

# The Déjà Vu of Rivers: Starting a New Year with COVID-19

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## I – Only in Israel

There's a phenomenon some of you may be familiar with known as the "only in Israel moment." Inducing the dialectal response of utter incredulity and total familiarity, it's an experience which defies the international standards of social convention and sensibility, yet makes total sense to us when it happens in Israel. The epitome of ridiculousness and *heimishness*, it's a moment so surreal, yet so embedded in the psyche of our people that it seems totally natural and at home in Israel.

One of my "only in Israel moments" was when I visited a relative in Beit Shemesh.\* Let's call them the Ben-Gamliel family. It was my first time there, so I called ahead and asked Mrs. Ben-Gamliel for directions. "We live at 22 HaPalmac Street," she said. "You can't miss it."

"Ok," I think to myself. "That sounds simple enough." I get on a bus at the Tachana Merkazit (Central Bus Station) in Yerushalayim and head out to Beit Shemesh. After a while, I glance out the window and notice that we're on HaPalmach Street. 2, 4, 6, 8, 10...

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\* Names and places have been changed.

We seem to be almost there, so I signal to the driver and get off at the next stop. I walk up to 22 HaPalmach Street. It's a lovely house with a front yard and porch swing. Sure enough, there's an olivewood plaque on the front door that says "*Mishpachat* (family) Ben-Gamliel."

I walk up to the house and ring the bell.

No answer.

I wait a bit and try again.

No answer.

Puzzled, I call my cousins to let them know I've arrived. I didn't want to make them feel bad for not answering the door, so I said, "Hi, I should be by your house in a few minutes."

"Ok," she replied with a twinge of impatience. "We'll be waiting for you."

I wait another minute and ring the bell a third time.

Still no answer.

"Maybe there's a back entrance," I thought. I walk to the back door and knock.

Nothing. There isn't a single light on in the entire house.

At this point I call my cousins again. "Hi, I think I'm at your house. I'm at 22 HaPalmach Street. There's a porch swing in the front yard, and a sign on the door that says Ben-Gamliel. Am I at the right place?"

“No, we live in an apartment building,” she responded matter-of-factly. “You’re at the other 22 HaPalmach Street where the other Ben-Gamliel family lives. We’re five minutes down the road.”

And sure enough, five minutes down the very same street was another building with the exact same address inhabited by people with the exact same last name!

Only in Israel.

## **II – Will the Real Jordan Please Stand Up!**

What makes this story humorous or cringeworthy (depending on your sense of humor) is that it's counterintuitive. The purpose of an address is to help you distinguish one house from all the other ones with same street name, especially when some of those houses just happen have identical plaques on their front doors. When you start doubling up on numbers, you've pretty much defeated the purpose of an address.

In short, you shouldn't have to say, “I'm at *this* 22 HaPalmach Street,” or in my case, “You're at the other 22 HaPalmach Street.” It's both superfluous and redundant, and yet Moshe Rabbeinu seems to do just that.

Parshas Vayeilech begins with Moshe telling the Jews that although he is in perfect health,<sup>i</sup> something quite special for someone 120 years old, his time to die has come because Hashem said לא תַעְבֹר אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה – “you shall not cross the Yarden (Jordan) River [into Eretz Yisroel].”

Except that's not what the Torah actually says.

The Torah says "אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה" – "this Yarden." Why does the Torah add the word "this?" Is there another Yarden that we don't know about? <sup>ii</sup>

In fact, "Yarden" is one of the only proper nouns in the entire Tanach that is ever modified by the word "this." Indeed, there seems to be something quite unique about the Yarden that whenever the subject of a historic crossing comes up, the word "*zeh*" is invoked.

The first time the word "*zeh*" is used in the context of the Yarden is when Yaakov returns from Charan to meet his brother Eisav. He recalls G-d's kindness that he miraculously crossed "this Yarden" with only his stick. <sup>iii</sup>

Generations later when Yehoshua leads the people into Israel, Hashem tells him repeatedly to cross "this Yarden." <sup>iv</sup> Similarly, Yehoshua himself later tells the Jews that future generations will return to the river and say that we crossed "this Yarden." <sup>v</sup>

So what is so special about the Yarden?

### **III – River and River Water**

I think that this question can best be answered by an Iraqi folktale that a taxi driver once shared with me. According to Shariah law, there are certain circumstances in which a couple cannot get remarried once they divorce.

There was once a Muslim couple who argued and fought for years. One time, the husband and wife were fighting on two sides of a small river. In a fit of anger, the husband declared, "If you cross this water then we're irrevocably divorced!" The woman did, and the two parted ways divorced.

After a few days when things cooled down, they regretted their rash decision and tried to annul the divorce, but none of the Imams in the city could find a way to void the husband's declaration. The former couple were very sad and about to give up hope when a Jewish friend of theirs suggested that they speak to the local *Chacham* who was known to be a wise and holy man.

Out of desperation they agreed and visited the rabbi, pouring out their hearts and begging for help. The *Chacham* thought for a moment and turned to the husband. "What exactly did you tell her?" he asked.

"I said that if she crosses this water then we're divorced."

The rabbi smiled. "If that's the case, then you have nothing to worry about! It's a river, so the water is constantly flowing. By the time your wife crossed the river it was different water! She never fulfilled the condition you set, so you're still married!"

The couple was overjoyed and lived happily ever after!

Now this rabbi wasn't the first or last person to make this observation. 2000 years before him, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, "you can't step in the same river twice because the river's always changing, always flowing."

Superficially, these observations seem identical, but there's actually a small but crucial difference. Heraclitus said that you can't step in the same river twice. The *Chacham* said that the water is different. You can't step in the same water twice, but you can step in the same in river twice. It might be different Yarden water, but it's still the same Yarden River.

In other words, despite the new water, it's still *this* Jordan River. The same river that Yaakov, Moshe, and Yehoshua all encountered on their journeys.

#### **IV – A Moving Horizon**

The Tzemach Tzedek says<sup>vi</sup> that just as the Jordan River is the physical boundary between *Chutz La'aretz* (Diaspora) and Israel, it also represents the boundary between us and the promised land of spiritual achievement.

And that boundary isn't stationary. A person's spiritual horizon is always moving. Behavior that is mature for a five-year-old is immature for a fifteen-year-old, and behavior that is mature for a fifteen-year-old is immature for a twenty-five-year-old. The actions themselves haven't changed, but the context has.

Similarly, when we're striving to reach a certain spiritual goal, it becomes our Eretz Yisrael. It takes a tremendous amount of effort to overcome the trials and hurdles of the Yarden in order to reach it. But once we get there, we've grown. What was once an ideal is now normal for us, and we can now grow even more to reach another, even greater achievement. There's a new Eretz Yisrael with a new Yarden to cross.

A person might think that this new Yarden is a completely new hurdle; a new never-before-seen set of challenges. And on the surface, there's a great deal of truth to that. The challenges of navigating a bunny slope and a black diamond ski trail are very different – there are trees ditches, hills, all sorts of things that a beginner has never seen before! But in reality, those differences are only superficial. Many of the fundamental skills and techniques remain the

same. It's only the details that have changed. But it's still the same river moments, years, and even generations later.

That's why the Yarden River is prefaced by the word "*zeh*;" as the threshold to the Promised Land of spiritual achievement, it's constantly changing. As we grow and our aspirations change, so do the challenges and opportunities we encounter. And when faced with rushing current of a superficially unfamiliar Yarden, a person can lose heart and wonder how Hashem possibly expects us to succeed at something we've never encountered before. To that Moshe responds, "*haYarden hazeh*." Deep down it's still the same river!

We believe that Hashem brought us each down into the world for a specific purpose that only we are able to accomplish.<sup>vii</sup> And if that's true, then everything we've ever done and faced in our lives has prepared us for this new Yarden. This new mountain to climb. So there's no need to fear because we have the tools to cross the river, since we crossed the same river yesterday!

### **V – Precedent in an Age of Unprecedentedness**

But is that really true? It certainly doesn't always seem that way.

These past six months feel utterly unprecedented. When was the last time that we had to contend with a pandemic of such scale and virility?! The devastating effects of COVID-19 have impacted every aspect of our individual lives, families, and communities. Hundreds of thousands of loved ones, many in otherwise perfect health, succumbed in a matter of weeks or days, leaving behind grieving families and unfillable voids.

How many of us can recall a time when the world came to an abrupt halt?! Businesses and shuls, simchas and schools - all closed, with some never to reopen again. How many lives have been upended, families thrown into turmoil, reeling from loss, stress, and economic uncertainty?

It feels like a totally different river! How can I possibly be expected to know how to cross it? How can Hashem tell me as he told the Jews by Yehoshua, *ta'avor es haYarden hazeh*?!

The answer, I believe, is that *someone else* has already crossed this Yarden.

We don't exist in a vacuum. We are part of Klal Yisrael – a multi-generational community and people. Unfortunately, we are not the first generation of Jews to contend with widespread death, disease, and economic hardship. Even if we're facing something totally unfamiliar, perhaps our parents, or grandparents, or someone within our generations of history and heritage was faced with a similar challenge, and, through their perseverance, fortitude, and faith, passed down the keys to success to us. <sup>viii</sup>

Or perhaps something else: Even if I personally may never have experienced something like this before, maybe the person sitting next to me in shul - six to eight feet apart with a mask - has. Maybe they just went through the same hardship that I'm going through right now.

Or maybe, just maybe, the person sitting next to me is facing something totally unprecedented for them, but it's something which I've already went through. I know how it feels, and I have the experience and the tools to help them navigate the challenging times that lie ahead or, at the very least, reach out to help shoulder their emotional burden.



The word *shanah*, year, is related to the word *shinuy* – change. But it’s also related to the word *mishneh* – to repeat. As the old year comes to a close and a new one begins, many things will change. New opportunities and new challenges – each with their own Yarden to cross. But the important thing to remember is that deep down it’s still the same Yarden.

Whether it be our own life experience, the national memory and *mesorah* (tradition) of Klal Yisrael, or simply our neighbor across the street, we have *bitachon* (faith) that Hashem has prepared us for what comes our way as we cross into next year.

May we all merit a *ksiva vchasima tova* – a year of health, happiness, and *aliyah* (growth) as we *im yirtzehs Hashem* (with G-d’s help) cross the Yarden together into the spiritual Eretz Yisrael of growth, and the physical Eretz Yisrael with the coming of Moshiach speedily in our days.

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<sup>i</sup> Deuteronomy 31:1-3; Rashi ad loc; Sotah 13b

<sup>ii</sup> At times, the word “zeh” is used to indicate pointing (see Rashi Exodus 12:2 for an example), but that does not appear to be the intended usage in this context (see Imrei Emes Vayishlach).

<sup>iii</sup> Genesis 32:11

<sup>iv</sup> Joshua 1:2

<sup>v</sup> Joshua 4:22

<sup>vi</sup> Sefer Halikkutim: Ma’areches Yarden

<sup>vii</sup> See Sefas Emes Korach 5647

<sup>viii</sup> Indeed, the Jews would return to the site where the Jews crossed the Yarden and where they camped thereafter. To that end, the Jews built monuments there with stones from river. It would seem then, that Jews wanted to create an “eternal memorial” (Joshua 4:7) to an event and location that would constantly changing. (See Joshua 4)