

Friday, February 2, 2024

One can learn much about the mood of this country, from all sides of the communal spectrum, by paying attention to both the significant amounts of graffiti and bumper stickers/posters plastered on every major thoroughfare. I pay attention to as much as of it as possible. Of the myriad I've taken in in the past week, the one that resonates most is a bumper sticker on the side of a bus stop that reads, "A Great Miracle Needs to Happen Here." This of course riffing off of the initials on the sides of the Dradle which says in the Diaspora, "A Great Miracle Happened There"; and on Israeli dradles which say, "A Great Miracle Happened Here." All of this of course, refers to the miracle of the Chanukah story. Indeed, the intent of the pasted sticker yearns for a magnitude of miracle that emanates from our historical tradition, one that is almost if not mythical. Indeed, when things are this bad, we can't just sit and wait for it to come down from Heaven. But it is WE, who need to create the environment for such mysterious intervention. It is we who must not only pray the words of our mouths, but need to create an atmosphere in which we can make real and perhaps even paradigmatic change. We need to make a great miracle happen here.



Why a miracle, created by action? Because the mood of the country matches the weather I have had here since our solidarity TBJ group left a week ago. It has rained at least 70% of the time; has been windy constantly and cloudy; with a raw, dry cold that seems unique to Jerusalem.

The weather correlates to the trauma and sadness I observe etched on the face of every Israeli with whom I encounter, engage or observe. It is not what it was like when I was here just weeks after the war began in the fall. Meaning people are going out to eat, to work and school, to cafes; and concerts and plays are even back. But there is roughened, worn out, almost run of the mill look to the Israeli face. But the run of the mill look is indeed one of trauma (either direct or adjacent); one of sadness; of not knowing what might still happen. One laughs and then stops because he, she, we, they remember that there is not much to laugh about. The mood is pensive and contemplative; one that pushes people into activity because embracing life when it is obviously so fleeting is of paramount importance. But the reality is still seared on the face of every soul. Each Israeli tells me they feel the way I have described because they are not sure how this all ends; and what it means exactly to end it. They feel isolated and determined; wary and intentional. They have lost trust in the government; less so of the army since the start of the war, but still can't believe they were left for so long to fend for themselves. Inflation is unbearable as is the fact that so many women and men are missing from participating in the production of the economy because they are in military service, leaving hundreds of thousands of families isolated taking caring of young children alone for months at a time. But more, it is clear what the greatest toll is: Every single day, if not a few times in a day, young men and women fall in defending our Homeland. There is not a day that goes by without funerals, wailing for lost youth and the days of Shivah and empty days that follow. Indeed, I am obliged and moved to point out that many Israelis speak also of the devastation they feel in knowing that their children are not just dying but taking the lives of others. There is not compassion for the terrorists that need to be killed, but for the innocent

lives that are inadvertently being taken as well. And, so indeed, it is cloudy here, the rain and cold match the feeling of the soul.

As for me, I am taking it all in. I am not happy. I laugh. I visit with people I love very much. I engage in deep and meaningful conversation with people I know and people I don't. In fact, I don't go through a day without serious dialogue. Everyone is willing to talk about it all. Perhaps, it's cathartic for them, as it is for me. I walk everywhere despite the weather. I want to feel the ground and soak in every bit of atmosphere. And I can't stop thinking. My thoughts come (perhaps because I am spending more time alone than I ever do) at such a pace that I beg them to slow down so I can understand. The same comes to me in the night. I dream constantly and vividly, in ways that are sending me the same messages my consciousness is trying to share with me during the day. I think it is the last 4 months talking to me....and the intensity of what I am experiencing here. But I would not call my time happy. I study with one of the finest teachers I have had in life. We speak only in Hebrew for three hours at a time. We read the newspaper, so I make sure I am keeping up in the native cadence. And, by my request, we spend time listening to and translating my favorite Israeli singers, whose words, whether written 40 years ago or yesterday describe the current tenuous world with poetic articulation and sewn with infinite hope. Hope and devastation....again, we have to hold both at once. Volunteering begins in conjunction with my study this week. I listen to music, eat and drink, all delicious Middle Eastern everything, but I am not happy. What I am is anxiously fulfilled. I am not even sure what that exactly means, but that is what I am.... I am utterly fulfilled and equally anxious. Not panicked nor scared, just on overload in a way that both utterly fulfills and also makes me feel worried for this country to which I am so devoted and with which I am in love.....so many cracks, so many things wrong...but all I want to do is make it better because isn't that what we are supposed to when we are in love?

Wow, I know this is long and I hope you are still with me...I just have a couple of other things. I feel enormous gratitude daily. Why? Because I have Lauren and our kids who somehow have enormous patience and love for me to be away from home for so long. Life doesn't stop there, and Lauren is managing an enormous load. She only encourages me because she knows me being here is about our family's values.

Why else? Because TBJ, my other family also understands exactly why I am here....and why my work here is not just important for me, but vital for our Congregation whose values are absolutely aligned. Thank you to our leadership and my fellow "teammates" who are leading with such devotion.

Next, I would like you to pray with me. Someone unbelievably close to me, someone I love like a brother is going in with his Unit to Gaza tomorrow night. He is clear-eyed and ready. I don't stop thinking of him and his family who is like my own. Thank you to so many of you have generously made sure his Unit has what they need; and now let him enter and return in the time the army said they will. Enough in this space, but please do pray with me.

Finally, after such a tough and I imagine sobering update, why am I fulfilled? Why do I believe? Why do I think there is still real reason to hope? You see, last Shabbat I sat at the Shabbat table of my dear friend and classmate, Rabbi Leon Morris, his wonderful family, and other colleagues that I know from other lifetimes. Leon and his beautiful daughter Shalva had studied a parable together in class the previous day. The parable teaches of the tree in winter. With the naked eye, the tree looks a like traumatic mess, naked, alone, shaken by the environs,

seemingly barely able to move, except when the violent wind threatens it with massive twists and turns. Paradoxically, however, the tree inside is already renewing itself, not seen by anybody, it is producing the very sap it will need to fully renew and reboot. It is during the very trauma, that within, the tree is already renewing itself. The parable finally goes on to teach that it is exactly the same for the Israeli (although written way before today's events). As the trauma is etched on the face of the collective Israeli, although, not seen, they and we are simultaneously producing the very stuff that is already renewing us from within and with which we will use to navigate our way to a place of hope, fulfillment without anxiety and yes, real and full renewal, perhaps even a new day of peace.

Again, not regularly, but consistently, I will continue to report back in this space. Please join at TBJ tonight, as my fellow travelers will reflect on our mission. Will be so worth your time. 5:30 PM at TBJ!!! Go!

Shabbat Shalom and love from a cloudy, but hopeful Jerusalem. The pictures below describe what it looks like and even the tree of hope that I might have imagined. You see I believe we can collectively make a great miracle happen here!