

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz
Monday, February 19, 2024

“Redemption” is not a word we use so much in English, and I don’t hear it a lot used in Hebrew either. But it is one of the hallmarks of Jewish Thought. It refers to an ultimate reckoning (Messianic) in traditional terms, and in modern thought it is meant, at least for me, to mean that moment of perfection is arrived at through the work of human hands...perhaps even doing the Godly work. As my teacher, Rabbi Robert Levine wrote in one of his books, “No one is the Messiah; and we’re it.

I have been thinking of redemption a lot in my last few days here in Israel.

I thought about it first when I had such a lovely breakfast on Friday morning with my dear friend, Rabbi Leon Morris. As we sat in the street café, several of his friends happened to pass by and offer greetings. One of them, a close friend of his didn’t look right. He noticed immediately and inquired. She said, “My son (who has been in Basic Training) because of the immediate need, has had his training cut short and he is to enter Gaza within 48 hours.” The depth of her fear was palpable. Leon embraced her with such compassion. She said, “I never imagined, me, a person from suburban America would have a son fighting in Gaza.” My heart sank. She couldn’t help in the meanwhile to be polite enough to notice me sitting with him. She asked what I was doing here. I told her. She immediately said, “Thank you for caring to be here now.” And then without missing a beat, she said, “I guess my son fights there, so we can have the right to sit on the street here and eat breakfast.” I pray for his safe return...and his redemption.

I travelled that evening to Joel and Gail’s for Shabbat dinner. This was not just a special Shabbat the way it always is at their home, one filled with laughter and love, but on this Shabbat, they had just received the news a day earlier that Yaniv’s Unit had successfully completed their mission and they just left Gaza. I left a mother I had never met earlier in the day, yearning; and now was with a family feeling a sense of redemption. This was and is really personal for me; and so, I felt their relief to the bottom of my spirit. To add, my good friend, Jeff Goldberg was in Israel on business, and he joined me for Shabbat. And my goodness, did we eat and drink in redemptive celebration. We didn’t have to talk about it so much, we all just felt it.

The next day, I woke after a hearty sleep and picked Jeff up and took him to the Kibbutz I had lived on for a year. I had just reconnected with Carol Shani (the Volunteer and Ulpan caretaker) who helped raise me that year, 40 years ago) and my adopted Kibbutz brother Itsik, his wife, Orli and their kids, in December when I was here with Lauren and the kids. It was redemptively sweet and wholesome. Everything they did for me as a 17-year-old far from home came back like it was redemptively new. The connection was seamless, like we had been in touch for years. The love was and is deep; and even Itsik’s children seemed to understand the depth of connection with their smiles and warm embraces. We talked about everything imaginable. And of course, the way life works, Jeff and Nicole’s brother-in-law had spent meaningful time there and we Facetimed him and renewed that connection as well. Wow, it was something.

And then the most redemptive moment of my time here. Yaniv, his wife, Racheli and I went to dinner. After exiting Gaza, Yaniv got three days off before having to return one more time to his Base to complete his Reserve Duty after 4 months in uniform. It was an incredibly special time together. It wasn’t an evening detailing every moment of his Service. It just didn’t seem to be what he wanted at this moment in time, and I really wanted to be careful not to cross boundaries at such a precious time. It was one of deep and meaningful conversation about life, raising and being raised; one of laughter and even tears; one of gratitude; of sweetness and without having to say it, an understanding of the precious and delicate nature of it all. Yaniv looked and sounded strong; accomplished; devoted; not for a moment arrogant; in fact, I would say humble. Yes, I guess if someone might find more strength than ever before from being humble, that was and is Yaniv. Simply said, I love him like a brother and have found that same love now for Racheli. I am grateful to have still been here to watch him redemptively return home. Joel and Gail literally look like

different people now that he is back in country. I obviously could never understand, but I certainly gained a vivid and palpable glimpse. Welcome home, Yaniv!

A final note of a different type of redemption. I continued my volunteering by returning to the Wholesale Market to save (perhaps, yes, to redeem) vegetables and fruits for those who are hungry. It was pouring rain this time and frankly I didn't want to go. I took a cab to get there, and the weather-driven traffic made the driver crazy. To add, suddenly the Prime Minister's caravan made its way through. It was a mess. Out of nowhere, the driver told me the date. I thought it sort of strange. He said, "Can you believe it is February 19th?" I commented that yes, time does move quickly. He said, "No, but yes, it does move quickly. I will never forget this day in the calendar. It was 51 years ago that I was drafted into the army." I did the math quickly and of course realized he fought in the Yom Kippur War. He told me he could remember the tears on his mother's face as he was to mobilize. He fought valiantly, was injured ten days into the war, recovered, returned. And now, he showed me pictures of two of his grandchildren who are fighting not far from where he fought. He asked me with pride, "Aren't they good looking?" "Indeed, they are," I answered. He had the same tears of his mother, as he told me how he worries for them daily like she worried for him. He obviously also prays for the same circle of redemption.

Before we knew it, we arrived at the Market; and in the mud, rain, garbage and with the absolutely delightful, Rutie, the psychologist, turned redeemer of vegetables and fruits for those who are hungry led the way as to make it feel that the weather was perfect for the job. As it works here, when I thanked her for the days of service with her, a handshake wasn't enough. We embraced and she told me next time, that she and her husband would like me over for dinner.

Pictures below to correlate to the story above.... with an extra one of the serendipitous meeting on the street of my old friend and colleague, the awesome, Rabbi Sue Shankman.

I guess besides sending you much love from Jerusalem, I pray for redemption.... for ALL who deserve.