

“Tsuris”

Shabbat Chukat 5782

Congregation Netivot Shalom

I recently used my last two note cards. Not exactly a major life event but not knowing when I might need one, or six, was enough of a concern to propel me to the notecard section of Books, Inc. earlier this week where I snagged not one but two new boxes – one sporting acid-toned images of succulents and the other with an illustrated variety of untranslatable words from world languages, such as the Farsi noun “*tiám*” describing “the twinkle in your eye when you first meet someone,” and “*naz*,” an Urdu noun meaning something akin to “the pride and assurance that comes from knowing you are loved unconditionally.”

Jewish languages have untranslatable words, too. While thinking about what how to talk about this morning what feels so hard for me to express right now, one of those words came to mind. It was a true “Aha!” moment.

The word of the day is “*tsuris*.” (Timely, no?)

Recognizing our linguistic and ethnic diversity and toward creating shared understanding of what we’re talking about, let me say a few words about this term.

Lexicographers note “*tsuris*” entering American English at the turn of the 20th century - no doubt introduced by uprooted Eastern European Jews, more than 2.5 million of whom resettled in the US from 1880-1924. Its popularization as a loan word is much more recent, dating only to the 1990s.

“*Tsuris*,” the essence of which is untranslatable, is a Yiddish descendant of the Hebrew root *tzarah*. The Hebrew noun, *tzar* means ‘trouble.’ *Tzarot* is the plural form. Its verbal relative, *litzrot*, means to become narrow or to be in a tight place.

But Yiddish is not Hebrew. Though there is a singular form, *tsure*, it’s *tsuris*, the plural form that’s used.

Sharon Kleinbaum, whom many of us know as the founding rabbi of New York’s Congregation Beit Simchat Torah and a powerful, progressive voice, is also a former assistant director of the National Yiddish Book Center. Rabbi Kleinbaum puts it this way: “...*tsuris* does not really exist in the singular, because Jews don’t do trouble in the singular. It *has to be* in the plural” (italics added).

Let’s take a look at how this works in Parashat Chukat. The shortest Torah portion in the book of Numbers, it’s so often combined with the infinitely more charming Parashat Balak – which we’ll get to next week – that it’s easy to miss or navigate around its most prominent characteristic, perhaps best summarized thus: “Call me a kvetch, but I’ve got *tsuris* up to here.”

The already long-beleaguered Israelites experience unrelenting calamities. Death stalks them in a tent (19:14), in the open by being killed and by natural causes (19:16), at the place they arrive on the new moon (20:1), by thirst in the parched wilderness (20:2-5), by disobeying God's command (20:12), with the stripping off of ritual garments (20:26), after being led away in front of the entire community (20:27), in the presence of family members (20:28), on a mountaintop (20:27), under attack by another people (21:1), under attack by fiery, biting serpents (21:6), by sword in a battle of self-defense (21:24), by God's decree, destroying an entire people and taking possession of their land (21:27-31).

This, I believe we can agree, *this* is tsuris. And the responses are both familiar and understandable:

The Israelites long for Egypt (i.e., *Mitzraim* – “Tsuriland”), the place few who are still living survived.

God, answering the distress caused by the tsuris they endure from the people's suffering, tells Moses and Aaron what to do, adding: “Don't give Me any tsuris!” Does Moshe Rabbeinu listen? No! He strikes the rock. Yes, it produces water for the desperately thirsty people but the Holy One, with tsuris of their own and known to hold grudges, is not amused and punishes them severely.

The psalmist implores: *My tsuris has increased; deliver me from my straits.* (Psalms 25:13) Perhaps this is what Aharon was thinking as he climbed with his son, and brother, Moshe, to the place where he would remove his High Priest's garments, to be worn from then on by Eleazer, and then take his last living breath.

And in our haftarah, which elaborates on the Torah's sparse description of how the Israelite army prevailed over Sichon, the Gileadite military commander, Yiftach, retorts to the elders who request his help long after casting him out: *You hate me and you chased me away from my father's home. Why do you come to me now when you have tsuris?* (Judges 11: 7). Yiftach's tsuris is about to get much worse.

So, what does all this biblical tsuris come to teach us on this Shabbat?

Consider this update of an old joke. Four Jews are conversing:

“Oy,” says the first woman.

“Oy vey,” says the second.

“Oy vez iz mir,” sighs the third.

“Stop it!” the fourth woman snaps. “I thought we weren’t going to talk about the Supreme Court, white Christian nationalism, *or* domestic terrorists today.”

Ta sh’ma – listen up!

We have tsuris—a feeling so pervasive it need not be named.

But when we name it, we begin to empower ourselves, our families, our neighbors, our communities, our people, our nation, our entire world to break out from the narrow place, the tight place that immobilizes us mentally and spiritually.

I ask you to declare it with me on this Shabbat Chukkat – right here, right now:

We have tsuris!

We have tsuris!

We have tsuris!

From here, like our ancestors, we move together toward the Promised Land – an earthly home of safety with freedom, equality, and justice for all.

Rabbi Dr. Rebecca Joseph