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“It’s Complicated”

I.

Every stop on our double tour of Israel last December drove us crazy. If you came into a site expecting your left-leaning point of view to be validated, you were thrown off guard by some indisputable reality there in front of your eyes. If you entered leaning rightward, some upsetting fact made you reconsider pretty much everything you had wanted to hold onto.

Among those who addressed us along the way, it was the same: so-called Israeli progressives brought up cautious points that jibed not at all with our expectations; so-called conservatives shocked us with their openness to progressive ideas we ourselves weren’t so comfortable with. Israelis were both more *and* less tolerant of one another than we thought. They were more *and* less reliant on historical narratives, more *and* less willing to change old models and try new ones.

Every time we got back on the bus and began to break down what we had just seen or heard, we always came back to the same joke, the same leitmotif of our journey: “it’s complicated.”

For a while I worried that by saying “it’s complicated” we were giving ourselves easy permission not to take sides, to form opinions, to take responsibility for our own points of view. Then I changed. I admitted that when we truly say that something is complicated, we admit to our own bias, our own ossified ways of looking at absolutely everything, our lifelong decision not to open ourselves to certain ideas, or to the human beings who put those ideas forth. By not seeing the baffling complexity, we are part of the problem. And in the case of American Jews trying to grapple with the reality of Israel, [not to mention the reality of our changing demographics and the morphing world around us], our simplistic attitudes contribute to Israel’s problems even at a distance of six thousand miles.

On the last night of the adult trip, as we went around the circle reflecting on our shared experience, a word flashed onto my mind’s eye and has lodged there all these months. In Hebrew, “complicated” is *m’subach*.

The root of *m'subach* is *samekh-bet-kaf*. Those letters form the Hebrew noun *s'vach*.

*Va'yisa Avraham et eynav va'yar, v'hineh ayil achar ne'echaz bas'vach
b'karnav*

“Then Abraham lifted his eyes and behold he saw at last a ram, caught by its horns in the *s'vach*, in the thicket.”

Or, if you will, “caught by its horns in the *complicatedness*, in the baffling complexity of the situation.”

II.

I wrote to you from Israel this summer, between trips to the shelters, between visits to remarkable heroes and heroines of Israel who get up every day and face the complications of life in a place that by all logic *should not* exist; that according to the belief of its enemies *does not* exist; that given its demography *cannot* exist; that given the existential reality of the Jewish people after the 19th century, and certainly after the mid-20th century, *must* exist; but that in any case *does* exist.

I tried to give you a sense of what I saw and felt and heard in real time. I wanted you to know how un-simple the situation had become. I wanted you to *own* the problem. Not just the anxiety, the worry, and for some of you, the embarrassment. But *the problem*. The *s'vach*.

Our people – the Jewish people, such as it is – our people see ourselves as descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Fair enough. I am proposing that today we have also become the descendants of the ram. The ram is our own Jewish version of Sisyphus. Sisyphus pushes the boulder up the mountain each day, only to see it roll downhill at day's end, where he will be required to start pushing all over again come the morrow. His situation is inescapable, if well-defined.

Our ram, by contrast, cannot move at all. He is always at the summit of the hill. He sees the frightful existential drama being played out in front of him, day after day: Abraham, Isaac, and the knife. He alone holds the key to its redemption. He alone can make things right. But try as he might, he cannot budge from his *s'vach*, his complicated thicket. *The more this ram tightens himself, the more he mires himself in his immobility.*

One can imagine that our poor ram – with proper coaching, maybe some yoga, maybe some therapy - could possibly *release* and *relax* his body, whereby he might more easily wrest himself free. He could change his position, alter his stance. Then he could shake loose, run toward Abraham and Isaac and offer a creative solution to the horror taking place on the altar. But it is not to be. It is as if the ram enjoys being stuck. He delights, in his own strange way, in the intractability of his predicament. His situation is *m'subach*. It is complex, complicated. But he insists on seeing it as straightforward and simple, which it can never be. So he tightens his position ever more. And he imprisons himself in his own stubbornness. His own self-assuredness. His *s'vach*. His thicket of thorns.

I know what we always think: Abraham, Isaac, Sarah, Ishmael, and Hagar are all complex characters, while the ram is merely a prop. But perhaps it is the opposite. Perhaps our usual heroes are typologies playing out their fated roles. The ram, by contrast, may be the only one with a choice. He is trapped, yes, but unlike the humans in these stories, he could free himself if only he learned to appreciate the gift of

complicatedness. If only he were willing to look at things from multiple perspectives. If only he were flexible in body and mind!

III.

My purpose today is not to explain (or explain away) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nor the summer's devastating war in Gaza, though you know very well that I have lots of opinions about those subjects, which I have spoken and written about *ad nauseam* over the last months and years. What I do hope to convey on this day of new beginnings is a feeling of willingness to "release" ourselves from looking at these issues in only one rigid way. I invite us not to judge every news item, every clash, every rocket, every statement from Washington or Jerusalem or Ramallah, through the time-honored lens of our own personal firmly-established ideology or politics. (Which, in my case, of course, is right, because it's mine.)

Shiv'im Panim laTorah, say the Rabbis. The Torah has seventy faces.

Not all of them are equally true and certain, *emet v'yatziv, emet*

v'emunah. But Torah comes to us through the hearts of people other

than ourselves and those identical to us in religion, movement, party, or point of view. Torah comes from many faces, *shiv'im panim*.

This past summer, Jews from very different *panims*, different points of view, overlapped in sympathy and support for Israel's cause, AND in sympathy and concern for the suffering of Gaza's citizens. Jews were willing to think out of their own rigid boxes. Not everyone, but more than I expected. And coalitions formed ever so tentatively among countries and factions we never see on the same page. For a brief moment, shared destiny, shared fate, shared hopes trumped shared animosity. Something new became possible. Something new IS possible.

In Israel, many citizens have found new energy to work for social change within, to push for civil liberties legislation (civil marriage, civil divorce, civil burial), for economic justice, for new back channels to talk with Palestinians about the dream of two adjacent states living cooperatively if not lovingly. Military leaders and intelligence gatekeepers have reiterated their belief that diplomacy must ultimately guide the outcome, since shooting like the horrific shooting we saw this

summer will never by itself seal the deal, however necessary it may have been. And you know I come down on the side of saying it was absolutely necessary, but so terribly tragic!

We Jews in America, far from Tel Aviv's bomb shelters and far from the anti-Semitic rallies in Paris, London, Belgium and Berlin, we need to change as well. [Though I can't help mentioning the encouraging *pro-semitic* rally in Germany only weeks ago, led by leaders willing not to be trapped by the ghost of their own historical thornbush. We need to let ourselves hear good news when it comes, not just bad news.] If we are to help Israel and our fellow Jews across the world, then we need to be both more lovingly supportive of one another AND more constructively critical. When we talk to Israel, we need to talk not as Americans, but as fellow Jews – as family - who share their fate and agonize over their existential choices. We need to let them know when they speak with a tin ear and hurt themselves. We need to advise them when they get themselves ever more stuck in the thorn bush of their ram-headed positions. And we need to love them with an unending love – the love of family. The love of Abraham for Isaac in tomorrow's confusing reading. The love of Abraham for Ishmael and Hagar in today's tortured reading.

IV.

Our key word will be “release.” In the Torah, “release” is *shmitah*. *Shmitah* is the term the Torah uses for the holy commandment to “release” our land from the farmer’s till, to release our poor from their debtor’s yoke, to release ourselves from backbreaking routine – for one sabbatical year out of seven.

By the ancient count, today begins the *Shmitah*, the biblical sabbatical year. Across the Jewish world – in Israel and on every continent – creative thinkers have concocted superb ways of incorporating “release” into every aspect of life: climate change; buying and selling; eating and cooking; the growing of food; the sustaining of resources; the ways we teach Torah to a new generation thirsty for relevance.

We could let the idea of *shmitah/release* direct not only our eating and our economics, but our *thinking* as well. We could remain “progressives” or “conservatives,” but we could commit to “releasing” ourselves – if just for one year - from the thicket of thinking only in those self-binding terms. We could, like the struggling ram, allow

ourselves to loosen up our bodies and release the tension that keeps us in constant conflict with our fellow Jews, with our fellow human beings, with our fellow life forms on this shrinking earth.

We Jews are that ram. We are caught up – not in our complications, but in thinking that our complications are really simple. In not letting ourselves see the truth that there are no simple answers, no obvious strait-forward way out of the bramble; that no one of us has the whole solution, and that no one of us deserves all the blame that goes around. “If only we stay the course,” our problems will *not* go away.

We need this year of *shmitah* to release ourselves from our own narrow-minded, narrow-spirited prison. We need to breathe. We need to talk to each other. We need to spend some time in silence. And in prayer. And in graciousness and gratitude. It has been a difficult year; a horrible summer. Our souls are broken. We need strength because more of the bad is coming. We need this *shmitah* year to repair the fields of our collective spirits, to let our fields restore their precious nutrients.

I leave you with our ram still fidgeting in the bramble. If he releases, if he lets go, he may find the redemption he has prayed for all these millennia. If not, he and Sisyphus will be eternal partners in frustration and disappointment. Let this new year, this *shmitah* year, be the year he finds his way home.