

The Daily Portion

- Sivan Rahav Meir

What did Omri Casspi tell me?

Translation by Yehoshua Siskin

"I hope it was an easy fast for all who fasted." This was the first sentence spoken by Omri Casspi, among the greatest Israeli basketball players, at his press conference yesterday evening in which he announced his retirement. I have nothing to add to all the praises of the world's elite basketball players who spoke of the professionalism, the humility, and the perseverance of the boy who grew up in Yavneh and made it to the NBA. But I was reminded of when Casspi interviewed me on his podcast and opened our conversation with this surprising statement: "I departed for the United States as an Israeli only, but I returned also as a Jew. He explained this transformation as follows:

"Outside of Israel, if you do not create an identity, it will not happen on its own. I lived in places like Sacramento, Cleveland, and Houston – without a large Jewish community. But at some point, I stopped and said

to myself: 'Wait a minute, what is going on with me?' I felt a sense of obligation and began thinking: I represent something, but I know nothing about what I represent.

For example: I land in Boston and American Jewish kids are waiting for me there with much excitement and they are staring at me. I represent for them the Jewish nation, the State of Israel, but I am conflicted. After all, if you go outside in Los Angeles on Yom Kippur, it's just a regular day, traffic as usual. If you do not do something special on Shabbat, you won't feel any Shabbat. It's your responsibility to do something since you are not in a Jewish country.

My wife and I went through this process together, as a family – Friday night dinner, kiddush, tefillin, holidays, community, Jewish education, kosher food. I felt a sense of obligation towards myself and towards the Jewish community. Many Israelis feel this over there, but there are many unfortunately who do not. Only there was I able to understand that I am an emissary of something great. Sometimes you need to go far away in order to come closer, to discover who you really are."

Wishing you much success, Omri, as you continue in the game of life.