

Vayakhel 5784
Spinning Goats
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Last week I attended the Hadar Institute's annual Rabbinic Yeshiva Intensive, where rabbis go to swim together in the sea of Talmud and related texts. There, in New York, I was among lots of Jews most of the time. There was very little talk of the October 7 War in those spaces, yet it loomed everywhere, a quiet presence that took up a great deal of room. Meanwhile, outside of mostly Jewish spaces, at places like airports and coffee shops, I am approached by other Jews who tell me they appreciate "not being alone"--having another Jew around. It does feel good, and important, for us to be together, and to be here, today, celebrating Shabbat in our sacred home.

So let's learn some Torah.

How many of you have ever spun wool into yarn? Have you ever woven cloth? I cannot say that I have done either of them, but I have watched, and I have heard that for some spinners and weavers there is a meditative aspect to the process, an artistic sense that flows into the technical work.

As our parasha begins, God commands all who are moved to provide materials and offer their skills to build the Mishkan and everything needed for its use. The work begins with women spinning wool. Let's take a look at the verses that describe that in the Chumash on page 554. Near the bottom of page 554, at verse 25, we read:

Exodus 35:25-26

(25) And all the skilled women (better translated, i think as "each skilled woman") spun with her own hands, and they brought spun yarn--the blue, and purple, and crimson yarns, and fine linen.

שמות ל"ה:כ"ה-כ"ו

וְכָל־אִשָּׁה חַכְמַת־לֵב בְּיָדֶיהָ טוּוּ וַיָּבִיאוּ מִטוּוֹ
אֶת־הַתְּכָלֶת וְאֶת־הָאַרְגָּמָן אֶת־תּוֹלַעַת הַשָּׁנִי
וְאֶת־הַשֵּׁשׁ:
וְכָל־הַנְּשִׂימ אֲשֶׁר נָשָׂא לֵבָן אֶתְנָהּ בְּחֻכְמָה טוּוּ
אֶת־הָעֵזִים:

(26) All the women who excelled in that skill spun the goats' hair.

More literally, though, the words mean:
 “All the women whose hearts lifted them
 up, in wisdom, spun the goats.”

The text goes on to show that the tribal leaders are the last to bring their gifts. But I’m really interested in what those women were doing.

“They spun the goats.” Rashi notices the funny language and asks what’s going on there. “This required extraordinary skill,” he says, for they spun the goats’ hair from off the back of the goats while it was still on the living animals” (Rashi on Exodus 35:26:1, BT Shabbat 99a).

The rabbis of the Talmud conclude that what those women spun and wove was imbued with a particular holiness and greatness because of the unique way in which they worked.

I wonder what it was about for them, that they spun the wool while it was on the living goats, that they spun the goats. What did it mean for them to do that? It seems that they brought a unique wisdom to their participation, a wisdom that required its own space, or platform. Their hearts lifted them into that spiritual-emotional place, from which their wisdom flowed from their hands into the creation of the Mishkan. They spun and wove its enclosure, thus defining the sacred space at the center of the community, with a knowing that they, uniquely, possessed. The Talmud confirms that their wisdom was extraordinary, and therefore, so was the effect of their heart wisdom on the creation of the Mishkan (Shabbat 74b).

There in the wilderness, those women heard a different voice, a better and wiser one than the conventional wisdom, and they spun goats. And because they spun goats, the center of the entire house of Israel was made better and more holy.

I feel as if the wilderness of this time we are living through grows more vast and gnarly each week. Facts and omissions about Israel’s formation, and Palestinian claims, painful truths and outright lies swirl through our neighborhoods, social media, the news, and in our own heads. We are beset by vilification of Israel and distaste for Jews and the difficult questions and emotions relating to what we are experiencing. Sometimes my mind bursts with too many words to cohere and other times I struggle to find words to meet the grief, anger, vitriol and confusion that confront me.

Just as the Mishkan held the center of our ancestors' spiritual life, Jerusalem, and by extension, Israel, have lain at the center of the Jewish psyche for millenia. Whether a mystical idea or a geopolitical urge, Israel is part of the story of who we are.

I would like to share with you about how one prominent religious Zionist drew on his heart wisdom and brought a change to the religious narrative of the settler movement and Israel's treatment of the Palestinians.

Rav Yehudah Amital was born in 1924 in Romania. His entire family was sent to Auschwitz, where they were murdered. Yehudah was sent to a labor camp. He survived, made aliyah to Palestine and fought in Israel's War of Independence. After the Six-Day War, he became the founding Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, which he headed for 40 years. Rav Amital originated the type of yeshiva known as a Hesder yeshiva, in which students study Talmud while also serving in the Israel Defense Forces. The yeshiva is located near Efrat, in the West Bank.

For many years, Rav Amital upheld a messianic settler view, but during the Lebanon war he pulled away from that view. Religious Zionists had conceived of Jewish sovereignty over what is referred to as "Greater Israel," which includes Gaza, the West Bank, and beyond, including the subjugation of other peoples, as part of the messianic redemption, but Rav Amital came to see of Jewish sovereignty as its own redemption, a Kiddush HaShem—as sanctification of God's name and a sacred redemption from the *Khilul HaShem*, the desecration of the Shoah. Whether or not it is part of a messianic redemption, the State of Israel has a religious value and significance.

Through a fascinating recasting of biblical and Talmudic sources, Rav Amital asserted that we have an obligation for Kiddush HaShem, for making God's good name known in this world, specifically and tangibly, where we live. We must avoid any desecration of God's name. The State must act in ways that sanctify God's name.

Further, Israel's Declaration of Independence, which calls for just treatment of all of her inhabitants, has the status of a public, sacred obligation. As such, acting against its principles is a *Khilul HaShem*—a desecration—and a great sin. Therefore, regardless of whether those who live under the rule of the State of Israel are good or bad actors, the State of Israel must uphold its commitment to justice for all inhabitants. That is our commitment, the upholding of which is a Kiddush HaShem, a sanctification of God's name.

In reframing religious Zionism Rav Amital boldly challenged his contemporaries in the

Religious Zionist Movement and circumvented its earlier religious framework which relied on a textual framework from the Tanakh through Maimonides. Based on his reframing, Rav Amital wrote: "...there is a halachic obligation to fulfill the obligations undertaken in the Declaration of Independence." "The State of Israel arose as a sanctification of God's name, following the terrible destruction of God's name in the Holocaust. We must ensure that the State of Israel continues to be a symbol of Kiddush HaShem, that Israeli society will be one characterized by sanctification of God's name—a society where justice and righteousness prevail."

Our biblical ancestors came together to build the Mishkan to hold their center and move with them as an inspiration for the holy national home they aspired to build in a land filled with other people. It was not easy for our ancestors, and it is not easy for us to face the practical realities of carving out a life for ourselves. They could not do it without taking in the inner knowing, the heart wisdom—of individual people—not the people in charge, who in our parashah bring their gifts last, but ordinary people, a group of women spinners and weavers—people like us, who have no authority but do have hearts and hands and voices. The wisdom of our hearts matters now. As difficult as it is, we must not stand by at this difficult time, as much of the world turns against us.

Let us muster our gifts, that our heart wisdom may elevate our words and deeds. Let us build a new Mishkan, feed a new fire, inhale a new scent. Let us discern how we are called to weave truth and justice into the fabric of a sacred place that can hold us all. Let's spin some goats.

Ken y'hi ratzon.