

The Origin of *Am Yisrael Chai*

I had the opportunity to participate in the wonderful JCC festival of the arts, albeit in a minimal way. A couple Saturday nights ago together with our visiting JTS student Gisel Baler we led havdalah at the concluding program. Which was, you also may recall, a screening of *Fiddler on the Roof*, now celebrating its 50th birthday, if you will. We stayed through the first half - I hadn't seen it in many years, and even then I'm not sure if I ever sat through the whole three and a quarter hours. I do remember being terrified as a child of the dream sequence where Fruma Sara comes back from the dead to haunt her widower, the butcher Layzer Wolf, so he would not marry whichever of Tevye and Golda's daughters he was slated to marry. I did not realize way back when that this was actually entirely made up by Tevye so he could get out of his agreement with Layzer Wolf so the daughter could marry...the tailor Muttel Kamzoil.

Now you might think I started with that to make it easier on our Hazzan to choose tunes for Musaf. But I'm about to make it harder. Because the Tradition that Tevye sings about so famously is very old, but not every aspect of it that we think is so called 'original equipment' actually dates back to Sinai. Chicken has only been considered meat for about 1900 years. The tune you know and love for *Sh'ma Yisrael* is only about 150 years old. And in something that surprised me upon looking into it, the phrase *Am Yisrael Chai* has only been in use since the end of the Holocaust, in the aftermath of the liberation of the camps. So about 78 years. And the most famous tune of *Am Yisrael Chai*, which has had a

resurgence since the beginning of the war against Hamas terrorists, is even later than that, penned by Shlomo Carlebach around 1965. He did that at the request of the leader of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, Jacob Birnbaum, who thought the movement needed a rallying cry. And boy did Carlebach deliver, choosing to add the verse Od Avinu Chai to the three words that have become an anthem second only to Hatikvah for the Jewish people.

The phrase Od Avinu Chai is based on a verse that we are still waiting for, toward the end of the Joseph story. Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers and after giving them that shocking news he said ha'od avi chai, is my father still alive? This verse morphed from a question into an emphatic statement, an answer to Joseph's question. Think about the setting it was composed for - Soviet Jews whose identity had been systematically quashed and almost erased. Yet when liberation came from behind the Iron Curtain there they were, still aware of their roots enough to know that a better and a Jewish future could now await. Am Yisrael Chai from the most radically destructive places to Jewish life and Jewish lives ever devised, and its most famous tune from another attempt to decimate the Jewish future by eliminating the Jewish present. It's no wonder the words and music have seeped so deeply into our souls, and no wonder either that they have been turned to once again in these difficult and tumultuous times for Israel and in these wary and guarded times for so many Jewish people.

While we have to wait about a month for Joseph's question, the beating heart of this phrase, the one that holds it together, plays a prominent role in Parashat Vayishlach. Because in it God tells Jacob "You shall be called

Jacob no more, but Yisrael shall be your name.” If you are paying particularly close attention, or if you read the note in the Etz Hayim, you’ll know that this is not the first mention of Jacob becoming Israel. Just a few chapters and one portion ago, Jacob wrestles with an angel and demands a blessing. That blessing is what amounts to the promise of name change. The angel says, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel” and here there is an explanation of the name that is not given when God fully affirms this name change this week. That explanation is *ki sarita im elohim v'im anashim va'tuchal*, “for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed”.

In Jacob’s dream, the one that results in his name change, his blessing, the affirmation that he would be the father of a whole nation, he does not seek the conflict, this existential wrestling match. The Torah says “vayei-aveik ish imo” - a man wrestled with him. Not Jacob wrestled a man, he sought out the fight, or even that he welcomed it. Does that sound familiar? Just as ancient Israel did not start his fight, modern Israel did not bring its fight on itself willingly. And just as ancient Israel prevailed, so too will modern Israel because there is no other option.

It is hard to say what the turning point will be for Israel in this war. The goals of getting all the hostages back to where they belong, home safe with their families, and eradicating the threat of what happened on October 7th from ever happening again are both of the highest priority. We continue to pray for and support both eventualities. I don’t know if you caught it but I think a moment that will be looked back to as a turning point toward Israel’s eventual triumph was seen by the world as 37 year old Rimon Kirsht was

finally released from captivity. As she walks toward the van that will bring her back to freedom, she looks up at a machine gun toting, uniformed and masked Hamas fighter or guard or captor and she stares him down in a way that says - well, in a way that says Am Yisrael Chai. Good luck trying to extinguish that flame. You can make things difficult, you can cause us to fight back in ways we never wanted to, it might take longer than anyone desires, but you will never take away the end result of Jacob's blessing - va'tuchal, Israel has prevailed. May that reality come sooner than we expect, and may the people of Israel live - in freedom and in lasting peace.

Shabbat shalom.