



What Does Torah Offer Us This Year?

R. Avi Strausberg – strausberg@hadar.org

Elul 5784

Back in Elul of 2023, when I began this year of writing Divrei Torah for the holidays, we didn't know what devastation lay ahead. In retrospect, each of the Divrei Torah I've written this year can be read in light of the events of October 7th. Each holiday celebrated, every encounter with Torah, is refracted through the lens of the last 11 months. If there has been a theme that has tied all of this Torah together it is: How do we observe and mourn and celebrate our holy days in light of a continually unfolding tragedy that plagues our people and the people in Gaza? Or, perhaps: Is Torah equipped to help us make sense of such devastation and what meaning can we glean from Torah in this period of violence and loss?

We are still reeling from loss and we are on the brink of a new war. There are still 101 hostages being held by Hamas. This past Sunday and Monday, we mourned the loss of six beautiful individuals who miraculously managed to stay alive for nearly a year in captivity, only to be executed by Hamas close to a potential rescue. What was unthinkable has become a reality that we have been forced to accept for the past 11 months. Thousands of Israeli families have been shattered by October 7th and its continued unfolding. Over 40,000 Palestinians have been killed in the war in Gaza.



Additionally, across the Jewish community we are fiercely divided from one another. We shout at each other from our respective sides and can't fathom the position of the other. We are outraged and appalled.

In America, we are preparing for an election that many of us can't bear to think about and can't stop thinking about. What will this next year bring? What will it bring for Israel and Gaza? For the Jewish community? For America?

As this Jewish calendar year ends and we prepare to begin once again, I struggled to find the words with which to transition to a new cycle of Torah. In this past year, we have touched on themes of resilience, uncertainty, loss, and mourning—all painfully relevant given the events of this past year. What else is there to say? What more can Torah have to offer us?

And then I realized, it all comes back to hope. As R. Jonathan Sacks z"l wrote, "Hope is one of the very greatest Jewish contributions to Western civilisation, so much so that I have called Judaism 'the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind.'"¹ The Jewish people know loss and yet it always comes back to hope.

As we prepare to end one cycle of Torah reading and begin another, I want to share a new *midrash* written by R. Yael Vurgan after October 7th. R. Vurgan is the rabbi for a community of *kibbutzim* in Israel that comprises Shaar HaNegev, all of which closely border Gaza. In the immediate aftermath of October 7th, R. Vurgan was on the phone all day with her congregants who were begging for help. She performed several impossibly painful funerals in the days that followed and pastored her broken community. And, then she wrote this *midrash* of hope.

¹ "The Birth of Hope," essay for Parashat BeHukkotai 5779, available here: <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bechukotai/the-birth-of-hope/>.



She begins by bringing two different prophecies that seem to contradict one another:

Yael said, "All my days, I grieved over this verse: 'And God said to her, two nations are in your belly, and two peoples will go their separate ways from your bowels, and one people another will overpower, and the elder will serve the younger' (Genesis 25:23).

"And I asked: How did Rebekah hear this harsh prophecy while Isaiah heard 'no nation will take up a sword against another' (Isaiah 2:4)?"²

אמרה יעל: כל ימי הייתי מצטערת על
מקרא זה: "וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לָהּ שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם
בְּבֶטֶןךָ וְשְׁנֵי לְאָמִים מִמֶּעֶיךָ יִפְרְדוּ וְרַב
יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר" (בראשית כה, כג).
ושאלתי, הכיצד שמעה רבקה נבואה
קשה זו, ואילו ישעיה שמע "לא יִשָּׂא גוֹי
אֶל גוֹי חֶרֶב וְלֹא יִלָּמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה"
(ישעיה ב, ד)?

She asks how can it be that Rebekah heard a prophecy of two nations doomed to always be at war with another, one nation overpowering the other, while Isaiah teaches of a time in which no nation will be at war and we will leave our swords behind?

In the *midrash*, she then brings story after story of brothers between whom there was once enmity finding their way toward reconciliation: Yitzhak and Yishmael, Ya'akov and Esav, Yosef and his brothers. Our Torah is replete with story after story of conflict between brothers, and in story after story, eventually the brothers find their way back to one another. Until ultimately, we arrive at two brothers between whom there was no enmity, but only love:

Moshe and Aharon:

"And I heard most of the people and the leaders saying,
'We will live by the sword forever.' And I grieved and wept

ושמעתי רוב העם ומנהיגיו אומרים: לנצח
נחיה על החרב. והייתי מצטערת ובוכה עוד,

² R. Yael Vurgan, "One People to Another," forthcoming in the second translated volume of *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash* (and the third Hebrew volume).



even more, that they prefer that bad prophecy that
Rebekah heard over the good one.
“Until a poem came into my hands:

על שמבכרים אותה הנבואה הרעה ששמעה
רבקה, על פני הטובה.
עד שבא שיר לידי:

‘I will believe in the future too,
even if it is far off today,
but it will come, they will come bearing peace,
and then, blessings, one people to another.’”

אאמינה גם בעתיד,
אף אם ירחק זה היום,
אך בוא יבוא – ישאו שלום
אז וברכה לאם מלאם.

R. Vurgan asks: Why is it that the people and the leaders seem to have only heard the first prophecy about Rebekah in which there will always be two nations at war, one overpowering the other? Why have they given up on Isaiah’s prophecy of peace? She grieves and longs for the prophecy of Isaiah in which no nation will lift up sword against nation. What about that prophecy? What about that world?

The character in this *midrash* discovers the poem of 20th century Russian-born Hebrew poet Shaul Tchernichovsky, who writes of a future, far off from today, but a future nonetheless of peace “לאם מלאם - one people to another.” This phrase is the same that we hear in God’s words to Rebekah, one people mightier than the other—but in Tchernichovsky’s poem these words are used to speak of the blessings shared from one nation to another rather than the enmity inherent in the relationship. Tchernichovsky overturns this prophecy of dueling nations into a belief in a future of nations at peace with one another, sharing blessings לאם מלאם. The language of his poem is powerful and resonant: even if it is far off today, still, there’s a hope and a belief in this future world.

R. Vurgan’s *midrash* ends:



“And I rejoiced a great joy that Tchernikhovsky had come and turned the first prophecy upside down, and made it like the second, better one. And I too, chose to believe in it, with all my heart and all my might.

ושמחתי שמחה גדולה שבא טשרניחובסקי והפך
הנבואה הראשונה על פיה ועשאה כנבואה
השנייה הטובה ממנה, ובכרתי גם אני להאמין
בה בכל לבי ובכל מאודי.

“And I would go about in the city and call out, and shout, ‘The two nations can, they can, live on this land in peace, share its blessings and be a blessing to one another!’”

והייתי הולכת ברחובה של עיר וקוראת בקול,
וזועקת: יכול יוכלו שני העמים לחיות על הארץ
הזו בשלום, לחלוק את ברכותיה ולהיות ברכה
זה לזה!

R. Vurgan too chooses to believe in the prophecy of Isaiah, a prophecy in which no nation shall lift up sword against nation, in Tchernikhovsky’s world of blessings and peace.

This feels like an impossible world to believe in right now. To call it “far off” feels like an understatement. And yet, if R. Vurgan can believe in this world, despite her firsthand encounters with the massacres of October 7th, in which she was called to bury close friends and community members, perhaps I too can or must choose to believe in this future world.

This is part of what Torah can offer us. Torah can offer us a language for sadness when we struggle to find the words to articulate our own feelings of immense loss. Torah can offer us a framework for resilience in moments in which taking the next step feels impossible. And, Torah can offer us a language for hope even when the reality in which we wish to be living is beyond imagination. In Torah and in *midrash*, we can imagine that a different world, a better world, might be possible.

In her poem, “Dreams Before Waking,” Adrienne Rich writes,



What would it mean to live
in a city whose people were changing
each other's despair into hope?—
You yourself must change it.—
what would it feel like to know
your country was changing?—
You yourself must change it.—
Although your life felt arduous
new and unmapped and strange
what would it mean to stand on the first
page of the end of despair?³

Rich's poem is a twofold call to action. First, to imagine that another world is possible, a world of hope and not despair. And second, she calls on us to be the person that creates this world. To feel as if we are connected to a city of people working together to change "each other's despair into hope," to create a new reality far better than the one in which we are living.

I don't know what lies ahead of us in the year to come. As Rich writes, the path forward may be arduous, new, unmapped and strange, but I pray for all of us, as we transition from the cycle of one Torah reading to another, that we stand on the first page of the end of our despair.

³ "Dreams Before Waking," in *Your Native Land, Your Life* © Adrienne Rich, 1986.

