



Parshat Ki Teitzei
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Be Like Taylor Swift's Seventh Album, Not Her Sixth
by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

I want to talk about two words I have never uttered from this bimah. *Taylor Swift*. Taylor Swift is dramatically germane to the moment in which we now find ourselves.

As you know, Taylor Swift is one of the best-selling, most popular singer songwriters of all time. She has sold more than 50 million albums. She has won 10 Grammy Awards. Her first five albums were all huge, runaway hits, full of simple and catchy tunes that dealt with universal themes like falling in love and fear of rejection.

Then came her sixth album, *Reputation*. That is where things got very interesting.

Music critics observed that the music on this album was Taylor Swift's most innovative and complex. She got out of her comfort zone and grew and stretched. The topics were also more complex: identity formation. Self-doubt. In the song *Delicate* she laments: "My reputation's never been worse." But her sixth album was by far her least successful album commercially because people thought it was too full of negative energy.

Brilliant music. Dark message. Her least successful album.

Which leads to her seventh album which was released in late August, a pre-Elul release. Her seventh album is very Jewish. It has exactly 18 songs on it. Chai. Now Taylor Swift herself pointed out that she had never done an album with 18 songs. I think I might be the only commentator who has observed the specifically Jewish resonance of the number of songs in the album.

But it is not just the *number* of songs that is noteworthy. It is also the *nature* of the songs. They are upbeat. Hopeful. Optimistic. Full of positive energy.

What is the essential difference between her sixth and seventh albums? The essential difference has to do with tone. Her seventh album also deals with real stuff. But in a positive and hopeful way. The saddest song on the album deals with Taylor Swift's mother's fight with cancer. It is hard to find a more serious topic than that. But the song is upbeat. It is entitled *Soon You'll Get Better*. It is a hopeful ballad about recovery and life. Plus the Dixie Chicks sing harmony in the background.

I bring all this up because it speaks to the moment in which we live right now. I cannot tell you how many people tell me they don't follow the news anymore. They don't read the papers anymore. It ruins their day. Every headline seems to portend another negative energy conversation, so people have told me they just opt out. *But when we opt out we miss out*. Can we learn from Taylor Swift's seventh album how not to opt out, but to tackle real subjects with a hopeful tone?

People cannot hear a negative energy message. Cannot hear the sky is falling. We are hard wired to want hope.

Thus our dilemma today: How do we turn negative energy into positive energy when no one of us can solve the big problems—politics in America, politics in Israel, resurgent anti-Semitism—that cause so much of that negative energy? How do we channel Taylor Swift's seventh album, not her sixth?

The Talmud is deeply concerned with the question how to we change the tone and tenor of our world. In Sanhedrin 98A Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi asks the prophet Elijah when will the Messiah come? In other words, how do we change this broken world?

Elijah answers: if you want to find the Messiah, go to the poorest part of town where you will see paupers afflicted with disease. The Messiah will be one of paupers who will be

wrapping and unwrapping his own bandages one at a time. Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi goes to the beggar colony and sees this pauper. The Rabbi asks him: when will the Messiah come? The pauper answers: *hayom*. Today. The Messiah is coming today.

Great answer. Fabulous. The Messiah is coming today. There was only one problem. It did not seem to Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi that *anything* had changed. All the problems of the world were still there. Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi goes back to Elijah and says: I saw the guy who is supposed to be the Messiah. He said the Messiah is coming *hayom*, today. But the world is the same. He lied!

That is how the story ends in the Talmud. But Rabbi Harold Kushner comes to the rescue. He observes that this story stands for two related propositions. First, you cannot save the world. Nobody can. If there *were* beggars, there *will be* beggars. If there *were* toxic political division, there *will be* toxic political division.

But here is the good news. You cannot save the world. But you can save the world *for somebody*. You can bring the Messiah *for somebody*, for the person before you. When Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi saw, talked to, and listened to this bloody beggar, when he paid him heed, on that day, in that moment, he saved the world for that man.

Let me tell you a story that happened right here, in Weymouth, Massachusetts. Tara Waters has a 3-year old son named Quinn who was undergoing some serious medical challenges, as a result of which he had to be in isolation. His immune system was compromised, so he could not leave his home. His only window to the world was literally the window in his living room. And for Quinn, a rambunctious tyke, that was a sentence.

Faced with those facts, Tara could have understandably radiated the tone of a young mother whose young child was being quarantined and was fighting for his life. She could have railed against the world. But she didn't.

She let the world know that while her son Quinn cannot come out, there is a window to his world in the form of the window in their living room. By all means, come by and wave hello.

At first it was neighbors who came by the window and started waiving to Quinn.

His mother Tara is a police officer for the Quincy Police Department. Soon Quincy police officers in their official blue arrived, on their motorcycles, sirens blaring, to salute Quinn and to blow him a kiss. One police officer came to sing him Somewhere Over the Rainbow.

When the Weymouth fire department heard about it, firefighters came and presented Quinn, through the window, with an official Weymouth fire fighter helmet that was bigger than he was.

Total strangers heard about Quinn and started booking appointments with Tara on-line to see her son. A man with a guitar serenaded Quinn. A drama troupe put on a play. People would find out from his parents who his favorite superheroes were, and they would come dressed as superheroes. Patriots players and Bruins players came by to visit. Tara observed: "The boost of positivity is keeping him going."

When the world is hard and dark, a positive tone—not a naïve positive tone, not a delusional positive tone, not an in denial positive tone, but a realistic, authentic positive tone—is even more important. We need to channel the energy of Taylor Swift's seventh album.

One day this summer, I received an anguished text from my daughter in Los Angeles. There was more news of the day, as there is every day. That news was negative energy

news, as it is every day. That news divided people, as it does every day. And my daughter texted me: Dad, what can we do?

I texted her back: We cannot stop the news of the day. We cannot save the world. But we can save the world *for somebody*. Be like the police department, the fire department, the neighbors, the total strangers who saved the world for Quinn. We can do this. We can all do this. We can all save the world for somebody.

By the way, the title of Taylor Swift's seventh album is *Lover*. Fill this world with the power of your love. And do it *hayom*, today. Shabbat shalom.