

Am Levadad Yishkon: Assorted Reflections on the Deaths of Naftali Frenkel, Gilad Shaar, and Eyal Yifrach

“Yes, it is a people that dwells alone (*Am Levadad Yishkon*), not reckoned among the nations.”
(Bamidbar 23:9)

So goes part of Bilaam’s prophecy, starting as a curse that ultimately becomes a blessing. The classic *mefarshim* note several possible explanations to this verse. But the Targum’s approach struck me as being significant in the light of the tragedy of this week: That we do not adopt the *Nimusei Ammaya*, the customs of the other nations. Even as we are integrated into society among us, even as we embrace science, culture, others different than us, we are still different. Our culture, our approach to things will always be different. For some things, we just cannot be reckoned among the nations.

This week, the blessings turned back into curses. Words cannot express the loss, the horror, the tragedy of a callous and cold blooded murder. Three sweet *dati-leumi* teens looking forward to life of purpose and service, cut down because they were Jews living in the Land of Israel. It would be very easy to respond by acts of random terror and vengeance. But as Prime Minister Netanyahu mentioned in his eulogy, we do not celebrate death in our people and faith. We celebrate life. We do not despair or give up. Truly, we do not adopt *Nimusei Ammaya*. We celebrate life and do what we need to in order to protect our people.

I have been ruminating over how we have journeyed over the past couple of weeks. Did we as a people gain anything from our vigils, anything that might give meaning to the deaths of Naftali, Eyal and Gilad? We have come together left and right, rich and poor, Ashkenaz and Sefardi, Liberal and Orthodox, secular and observant. Why does it take shared pain and tragic experience to bring us together? Can we not possibly find common ground in our shared identity and faith in times of joy, or times of normality, as well in as in times of despair and sorrow? I truly hope so.

My wife and I last night discussed if all the prayers we have been saying for the last couple of weeks have been for naught, given that in all probability the boys were already dead for most of the period. We agreed that prayers are never for naught; they always have value. Perhaps they were the way to bring us together. They were for our own sakes, maybe even more than for Hashem.

And what was Hashem thinking, hearing our *tfilot* for boys whose lives had already been cruelly snuffed out? I believe Hashem was crying. Every *perek* of tehillim carried another Divine tear.

I asked my son Rav Shalom Ozarowski, who is the Special Ed coordinator at their school (Mekor Hayyim), what was going on from his perspective. This is what he wrote:

We are doing ok, as we simply share the feelings & experience with everyone else. You probably can imagine it as you have done crisis work yourself. YU sent out some helpful resources from Dr. (David) Pelcovitz, and Mechor Hayyim has been doing a fantastic job being constantly in touch with students, staff & families and their needs, along with keeping the school open, organizing events (some of which I joined, will hopefully tell u about it at some point or perhaps write it up), family support groups and working closely with professional

support services & the authorities. Late last night I went back to Mekor Hayyim, where people sang, hugged, talked, didn't talk, or were simply "ביחד". The Roshei Yeshiva (Rav Dov Zinger & Rav David Rabinovich) spoke very briefly, someone read a letter from Rav Steinsaltz, and there was a security/army update. The school has really come together as one big family.

Truly an *Am Levadad Yishkon*. We appreciate the wishes of decent people everywhere, who give us strength and comfort. We have come together, and pray we can continue to do so. But we will grieve in our own way. And we will do whatever it takes to protect our people. We will not dance on the rooftops when our enemies fall. For some things we will not follow *Nimusei Ammaya*.

We offer wishes of comfort to the Frenkel, Shaar and Yifrach families. May Hashem comfort them from Above, from a parent's worst nightmare.

To paraphrase the Yom Kippur prayer, may Hashem take our tears and put them in the Divine flask for Safekeeping.

In the meantime, we will remain *Am Levadad Yishkon*, in spite of the BDS, the terrorism, the hatred. We will go on.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Joseph S. Ozarowski