



*Parshat Ki Tavo*  
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**Rebbe, Please Give Me Fervor!**  
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Once, there lived amongst us a man with the stature of a prophet, a man with the moral vision of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. His name was Elie Wiesel, and he taught for years just a few miles from here at Boston University.

In his book *Witness*, which is about Elie Wiesel's teaching at BU, Ariel Burger, his student for 25 years, tells a story that Elie Wiesel shared in class. The story concerned a man named Isaac Babel, who was both a Jew and a lieutenant in the Russian cavalry. That cavalry was a fierce fighting force conquering a lot of areas where Jews used to live in the Pale of Settlement. Isaac Babel himself had a reputation for being a fierce, even bloodthirsty, fighter. He embodies this enigma. He is Jewish. And at the same a Russian military man who is about to conquer Jewish towns.

One day Isaac Babel leads his cavalry into the town of Chernobyl, a small town in Poland. We know Chernobyl as the site of the nuclear melt-down. We also know Chernobyl as the HBO dramatic miniseries with a 95% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes. But before the nuclear meltdown, and before the HBO series, Chernobyl was once the seat of a great Hasidic dynasty. On the day that the cavalry was to conquer Chernobyl, Isaac Babel went to see the last Chernobyl Rebbe. The Russian fighter wanted to tell the Hasidic master that Jewish history was over. Religion was dead. God was dead. Prayer was dead. A new Communist world order was now ascendant.

Isaac Babel goes to where the Hasidim lived in Chernobyl, and it is a ghost town. The Jews were hiding from the Russian army. They were living in caves, fearing for their very lives.

At last Babel gets to the simple home of the Chernobyler Rebbe, who is sitting at a table, learning Talmud. When Babel walks in, the Rebbe continues to learn Torah despite the Russian fighter's menacing presence before him. Rebbes have a sixth sense. They have intuition. Calmly the Rebbe looks up, beholds a Russian fighter in a Russian uniform, and says: "My dear Jew what can I do for you?" This is what happened next, according to Ariel Burger quoting Elie Wiesel.

Babel forgot what he'd been planning to say. He forgot that he was a lieutenant in the Russian army...Suddenly a cry that was not mine came out of my mouth, perhaps it was my grandfather's. I heard myself say, "*Rebbe, please give me fervor!*" (p. 215)

Rebbe, please give me fervor is a prayer for fervor. Rebbes were thought to have a special connection to God. This fierce Russian fighter is asking the Hasidic rebbe to ask God for fervor. The dictionary definition of fervor is "intense and passionate feeling."

Since reading this story, I have been wondering: Should *we* pray to God for fervor, for intense and passionate feeling, and if so, fervor for what? Are we suffering from a fervor deficit?

This question has preoccupied me because most of the time it seems that all the communities I love and care most about—America, Israel, and the Jewish people—are suffering from too much fervor. The left has plenty of fervor. The right has plenty of fervor. That is why all too often we cannot talk to one another. Maybe a better prayer for our time would be Rebbe, please give me humility.

But the Russian Jewish soldier prayed for fervor, and Elie Wiesel teaches this story in praise of fervor, and I believe that Wiesel is a modern prophet, so I have been trying to understand the wisdom in this story. Two things happened this summer that helped me in that regard.

The first had to do with a conversation I had with a very bright young man to talk about his d'var Torah for his Bar Mitzvah. He had a burning desire to talk about immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers in America today.

For him this issue is deeply personal. His own family are immigrants to America. He would not be here if his family members had not been let into America.

He talked about the values of America, our nation as a nation of immigrants.

He talked about Jewish values. How we were strangers in a strange land. Therefore the Torah commands us to be kind to other strangers in our midst.

I told him you have obviously thought about this complex issue a lot, and it shows. And you are only 13. You could give the d'var as it is, and people would say it was excellent. But what is missing is the other side. Can you make the case of somebody who sees this same issue very differently? If somebody disagrees with you, what are the principles behind their position might also be fair and reasonable? That is your summer spiritual homework. We agreed to reconnect at the end of the summer. That was the first thing that helped me understand and share Isaac Babel's prayer.

The second thing was a teaching of Micah Goodman in Jerusalem. Micah was talking about what it is like to be *in the middle of a spectrum*. He pointed out that extreme positions are usually loud, and the people taking them have fervor. By contrast, people in the middle are thought to suffer *from a fervor deficit*. People in the center are said to be namby pamby, lukewarm, tepid.

In fact, however, Micah points out that there is a special quality about people in the center that is rare and badly needed in our world today. Namely, the ability to see and get both sides of any hard question. We are trained by our sacred texts to do just this. The Talmud does

not canonize answers. The Talmud canonizes questions--and multiple positions on those questions.

This is true for unemotional questions. The first question in the Talmud is what time do we pray the evening prayers? You might think there would be a single answer to a simple question. But no, there are three answers, each of which is plausible.

This is also true for deeply emotional questions. What do we think of capital punishment? One answer is that if a court puts somebody to death once every 70 years, that is considered a bloodthirsty court. But the leading rabbi of the day dissents, arguing that this kind of thinking will eliminate deterrence, resulting in more bloodshed. We canonize complexity, not resolution. We canonize questions, not answers.

Which brings me back to what I learned from a 13-year old.

His homework had been: see the world from the other person's point of view. If somebody favors a restrictive immigration policy, if they say Emma Lazarus was great in her day but Emma Lazarus does not work today, and here's why, can they say that without being a bad person?

At the end of the summer we got together again. He showed me his new draft. He made the point forcefully that American values and Jewish values demand that we warmly welcome immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. But there was no nod towards the arguments on the other side.

What happened to the other side, I asked?

What he said is just so important and revealing. What he said shows so clearly the work we all need to do.

*What he said is that this issue is personal. It is not academic.* This is life. His life. His

family's life. He really cares. So his position remained unchanged.

Now he is all of 13. He is wonderful and bright, His d'var reflected his personal conviction.

But this whole experience made me realize that just when it is the hardest to hold onto the Talmudic move of canonizing complexity, just when it is hardest because it is most personal, just when it is hardest because it cuts deepest, that is when we most need to do it.

What this 13-year old said is true for all of us. The issue is personal. Not academic. Of course it is. *All* issues that matter are personal. My race. My religion. My health care. My economic status. My gender identity and sexual orientation. The groups with which I affiliate. Personal. Personal. Personal. There is nothing academic about *any* of this.

*But it is precisely when the issue is most personal that we need to canonize complexity.* This is really hard. But what alternative do we have? After all, if I can only see me, and you can only see you, then I cannot see you, and you cannot see me. Neither of us can see us. We stare at one another in mutual incomprehension—which is the case all too often in our country today.

If we want to have a different country, where I see you, and you see me, and we both see us, we each need to be open to the other's truth. That is not easy. That is not intuitive. That takes work. That takes prayer. That's why I pray:

*Lord, please give us fervor to see the humanity and the decency of the people who see the world differently, especially on the issues that we care most about.*

In this time, and in this place, it is hard to think of a more important prayer. Shabbat shalom.