

Shabbat Shirah 5784

27 JANUARY 2024 · PARASHAT B'SHALACH

Shabbat Shalom.

I offer these words in memory of Raphael Ruimy, a beloved and dedicated member of our community. He read from the Torah for us many times, bringing a flavour from a different part of the Jewish world, always with a smile and a kind word. His presence is already missed. יהי זכרו ברוך.

Time can be a very nebulous concept in the Torah. We are told that the world is created in 6 days, a process which science can only try explain in millions of years. The earliest characters in B'reishit live many hundreds of years. But, by the time we reach Sh'mot, we are already living in something closer to "real time," where days and years match up to what we know and can accurately measure.

According to the Vilna Ga'on, 6 days elapse from the beginning of Parashat B'shalach until the crossing of the Red Sea, from the 16th to the 21st of Nisan. That may seem like an unremarkable detail, but consider it for a moment. In 6 days, our ancestors transitioned from the horrors of slavery to the Red Sea's shore, from crying out to God in despair to singing a song of freedom.

This shocked me at first, but after giving it further thought, it made a little more sense. This is partly due to the emotional rollercoaster that I often ride as a cantor: a Sunday morning Bar Mitzvah followed by an afternoon funeral followed by an evening wedding is not atypical for clergy in high season. And this quick changeover should probably not surprise me given how many Jewish heritage trips I've been on. A morning at Auschwitz/Birkenau leads to an evening concert performance at the Krakow Jewish Cultural Festival. A trip to the colonial era Jewish cemetery in Curaçao followed by an afternoon at the beach. These emotional appositions should not be shocking to us Jews. They are the essence of our story: מצרה לרוחה, מאפלה לאורה, משעבוד לגאולה – from distress to relief, from darkness to light, from oppression to freedom.

In the spirit of these turbulent times, I offer you 6 vignettes of the 6 days I spent in Israel in late December. I could have offered 6 times 6 vignettes from each single day, but unlike the other diaspora festivals, Shabbat Shirah is but a one-day "holiday." I hope that these scenes will offer a glimpse of the highs and lows of life in Israel during this now 114 day-long war.

Day 1 – Thursday, The Question

The war has made getting to Israel a lot less convenient. El Al is the only airline whose schedule has continued without interruption. No nonstop Air Canada flights from Montreal to Ben Gurion, these days. I had to fly Swiss Air to Zurich and then transfer to an El Al flight.

Before being allowed to approach the gate for the flight to Tel Aviv, there is still the obligatory El Al security interview, which on that day was administered by a tall, thin Israeli woman named Anat. My "Shalom" in response to her "Hello" elicited a grin. It also opened the usual line of questioning about my Jewish educational background (Jewish day school, college Hebrew), which then led to the questions about why my Hebrew is so fluent (living and studying in Jerusalem for two years), where I live and what I do that I can maintain such a native Hebrew (Montreal, cantor, etc).

It was her last question that stumped me: "Why are you going to Israel now?" In my heart, I knew why I was going, why I had to go, why no amount of rocket sirens or travel warnings could keep me away. I just hadn't given much thought about how I would put those feelings into words. So I said the first thing that came to mind: "לתת חיזוק" – to give some strength."

She smiled kindly, a knowing look on her face. "באים לחזק וחוזרים מחוזקים" – people come to give strength, and they return strengthened themselves." Clearly this wasn't the first time she had asked this question of a traveler since October 7. She got it, and she helped me get it.

Day 2 – Friday, The Sound of Shabbat

There really is nothing like Erev Shabbat in Jerusalem. Time slows down as the Friday sun sets, and the sound of the Shabbat siren marks a clean break from the work week into the peace of Shabbat, something eagerly anticipated in these tense times.

Walking into the Jerusalem Great Synagogue, my home away from home, all seemed normal enough until I saw many in the congregation with phones. The last time I saw that was in my student days during the second Intifada. “A precaution,” they said. There hadn’t been any rocket sirens in Jerusalem on Shabbat since that fateful 7th of October.

The Chazan, a Chasidic colleague, had just begun an improvisation. “קול ה’ - the voice of God. It makes the desert quake and strips the forests bare.” But it was the voice of the rocket siren app on all those phones that stopped the Chazan in his tracks and made the daveners run for the reinforced stairwells.

90 seconds is the approximate timing for a rocket launched from Gaza to land in the general area of Jerusalem, and those of us more able-bodied helped the older attendees find their way to safety.

As we waited in the stairs for the all-clear, the singing spontaneously continued. “ה’ עוז לעמו יתן, ה’ יברך את עמו” - The Lord will give strength to His people; the Lord will bless His people with peace.” Strength, yes. Peace? Not quite. Not on this Friday night.

Day 3 - Sunday, The couple

We have all been inundated by videos since the war began. Not only the horrific Hamas-filmed videos of the crimes perpetrated on October 7, but many heartwarming clips as well. Inspirational displays of heroism from ordinary citizens; of courage from soldiers; of families reunited and lives saved. On Sunday evening, I met the stars of one of the most moving videos of the war: Alla and Yosef Rozhensky.

I met them when I performed in the social hall of מחלקת השיקום - the rehabilitation section of the Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv. This floor is for people recovering from trauma, from surgeries. They are scarred, visibly and invisibly, many are missing a limb. They are soldiers, freed hostages, and others wounded on October 7 from all over the country, now taking their first steps into a very different life.

Alla and Yosef, who live in Kiryat Shmona, were visiting their daughter and her family for Simchat Torah on Kibbutz Cholit, near the borders of Gaza and Egypt. When the rocket salvos began that morning, Yosef was out for a walk. Soon the reports came of terrorists inside the kibbutz, so the family (Alla, Yosef, their daughter Anat, her four children and their dog) huddled inside their protective room.

But not before Yosef and Anat saw a neighbor’s house being set on fire. Anat left the safe room and, together with three other residents, managed to save one neighbour from her burning house by pulling her out of a window, while her parents managed to dampen the area so the fires did not spread to other homes.

Eventually the barking of their dog alerted the infiltrators to their presence. Alla and Yosef held on to the safety door with all their strength. Unable to open the door, the terrorists began shooting at it and finally, they threw a grenade at it. The shrapnel injured Alla and Yosef severely in their legs. Yosef later lost his foot. The rest of the family was also injured, albeit less severely. They lay in pools of their own blood until rescuers came in the evening.

Alla and her granddaughter Ofek were brought out of the kibbutz in a military vehicle. Their wounds were dressed with tourniquets but Alla had lost a lot of blood and soon she lost consciousness. She was rushed by helicopter to Shamir Medical Center, 15km southeast of Tel Aviv. Yosef was flown in another helicopter to Ichilov in the city centre. Neither knew where the other was or if they were even alive.

After 40 days, Alla and Yosef were reunited when Alla was transferred to Ichilov’s rehabilitation ward. I cannot tell you how many times Michelle and I cried together watching the video of Alla and Yosef seeing each other again after 40 days. Their expressions of relief, of sadness, of love, are so genuine. Their faces were unforgettable.

As I was singing in מחלקת השיקום, I tried to look around the room and make eye contact with as many of the people in attendance as I could. When I saw Alla and Yosef sitting at a table together with their

granddaughter Ofek, I lost my place in the middle of the song. As soon as the concert was finished, I immediately went to their table and hugged them and looking at them I cried again. Alla asked if we know each other and I said, “No, but I feel like we do.”

Day 4 – Monday, The Mincha of the damned

I spent Monday in what is called עוטף עזה, the Gaza envelope. After volunteering in Kfar Azza, a kibbutz that saw more than 50 members murdered and another 20 kidnapped, I made my way further South to the turnoff from route 232 that leads to the site of the Supernova rave. Those of you who come to the screening of Supernova next Wednesday night at The Shaar will see the full horror of what transpired at that site. Now, the area has been cleaned up. What remains is eerie, haunting, and surreal, evocative of the psytrance atmospheric music that was played there, but only in the most horrifying way.

The field where the festival took place is now filled with wooden posts. Atop each one is a photo, a headshot of a victim. More than 360 large, poster-sized photos of those poor souls who were killed or kidnapped from that field where now, the late afternoon sun was casting a golden glow.

I met a female soldier there, alone, crying by a picture of someone she obviously knew. I asked if she wanted to be alone or if she wanted company. She told me that she was there at the rave; that she ran across the road to an orange grove and covered herself with branches and scraps; that she survived in hiding, all the while hearing the sounds of the carnage across the street.

Near us was a group of soldiers, many of whom were religious. One of them needed to say kaddish, so we formed a minyan. There we stood, 10 of us commingled with the faces of the dead and the abducted. I will never forget that impromptu service, punctuated every few seconds by either “Baruch hu uvaruch sh’mo” or “Amen” or the literally earth-shaking booms of nearby artillery fire. That soldier said kaddish, but really, we all said kaddish. It almost felt as if those now departed faces were saying Kaddish with us, for each other. It was a minyan of the damned.

Day 5 – Tuesday, The Man in the orange sweater

If the rallying cry to free the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery was “Let my people go,” then the cry that is heard all over Israel today is מחזירים אותם הביתה עכשיו! – Bring them home, now!” The plight of the hostages confronts you from the moment you walk off the plane. It’s on every highway billboard, at every traffic circle, around nearly every neck of everyone walking down the street. And it is very much in the air at Ichilov hospital, located just a few short blocks from כיכר החטופים, literally “Hostages Square” where the families of those held captive congregate and where memorials and tributes have sprung up, brought from all over the country and all over the world.

My Tuesday afternoon concert in the main entrance lobby of Ichilov hospital almost didn’t begin. Literally 90 seconds before I was to start, there were more rocket sirens that led us all to scurry for protected areas. Quite a way to begin a 30-minute presentation that is supposed to soothe the hospital community that has seen so many victims and freed hostages pass through its corridors. Once everyone settled after the commotion of the siren, we got underway.

The lobby is an atrium space that extends upward to the fourth floor. After the first song I glanced upward to the faces and arms hanging over the railings and something on the 3rd floor caught my eye: an older man in a bright orange sweater, who was leaning over the railing and screaming at the top of his lungs: “אתה נהדר!! אתה!! מציין” and other superlatives. I waved to him and continued with my next piece, after which I looked up again to acknowledge him. Only now, he had moved down two levels to the first floor. (It was becoming like איפה אפי, the Hebrew version of Where’s Waldo?)

As I began my third selection, I noticed that he was now on ground level, standing right in front of me. That selection was Bring Him Home, the beautiful song from Les Misérables, that I sang in Hebrew. I introduced the song, dedicating it to the חטופים, the hostages. I spoke, while clutching my דיסקיה, my dog tag, telling those assembled about how we pray here at Shaar Hashomayim each week for the return of the hostages. There were many tears as I sang phrases like “Bring him peace, bring him joy, he is young, he is only a boy.”

The song finishes with a soft delicate high note, and my eyes were closed in a vain attempt to maintain my

composure. When I opened my eyes to wipe away the accumulated tears, I saw the man in the orange sweater headed toward me, his arms outstretched, tears streaming down his face too. He embraced me and would not let me go. People applauded but his arms remained locked around me. He was sobbing. As the applause subsided, he began to whisper in my ear, and this is what he said:

“50 years ago, I was a soldier in the Yom Kippur War. On the second day of the war, my base in the Sinai was overrun and I was taken to Egypt as a prisoner of war. For the next month, I was held in the worst conditions you can imagine. I never thought that I would make it home. At the end of the war, I was released, and I was treated at this hospital for my injuries, both physical and emotional. Hashem gave me a gift by helping me to come home, and since 1974, I repay that gift by volunteering here at the hospital every week.”

And then he continued: “It’s obvious that Hashem gave you a gift, and now you are repaying that gift by coming here during this terrible war and praying for the return of those who may never make it home to their families. Thank you for coming.”

Day 6 – Wednesday, Going home

How does one go home after all that? It’s not easy to be a diaspora Jew these days, but these stories and their protagonists carry me through. I came to give strength, and I was strengthened. I came to bring healing and I felt my own emotional wounds bound. I came to pray for those who lost their lives, and I now feel as though I actually prayed among them. I came to show solidarity with those in captivity and instead, a former prisoner of war expressed solidarity with me.

Every morning, I pick up my phone with a lump in my throat, dreading the news that awaits me. But now I have something to help me through that fear. I will remind myself of those 6 days. It was enough time for Creation, enough time for our ancestors to shift gears from slavery to freedom. And I will recall my 6 days in Israel, the people I met, the songs I sang. I will share their stories, and so many others. And I will visit them again soon.

This morning’s 4th Aliyah in which we read Shirat Hayam concludes with three words that should bring us hope. **אֲנִי ה' רֹפֵא** – God tells the Children of Israel that He is “the healer.” Perhaps the part of us that heals the fastest is Hatikvah, is our hope. It has kept us alive for **שְׁנוֹת אֲלֵפִיִּים** – for thousands of years and will keep us for millennia to come. May it be with our soldiers as they protect our State; may it keep the hostages alive until they come home; may it bring healing to those who grieve; and eventually, may it bring peace.

הַשָּׂמַיִם בְּעֵגְלָא וּבְזִמְנָא קָרִיב - now, swiftly and soon.

Shabbat Shirah Shalom.