



Every Brother Has a Heel Like Me

Preparing this phrase from Jeremiah for the Tisha B'Av Haftarah, I stumbled at its discomforting brilliance. כָּל-אָחִי עָקֹב יַעֲקֹב *khol ach akov yaacov* - is an impossible phrase to translate – “every brother has a heel like me” doesn’t quite get there. As a name, the letters Ayin Kuf Vet, make up the name Yaacov – us. As a noun, they mean “heel” and as a verb they suggest “deceit” (We have similar etymological plurality in English; a ‘heel’ is ‘crooked’ or ‘bent’). The locus classicus comes when Esau, having traded away his birthright for a pot of soup and been deceived out of a blessing from his father, says of his brother, “Rightly is he called Yaacov, he has heeled/tricked me twice over.”

When Jeremiah says, כָּל-אָחִי עָקֹב יַעֲקֹב, JPS suggests the translation, “every brother acteth subtly,” but the Hebrew, in the language of the playground, turns the finger around to point at ourselves. We, children of Jacob, are summoned to acknowledge our crookedness. When the Rabbis include, for the Haftarah on a day focused on self-pity, this phrase, they shove us outside our experience of victimhood and into acknowledging our agency as perpetrators.

I had an email from a member last week, responding to a comparison I made between the breach of the wall of the Temple in 70CE and the breach of the fence separating Gaza from the Southern Kibbutzim in 2023. What about, they asked, the things that have been done by ‘us’ since; the destruction of Gaza, the treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank and beyond? It’s uncomfortable to be challenged to identify as the “heel.” But it’s important to acknowledge recent incidents like these. 1,000 Jewish ‘worshippers’ entered the Temple Mount compound on the 9th Av, breaking every regulation designed to protect peaceable separation at such a sensitive area. There were 16 arrests of Jews suspected of damaging the Muslim cemetery at Lions Gate and attacks by Jews on Palestinian passersby. A raid by Jewish settlers on the Palestinian village of Jit, near Nablus, resulted in the death of one Israeli settler and four Palestinians – resulting in Israel’s Security Minister saying Palestinian homes and villages in the West Bank should share the “same fate” as Bet Hanoun in Gaza, largely destroyed. On the subject of Gaza, twelve were killed in Gaza City on Tuesday as Israel targeted a Hamas operative, bringing the total of Palestinians killed since the ceasefire was declared to 1,168 – according to the Hamas-led health ministry.

It’s not that Jews haven’t suffered extreme levels of hatred through history – and there was a knife attack on an identifiably Jewish worshipper leaving Shul on the 9th Av on the Upper West Side of New York! But there is something deeper that demands address, as uncomfortable as that may feel.

My wife recently took part in a discussion on antisemitism with Arts Council England. In a room full of Jewish artists, many shared their experience of feeling unsafe as British Jewish artists in the current climate. It is, of course, vital that these reflections are properly acknowledged. But, as my wife noted, everyone’s feeling unsafe at the moment; every colour, every nationality, every political view, every everything. Privilege exists – of course it does – but in a world where everyone feels part of a threatened minority, we cannot get out of the holes in which we are currently located by insisting that “our” experience of unsafety is greater than “theirs.” We must stop competing to be the only people whose

suffering is to be acknowledged by everyone else. It is both untrue - כָּל-אֶחָד עָקוֹב יַעֲקֹב - and it won't help.

We move, in the Hebrew calendar, from the week of the 9th Av – Tisha B'Av – to the week of 15th Av – Tu B'Av, marking the date in ancient times when “daughters of Jerusalem would dance in the vineyards and whoever did not have a partner would go there” to seek love. We are all seeking love. And finding love requires an opening of the heart to risk, to another, to rejection. So be it. The other option, closing our hearts, insisting on only our own victimhood, rejecting our complicity in being a heel, is worse.

Shabbat Shalom