

Hamilton: A Jewish Musical
Yizkor Shavuos 5776
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\$1300. That is the princely sum you can expect to pay for the privilege of being in the audience for a performance of the musical “Hamilton.” Legions of fans wait for hours on line on the off chance that someone has cancelled and freed up a ticket, and these HamilFans know by heart the lyrics to this multi ethnic Hip Hop musical. In San Francisco, there is even a sing along event called HamilTunes. It probably swept the Tony Awards¹ last night, has garnered Pulitzer Prize and Grammy and the creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda, was recently awarded the MacArthur Grant, also known as “The Genius Grant.” One of the reasons the musical is so popular is the story line of the protagonist, Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton was born of humble, even ignoble circumstances, an orphaned bastard who was product of a dalliance between a woman of loose morals and her paramour, a Scottish merchant. From the West Indies, he was sent to King’s College in New York City through the largesse of local wealthy men, thus launching a legendary career in which he became Chief Staff Aide to George Washington, founder of our nation’s financial system, promoter and interpreter of the US Constitution, founder of the US Coast Guard and the founder of the New York Post- among others. His genius, resourcefulness and relentless ambition are what drove him to the heights of success, all of which was driven by his desire to make a name for himself. As he is introduced at the beginning of the musical,

The world is gonna know your name. What’s your name, man?”

Alexander Hamilton

¹ The Tony Awards were on Yom Tov- a member who received the newspaper informed me that Hamilton swept the Tonys.

My name is Alexander Hamilton

And there's a million things I haven't done

But just you wait, just you wait...²

The desire to make a name for ourselves, to be viewed as noteworthy- all of us can relate to that motivator, which makes this morning's reading of the book of Ruth even more puzzling.

In general, Tanach names its heroes and villains. Preserved for posterity are the names of dozens of virtuous individuals and their adversaries: Kayin and Hevel, Yosef and Potiphar's Wife, Pharaoh and Moshe, Amalek and the Jewish people, Korach and Moshe, Achav and Eliyahu and Haman and Mordechai. The sheer wickedness of some of the most evil characters in Tanach leaps off the page, astonishing in its vileness, and the seminal acts of righteousness of our holy forefathers are the lodestars of our spiritual existence. In the book of Ruth, however, we find several characters relegated to complete or near anonymity for offenses far more innocuous than those committed by our biblical villains. The very first verse in the Megillah describes a man from Bethlehem, in the territory of Judah, who travels to the fields of Moav with his wife, two sons and daughters in law. It isn't until the second verse that we are that the name of this *ish* was Elimelech. The Medrash Rabbah relates that this anonymity, albeit temporary, was punishment for leaving the land of Israel during the famine. Later on, though, we come across a character who is not only anonymous- his name has become synonymous with anonymity. Ruth wanted her cousin by marriage, Boaz, to marry her and beautified herself, going down to the threshing floor and laying at Boaz's feet. In the morning, he woke up and she proposed, but he told her that he could not do so immediately; there was another relative whose relationship was closer who

² <http://genius.com/7912217>

had first rights to her and her property, but he would marry her if that relative did not. Boaz convenes a court, encounters that relative and asks him if he is interested, and he replied, “I do not wish to exercise this right, for I don’t want to destroy my inheritance and heritage.” Referring to the prohibition of accepting converts from Moab (a prohibition that applied to men and not women), he chose to preserve the purity of his lineage and lost out on the opportunity to marry Ruth. As punishment for this choice, the Megillah leaves out his name, referring to him instead as *Ploni Almoni*, or, loosely translated, “that guy.”

If you think about it, what was so egregious about what either of these men did? Did they commit any offense so heinous that they deserved for their name to be omitted, temporarily or permanently? Elimelech left the land of Israel in order to support his family; as a matter of Halacha, this is one of the circumstances under which it is *permitted* to leave Israel. So why is he punished with the erasure of his name? And Ploni Almoni *was right* in his considerations. There was a serious concern about tainting the legacy of his family and his lineage if he linked his lot with Ruth, and it would have been foolhardy for him to think otherwise. So why is *he* punished by relegation to the biblical trash heap?

Perhaps we can suggest that the book of Ruth is unique, in that it features no aggressors and describes no villains. Its protagonists are not evil; they are, rather, unexceptional. The Torah reviles the repugnant and venerates the virtuous, but has no time for mediocrity- and by the Torah’s standards, it does not take much to transcend mediocrity and achieve greatness.

Certainly, Elimelech had every right to leave the land of Israel, but the mark of greatness in his

situation would have been to inconvenience himself and show leadership, by remaining with his family and tending to the people of Bethlehem. Ploni Almoni was within his rights to decline a *shidduch* with Ruth on the grounds of her shaky lineage. In today's *shidduch* system, potential matches have been declined on far flimsier pretexts. But an act of greatness would have been to move out of his comfort zone and marry the holy convert motivated by sincerity and passion for Judaism. Heroism, in Tanach, is not necessarily about grand gestures of salvation and fiery orations in which truth is spoken to power. It is, rather, about refusing to settle for the status quo and taking the opportunity to do something more. It is for these failed opportunities that the names of Elimelech and Ploni Almoni are nearly or totally omitted. There is no sin in being pareve, but being pareve is a world away from being great. Being a person of name and of note, the kind of person Alexander Hamilton strove to become- calls for more than simply showing up.

This is a critical lesson for us in life, because each day we are faced with opportunities to attain the Torah's definition of greatness. We have the choice to make a name for ourselves by doing something more, or we can simply exist. In our interpersonal relationships, we can choose simply to exist. We are there when a friend calls upon us, willing to do a good turn if summoned, giving to tzedaka sparingly and often only if asked, not going out of our way for extra opportunities of *chessed*. That is fine, but it is also just adequate. It's especially true as parents. We can choose to exist as parents and spouses- managing a household together, attending functions of our children, doing what needs to be done but never having deep conversations or spending intense quality time with each other or with our children one on one. That is fine, but it

is merely existing in each of these capacities. Will we settle for basic adequacy or will we strive for greatness?

And if it is true in our relationships with others, it's certainly true in our spiritual lives. We can settle for the bare minimum and, in our spiritual life, just exist- or we can do something more. We can go to shul and show up at the very end, muttering words we don't understand and to which we have little connection, or we can invest in our internal world of prayer that will radiate outward and affect our entire families, by reading the translation or picking one prayer to be really good at. We can keep the most basic form of Shabbos, marked more by the absence of creative work than the presence of spirituality, or we can do something more, attempting to infuse our Shabbos experience with meaning and our Shabbos tables with dialogue and spiritual growth. We can keep kosher at home, or we can upgrade our kashrus to the next level in terms of consistency and knowledge. Indeed, knowledge is another area in which this choice is ever present. There is no question that a Jewish education is an act of sacrifice, and providing our children with a Jewish education an act of great merit. But what about educating ourselves? Signing checks so our children have some form of Jewish education is great, but for ourselves, merely a form of existing and fails to provide a home environment in which the lessons our children are taught are sustainable. We can do that, or we can do something more. Isadore Gibber is a man I met once in my life, but whose story left a powerful impression on me everyone who heard it, at his funeral and numerous times throughout shiva. Mr. Gibber grew up observant, on an egg farm in Monticello, New York, in the Catskills, but without the benefit of much of a formal Jewish education. There were simply no Yeshivot or Hebrew Schools in

Sullivan County, New York in the 1930's. Throughout his life, Mr. Gibber made numerous heroic sacrifices throughout his life to remain steadfastly religious. He worked hard in his family's egg business, provided for his family and gave his children a Jewish education, but because he was not Jewishly educated, he was not particularly engaged in or interested in Jewish study, and certainly wasn't known for his Torah scholarship. When he turned eighty, Mr. Gibber realized that he was no longer in the full vitality of his youth, and began to be concerned that he would die as he lived- observant but unlettered- and he decided that this was not an acceptable state of affairs. Immediately, Mr. Gibber embarked on the study of Daf Yomi, the daily page of Talmud. Each day, without fail, he would study the daf, even in the midst of painful and time consuming medical treatments. And if he ever fell behind, he always caught up; one of his sons asked him, "Dad, you have an out! You're sick, you aren't a young man- how do you keep going?" Mr. Gibber replied, "A Gibber never quits." At the age of 88, in the presence of his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, he made a Siyum Hashas, having completed all 2711 folio of the Talmud. Will we be content to just exist, or will we commit to expanding our knowledge base? This is how we make a name for ourselves, how we save ourselves from the Torah's anonymity- by pushing ourselves, striving, and doing something more.

The world is gonna know your name... We are about to recite yizkor, invoking the names of those we remember. Let us commit to living a life that is memorable- a life of greatness, in which people know our names because we strove for and succeeded in being the very best version of ourselves.