmer + fred](#).

We find ourselves in the desert. That is, in *parashat Beshalach*, we find ourselves in the desert. And also: in 2017, on this day in February, as I write this, we find ourselves in the desert. The former: escaping Pharaoh, running to freedom. The latter: finding a new home at the northern tip of the Negev.

We all know the start of the story of *parashat Beshalach* because we talk about it over matzo ball soup once a year at the seder table. The Israelites, at last set free, gather up what they can carry and run from Egypt before Pharaoh has time to change his mind. And then he changes his mind. A chase ensues, and the miracle of the split *Yam Suf*, the Sea of Reeds, saves the Israelites and drowns the Egyptians. But what happens then, immediately after the Israelites find themselves on dry land without pursuers?

First: Song, dance, and great rejoicing. Endless gratitude for the miracle that they

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witnessed and the amazing act of Gd and nature.

Second: Almost immediate complaining. Wait, what? After the sea returned to normal, and the song and dance died down, the Israelites looked around and found themselves in the desert. No water, no food. No civilization in sight. Which direction to walk? Who to trust? Why leave Egypt just to wither away, insignificant, in the empty desert? Suddenly one word pops up over and over again in the narrative - *yilnu* - "they grumbled." Not a very biblical word. In the midst of miracles, of power and strength and fury and awe, we find grumbling. Repeatedly throughout the rest of the *parasha*, the Israelites grumble - for water, for sweeter water, for food, for water yet again. Each time an open miracle occurs. Water appears, water is sweetened. Manna falls from the sky. But each time the awe and gratitude exists only in the moment and by the next collective breath frustration has taken its place. In this less popular section of the Passover story, I find that I feel some empathy for our ancient cousins. I find myself, sitting in the desert in 2017, to be experiencing a similar cycle of emotions, albeit of much smaller proportions.

Tu B'Shvat, the birthday of the trees, occurs every year around parashat Beshalach. This is my first Tu B'Shvat in Israel as an Israeli. Moving to Israel for myself was a decision based in a certain kind of ideology, though not a particularly communal one. I simply always felt more whole in Israel, more able to give of myself because I somehow felt more complete. I always felt a certain awe that would leave me when I landed back at JFK. The experiences my husband and I had in Israel told us it would be a place where our children would walk themselves to school at age 7 and go hiking with their friends for fun and develop a thick skin but a big heart. So my ideology was my own, not political or even particularly religious, but connected to the land, certainly, deeply.

My mother recently came to visit us from the States. A week or so before her trip, she was chatting with my four year old son on Facetime and asked him if there was anything in particular he wanted from America. Without hesitation, he answered, "Savta, can you please bring some figs from Trader Joe's?"

The irony! I thought to myself. We now live in the land of the seven species, of bountiful dried fruits piled at the *shuk*, and the only thing my son misses from America is a plastic bucket of California figs. Maybe I need to take him to an

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orchard, I thought. Maybe he needs to see them, to pick them from the trees, to understand what a special thing it is to live in the land of Israeli figs. I kept my thoughts to myself and let my mother address the peculiar request. Of course, as grandmothers do, after a moment of surprise she promised him that they would soon eat their “figgies” together again. Sure enough, the first thing she pulled out of her suitcase was a smuggled package of figs, and they enjoyed them every morning of her visit.

To my son, figs simply mean Savta. She introduced him to the fruit, her favorite, and shared them with him at every occasion. He’s a kid with an excellent memory, and despite the great distance he now found himself from his savta, he remembered the figs.

The *shivat minim*, seven species, are the fruits and grains of Israel that merit mention in the *Torah*. The seven species have become a main focus of Tu B’Shvat through the relatively recent tradition of a kabbalistic seder. They are synonymous with both the ancient wishes of the people of Israel for the bountiful land of Israel, and with the modern perception of the land of Israel by the worldwide diaspora of Jews. Often a first visit to Israel will include an obligatory taste of a date straight off the tree, a visit to a winery to marvel at the quality of grapes of the land.

Yet the *al hamichya*, the traditional blessing after eating one of the seven species, comes with a qualification that it should be said whether or not the fruit or grain was actually grown in Israel. What is important is the act of remembering; the act of connecting the hopes and dreams of the newly birthed Jewish nation with our current appreciation for delicious and natural foods.

Tu B’Shvat is the rare kind of Jewish holiday that comes with very few rules. There is no commandment to pray, to rest, to eat or to bless. Perhaps this is because inherent in the appreciation of nature and natural beauty is the human desire to do all these things anyway. Arriving safely on the far side of the *Yam Suf*, Moses sang a song to Gd; Miriam took out her timbrel and danced. Gratitude, awe, and deep happiness tend to pour out of humans in these moments.

But what happens when these expressions don’t come naturally just steps away from natural beauty and bounty? When you stop seeing the blessing that was just one moment ago laid out in front of you? Even five short months of “real life” in

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Israel has worn away the wonder of the land. It is easier to go to the grocery store than the *shuk*. It is necessary to grumble about the endless bureaucracy and to spend days waiting in lines at government offices, and it is not necessary to spend a morning hiking in the desert. After miraculously crossing through the *Yam Suf*, the Jewish people wander through the desert for three days without finding water. Finally, they discovered an oasis! But the water was too bitter to drink. Their grumbling ensued. But the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of *Hassidut*, writes that the water was actually not bitter at all. The people were angry, depressed, and exhausted, and so their perception of the water was reflective of their state. But how could they possibly be bitter! Just three days before an amazing miracle occurred - their lives were saved and they were completely assured of the presence and protection of Gd.

An oasis in the desert, 2017

Human nature is such that when put in an excellent situation, we adjust rapidly and expect that to be the new norm. Conversely, when a negative situation arises, we do not adjust and we cannot understand why challenges have befallen us. Moving to Israel was the fulfillment of the personal ideology I had built. Logically, I prepared myself to live a normal life here. Work, family, errands - all the regular stuff came along with us on the *aliyah* plane. Yet the feeling of awe persisted above all for the first few months, fortified by applause and encouragement from *sabras* and older *olim* alike. Then I started to break my teeth on more complicated Hebrew. I went to the store and got yelled at by the clerk. The bureaucracy mounted. I fell down from the high of my awe-inspired *aliyah*, and I grumbled. A lot.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski, in his book *Living Each Week*, points out that while the Israelites may have tasted bitter water as a reflection of their inner state, nonetheless Moses is able to fix the problem by throwing a tree into the water, thereby turning it sweet. How could even a miraculous tree fix what is clearly a problem of perspective on the part of the Israelites? They should have to work on their outlook, introspect, and change themselves. Throughout Jewish tradition, trees are the preferred symbol for Torah - an *etz chaim*. In times of emotional upset, swings between highs and lows, finding a stabilizing, comforting presence can be the best way to heal. *Etz chayim hi lamachazikim ba* - a tree of life to those who hold fast to it - a life preserver in times of emotional distress.

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What is my son's life preserver? His own kind of Torah - sharing figgies with his savta. Renewing and living tradition that is important to him, no matter where or when. What is mine? Remembering that coming to this country and making a life here is about more than the highs and more than the lows. Coming here, for me, is a way of connecting to the *etz chaim*, clinging to it and hoping it will carry me through the tide.

Continue the conversation. Send Ariel your thoughts:

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