

Yosef Kibita and David Ben Moshe are two names I imagine many of you are not so familiar with. Kibita is a member of the 2,000-strong Abayudaya community, has been living in Israel for the past four years, and has undergone three separate conversions to Judaism – two in Uganda and one in Israel.

Back in 2018, he applied for citizenship under the Law of Return but was not accepted. After being told that his conversions didn't meet the specific requirements, they appealed to the High Court. They sided with the Ministry of the Interior citing his 2008 initial conversion as having preceded Abayudaya's acceptance by both the Masorti Movement and the Jewish Agency. To make a long story short, after the High Court recently ruled that non-Orthodox conversions would be accepted for the Law of Return, high hopes were dashed when the Ministry of the Interior denied his application

for aliyah and gave him a hard deadline to leave the country before his appeal could even be heard. Needless to say, bad news.

Ben Moshe, a native of Baltimore has been on a hunger strike recently after the very same Ministry of the Interior denied his request for citizenship. He has been living in Israel for 4 years, married to an Israeli, with two children where they are members of a Jewish community in Beer Sheva. The rationale given for his rejection was that he had a criminal record from his time in America and that he hadn't spent the required 9 months with the community with whom he converted, a technicality of the Law of Return rarely enforced.

I share these anecdotes with a pit in my stomach a pain in my soul. I have spent 3 of the best years of my life in Israel in addition to 5 intensely formative summer periods. I haven't been to Israel since

2016 and I so sorely miss being there, hearing the sounds of Hebrew floating on the breeze, hiking on her trails, and learning her influential Torah. One thing I don't miss though are these stories. Those that involve the humanity of those who don't look quite so Israeli, those who are not part of the Orthodox hegemony, and anyone else on the periphery. It was made real for me, when my good friend in Israel was interrogated during our year of study there to get his student visa because he was a Jew by choice. My friend who had caused great pains to his birth family to cast his lot with our people was told maybe he wasn't Jewish enough by the state of the Jewish people.

It's so hard to continue to read these narratives. No matter where you fall on the Israeli political spectrum, those of us who identify as members of the Conservative movement should

understand what this is saying to us. In essence, Kibita's denial was due to the Ministry's belief that the study process he went through wasn't enough. As my teacher and former dean, Rabbi Bradley Artson said denying that the Abayudaya are authentically Jewish is on some level saying that my rabbinical school isn't an authentic rabbinical school and it's saying that I'm not an authentic rabbi. Lawmakers from the Israeli Religious Action Committee, various politicians, and religious leaders are fighting the good fight but I wonder if they need our support, certainly in spirit and emotion but also financially, because as we know, money talks. I feel the mandate to fight for people like Yosef and David. Even with the latter's case recently resolved, those of us here in the diaspora are part of a long chain of those who have power being able to go to bat for those lacking power.

In Parshat Beshalach, we are right on the cusp of one of the greatest miracles of our tradition, the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. We spend a lot of time talking about the word redemption with the Exodus story. But it's this moment in particular that is the 1st true moment of redemption because with the sea in front of them and the Egyptians behind them, the Israelites and Moses still need to come together.

Their true redemption could not come until there was unity. According to the Maharal of Prague, the moment at the Sea was unique. The Egyptians pursuing the Jews are mentioned in the singular, for it was a unified nation of Egypt – a civilization - that came to return the Jews. However, at Kriat Yam Suf, the Jewish nation finished for good their romance with Egyptian culture. Throughout Kriat Yam Suf the Egyptians are mentioned in the

singular, for it is as a nation and a civilization that they are being destroyed. In that same moment, the Jews and Moses are finally coalescing. They have realized the Egyptians will be no more, so they no longer need to fear. And Moses realizes they need him to bring them out from the fringes, from the mindset of slavery.

The Sefat Emet, in his introduction to the book of Exodus teaches about 3 different levels of redemption. 1) God brings forth the prisoners; 2) God delivers the humble; 3) God helps the poor.

His interpretation and explanation of "God delivers the humble" stuck me, especially as Moses' greatest character trait is his humility. The Sefat Emet goes on "The humble are the righteous; they themselves are not really in exile, but they remain there only for the common good. Such was the case with Moses, who had already

been a shepherd. He was prepared for redemption. In essence he was no longer in exile at all, but was there just to redeem Israel."

This is remarkable. Moses, with no immediate personal need for redemption, chooses to leave the center to join the margins, to stand with the vulnerable, to experience the role God had chosen for him, precisely from the space in which redemption was so necessary. And at great risk.

We don't often think of this perspective of Moses' journey. He has been saved, gone through all of his own trials and tribulations to find personal redemption. But the thing is, that singular redemption is not enough because as long as the people of Israel are still embroiled in the quagmire that is their escape from the physical and mental clutches of Egypt, Moses cannot actually experience real redemption. He chooses to stay there, to wield his privilege for good.

It's why in the moments before they jump into the sea, when the Israelites complain one more time to Moses, and Moses turns to God, God doesn't give Moses some magical answer. God tells Moses, "don't talk to me! I don't need your words now. Go to the people. Speak to them. Help them through this moment. You're here because you chose to be here. You understood that they needed you. They're out-you're in. Bring them to redemption.

All power brokers operate from the perspective. In theory, they are living in a world free of burden. They can get what it is that they want: Torah or Redemption and not need for anything else. But in their positions, whether you think it from happenstance or divine will, they recognize something more potent. They are not free as long as there are people who are still toiling under oppression.

Whether it's a gatekeeper who is shutting the doors maliciously or a group of slavers that is mindlessly pursuing them to put them back in shackles, they need their leaders who are coming from a place of freedom. Those on the fringes need those in the center to look out for them. We can do that in our relationship with Israel. We can donate to this specific cause that the Masorti movement is collecting for. We can stay abreast of the developments in this case and others. When we go to Israel, we can offer our support not only for the Masorti movement but for its youth wing and for other institutions that are fighting for religious pluralism in Eretz Kodshenu.

This is Moses and this is us. We are living in precarious times. For the most part, many of us are operating from the power structure of Moses, but perhaps we've been in the margins before and now we've made it to the center. So we need to remember. We

have immense privilege. Yet, it comes with a price. It will all be for naught if we don't use it to look out for the Israelites of our world. Your personal redemption is not redemptive until you allow others to find their own redemption. Lo Kam B'Yisrael K'moshe Od, we say in Yigdal, there will never arise another like Moses among our people, but that sure doesn't mean we don't have to try.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Adir Yolcut