

Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz
Friday, February 9, 2024

There are certain words in Hebrew that translate literally to English; and indeed, they mean the same thing, but when used in cultural context, they carry a meaning that contains more layers. That could just be the way this American hears the Hebrew through my own lens; or because cultural context matters when speaking in a different language in a different place.

As I have been writing, beyond the volunteering I am doing, I am studying intensive modern Hebrew three days a week, three hours each time. I lived in Israel the first time between high school and college. I worked on a Kibbutz for a year. It was a time that changed the trajectory of my entire life. One of the important aspects was that I came back speaking fluent Hebrew. Street Hebrew for sure. I couldn't understand more than 50% of the news on television, but I could navigate anywhere else. I dreamed and thought in Hebrew by the time I returned home. And, ever since unless, I am here for a significant amount of time, my fluency precipitously decreases. And it makes me crazy. I am almost a different person when I speak Hebrew. I am deeper, bolder; have a different sense of humor; and less worried about almost everything. And so, given that I almost never come for more than ten days at a time, the last few years, I couldn't even call my Hebrew fluent anymore. And thus, last winter and this, I have devoted significant effort in this regard. As I am getting older, it would be one of the great regrets of my life to lose it. Last year pushed me back to being able to navigate and I am about there again.... understanding so much and speaking well enough that people talk a million miles an hour and I get lost.

Wow, I write all of that (I haven't lost my penchant to go on while on sabbatical, have I?) to write about one word that I have known for decades and translates simply. But in the songs, I have been listening to and translating, it takes on more. The word is "*Pitom*" ... "Sudden or Suddenly". We all know what the word means, but here it captures the concept of time....that time and life; and perhaps life not only changes on a dime, but also comes at us in ways that challenge us to wrangle it all; to capture it; to be present in it because the suddenness washes over us in a way that is foreign even while it is absolutely familiar. It is written about a lot by song writers who speak of having to separate from their children. I feel like almost every song writer does so; not just in the Cats in the Cradles kind of way, but with an urgency that must reflect the fact that when their children leave home, it's not for college, but for the army. They write about how they always knew it would come; it is part of nature in fact, but how did it come so suddenly?

Pitom...suddenness defines my days since I last wrote. On the volunteering side, Joel and I went up North to the Lebanese border. The border towns up there were evacuated SUDDENLY, after the war began. Residents and the government worried that what happened in the south could easily be replicated in the north by Hezbollah. There are not workers to fill in. 70% of the eggs in Israel come from these border towns in the North. And so, you could imagine how SUDDENLY there would be a crisis if this staple food were to disappear. It was not just quiet as we got close to the border, it was eerie. Every home and building were completely shuttered. There were no cars on the road. It was silent in ways I don't know Israel to be silent. We arrived at the farm and packing house at 7:30 AM and they put us to work. We worked for 9 hours with a 35-minute break for lunch, which luckily Joel thought to pack us. The Israeli owners were there and otherwise, there were several Thai workers who came up north from their work down south after the war started. They knew fellow workers who were kidnapped and showed us a picture with gratitude of their close friend who was released two months ago. Well, we packed (with no more than 4-5 others) 187,000 eggs. I didn't think it would be a big deal, but all of those hours on my aging body did a number on me.... hands, back, legs.... wow, I am not used to this kind of work. The pace became almost meditative; and in between the mantras, I kept on thinking about how long this evacuation could last; how the economy could be sustainable; how I ended up manifesting my Zionism in an egg packing house.and because the eggs kept furiously coming off of the conveyor belt, I kept on thinking how these eggs came at me SUDDENLY.... I have to admit I wondered when they would stop. Thank God there were no SUDDEN Red Alerts. But, the next day, there were.

And *Pitom*.... suddenness describes my entire experience here this time around. I cannot get over how SUDDEN everything feels. My thoughts wash over me with a suddenness. I can't figure how I feel about it all with a suddenness. There is an urgency on everyone's faces. There is even a suddenness in the Israeli Voice. No matter what the political perspective, it feels sudden because it is.

The newspapers are full of suddenness as well. And the change since I've been here (3 weeks now) is that SUDDENLY there is a lot of talk about the "Day After". It is being discussed by all sides of the political spectrum. It is obviously being talked about in the States. And as important as both, it is being talked about in the Arab Capitols around the world. The discussion of such is all over the map, but what it says to me, having been here quite a bit since October 7th, is that something is going to come in this regard. No one (perhaps except for the fringe) believes this all comes to an end militarily. Everyone understands that an ideology can't be eliminated completely by force alone. What that "Day After" looks like is hard to say right now, but I will say again, the idea is clearly on the agenda everywhere. What I do know is that if you are an Israeli with a loved one fighting, you want to understand direction. If you are the family of someone being held hostage, you live and breathe on the potential of that understanding. (Please Bring Them Home Now!!) This week, almost SUDDENLY, there was an Opinion Piece written by a Palestinian, saying that Hamas must be eliminated to free Palestinians from what Hamas has wrought on its people. That the only way for there to be peace, prosperity in a situation that offers Palestinian statehood is to stop teaching hate; to stop terrorism and to stop the Israeli Occupation in the territories. You may agree or not with the premise of his writing, but this is the first time I have read something of this sort. Israel also will have to do an internal reckoning to get there...and given what happened in October I don't know how there can be trust so easily. But my point is somehow, with a suddenness, there are ideas on the table that simply weren't, at least publicly, as of last week.

Please continue to pray for Yaniv and his Unit in Gaza. The one thing that is not sudden is the consistency with which I think of him.

And, please give Lauren and the kids extra love when you see them. It really is a long time.... I miss them very much....and I miss you all at TBJ also. I know they and you all know why I am here.

Okay, enough. I hope you get message of the feel the last couple of says.

I am getting ready for Shabbat fighting off a good old fashioned Jerusalem chest cold (no, nothing holy about it at all!).

I send you all much love from a suddenly sunny Jerusalem.
Shabbat Shalom and thank you for continuing to read.