

Parashat VaYeshev 5784 / פְּרַשְׁת וַיֵּשֶׁב

Dr. Alix E. Ginsburg December 9, 2023

Torah Portion: [Genesis 37:1-40:23](#); [Numbers 7:18-23](#)

וַיֵּשֶׁב (“He Settled”) begins the story of Joseph, describing his rivalry with his fratricidal brothers, his kidnapping from the land of the Hebrews by the Midianites who sold him to the Ishmaelites, his slavery in Egypt, and imprisonment after his master’s wife frames him in response to Joseph’s refusal of her advances. We also read of Joseph nearly holding his brother Benjamin hostage. The פְּרַשְׁה also contains the story of Tamar, her husbands, and her father-in-law, Judah.

As in most פְּרַשְׁוֹת that we read in Torah, there emerges a double question: G-d’s role in human endeavors, in religious terms – determinism, and, on the other hand, the question of free will coupled with or decoupled from man’s faith in G-d’s powers and grace. In בְּרֵאשִׁית, we see the creation of the world, human sin before the eating of the apple, the destruction of the Garden of Eden, The Flood, and so forth. All of these foundational stories evoke the BIG questions of spirituality and the literality of the text.

In וַיֵּשֶׁב, in Joseph’s story, we read of human cruelty without divine intervention, at least initially, with the brothers mistreating Joseph, with the manifest intention of killing him, with Pharaoh and the Egyptian prison master mistreating him, again with the intention of physically punishing him, and Judah, even if inadvertently, raping Tamar.

Most cruelly, Genesis 40:15 contains the following פְּסוּק describing Joseph’s imprisonment in Egypt:

כִּי־גָנַב גָּנַבְתִּי מֵאֶרֶץ הָעִבְרִים וְגַם־פָּה לֹא־עָשִׂיתִי מְאוּמָה כִּי־שָׂמוּ אֹתִי
בְּבֹר:

For in truth, I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews; nor have I done anything here that they should have put me in the dungeon.”

How do we deal with this overt and highlighted savagery, bestiality and unmitigated bloodthirstiness? פְּרַשְׁנִים through the years have their interpretations, justifications and philosophical arguments. Our sources are replete with rejoinders to these unsavory episodes.

But now after October 7, 2023, in the aftermath of one of the most vicious, depraved and fiendish chapters in our multi-millennial history, what is our response? Most people say that there are ‘no words’. We say “We cry, we are silent, we are stunned”. Israelis now say: “לא נתפס” -- inconceivable, impossible to understand. The catastrophe is so immense that the human mind cannot encompass it and express a response.

And yet, there has been a rich explosion, a crucible of new poetry in Israel in the weeks since October 7, Simchat Torah 5784. People turn to poetry for solace, for diversion, for beauty that might lead to hope. **Hope** is the one crutch that remains for us all. Leah Goldberg (1911-1970)

is said to have written during an earlier Israeli war that the role of poets in wartime is to sing the 'songs' of war **and** of hope.

Inexplicably, and with gratitude in these very dark days of collective trauma, many of us turn to poetry and song as a way to find brightness amid the cognitive dissonance of grief, shock, disillusionment and despair. We seek divine presence and grace in the poetry and song of prayer.

Assaf Gur is a well-known secular journalist in Israel, an editor at Yedioth Ahronoth. and a TV broadcaster. He had never written nor published poetry before this cataclysmic crisis in our lives. This is his **first** poem, written in the days immediately following the attack, and it has taken on a life of its own in Israel and beyond. Only in Israel do we encounter this intense, organic power of poetry commingled with the **scaffolding of liturgy in daily life**.

I will read the poem in Hebrew, then English and then repeat them so you capture - more fully - your own comprehension of and absorption of the poem. *We'll pass out copies after you absorb the sounds and music of the prayer-poem.*

Pay attention to the sacred language that you will immediately recognize **and** to its conversion to secular and vernacular expression. Mark the poet's personal return to religious expression in the face of the most **abject despair of faith**. Most ironically, this is the secular poet who turns to classic prayer. We witness the inescapable power of subliminal, religious rhetoric in the daily life of the everyday secular Jew.

(If you are reading this Drash rather than listening to someone read it to you, read the following prayer-poem **aloud** as you any other prayer in shul. The power of this poem is in the oral recitation and in the hearing.)

Kadish Asaf Gur

Translated by Heather Silverman, Michael Bohnen, Rachel Korazim

קדיש אסף גור

Yisgadal V'yiskadash Shmei Raba
 And no one came
 Many thousands called Him on Shabbat morning
 Crying His name out loud
 Begging Him with tears just to come
 But He ceased from all His work
 No God came
 And no God calmed
 Only Satan celebrated uninterrupted
 Dancing between kibbutzim and the slaughter festival
 And our correspondent goes on to report
 All the while sobbing
 Saying there is a burnt baby
 And there is an abducted baby
 There is an orphaned baby
 And there is a day-old baby
 Still linked to his mother's body by the umbilical cord
 He hadn't even managed to find out his name
 What will be inscribed on the tiny headstone
 With a single date for birth and death
 This is what the kibbutz looks like after Satan's visit
 Turning the broadcast back to the studio
 Quiet now they are shooting
 They are also launching rockets
 And there is no government
 And there is no mercy
 Just the screaming and the pictures
 That will never leave the mind
 The seventh of October
 Two thousand twenty three.

יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבא
 ואף אחד לא בא
 כמה אלפים קראו לו בשבת בבוקר
 וצעקו את שמו
 התחננו בדמעות שרק יבוא
 אבל הוא שבת מכל מלאכתו
 שום אלהים לא הגיע
 ושום אלהים לא הרגיע
 רק השטן חגג בלי הפרעה
 מפיץ בין הקיבוצים למסיבת טבח
 וכתבנו מוסיף ומדווח
 בין לבין גם מתנייח
 שיש תינוק שרוף
 ויש תינוק חטוף
 יש תינוק נתום
 ויש תינוק בן יום
 מטל מחבר בכתל הטבור לגופת אמו
 ולא הספיק אפילו לגלות מה שמו
 מה ירשם על המצבה הקטנטנה
 עם תאריח אחד ללידה ולפטירה
 כה נראה הקיבוץ אחר ביקור השטן
 מחזיר את השדור לאולפן
 עכשו שקט יורים
 יש גם שגורים
 ואין ממשלה
 ואין רחמים
 ורק הצרחות והתמונות
 לא ייצאו לעולם מהראש
 השביעי באוקטובר
 אלפים עשרים ושלוש

Just a quick heads-up. Gur describes a TV field reporter and his report as he broadcasts live. **You** are the TV viewer watching from the safe distance of your screen.

A few quick observations that might lead us into a discussion.

The role of the TV broadcaster and his firsthand *visual* witnessing of the events *in real time and afterwards* reflect the power and the weakness of the witness in the face of the October 7 reality. I watched Israeli TV during the first few days. This actually happened. The reporter in בארי was so unbalanced and so shattered by his first-hand view of the atrocities that he asked the studio to take over. He said he could not continue to do that job. He quit. They took the broadcast back.

Parenthetically, reports are that over 30% of the Israeli public now suffers from PTSD from seeing the images of this **חורבן הבית**. Yes, even today we can view this abomination in historical-religious terms.

We talk about the **קדיש** as a prayer that we say for the dead, a prayer to ease and lessen our mourning. A prayer that never mentions death – until now. This **קדיש** upends the paeans to G-d and immerses in deep, continuous mourning. What is your reaction, what are your first impressions of the poet's response to our *almost* genetically-acquired text?

What is **your** experience of the terseness of the text in contrast to its complete richness and abundance in the context of the visceral, embedded, known text. Our legacy liturgy lends the poem depth and intensity. A personal literary observation: There is no conclusive prayer-like statement resolving in “תקוה”, as a Jew might expect. We are left breathless. In other words, there is no “עושה שלום במרומיו”, no comfort, no uplifting of the spirit from this **קדיש**.

There is a sense of the eternality of this **קדיש** in concert with the original text. So, what does **קדיש - holy** mean to you? What is holiness? So, can you ever recite the **קדיש** the same way again? How does this poem challenge your sense of faith? How does saying **קדיש** in a **מנין** affect your understanding of the poem? Can you imagine being there alone crying out to G-d?

Maybe, and more importantly, we are a *people of memory* and this catastrophe in our collective lives, the rise of antisemitism internationally and loss of trust, of certainty and of confidence in G-d **and** in the Israeli Army, will be become memorialized like **יציאת מצרים**, **תשעה באב** and the **שואה**. This will all become part of our **ירושה**, our canon for generations to come. Jewish children **today** will grow up like the child survivors of the **שואה**. October 7 is now the formative basis of their Jewishness.

As for the **פרשה**, Joseph eventually gets out of the pit in **מקץ**.

Parenthetically, I will add that I told my brother David, who lives in **מודיעין**, that I gave this **דרש** on Shabbat VaYeshev. He told us that Gur has been on Israeli TV a lot reciting his poem.

Examinations of faith abound. This **קדיש** prayer-poem returns us all to the major questions of faith and holiness.