

Why are you here?

First, I want to apologize, but because I arrived home Friday morning the derashah is not as fully-formed as I would usually like.

Many of my conversations with Israelis this past week started this way:

- מאיפה אתה - “Where are you from?”
- “New York.”
- אז למה אתה כאן - “Why are you here?”
- “I’m with a group of rabbis from North America who are here for the week, with Mizrachi and the RCA.”
- כן אבל למה אתה כאן “Okay, but why are you here?”

Obviously, I was there to offer our community’s support, tangible as well as moral. But there was another reason, and I hope to clarify it by looking at the life of one of the true Sephardic greats in this Sephardic month: Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi.

Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi

Rabbi Yehudah haLevi was born about the year 1085; he lived in both Christian and Muslim Spain at different times. He learned in yeshiva, he was trained in Arab and Greek thought, and he studied medicine. He was an outstanding thinker, composing the *Kuzari*, one of the best-known works of Jewish philosophy of all time.¹ Letters found in the Cairo Genizah reveal that he did not inhabit an ivory tower; he took a leading role in communal matters.

Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi also wrote poems on many diverse subjects. His poetry remains a vital part of our davening, particularly our *Selichot* and in the past our *Kinot*, and we sing it in יום שבתון on Shabbat.

Much of his later poetry expressed longing for the land of Israel, like in *Tzion Halo Tishali* and *Libi baMizrach*. In the year 1140, Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi made good on his lifelong desire to go to the Land of Israel. It is unclear whether he ever arrived.

Better to be an avel there

In his poem *ציון הלא תשאלי*, Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi declared, addressing Tzion, Yerushalayim, Har HaBayit:

יָנַעַם לְנַפְשִׁי הַלֵּךְ עָרֹם וְיָחַף עָלֵי הַרְבּוֹת שְׂמָמָה אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ דְבִירֶיךָ, בְּמִקוֹם אֲרוֹנֶךָ אֲשֶׁר נִגְנְזוּ, וּבְמִקוֹם כְּרוּבֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר שָׁכְנוּ חֲדָרֵי חֲדָרֶיךָ.	It would be pleasant for my spirit, to walk unclothed and barefoot Upon the desolate ruins which were your Holy of Holies, In the place of your Ark, which was hidden, And in the place of your cherubs, which resided in your rooms within rooms.
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What did Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi mean when he said it would be pleasant to grieve in the desolate ruins of Yerushalayim? How could that be pleasant? As with many good poets, his words could have multiple messages.

- Perhaps he meant that if we must grieve, better to grieve where we are comfortable, among family and the familiar, in Israel. That would be more pleasant than grieving elsewhere.
- Or maybe he meant that grieving in Yerushalayim would provide a level of comfort because of the echoes of the holiness that had been there, and perhaps remained there. So better to grieve there, than elsewhere

But I would offer another way to explain why Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi found it pleasant to mourn in Yerushalayim. We’ll come back to it; first I want to ask one more question, from our parshah.

If so, why this me?

Rivka is suffering in her pregnancy. She says,² אמ כן למה זה אנכי: “If this is so, why me?”

- Rashi suggests that Rivkah regretted praying for pregnancy: “If this is the pain of pregnancy, why did I ask Hashem for this?”

¹ See Shemot 9:1, for example

² Bereishit 25:22

- Ramban contends that Rivkah was on the brink of rejecting her very life: “If this is the pain of pregnancy, why should I live at all?”³

But Dr. Yael Tzohar of Bar Ilan University asks:⁴ according to either of these interpretations of Rivkah’s question, why would she have been comforted by the answer she received?⁵ “I’m in such pain, why should I live?” “Your sons are going to be at each other’s throats.” “Oh, ok, thanks for letting me know.” Why would that message reconcile Rivkah to her suffering? (Ramban offers an answer; see Torat Chayim.)

But Dr. Tzohar offers a different, brilliant approach; it fits with what I wrote in the Parshah article in Torat Chayim this week. When Avraham’s servant entered Rivkah’s home, he refused to eat until he could retell the amazing story of how he met her. “I was at the well, and I asked Hashem for help. I asked that the girl who would be a match for Yitzchak should come out to the well, and I will ask her for some water, and she will tell me to drink and she will also draw water for the camels. Then I will know that this is Hashem’s chosen woman. And even before I finished speaking, Rivkah did exactly that.” In other words: This is Hashem’s chosen one!

Rivkah heard all of this, and understood that Hashem had selected her. Like Avraham, she had a Lech Lecha moment, her summons to leave Aram for Israel. And so when her family tried to stall, she said simply, “I’m going.”⁶

But now, after 20 years of trying to conceive, she was pregnant, with terrible pain that made her call into question that Lech Lecha promise. If Hashem chose me, why has my path been so hard? Twenty years of trying – and now such pain! Was I wrong? Am I not chosen? אם כן – if so – למה זה אנכי? Why did Hashem pick me?

To which the answer came, as explained by Dr. Tzohar: There are two nations בבתוך – in your belly. And two nations will separate ממעיך – from your womb. It is about you, you are special. You are going to be needed as they grow up. And therein lay the comfort. The future will include strife, but you did leave Aram for a reason. And with this, Hashem gave Rivkah the meaning in her suffering.

Dr. Viktor Frankl is well-known for teaching that human beings need meaning in their lives, and especially when they are suffering. What is meaning? In an essay called *The Will to Meaning*, he wrote, “It is a characteristic constituent of human existence that it transcends itself, that it reaches out for something other than itself.” In other words: To be human is to act on behalf of something besides ourselves.

That’s what comforted Rivkah – the knowledge that her suffering was for a Divine mission, outside of herself. It would be painful to carry that pregnancy to term. And afterward, she would have to deal with forever-fighting children. But she would have a greater reason for all of it, a Divine purpose.

Back to Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi

And maybe that was Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi’s perspective, too. Certainly, he could remain in Spain and write poetry and philosophy and converse with an elevated intellectual circle and be a leader. But he could also walk barefoot in the desolate ruins of the Holy of Holies, He could mourn and grieve in a place that once held the luchot of Hashem. He would be less comfortable, but he would have meaning, Rivkah’s meaning.

And Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi declared: I would rather do that.

The trip to Israel

Rivkah can look past her pain when she understands that it has a purpose.

Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi would rather grieve in a place where it has a purpose.

And that was the other reason I came to Israel last week – because it was better to grieve for Shemini Atzeret in a place where there was a visible purpose, a nation of Jews building a society on the stones where Dovid haMelech walked.

³ For another approach, see Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra and Radak

⁴ <https://www.biu.ac.il/jh/parasha/toldot/zoh.html>

⁵ Indeed, Ramban concludes that the in-utero strife ended once Rivkah received her message, but that view is not common and not expressed in the text.

⁶ Bereishit 24:58

Those who saw my updates last week know what I mean – there was a lot of grief, but with such a powerful sense of meaning and purpose, of acting, living, for something bigger than ourselves.

- Visiting Machaneh Shurah where the IDF rabbinate uses 21st century tech to identify bodies, bringing closure for families and releasing agunot, while employing timeless sensitivity and compassion as they accompany families along this most painful journey and protect the dignity of those who have passed away;
- Crying with אירן in Kfar Aza as she told us how her boyfriend Netta threw himself on a grenade to save her life, crying again as Michal Sandhaus in Ofakim described how her heroic brother Moshe tore open a locked door to enable people to reach safety, then headed out into danger to retrieve keys for the other shelters.
- Witnessing the meeting of Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon of Gush Etzion and Machon Lev with the Sadigura Rebbe, as both came to pay their respects and offer chizuk to the chayalim in the devastated Kfar Aza at the same time
- Dancing with chayalim who dropped their lives, their families, their careers, to report for reserve duty.

Rivkah's descendants are again suffering today; the pain of so many families can be overwhelming. And it's reasonable to ask: למה זה אנכי? If so, why me?

But a voice reverberates across the generations: בבטנך, this nation is emerging from you. ממעריך, their identity is formed by you. You are Rivkah's children. You who put your nation first, you who act with painstaking, expensive sensitivity and compassion, you who endanger yourselves for others, that is all the evidence you need. This is why אנכי.

Better to live there

A final note: Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi's kinah ends not with praise for grief, but praise for life:

<p>אַשְׁרֵי אֲנוֹשׁ יִבְחַר יְקָרָב וַיִּשְׁכֵּן בְּחֻצְרֵיךָ. אַשְׁרֵי מְחַכֶּה וְנִגִּיעַ וַיִּרְאֶה עֲלוֹת אוֹרְךָ וַיִּבְקְעוּ עָלָיו שְׁחַרְיָךְ... ... וַיִּבְקְעוּ עָלָיו שְׁחַרְיָךְ...</p>	<p>Fortunate is the one who will choose, draw near, and dwell in your streets. Fortunate is the one who waits and arrives and sees the rising of your light, And your dawn will break upon him...</p>
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A gemara teaches that it's better to live in Israel than to be buried there,⁷ and here Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi adds that it's better to live there than to grieve there. May we merit to go to Israel for something other than grief, if not for aliyah than at least for semachot, to live and rejoice in that which is bigger than ourselves. ופדויי ד' ישׁוּבוּן וּבָאוּ צִיּוֹן בְּרִינָה, may Hashem redeem His captives, and may they return to Tzion with joy.

⁷ Ketuvot 111a