

## Mysterious Falmes: Old and New Layers in the Holiday of Fire

Rachel Sharansky Danziger \* 29/4/2025 \* Silence and Song: Prayers and Torah for Israel's National Holidays #2

### 1: In the shadow of empire

#### Shabbat 33b

The Gemara relates that this resulted due to an incident that took place **when Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Yosei and Rabbi Shimon were sitting, and Yehuda, son of converts, sat beside them. Rabbi Yehuda opened and said: How pleasant are the actions of this nation, the Romans, as they established marketplaces, established bridges, and established bathhouses. Rabbi Yosei was silent. Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai responded and said: Everything that they established, they established only for their own purposes. They established marketplaces, to place prostitutes in them; bathhouses, to pamper themselves; and bridges, to collect taxes from all who pass over them. Yehuda, son of converts, went and related their statements to his household, and those statements continued to spread until they were heard by the monarchy. They ruled and said: Yehuda, who elevated the Roman regime, shall be elevated and appointed as head of the Sages, the head of the speakers in every place. Yosei, who remained silent, shall be exiled from his home in Judea as punishment, and sent to the city of Tzippori in the Galilee. And Shimon, who denounced the government, shall be killed.**

#### Deuteronomy 15:1-15

(1) Every seventh year you shall practice remission of debts. (2) This shall be the nature of the remission: all creditors shall remit the due that they claim from their fellow [Israelites]; they shall not dun their fellow [Israelites] or kin, for the remission proclaimed is of ה'. (3) You may dun the foreigner; but you must remit whatever is due you from your kin. (4) There shall be no needy among you—since your God ה' will bless you in the land that your God ה' is giving you as a hereditary portion— (5) if only you heed your God ה' and take care to keep all this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day. (6) For your God ה' will bless you as promised: you will extend loans to many nations, but require none yourself; you will dominate many nations, but they will not dominate you. (7) If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kin in any of your settlements in the land that your God ה' is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kin. (8) Rather, you must open your hand and lend whatever is sufficient to meet the need. (9) Beware lest you harbor the base thought, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is approaching," so that you are mean and give nothing to your needy kin—who will cry out to ה' against you, and you will incur guilt. .. (12) If a fellow Hebrew man—or woman—is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall set him free. (13) When you set him free, do not let him go empty-handed: (14) Furnish him out of the flock, threshing floor, and vat, with which your God ה' has blessed you. (15) Bear in mind that you were slaves in the land of Egypt and your God ה' redeemed you; therefore I enjoin this commandment upon you today.

#### דברים ט"ו:א'-ט"ו

(א) מקץ שבע-שנים תעשה שמטה: (ב) וזה דבר השמטה שמוט כל-בעל משה ידו אשר ישה ברעהו לא-יגש את-רעהו ואת-אחיו כי-קרא שמטה לה: (ג) את-הנכרי תגש ואשר יהיה לך את-אחיד תשקט ידך: (ד) אפס כי לא יהיה-בך אביון כי-יבקר יברכה ה' בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נְתַן-לְךָ נַחֲלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: (ה) רק אם-שמוע תשמע בקול ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשֹׁמֵר לַעֲשׂוֹת את-כל-המצוה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם: (ו) כי-ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בֵּרַכְךָ בְּאֶשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ וְהַעֲבַטְתָּ גוֹיִם רַבִּים וְאֹתָהּ לֹא תַעֲבֹט וּמִשְׁלָתָּ בְּגוֹיִם רַבִּים וּבָהּ לֹא יִמְשְׁלוּ: (ז) כי-יהיה בך אביון מאתד אחיד באתד שְׁעָרֶיךָ בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ לֹא תִאָּמֵץ אֶת-לִבְּךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת-יְדְּךָ מֵאִחִיד הָאֲבִיוֹן: (ח) כי-פָתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת-יְדְּךָ לוֹ וְהַעֲבַט תַּעֲבִיטֻנוּ דִּי מִחֲסָדוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִחַסֵּר לוֹ: (ט) השָׁמֵר לָךְ פְּרִי-הַנֶּחֱדָר עִם-לִבְּךָ בְּלֹאֵל לֹאֹמֵר קִרְבָּה שְׁגַת הַשִּׁבְעָה שְׁגַת הַשְּׁמִטָּה וְרָעָה עֵינֶיךָ בְּאִחִיד הָאֲבִיוֹן וְלֹא תִתֵּן לוֹ וְקָרָא עָלֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵי וְהָיָה בְךָ חָטָא... (יב) כי-ימלך לך אחיד העברי או העבריה ועבדך יָשׁ שָׁנִים וּבִשְׁנֵה הַשְּׁבִיעִת תִּשְׁלַחְנוּ חֲפָשִׁי מֵעִמּוֹ: (יג) וכי-תִשְׁלַחְנוּ חֲפָשִׁי מֵעִמּוֹ לֹא תִשְׁלַחְנוּ רִיקָם: (יד) הַעֲנִיק תַּעֲנִיק לוֹ מִצֹּאֲנֶה וּמִמִּגְרָגָה אֲשֶׁר בֵּרַכְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ תִּתֵּן-לוֹ: (טו) וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְיָדַדְתָּ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל-כֵּן אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶת-הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה הַיּוֹם:

## 2: The danger of success

### A Prayer for Confidence after Disillusionment

Rachel Sharansky Danziger

(English)

(from *Az Nashir: Women's Prayers from Our time of Need*)

My God,

We are not the Israel we thought we were.

Our army is not the impenetrable wall we thought it was.

So many of the truths we used to know deep in our bones  
proved false.

False, like false gold.

False, like  
false prophecies.

False prophecies spoken with great confidence  
made our ancestors blind.

They decried the possibility of destruction.

They called out "The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the  
Lord,"

As if the fact they had the Temple  
was irrefutable proof of their invincibility,  
because God won't destroy His own Temple, now would He?  
But He did.

You did.

Our own strength  
proved as hollow, as brittle,  
a reed too splintered  
to take the weight of our vast confidence,  
of everything we took for granted,  
of our false perception of ourselves.

We know, now, what it is to lose this confidence.

To learn that nothing is as we believed it to be,  
and therefore,  
neither are we.

We, ourselves, who breathed these truths with every breath,  
and walked so confidently,  
upon the firm road that these truths  
placed beneath our feet.

We lost these truths and

We lost the that air and

We lost the road and

We lost ourselves in this new place of not-knowing

Not knowing who we are

And what is true

And where our feet will land when we step blindly into this  
unknown.

When our brethren's homes burned, so did our confidence,  
and now we dwell here in the ruins of our self-perception,  
and -- my God -- it's hard to dwell here in the ruins,

where every shard reminds us

of the false gold

of the truths

we thought

we knew

about the world.

About ourselves.

It's hard to dwell where every shard

is sharp enough

to cut ourselves on.

Sharp enough to cut

and make us bleed

songs of lament.

It's hard, and it is dangerous, for we are not at peace, my Lord,  
nor do we have the luxury to simply mourn, lament, and  
wallow.

Our enemies and Yours are now upon us.

We must stand tall.

We must fight for our future  
and Your name.

And so, I come before you today to beg for help.

God, help us restore our sense of self, our confidence.

Help us build it on truer foundations.

Help us combine humility  
with strength.

Help us remember all we can't control  
yet believe in our ability to make things better.

Help us see the true good within ourselves and nurture it.

Help us commit to our future,  
even as we heal from the disillusionment  
of our past.

We have much to be proud of:

our willingness to fight and to defend,

our sacrifices,

our acts of kindness,

the way we hold each other

tightly

through this storm.

Help us turn these truths into a humble and proactive  
confidence

the kind that is a call for action,

instead of the laurels

which we allowed ourselves

to sink into

before.

### 3: Fire and zealotry

#### Shabbat 33b

Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai and his son, Rabbi Elazar, went and hid in the study hall. Every day Rabbi Shimon's wife would bring them bread and a jug of water and they would eat. When the decree intensified, Rabbi Shimon said to his son: Women are easily impressionable and, therefore, there is room for concern lest the authorities torture her and she reveal our whereabouts. They went and they hid in a cave. A miracle occurred and a carob tree was created for them as well as a spring of water. They would remove their clothes and sit covered in sand up to their necks. They would study Torah all day in that manner. At the time of prayer, they would dress, cover themselves, and pray, and they would again remove their clothes afterward so that they would not become tattered. They sat in the cave for twelve years. Elijah the Prophet came and stood at the entrance to the cave and said: Who will inform bar Yoḥai that the emperor died and his decree has been abrogated? They emerged from the cave, and saw people who were plowing and sowing. Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai said: These people abandon eternal life of Torah study and engage in temporal life for their own sustenance. The Gemara relates that every place that Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar directed their eyes was immediately burned. A Divine Voice emerged and said to them: Did you emerge from the cave in order to destroy My world? Return to your cave. They again went and sat there for twelve months. They said: The judgment of the wicked in Gehenna lasts for twelve months. Surely their sin was atoned in that time.

#### I Kings 18:36-41

(36) When it was time to present the grain offering, the prophet Elijah came forward and said, "O ETERNAL One, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel! Let it be known today that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your bidding. (37) Answer me, O ETERNAL One, answer me, that this people may know that You, O ETERNAL One, are God; for You have turned their hearts backward." (38) Then fire from GOD descended and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the earth; and it licked up the water that was in the trench. (39) When they saw this, all the people flung themselves on their faces and cried out: "the ETERNAL One alone is God, the ETERNAL One alone is God!" (40) Then Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal, let not a single one of them get away." They seized them, and Elijah took them down to the Wadi Kishon and slaughtered them there. (41) Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink, for there is a rumbling of [approaching] rain,"

#### II Kings 2:11-12

(11) As they kept on walking and talking, a fiery chariot with fiery horses suddenly appeared and separated one from the other; and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. (12) Elisha saw it, and he cried out, "Oh, father, father! Israel's chariots and riders!" When he could no longer see him, he grasped his garments and rent them in two.

#### מלכים א י"ח:ל"ו-מ"א

(לו) וַיְהִי אִי בַעֲלוֹת הַמִּנְחָה נִצָּשׁ אֱלֹהֵי הַנְּבִיאָה וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם יִצְחָק וְיִשְׂרָאֵל הַיּוֹם יִנָּדַע כִּי־אַתָּה אֱלֹהִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲנִי עַבְדְּךָ (ובדבריד) [ובדברך] עָשִׂיתִי אֵת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה: (לז) עֲנֵנִי יְהוָה עֲנֵנִי וְיִדְעוּ הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי־אַתָּה יְהוָה הָאֱלֹהִים וְאַתָּה הַסֹּבֵת אֶת־לִבָּם אֲחֻרָּיִת: (לח) וַתִּפֹּל אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל אֶת־הַעֲלֵלָה וְאֶת־הַעֲצִים וְאֶת־הָאֲבָנִים וְאֶת־הַקֶּפֶר וְאֶת־הַמִּיִּם אֲשֶׁר־בַּתְּעֵלָה לְחֻכָּה: (לט) וַיֵּרָא כָּל־הָעָם וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים: (מ) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי לָהֶם תִּפְשׁוּ אֶת־נְבִיאֵי הַבַּעַל אִישׁ אֶל־יָמֻלֵּט מִמֶּה וַיִּתְּפְשׂוּם וַיּוֹרְדֵם אֱלֹהֵי אֶל־נַחַל קִישּׁוֹן וַיִּשְׁחָטֵם שָׁם: (מא) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי לְאַחָאֵב עֲלֵה אָכַל וּשְׁתֵּה כִי־קוֹל הַמָּוֶן הִגָּשָׁם:

#### מלכים ב ב':י"א-י"ב

(יא) וַיְהִי הִמָּה הַלָּכִים הַלּוֹךְ וְנִדְּבָר וְהִנֵּה רֶכֶב־אֵשׁ וְסוּסֵי אֵשׁ וַיִּפְרְדּוּ בֵּין שְׁנֵיהֶם וַיַּעַל אֱלֹהֵי בַסַּעֲרָה הַשָּׁמַיִם: (יב) וְאֵלִישָׁע רָאָה וְהוּא מַצְעֵל אַבִּי אָבִי רֶכֶב יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּפְרָשׁוּ וְלֹא רָאָהוּ עוֹד וַיִּחַזַּק בַּבְּגָדָיו וַיִּקְרַעֵם לִשְׁנַיִם קָרְעִים:

## 4: Tempering fires

### Genesis 15

(10) He brought all these and cut them in two, placing each half opposite the other; but he did not cut up the bird. (11) Birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. (12) As the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great dark dread descended upon him. (13) And [God] said to Abram, "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; (14) but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth. (15) As for you, You shall go to your ancestors in peace; You shall be buried at a ripe old age. (16) And they shall return here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." (17) When the sun set and it was very dark, there appeared a smoking oven, and a flaming torch which passed between those pieces. (18) On that day ה' made a covenant with Abram: "To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates—

### Exodus 3:1-10

(1) Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. (2) A messenger of ה' appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. (3) Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" (4) When ה' saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." (5) And [God] said, "Do not come closer! Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground!" (6) and continued, "I am the God of your father's [house]—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (7) And ה' continued, "I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings. (8) I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the region of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. (9) Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. (10) Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt."

### בראשית ט"ו

(י') ויבחר לו את כל אלה ויבחר אתם בתנך וינתן איש-בתרו לקראת רעהו ואת-הצפר לא בחר: (יא) ויגרד העיט על-הפגרים וישב אתם אחרם: (יב) ויהי השמש לבוא ומרדמה נפלה על-אברם והנה אימה חשכה גדלה נפלת עליו: (יג) ויאמר לאברם ידע תדע כי-גר י יהיה ורעך בארץ לא להם ועבדים וענו אתם ארבע מאות שנה: (יד) וגם את-הנזיר אשר יעבדו הן אנכי ואחר-יבן יצאו ברכש גדול: (טו) ואתה תבוא אל-אבותיך בשלום תשקב בשינה טובה: (טז) ודור רביעי ישובו הנה כי לא-שלם עון האמרי עד-הנה: (יז) ויהי השמש באה ועלטה היה והנה מגור עשן ולפיד אש אשר עבר בין הגזרים האלה: (יח) ביום ההוא כרת ה' את-אברם ברית לאמר לו-רעך נתתי את-הארץ הזאת מנחם מצרים עד-הנהר הגדל נהר-פרת

### שמות ג' א'-י'

(א) ומשה היה רועה את-צאן יתרו חתנו כהן מדין וינהג את-הצאן אחר המדבר ויבא אל-הר האלקים חרבה: (ב) ויבא מלאך ה' אליו בלבת-אש מתוך הסנה ויבא והנה הסנה בער באש והסנה איננו אכל: (ג) ויאמר משה אסרה-נא וארא-ה את-המראה הגדל הזה מדוע לא-יבער הסנה: (ד) ויבא ה' כי סר לראות ויקרא אליו אלקים מתוך הסנה ויאמר משה משה ויאמר הנני: (ה) ויאמר אל-תקרב הלא של-ינעליך מעל רגליך כי המקום אשר אתה עומד עליו אדמת-קדש הוא: (ו) ויאמר אנכי אלקי אביך אלקי אברהם אלקי יצחק ואלקי יעקב ויסתר משה פניו כי ירא מהביט אל-האלקים: (ז) ויאמר ה' ראה ראיתי את-עני עמי אשר במצרים ואת-צעקתם שמעתי מפני נגשיו כי ידעתי את-מקאביו: (ח) וארד להצילו מיד מצרים ולהעלותו מן-הארץ ההוא אל-ארץ טובה ורחבה אל-ארץ זבת חלב ודבש אל-מקום הפנוני ותחתי והאמרי והפריזי והחני והיבסי: (ט) ועתה הנה צעקת בני-ישראל באה אלי וגם-ראיתי את-העלעז אשר מצרים לחצים אתם: (י) ועתה לכה ואשלחך אל-פרעה והוצא את-עמי בני-ישראל ממצרים:

## 5. Our own caves

<p><b>In the Cave of My Soul</b>  <b>Rachel Sharansky Danziger</b>  <i>From: Az Nashir: Between Silence and Song</i>  In the cave of my soul  all is well-ordered.  The altar stands just so.  The candles burn brightly.  The angels sing and their harmonies run smoothly,  one into the other,  intricate and true.</p> <p>But You have not made us to be cave-dwellers, God.  You have not formed us for the unchallenged quietude of our private spaces.</p> <p>Go forth,  You said.  Go forth.  Go forth and leave the cave behind.  The ark behind.  The enclosed spaces of our interiority behind.  The clean place where the soul can sing, uninterrupted.  Go forth into the messy world that lies</p>	<p>between one person and another.  Go forth into the place where our songs and visions clash.  Go forth into the place where one heart's edges can sometimes cut another.  Go forth into a place that can be loud and harsh.  In that place,  where the light we carry sputters,  challenged by the light in other people's hands,  lies the fertile ground —  The battleground —  Where we can sow —  Or struggle,  where deeper understanding can take root,  Or we can burn the whole world down.</p> <p>God,  as we heed your call  and step beyond our inner caves,  grant us compassion.  Grant us the strength to see that  which we don't agree with,  and respond with caring.  Grant us the patience to ask questions</p>	<p>instead of yelling answers in each other's faces.  Grant us the inner calm to explore and not reject,  to open doors instead of shutting them.  Let our eyes see the good in our brothers, our sisters,  instead of scorching all the world with scorn.</p> <p>May we sow seeds of understanding and collaboration  in all this fertile ground that lies between us,  And may we remember, always,  that this messy space  is our field  to tend to  And to guard.</p> <p>May we stand rooted and strong  against those who work for our destruction,  And may our roots  Be ever  Intertwined.</p>
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## 6: Healing and growth

### Shabbat 33b

**A Divine Voice emerged and said to them: Emerge from your cave. They emerged. Everywhere that Rabbi Elazar would strike, Rabbi Shimon would heal. Rabbi Shimon said to Rabbi Elazar: My son, you and I suffice for the entire world, as the two of us are engaged in the proper study of Torah. As the sun was setting on Shabbat eve, they saw an elderly man who was holding two bundles of myrtle branches and running at twilight. They said to him: Why do you have these? He said to them: In honor of Shabbat. They said to him: And let one suffice. He answered them: One is corresponding to: “Remember the Shabbat day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8), and one is corresponding to: “Observe the Shabbat day, to keep it holy” (Deuteronomy 5:12). Rabbi Shimon said to his son: See how beloved the mitzvot are to Israel. Their minds were put at ease and they were no longer as upset that people were not engaged in Torah study. Rabbi Pinehas ben Ya’ir, Rabbi Shimon’s son-in-law, heard and went out to greet him. He brought him into the bathhouse and began tending to his flesh. He saw that Rabbi Shimon had cracks in the skin on his body. He was crying, and the tears fell from his eyes and caused Rabbi Shimon pain. Rabbi Pinehas said to Rabbi Shimon, his father-in-law: Woe is me, that I have seen you like this. Rabbi Shimon said to him: Happy are you that you have seen me like this, as had you not seen me like this, you would not have found in me this prominence in Torah, ...Rabbi Shimon said: Since a miracle transpired for me, I will go and repair something for the sake of others in gratitude for God’s kindness, as it is written: “And Jacob came whole to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram; and he graced the countenance of the city” (Genesis 33:18)...He said: Is there something that needs repair? They said to him: There is a place where there is uncertainty with regard to ritual impurity**



### **Flickers from Another World**

**Shira Lankin Sheps**

From: *Az Nashir: Between Silence and Song*

God,  
I am looking for You amongst the flames  
The shadows are flaring up, higher  
Reflecting a release of darkness,  
swallowed up by light.

My eyes burn as I watch  
Smoke tendrils skimming my skin  
Wind scented like mystery  
I am searching for Your secrets.

Have the mystics buried the answers  
In the towering bonfires?  
Do the truths pop up on every hilltop  
In fires of miracles?

The skies are filled with sparks  
That escaped the wild dancing,  
Flickers of another world,  
That we can only see tonight.

God, I am searching in the blaze  
For the hidden meanings,  
The holy pathways,  
The revelation that we are all waiting for...

Tonight, we can taste it,  
A small serving of the beyond,  
Elusive and everlasting,  
While we search for the spiritual in the mundane.

