

Memory, Kaddish, and Covenant

Parashat Ki Tavo, Deuteronomy, Chapters 26-29 | September 15, 2022

In April of 1948, a series of Passover Seders were convened in Jerusalem. Their celebrants were Jewish fighters who would ultimately become part of the Israel Defense Forces. Though Israeli independence would not be declared until May, the British were destined to leave within a few weeks, and the war had already begun. There was, therefore, a sense that the Seder that year was also a celebration of the nascent Jewish state. But the Jews of Jerusalem were besieged by their enemies, and so David Ben-Gurion was forced to fly into the city to take part in the celebration. The Seders were overseen by Rabbi Shlomo Goren, who tells us that,

We conducted the Seder standing, because there were so many soldiers and there was no room to sit down.

Then Ben-Gurion addressed the crowd, telling them that this was the first time after two thousand years of exile that the Jewish people was celebrating the festival of freedom as a free nation in our own land. Even though we were still in the midst of heavy fighting, we were taking the risk and celebrating our renewed freedom.

As we will see, the celebrations were the product of the joint effort of Jerusalem's Jews and the sacrifices of those beyond the sacred city. But perhaps unbeknownst to many of them, they were also fully reifying, for the first time in many centuries, a series of verses in Deuteronomy that lie at the center of the Seder.

Throughout Deuteronomy, we discover how Moses, in the last weeks of his life, reminds Israel about events that have occurred in the past 40 years, and how he exhorts Israel to never forget them, thereby ensuring that the memory of these moments is passed on to the next generation. For example, we have the commandment to remember Sinai:

Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes saw, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life. Make it known unto thy children and thy children's children;

Specifically the day thou stoodest before the Lord thy God in Horeb... (Deuteronomy 4:9-10)

And we have the instruction to remember Amalek that we find at the end of last week's Torah portion:

Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way, as ye came forth out of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 25:17)

Here, Moses is molding the memory of the Israelites for the generations to come. In an extraordinary command from God transmitted by Moses, Israel is given a succinct summary of all that transpired in Egypt, and they are called to remember and recite this summary every year.

This is the law of "bikkurim," "first fruits":

And it shall be, when thou art come in unto the land which the Lord thy God gave thee for an inheritance, and possess it, and dwell therein.

That thou shalt take of the first of all the fruit of thy ground, which thou shall bring in from thy land that the Lord thy God giveth thee, and thou shalt put it in a basket, and shalt go unto the place which the Lord thy God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there.

And thou shalt come unto the priest that shall be in those days, and say unto him, I profess this day unto the Lord thy God, that I am come unto the land which the Lord swore

unto our fathers to give us.

And the priest shall take the basket out of thine hand, and set it down before the altar of the Lord thy God. (Deuteronomy 26:1-4)

The farmer brings his first fruits to the Temple, thereby linking his success to God. He does so in the place where, in the words of the Torah, God will cause his name to dwell, which of course is ultimately Jerusalem. Thus is the connection to Jerusalem knitted into the Jewish soul.

Imagine an Israelite farmer tending his land. The age of Egypt, of slavery, of the Exodus, is long gone. When the first fruits of his crop are seen in his field and orchards, then, as the rabbis describe, he would tie a string around those fruits, separating them thereby from the rest of the crop, and would bring them to Jerusalem as a gift to the priesthood. The rabbis describe how when the Second Temple stood, the farmers of the Holy Land would stream toward Jerusalem and would be welcomed by the Jews of the city as they made their way to the Temple with the literal fruits of their labor.

But giving up one's first fruits to the priests who serve the God of Jerusalem is not enough. The farmer is also obligated to recite a succinct summary of history in the presence of the priest. Thus, Deuteronomy continues:

And thou shalt speak and say before the Lord thy God, A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there, few in number, and he became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous.

And the Egyptians dealt ill with us and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage.

And we cried unto the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, and our toil, and our oppression.

And the Lord brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great fearsomeness, and with

signs and with wonders. (Deuteronomy 26:5-8)

This obligation thereby ensures that the Exodus is placed at the very center of the memory of Israel.

There is a biblical obligation to recite the story of the Exodus on Passover evening at the Seder; but the words we use to describe the details of our experience in Egypt are largely left up to us. As the text that we now know as the Haggadah came into being during the Second Temple, it was these verses in Deuteronomy—once cited by Israelite farmers over their first fruits—that became the primary verses through which the tale of the Exodus was told.

Why? Scholars offer two possible explanations. The first is that, in an age before printing, the text of the Haggadah needed to be something that was simple and accessible to all. The first fruits recitation would have been known by Israelites everywhere during the period before the destruction of the Temple. According to Deuteronomy, after describing the Exodus, the farmer bringing first fruits to the Temple would then add further descriptions about his, and Jewish, history—words which are in the Torah, but not mentioned in our Haggadah text today.

And he has brought us into this place, and given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Deuteronomy 26:9)

The recitation of *bikkurim* connects the Exodus and the arrival into the Land of Israel; that, perhaps, is why it ended up in the Haggadah. Before the destruction of the Second Temple, the Haggadah would have been recited in Jerusalem. Jews would have come from all over, including the Diaspora, to mark that moment in the Holy Land. Deuteronomy's "first fruits" declaration was chosen to serve as a Passover recitation, because it connects the tale of the Exodus to the entry into the land and to Jerusalem. All the Seder celebrants could say the very same words recited by Israelite farmers, "And he has brought us into this place," meaning that one of the purposes of the Exodus was to bring Israel into the Holy Land so that the Temple could be built, and the Seder could be celebrated in Jerusalem.

Suddenly, we realize why that Seder of April 1948 was so resplendent. Why was that night different from all other nights; from all other Seders that had happened for so many centuries? The link between the Exodus and Israel, and between the Exodus and Jerusalem, was suddenly being realized as it once had been. This was true not only about that Passover evening in Jerusalem, but also about the days leading up to it, when the Jewish memory of Jerusalem was made manifest in the Holy Land.

The book *O Jerusalem!* describes the siege around the city in April of 1948. Convoys to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv bearing food had to traverse a dangerous passage known as Bab al-Wad, and the Jews in the convoy were fired upon by the enemy from the heights above, with many Jews falling there. Ben-Gurion therefore ordered a special operation to get food to the city before Passover and allow Jerusalem's Jews to hold out. Those overseeing the operation commandeered a bunch of trucks from Tel Aviv and forcibly drafted their drivers in order to get the convoy to its destination. The book describes the convoy making its way toward the Holy City:

Shaking the night with the steady drone of their engines, the trucks ground slowly up the pass toward Jerusalem. Some lurched along with two or three tires flattened by sniper fire...All along the column...men shouted, "*Kadima, Kadima!* Forward! Forward!"

The book describes the convoy being led by a Jew named Harry Jaffe, forging the path in his blue 1947 Ford:

In Jerusalem, the news that a convoy was coming rippled through the city. Hundreds of people ran down Jaffa Road to watch it come in: women in bathrobes...school children, religious Jews coming from morning services in the synagogues...They hung out of windows, clambered onto rooftops and balconies, to watch in awe and gratitude. They sang and cheered and clapped as the convoy drove into sight. They were a desperate, hungry people existing that week on

a ration of two ounces of margarine, a quarter of a pound of potatoes, and a quarter of a pound of dried meat. For two weeks not a single vehicle had reached the city, and now they were rumbling forward in a steady stream as far back as the eye could see—dozens of trucks bumper to bumper, their swaying vans crammed with supplies.

Mature men watching from the curb wept openly. Children scrambled up onto the trucks with flowers... Even the sullen truck drivers...were transformed. Rolling down the corridor of ecstatic human beings, they understood they had saved a city.

Above all else, one memory would remain engraved upon the minds of those Jerusalemites watching the convoy stream down the streets of their city that happy April morning. It was the first glimpse many of them had of the convoy—the front bumper of the blue Ford of Harry Jaffe.

On it, Jaffe had painted six words in English, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem..."

Imagine: Jews bringing food to Jerusalem from across the land to an ebullient city, just as farmers once brought their foods to an ebullient city from across the land. These Jews did so because they refused to forget Jerusalem—where the first fruits had once been brought. And they thereby highlighted why the Jewish state was born, why Jews returned to the land: because of the national memory of the Jewish people, one formed by Moses right before his death, which ensured that the remembrance of a land and a city would never die.

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik discusses the ways Jews are called to remember our particular history. Are we also called to recall the more universal story of mankind? What rituals and practices help observant Jews do this?
2. What is the connection between the three major events Moses calls on Israel to remember in these passages in Deuteronomy: the Exodus, the attack of Amalek, and the revelation at Sinai?

Soon after the end of World War II, before the State of Israel was declared, a young boy by the name of Yisrael Meir Lau was brought to the Wailing Wall. Lau was a child survivor of Buchenwald, the son of the murdered rabbi of the Eastern European Jewish community of Piotrków. He was a descendant of generations of scholars, but he had been denied, in his childhood spent in the camps, the education that was his birthright. Standing at the Wall with his elder brother Naphtali and another individual named Nachman, he had no notion of the significance of the site. He later reflected on the experience:

I gazed in wonder at the people gathered there, praying in front of the Wall with all their might, as if they were standing before the Holy Ark in a synagogue. Nothing here reminded me of the synagogue I had known in Piotrków, where the Nazis had separated my mother and me from my brother Shmuel, nor did anything here resemble the makeshift synagogue in Buchenwald, organized on our last holiday, Shavuot, in the Gestapo's quarantine hall. The stone wall in Jerusalem did not even have a Torah scroll. I did not understand why Nachman felt it was so important to bring us to this place. As we stood there staring silently, Nachman disappeared. He returned in a few minutes with several young men he had found in the Old City. He glanced in his watch and announced, "It's midday. We can recite the afternoon service now." At that point, three months after the liberation, I did not yet know how to pray. So I did not join them. Nachman asked everyone to be quiet, then said, "I've brought you here so that he," and he pointed to Naphtali, "can recite the Mourner's Kaddish for his mother and father here at the Western Wall in Jerusalem." This was one prayer I already knew by heart. So Naphtali

and I said it together. Only afterward did Nachman explain to me where we had been and the significance of the stone wall for the Jewish people. He also told me how important it was that I never forget that Kaddish. And indeed, I never will.

What does it mean for a boy to recite Kaddish for those he has lost? What is the source of the connection between generations, between Jews in this world and in the next? What sort of spiritual bond joins us and how does this impact the Jewish obligation to past and posterity? It is these very questions that Moses addresses in Deuteronomy, in sublime scriptural words that capture the very essence of Judaism.

In the last weeks of his life, Moses creates a covenant between God and the Israelites about to enter the land, building on the original covenantal formation that he had helped bring about at Sinai a generation before. Moses describes, in chapter 28, the blessings to be bestowed upon Israel if God is obeyed, and the exile to be endured if God is not obeyed. Then, in next week's Torah portion, Moses makes clear who precisely is bound by this covenant:

And not with you only do I make this covenant and this oath;

But with those that stand here with us today before the Lord our God, and also with him that is not here with us this day...

(Deuteronomy 29:14-15)

These verses have always had a profound emotional resonance for me. Moses exquisitely describes how in Judaism, one generation can obligate the next, so that long after his own generation is gone, the obligation of the original covenant will endure. Few aspects of Judaism are more central, or more countercultural, in our age. The past obligates us; our duties as Jews today stem from a covenant created long ago. Echoes of Moses' words can be found millennia later in the writings of a very different individual: Edmund Burke, in his critique of revolutionary France. Believing (correctly) that France had gone too far, Burke

wrote the following. Society, as he put it:

is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.

In other words, each generation can only succeed in its aims by building on those that came before, and by relying on those that follow. In a similar sense, the Talmud describes the rabbinic sage, Honi, coming upon an elderly man planting a carob tree. Knowing that the man would never live to see the tree bear fruit, Honi queried of the man why he labored so. The planter replied:

I myself found fully grown carob trees in the world; as my forebears planted for me, so am I planting for my children.

This is exactly what Burke is getting at. But what Moses is emphasizing here is beyond Burke. It is not merely moral or political; it is metaphysical. Writers such as Daniel Elazar and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks have noted that whereas modern political thinkers spoke of us being bound in a social contract, Moses describes a “*brit*,” a “covenant.” There are many differences between a covenant and a contract, but first and foremost is the fact that if a covenant can truly join generations, it is because unlike a contract, one of the parties in a covenant is always God—who is beyond time itself.

Thus, right before Moses explains the intergenerational nature of the covenant, he emphasizes before whom the entire covenant takes place:

Ye are standing this day all of you before the Lord your God; your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, even all the men of Israel,

Your little ones, your wives, and thy stranger that is in the midst of thy camp, from the hewer

of thy wood unto the drawer of thy water:

That thou should enter into the covenant of the Lord thy God, and into his oath, which the Lord thy God creates with you this day...
(Deuteronomy 29:10-12)

Standing before God is what allows the covenant to be formed, and because God is outside the usual constraints of time, he can allow spiritual bonds to be created that link lives together, so that those who have come before speak to us still.

The boy Yisrael Meir Lau, known as “Lulek” to his parents, survived Buchenwald in large part because of his elder brother, Naphtali, who in turn was driven by what his parents had said before they were murdered by the Nazis. Rabbi Lau later wrote that,

Naphtali recalled his last conversation with Father, in which Father had counted thirty-seven generations of rabbis on both his and my mother’s sides of the family. He did this in order to demonstrate the great responsibility of whoever would be saved from the horror to continue the chain of our heritage. Father read verses from Jeremiah: *There is hope for your future, the word of God, and your children will return home.* He emphasized that if we escaped this inferno safely, we would know how to find our home, which was not this home or any other on this enemy land. “Your home will be in *Eretz Israel* [the Land of Israel], even if you have to acquire it through suffering,” he said, and Naphtali and Father cried on each other’s necks. After embracing each other tightly, Naphtali returned to his job in the ghetto. Father’s words echoed in his ears. Father had believed that I, the youngest son of the Lau family, would escape the inferno safely and pass along the heritage that the Nazis were attempting to destroy.

Naphtali's father's words echoed in his ears. A father commands his son to preserve his family, and even after that father is murdered, the father's voice is heard still.

This is what a covenantal bond means: not only obligation, but a true spiritual link between generations. If there was an Israeli leader who understood this, it was Menachem Begin. I often call Begin's worldview "covenantal Zionism." Begin's Zionism was one which fought for Israeli independence, but also celebrated the faith of the Jews during centuries of exile.

Thus it was that the day after Israel declared independence in May of 1948, that the most wanted man in the British Mandate, Menachem Begin, came out of hiding and delivered his own independence address, 24 hours after Ben-Gurion's declaration. Begin began by blessing God, "*shebechyanu vekiyimanu vehigianu lazman hazeh*," "who has kept us alive to see this day." Having invoked the Lord of the covenant, Begin then spoke of how this covenant connected Israelis with those who had been murdered in Europe. He said:

We shall be accompanied into battle by the spirit of the heroes of the gallows, the conquerors of death. And we shall be accompanied by the spirit of the millions of our martyrs, our ancestors tortured and burned for their faith, our murdered fathers and butchered mothers, our murdered brothers and strangled children. And in this battle, we shall break the enemy and bring salvation to our people, tried in the furnace of persecution, thirsting only for freedom, for righteousness and for justice.

A true covenant is a communion of souls between those here today and those not here. It is just this communion into which a young survivor of Buchenwald was initiated at the Wailing Wall, a site which seemed so unlike any synagogue he had seen, and yet a site that truly brought him into connection with the spirits of Jews past, remembering his parents saying the Kaddish as Moses' words from Deuteronomy were reified in a new poignant and powerful way.

An event like this could perhaps be the one that would set him on the course of a life in the rabbinate, a life lived in continuity with the generations that had come before.

Thus, it was that even as the Wailing Wall was lost in 1948, Yisrael Meir Lau embraced the vocation of his family, became a rabbi, and in 1993, several decades after the very same wall was regained, this survivor of Buchenwald became Chief Rabbi of Israel, another astonishing instance of Jewish resurrection.

Rabbi Lau's brother and savior, Naphtali, described his own feelings at that moment:

For 50 years, I carried the responsibility passed on to me by my father before he went to his death in Treblinka. He placed in my care a weak child who was five years old, but looked like he was only three or even younger. For three years, I served as father and mother, guardian and protector, to my younger brother Yisrael Meir, or Lulek, as we called him. I often felt despair attacking me, flinging me helplessly to my destruction. I think it was the mission my father gave me to bring my younger brother to safety and to ensure the continuation of our family's rabbinic dynasty, that kept me alive and gave me the will to continue fighting for our lives rather than succumb to the horrible fate that befell the rest of our family.

Then, describing how he felt standing at the Western Wall, watching the boy he had saved become Chief Rabbi of Israel, he further reflected as follows:

48 years earlier, when we first arrived in Jerusalem, we had stood in the same spot. Then-young Yisrael Meir had gazed at the stones of the Wall without understanding what he was seeing. This time, he was praying just two hours before his anticipated election to the highest rabbinical post in Israel. My younger brother who had

risen from the piles of ashes in the death camps was chosen that day to serve as the Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel. I looked at him from up close and felt tears welling up in my eyes. As I left the Wall, I felt profound relief, as if a heavy burden had been lifted from my shoulders and my conscience. At last, an almost impossible mission had been fulfilled.

“[T]hose that stand here with us today...and also...him that is not here with us this day.” Covenant binds us all, connects us all—an ever-living past and an eternal Jewish future. These few words by Moses tell us what it means to be a Jew.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the challenges to thinking intergenerationally, covenantally, presented by contemporary society?

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