

# Weekly Words of Torah

## I Can't Smile Without You: Parshat Beshalach

### Framing

What is the appropriate balance between embracing joy and feeling the pain of our fellow Jews in mortal danger? This is especially challenging as life continues after well over 100 days since Hamas declared war on Israel, massacring 1200+ people and kidnapping 240+ innocent men, women and children from their homes.

### Access Points

- **My creatures are drowning in the sea and you are singing before me?!** After 400 years of exile and slavery, the Israelites finally experience redemption as they cross the Red Sea and escape their oppressors once and for all. The angels sought to join the celebration. And yet according to Talmudic tradition ([Sanhedrin 39b](#)), God silenced them. “My creatures (the Egyptians) are drowning, how can you sing?” If it is objectionable to celebrate when the wicked die, how much more so must we participate in the suffering of the innocent hostages, ripped from their homes for no reason other than being Israeli.
- **“I am with you in your suffering” (Psalms 91:15):** By revealing Godself in a lowly, prickly bush rather than in a more impressive location like a tall tree, the Divine models this empathetic posture. God symbolically says, “If the Israelites are enslaved, I too am in a narrow prickly place” ([Midrash Tanhuma](#)). Similarly, when Noah and his family are on the ark, they abstain from intimate relations in identification with the destruction of the world around them ([Rashi Gen. 8:16](#)). These three precedents demonstrate the problematics of un-tempered joy as others are suffering.
- **The hostages' suffering is actually our own suffering:** As Jews, we do not ignore suffering wherever it is found, but when our fellow Jews are suffering this is even more the case. All Jews are both responsible for one another and share a common destiny. The Kuzari 3:19 explains it succinctly: “The relation of the individual to the community is like a limb to the rest of the body. Should the arm, if blood-letting is required, refuse its blood, the whole body would suffer, including the arm. It is the duty of the individual to suffer hardships, even death, for the well-being of the nation.” A part of each and every one of us is captive in Gaza right now.  
  
As at the Red Sea, recognizing the suffering of other innocent civilians is [not in conflict](#) with feeling deeply the pain of our fellow Jews (but see the larger context of our Talmudic passage [here](#)).
- **Yes, in the midst of shared pain, we also remember to give thanks.** Our daily prayer, the Amidah, contains 13 requests ascending in intensity. And yet immediately after we throw up our hands in desperate need of a new world order, we immediately turn to give thanks for the many blessings that are with us, morning, noon and night. In fact, by feeling fully the difficulties around us, we can sharpen the awareness of our blessings. Jack Gilbert captures this sentiment poignantly in his poem [“Brief for the Defense.”](#)

### Call to Action

Just as the Jewish tradition calls on us to leave a part of our home unfinished and to break a glass at a wedding to remember the destruction in Jerusalem and the world, set aside a moment every day to identify with the pain of the hostages. Wear a masking tape number, pray for the hostages, call the White House.

### Closing Intention

As the war drags on and the hostage crisis remains unresolved, it is easy to let life's routine eclipse the ongoing suffering around us. And yet, while the hostages remain captive, we too are held captive. Keeping the suffering of the hostages at the top of our priorities is not in conflict with recognizing other suffering. Nor is it in conflict with continuing to embrace our everyday blessings.