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The Chain Is Unbroken

Rabbi Dahlia Kronish | BronfmanTorah | D'varim / Tisha b'Av 2017

The last email in our series featuring the 2017 Bronfman Fellowship education team comes from Rabbi Dahlia Kronish, who is teaching a five-session shiur called "The Chain is Unbroken: Israeli Literature as Commentary on Challenging Topics in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature."

This course explores the ways in which modern Israeli literature sheds light on, problematizes, and expands on questions that have been at the core of Jewish discourse for millennia. Fellows study modern Hebrew poetry to gain an understanding of the role of sacrifice within Israeli society, and use a rabbinic autobiography to explore questions of theodicy – specifically, thinking about where God was during some of Israel's most challenging battles, and what it means to understand suffering as a symbol of God's love.

***Rabbi Dahlia Kronish** is the Director of Jewish and Student Life at the Abraham Joshua Heschel School in New York City. At Heschel, in addition to overseeing programming and the student experience outside the classroom, Dahlia teaches Talmud, Jewish Ethics, and Tanach. She was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Dahlia has worked at Camp Ramah in New England and the Ramah Day Camp in Israel. She lives in Riverdale, NY, with her spouse, Josh, and her son.*

Recently, I visited the museum in Kibbutz Degania (on the southern shore of the Kinneret). Degania was the first *Kibbutz* (originally referred to as a *kevtza* – group) established by Jewish pioneers who came to Israel, then Palestine,

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under [Ottoman](#) rule. The museum tells the story of the *kevtza* – its socialist ideology, its commitment to working the land, and its role in building the Zionist Dream. On one of the walls in the museum, was the following quote by A.D. Gordon, 20th century Zionist thinker and leader, who eventually made his home in Degania:

"...ארץ נקנית בחיים עליה, בעבודה, וביצירה."

"...land is acquired through those who live on it, through work, and through productivity."

I found yet another version of this quote where Gordon states that the land of Israel is acquired through work and not through fire and blood. Both of these teachings can be understood as a response to the Talmudic teaching (Babylonian Talmud – Tractate *Brachot* 5a-b) that the land of Israel is acquired through suffering. The Talmud struggles with the question of how to make sense of suffering and suggests that suffering is a way that God expresses love. This is a theological challenge for many, including Moses. A few pages later in Tractate *Brachot*, the rabbis discuss a conversation between God and Moses where Moses asks God to explain why there are righteous people in our world who suffer. The rabbis explain, this is the essence of Moses' question, when he asks God "to show him His ways" (Exodus chapter 32).

God responds to this request by sharing with Moses the Divine attributes that have become known as the thirteen attributes of God. This is the text we read during *mincha* on *Tisha b'Av*. The fast of Tisha b'Av - 9th day of Av - begins on Sunday night. God states that God is merciful and just, compassionate and slow to anger.

In one of my classes with the Fellows, we focused on the question Moses raised to God: צדיק ורע לו – how do we make sense of righteous people who suffer? How do we make sense of suffering and of the understanding that Israel is to be acquired through pain, suffering and loss?

In addition to A.D. Gordon, we looked at a chapter from a new book written by Rabbi Chayim Sabbato – *BeShafrir Chevyon*. Rabbi Sabbato is the head of a Yeshiva in Ma'aleh Adumim (outside Jerusalem). He served in the IDF during the

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Yom Kippur War (1973) where he lost a very close friend in combat. Throughout the book, Rabbi Sabbato contemplates God's presence during the Yom Kippur War. In the chapter we looked at, Rabbi Sabbato remembers a recurrent conversation with his teacher when he was a child, where the teacher discusses a comment Rashi wrote to a verse in Isaiah. Rashi states that God hides because it is "as if" (כביכול – *kivyachol*) God does not have energy to redeem the People of Israel. Rabbi Sabbato recalls his response of panic and fear. Why is God hiding? If it is only "as if" – does this mean God *could* redeem Israel but chooses not to?

Rabbi Sabbato recalls a later conversation with the same teacher, right before Tisha b'Av. The teacher taught the young Sabbato and his peers a text where upon return to Zion, God is the one who states: "If I forget thee, Oh Jerusalem, may my right hand be forgotten." The teacher explains that when God and the Jewish people return to Zion, God will respond and reward those who dwell there. The teacher then said to his young students – "we (your parents and teachers) are the generation that was in exile, but you, my children are destined for greatness. Just remember – the land of Israel is acquired through pain and suffering."

Rabbi Sabbato knows the pain of the suffering from close and near following his involvement in the Yom Kippur war. Perhaps his answer to the eternal question of where is God's presence during these challenging times lies in the title of his book – *BeShafirir Chevyon*. The word *shafirir* can be translated to mean spark or tiny particle and *chevyon* means hiding place. The phrase appears in a *piyut* (liturgical poem) that Rabbi Sabbato references throughout his book. The poem begins with the words "God who hides in *shafirir chevron* – in the tiniest of hiding places..." At the end of the book, Sabbato merges this poem with a popular Israeli song and ends the poem with the line *כי עוד נמשכת השרשרת* – "for the chain indeed does continue". In other words, we respond to these questions, as we always have, by preserving the links to our past, and passing on our questions and our challenges in addition to our light and our hope to the future.

This week's Torah reading *Dvarim* (the first portion in the book of Deuteronomy) begins with Moses' recounting of God's covenant with the Children of Israel. Moses begins with the words "when you come to inherit the land." The purpose of the *shiur* that I am teaching is to see the ways modern Jewish thought in Israel sheds light on questions that have been a part of our covenant from Biblical times through the rabbinic era – questions surrounding the sacrifice of Isaac, the rape of

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Dinah, the way we treat people with disabilities, what it means to be a chosen people, and questions of theodicy (righteous people who suffer). My hope is that by struggling with texts and ideas that have been dealt with in the past, and looking to new sources and teachers to offer us insight and hope, we can model and practice the teaching that indeed the chain does continue.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,
Rabbi Dahlia Kronish

Continue the conversation. Send Rabbi Kronish your thoughts: dahliakr@heschel.org.

P.S.: We're always looking for more dvar torah writers. Interested? Contact stefanie@byfi.org. We look forward to hearing from you.



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