

Loving Peace and Pursuing Peace: Be Students of Miriam and Aaron

Drash Chukat July 2024

Age 20, I'm doing my laundry at Hebrew University. I get my laundry mixed up with another student's laundry and we crack each other up in Hebrew about how our underwear is all mixed up. When I walk Naaimah back to her dorm room, her door has Arabic name plates. And she is already my close friend.

Naaimah and her friends try to help me learn the Arabic sound "hhh." You know, they say, it's like you're cold, wrapping their arms around their chests and blowing, "hhh." Hmm, I respond, we say brrr.

A few years later, I visit Naaimah's family. I am the first Jewish guest in the home of her parents. Her husband teaches me Arabic words while we cook shakshuka together, garlic is shum in Hebrew, thum in Arabic. Her toddler claps her hands and stomps 1 foot in the Palestinian dabke dance.

When I come back to Jerusalem, my Jewish friends have been scared for me. You guys, I say, I did the same exact thing I do with you every time. We sat on the porch and ate watermelon and sunflower seeds and cracked the seeds with our teeth.

Our parashah, Chukat, also talks about the land.

Aaron and Moses will not enter ha'aretz. The holy one told them to speak to the rock to bring water, but they hit the rock. Because of this misunderstanding, they will not dwell in the land. This special land, ha'aretz, is a place for listening and speaking, not hitting.

When Miriam dies, her well is lost. I love this well that “hitgalgel,” rolled. It's funny, a well that rolls without spilling water. Super magical — we need one here.

In the first Midrash I wrote as a teen, about Rebecca, and Miriam's well, I say:

because the waters rose to you
your sister of the future yet-to-be
miriam, will bring a well with her
for the thirsty children in the desert

I love this midrash from Genesis Rabbah about Rebecca and Miriam that meets the Bechdel test. Alison Bechdel, creator of Dykes to Watch Out For comics, sets her test for a movie that includes a) two women b) talking c) about something other than a man.

Aaron also dies.

Pirkei Avot says be a student of Aaron,

אוֹהֵב שְׁלוֹם וְרוֹדֵף שְׁלוֹם,

loving peace, pursuing peace.

When Aaron saw two people argue, he would create a useful fiction to move the peace process. He would say to each one, “Hey, your friend feels bad about how they treated you. They asked if you will forgive them.” He would sneak to the other friend and give the same story. When the upset friends bumped into each other, they would kiss.

In Bamidbar Chapter 21:4, the Torah says

וַתִּקְצַר נַפְשׁ־הָעָם בַּדֶּרֶךְ:

the people became short of spirit on the way ...

Rashi shares the most emotional teaching I have heard from him.

Anything difficult to bear is called קְצוּר נֶפֶשׁ, shortness of spirit,

וְאֵין דַּעְתוֹ רְחֹבָה לְקַבֵּל אוֹתוֹ

הַדָּבָר

their mind is not wide enough to accept it.

וְאֵין לוֹ מְקוֹם בְּתוֹךְ לְבוֹ לְגוֹר שָׁם הַצָּעַר

There is no place in their heart for the distress to live...

שְׂגָדוֹל הוּא וְכִבֵּד עַל הָאָדָם,
it is large and heavy on them....

שֵׂאִין הַדַּעַת סוֹבְלָתוֹ
the mind cannot bear it.

Since October, I have felt these emotions. Who has felt short of spirit?
there is no place in the heart for all of this tzuris? it's too much, the mind
can't bear it?

No matter our beautiful and diverse perspectives on Israel/Palestine, we
share the most human experiences.

I invite us to take 3 breaths. You can spread your fingers in the priestly
blessing of peace, place a hand on your heart, or just wait for this woo to
be over.

There is an inner conflict between 3 kinds of peace: peace between
nations; inner peace; and harmony with friends and communities. Speaking
up about injustice rubs against my desires for inner peace and harmony.

As the Torah says, our parents affect us for three generations. A person in
Palestine who is pregnant with a girl, that human inside of her has all the
eggs she will have. Three generations in one body are having their brain
cells starved. We know from studies of Jewish trauma how gene

expression changes for three generations.

We know from the Torah not to harm trees. Is the tree of the field a person? Since 1967, Israelis have uprooted 800,000 olive trees. An olive tree lives for 500 years, thousands of years. 500 years ago, Jews and Muslims are studying the mystical ways of the universe together in Spain, and composing hot love poems from one man to another. Shlomo Halevi comes to Tzvat and beta-tests a new song, check this out, L'cha Dodi... 1199 years ago, Baghdad mathematician Muḥammad ibn Mūsā is inventing algebra and algorithms, and writing about the Hebrew calendar. Yet the trees are taken out in a moment.

Many people in Palestine start their day with olive oil, and za'atar, a wild herb. From my training in mental health nutrition, I long for us to restore access to nourishing and culturally appropriate food, today. It is unbearable that people benefit from the Mediterranean diet while others are starved. As Mohammed peace be upon him quotes from the Talmud, one who saves a life, saves a world.

I read that some Jews are starting to have doubts about Israel's conduct. A little doubt is a good reason to be a deeply committed peace activist. We could start a movement whose slogan is I'm! not! sure! yet! We can stop the wars, research, pray, and consider alternatives until we are sure of the very best ideas, even the best ideas for Jewish safety. The leaders of Standing Together repeat that Jewish safety depends on Palestinian freedom.

Rabbeinu Yonah says those that do actions and bring peace and love -- those activists are the students of Aaron.

As Majed Bamyia said about the sweet release of Noa, an Israeli hostage, Noa will be able to be by her mother's side who is terminally ill with cancer. ... I lost my mother to cancer and cherish every second I spent next to her, ...Allow us to see the other as a human being and relate to their suffering. ...these humane feelings... make us stronger ...in our pursuit of justice and peace.

Ambassador Majed Bamyia is the Deputy Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the UN.

How are you doing? Maybe you are grateful, or angry. These feelings are welcome.

I learned these values from my family –make music, anyone can make art if they are given materials, find your own path in a family of many spiritual paths, save water, grow gardens, service to humanity, stand up against nuclear weapons, Make peace.

I learned these values from you, my Jewish community. Love your neighbor, return what is lost and stolen, preserve and teach diverse minority opinions, every person is created b'tzelem Elohim, in the image of the divine, pikuah nefesh, saving a life matters more than anything, make peace.

What values are precious to you? I invite you to share these values at lunch.

As we sing together each week,

She is a tree of life, and all her supporters are happy.
Her ways are pleasant, and all her paths are peace.

עֵץ־חַיִּים הִיא לַמַּחְזִיקִים בָּהּ וְתַמְכִּיהָ מְאֹשֵׁר

דַּרְכֶיהָ דַּרְכֵי־נְעִים וְכָל־נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם