

*Shabbat shalom,*¹

About two weeks into settling into Israel, a cab driver asked me what I do.²

“סטודנט³,” I replied.

Curious to know what I’m studying, he asked me, “מה אתה לומד⁴?”

I broke the news to him that I’m a rabbinical student. “אני לומד להיות רב⁵.”

“Ahhhhh,” he said. “?נווה שכטר⁶?”

I was surprised that he guessed correctly. “כן. מכון שכטר⁷.”

“קפלן!⁸” he said.

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1. I was honored to deliver this *Devar Torah* (דבר תורה “speech about Torah”) at the Friday night prayer service hosted by the 1st annual Hartman Rabbinic Students Engaging Israel Conference, on January 27, 2012.
 2. I’m translating the words from the Hebrew dialogue in these footnotes.
 3. “Student.”
 4. “What are you studying?”
 5. “I’m studying to become a rabbi.”
 6. “The Schechter Institute?”
 7. “Yes, the Schechter Institute.”
 8. “Kaplan!”

Not quite understanding, I repeated: “קפלן?”⁹”

“כן. קפלן! מרדכי קפלן!”¹⁰”

Not expecting an Israeli cab driver to know about Mordechai Kaplan, I told him there was a connection between Kaplan and the Schechter Institute.

“אני נסעתי אותו לאירפורט”¹² he said, “לפני הרבה שנים”¹¹,

I was astonished. I had no clue that איירפורט¹³ was a Hebrew word. More importantly, something in that *one cab ride* with Mordechai Kaplan somehow *moved* or *changed* this cab driver. Otherwise, why would this guy remember this one ride with some American rabbi affiliated with some tiny American movement and even more marginally affiliated with some Israeli movement whose membership comprises less than 1% of the

9. “Kaplan?”

10. “Yes, Kaplan! Mordechai Kaplan!”

11. “Many years ago...”

12. “I drove him to the airport.”

13. “Airport.” The word used was pronounced just like “airport” in English, but with an Israeli accent.

Israeli population? Driving קפּלן¹⁴ was somehow an extraordinary experience for this cabbie.

I told the cab driver that I had no idea I was sitting in such a holy cab. But this cabbie definitely knew.

At JTS¹⁵, I hear a lot about “myth”—that we can appreciate *Torah* even if none of it is historical or real or even necessary.

But, to me, a myth is something I have been *fooled* into believing, so the language of “myth” doesn’t work for me. My own approach is slightly different: **Judaism is an epic poem, and I am eager to live it everyday.** The metaphors of poetry are code for reality, and these symbols become the way I articulate real life. In that sense, I want to believe that just about the *whole Torah did* happen and *does* resonate with real life.

And I’ve gotta get better at understanding the poetry of the

14. Kaplan.

15. The Jewish Theological Seminary.

Torah: To what do the metaphors allude? How can I interpret these metaphors to uncover the layers of reality beneath each story—beneath each word? **I want to become a better reader because Judaism is the most beautiful poem I know.**

Yet some things we associate with Judaism are very ugly.

Each month, I pray with Women of the Wall. I've been getting the feeling that there is nothing inherently holy about the *Kotel*¹⁶. Whatever sanctity it has must come from what we are willing to bring *to* it. Some days, when all's quiet on the Western Wall front, I can contemplate the history and holiness of that Wall. Some days, when the Women of the Wall and their allies are called "pigs" and "infidels," I struggle to see the sacred. *Kedushah*¹⁷ is never inherent. We must bring *kedushah* to wherever we want to see it.

16. The Western Wall.

17. Sanctity.

So, I believe there is great potential for *kedushah* in the Land of Israel, and the Land of Israel holds great potential for ways we can concretize the metaphors of a promised land, or of redemption. And I *could* find meaningful ways to incorporate these same religious concepts spiritually and internally, entirely independent from the existence of the State of Israel. But, the State of Israel's here *now*, and a good chunk of the Jewish people *has* chosen to embody their religious ideas into this land. For me, because it *is* a physical entity, there is no choice but to work towards an Israel that must embody a vibrant and reputable Judaism.

In my own daily life, the greatest threat I know to Israel is internal: the religious tensions between the binary of secular Israelis and religious Israelis. This wound becomes severely

painful when anyone who is neither *chiloni*¹⁸ nor *charedi*¹⁹ becomes **negligible**. Can the Jewish State host a Judaism that is critical, thoughtful, *and* religious? Or is this a State whose greatest pride in progressive Judaism is driving Mordecai Kaplan to the airport, only to fly him back to the United States—sending liberal Judaism back to *Galut*²⁰ where that sort of *mishegos*²¹ belongs? If Jerusalem is *Tziyyon*²², then, to me, it must be *metzuyyan*, “remarkable” and “noteworthy.” But if the Jerusalem of *Tziyyon* represents a Judaism devoid of nuance and moderation, that’s not “remarkable,” and we’re not in *Tziyyon*. We’re in *Mitzrayim*²³: a state of mind so צר²⁴—so narrow—that all we feel is צרות²⁵, *tzuris*²⁶, troubles, woes. In *Mitzrayim*, it can

18. “Secular.”

19. “Ultra-Orthodox.”

20. “Exile.”

21. “Craziness.”

22. Zion. In Hebrew: ציון.

23. Egypt. In Hebrew: מצרים.

24. “Narrow,” pronounced *tzar*.

25. “Troubles,” pronounced *tzarot*.

26. The Yiddish pronunciation of *tzarot*.

feel too narrow to escape. But in the epic poem of Judaism, our exodus from *Mitzrayim* is an essential narrative.

Introducing *Shemot*²⁷, they say the Ba'al Shem Tov said²⁸:

וְהִנֵּה הָאָדָם הוּא עוֹלָם קָטָן,

Every person is a small universe,

וַיֵּשׁ בּוֹ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן וּמִצְרַיִם.

And within every person, there is a *Mosheh*²⁹, an *Aharon*³⁰, and a *Mitzrayim*.

You and I are all little universes. In my little universe, *Mosheh* is not a person named Moses. His name *Mosheh*, meaning “to draw” or “to pull” renders him the Tanakh’s³¹ name for that force in the universe that seduces us towards religion:

Divine persuasion, Divine love, or what Rabbi Brad Artson calls

27. Exodus.

28. *Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov Al Hattorah*, published by Pithey Megaddim, Jerusalem 1992; Vol. I p. 306.

29. Moses.

30. Aaron.

31. The Hebrew Bible.

“the Divine lure.”³²

In my little universe, *Mosheh* is a great force, but sometimes *Mosheh* doesn't do the trick. *Mosheh* is “כַּבֵּד-פִּיָּהּ וְכַבֵּד לְשׁוֹן”³³—of impeded mouth and impeded tongue. Beautiful and persuasive as the Divine lure may be, when *Mosheh* is no good, you gotta send in the sibling *Aharon*. In my little universe, *Aharon* is an *Aron*³⁴, an ark, a sacred home and decorative covering for the ineffable *Mosheh* who cannot speak or even be heard or understood by others. *Aharon* takes the words of *Mosheh* and embodies them as he dresses them nicely, presenting the words of *Mosheh* just as any ark or any home to our sacred words should. Without *Aharon* providing an elegant home for the Divine voice that Moses trembled to replicate authentically, some might have never heard that still, small

32. Most significantly Rabbi Artson writes about this in his works on process theology. For one fine example of this, see the 2011 issue of *Conservative Judaism* dedicated to his work.

33. Exodus 4:12.

34. אָרוֹן.

voice of the Divine Lure, for *Mosheh* was not a great speaker.

Mitzrayim is easy for me to find in my little universe. I know what *tzuris* stresses me out. I have to listen carefully to my *Mosheh*, and, when I don't hear the Divine voice, sometimes I need to look at nature to remember that God is emanated in the universe in ways other than *Mosheh's* words, which, without a little help from *Aharon*, I can rarely hear. When *Mosheh* and *Aharon* work within me and when I let myself listen, I can eventually find myself freed from my *Mitzrayim* within.

In *No'am Elimelekh*, the 18th Century Chasidic master Elimelekh of Lizhensk examines the beginning of this week's *Parashah, Bo*. One could say it's *chutzpadik*³⁵ for God to tell *Mosheh* to ask *Par'oh*³⁶ to free the Hebrews and then for God to harden *Par'oh's* heart over and over. But, *No'am Elimelekh* says

35. It's hard to translate this word. Wiktionary (as of January 28, 2012) defines it as "showing chutzpa; not showing due respect; impudent; impertinent; brazen" (<http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/chutzpadik>).

36. Pharaoh: פֶּרַעִי.

that this is a healthy model for expressing and recognizing God's greatness. *Noam Elimelekh's* take is that the righteous *Mosheh* confronted the evil *Par'oh* on a regular basis. Evil people are not persuaded to serve God upon seeing or hearing about God's wondrous acts. But, if you badger a *rasha*³⁷ like *Par'oh* frequently enough on a regular enough basis, eventually that *rasha* will have a change of heart—a softening, not a hardening. Additionally, coming by so regularly with his predictable promise of a new act of God for *Mitzrayim* to witness, *Mosheh* is drawn ever closer to God; *Mosheh*—in the heat of his passion for the Divine—*has* to tell the progeny of his people of God's wonders.³⁸

No'am Elimelekh says that, by engaging with the other, you inform or remind yourself, your kin, and your so-called “enemy”

37. “Evil person,” עֲשֵׂר.

38. *Sefer No'am Elimelekh*, Jerusalem, 2006: p. 107.

what wonders you see and what good your Divine self brings to the universe. It's really a win-win for everybody—even when it feels like loss after loss.

About two months ago, a cab driver argued with me over whether liberal Judaism was legitimate. A *kippah*³⁹ on his head, this cabbie was familiar with Orthodox life. He explained to me he doesn't understand all of the laws he follows and doesn't always *like* following them, but rules are rules. Yet, a freezing Shabbat devoid of heat is an uncomfortable way for him to spend his day of rest. I told him that it was a bizarre invention of the rabbis when it was determined that *how we feel and experience ritual* and the lessons we learn from *aggadah*⁴⁰ and Jewish narrative must be completely divorced from the factors that determine our rulings in *halakhah*⁴¹. For about 10 minutes,

39. Head-covering: כִּפָּה.

40. Literally, “telling,” אגדה is the corpus of Jewish mythological narrative external to what is written in the Hebrew Bible.

41. Literally, “walking,” הלכה is the term traditionally given to Jewish law.

we talked about how difficult it is to balance what we need spiritually and what tradition has asked of us. The conversation was deep and honest, and, when I arrived at my destination, I thanked him for the chat. As I left the cab, he said, in Hebrew, “I don’t know who is right, but may it be that that one day we will know the truth.”

His hope might be Messianic, but, in my opinion, it is only this kind of serious and engaging dialogue that can build a *Yerushalayim*⁴²: a *yerushah*⁴³—an inheritance or heritage—of *shalom*⁴⁴—of wholeness. But we’re living in an age where *Yerushalayim* is not just a metaphor for a nice religion. Today, we need to be willing to determine when we live in *Mitzrayim*, what the words are of our *Mosheh*, and how our *Aharon* can articulate these words. We must be prepared for daily

42. Jeruaslem: יְרוּשָׁלַיִם.

43. יְרוּשָׁה.

44. שְׁלוֹם, often translated as “peace.”

confrontations with our *Par'oh*. It is only through this earnest and honest religious dialogue that we can leave our *Mitzrayim* and work together to repair a fractured Jewish State, turning it into a wholesome heritage—a *yerushalayim*. If Israel must embody Judaism, we must strive for *Tziyyon*, for notability, and for diversity. We must work towards turning the Jewish State into a far more nuanced and articulate Jewish *Statement*.