

Teshuvah L'Medinateynu: Embracing a Return to Our Homeland

A story is told of a particularly difficult impasse in Middle East negotiations between then Foreign Minister Henry Kissinger, and Prime Minister of Israel Golda Meir. Kissinger looked at Meir and said to her, "Golda, you must remember that first I am an American, second I am Secretary of State and third I am a Jew." To which, without missing a beat, Golda responded: "That's okay Henry, you forget that in Israel we read from right to left."

The message of this cute quip is simple: each of us in this room must never forget that our Judaism is not only tied to our ritual practices, it is not only tied to our cultural practices, and it is not even only tied to our personal lives of faith. Golda was reminding Kissinger that to be a Jew means to be a part of a people who *have always been*, from the time of Abraham and Sarah, to present day, connected to a national homeland- the land of *eretz Yisrael*.

To be a Jew means to walk around with the sense of longing and connection. The great medieval poet Yehudah Ha-Levi wrote the following words in Spain around the twelfth century:

My heart is in the east, but I am in the uttermost West...A light thing would it seem to me to leave all the good things of Spain-- Seeing how precious in my eyes (it would be) to behold the dust of the desolate sanctuary.

During the time of Yehudah Ha-Levi the concept of a national Jewish homeland was a fantasy -- utterly unimaginable. It was only three hundred years after this poem was written that the Jews were exiled from Spain, and given the choice to convert or flee for their lives. The very prayer that we just chanted, the Kol Nidre, likely alludes to these secret Jews who were forced to convert, but remained in Spain secretly practicing their Judaism. That is why they were called "Avaryanim" habitual sinners, sounding similar in word form to "Iberians," who the author of the prayer was including in those who were coming before God in prayer. Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Saso tells a story:

“of one such woman who grew up Catholic in Spain. Every Friday night she would place two candles on her dinner table and light them. Before kindling the flames, she would turn to the picture of Jesus in her dining room on the wall. On the other side of the frame, she had placed a mirror. She did that so at least once a week she could see who she really was.

This is the power of Kol Nidre. To begin the meal before the fast, we place two candles on our dining room table and light them. Then we come to the synagogue. Kol Nidrei is a mirror. At the beginning of Yom Kippur we look in that mirror to see who we really are. (Hoffman, All These Vows, 202).

As we gather together on this Kol Nidrei, surrounded by the memory of those Spanish exiles, whose hearts were in the East but who could only

dream of a national homeland for the Jewish people, we must ask ourselves what exactly this dream means to each one of us today. On this Kol Nidrei, as we reflect and as we confess, we, as American Jews, must admit that we have a problem – we do not know how to deeply and honestly, discuss, connect, and relate to our other homeland with all of its complications.

Somewhere over the past few decades we have forgotten just how to talk about Israel. Some talk about the "matzav," the situation between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Some talk about the rise of the Boycott-Divestment-and-Sanctions movement on college campuses and the increase of anti-Semitism that is clearly attached to it. And other focus on whether or not politicians are, "for," or, "against," Israel (as if it is always that clear-cut). But that is not what I mean. When I say that we have forgotten how to talk about Israel, I mean that we have stopped talking *about why Israel is important in the first place.*

By now, many of you are familiar with the famous Pew Study of American Jews that came out a few years ago. It showed that while roughly 75-80% of Jews 50 and older say that they are attached to Israel, only around 60% of Jews ages 18-49 and older feel that same sense of connection. What's

more, when asked whether caring about Israel was *essential* to being Jewish, only 43% of all respondents replied positively. These are troubling statistics because to be a Jew is to understand that Israel *is an essential* part of our identity and something that must be engaged with, nurtured, and embraced as such.

So let me ask you a few questions:

1. Who here has visited Israel?
2. Who here has visited Israel in the last 20 years? 10? 5?
3. How many of you have read a book that is related to Israel in the past year? How many of you listen to podcasts related to Israel?
4. How many of you keep up with Israeli news on a weekly basis? How many of you do this by reading Israeli newspapers (in translation)
5. How many of you speak modern Israeli Hebrew? How many of you have tried to learn?
6. How many of you speak with your Jewish friends about Israel? With your non-Jewish friends?
7. How many of you intentionally buy Israeli products, drink Israeli wine, or regularly eat Israeli food?
8. How many of you could list at least five technological, medical, or agricultural innovations that were produced by Israel in recent years?

If you answered yes to any of these questions- you are off to a good start. If you answered no to all of them- there is work to be done.

I have been thinking about Israel a lot over this past year. As many of you know, last fall I taught a three-month course on Wednesday evenings looking at the political and religious issues surrounding Israel from the perspective of Jewish values. Using incredible materials put out by the Shalom Hartman Institute, we listened to fascinating lectures each week and studied classical and modern Jewish sources related to issues such as the use of power, Israel as a Jewish and Democratic homeland, issues related to the concept of occupation, and Jewish sources on the ethics and morals of war.

In the spring I was also privileged to attend the AIPAC policy conference, the single largest gathering of Jews in North America each year, with over 18,000 participants, including representatives from hundreds of synagogues, over 750 Jewish clergy, as well as many non-Jews. In addition to hearing from a variety of political speakers, we had an opportunity to learn about different areas of Israeli innovation, and choose from over 300 breakout sessions discussing issues such as the Iran Nuclear deal, Islamic Jihad, the

Settlements, the Middle East in 2016, Israeli's and Palestinians in 2016, advances in medical technology, how Israel is helping Syrian refugees, and even the way Israel is bringing drought technology to California! Last year we had one member of the congregation join me at this amazing conference, and I look forward to others joining me this year.

But in addition to studying and teaching about Israel, and attending a major conference about Israel- my personal highlight of last year was when I was privileged to travel to Israel with my family this summer. Because it was there, just over one month ago, I fell in love with Israel yet again- as my homeland, as an integral part of my identity, and as an essential part of what it means to be a Jew living in the 21st century.

Let me share some of the important things that this trip helped me remember:

- 1. Israel is a place where Judaism is lived, albeit imperfectly, in the public square.** The rhythm of life in Israel is in accordance with Jewish life, from the food that is eaten, to stores closing early on Fridays, to Jewish holidays and Shabbat marked by every school, town, radio and TV station. It is even marked in non-traditional ways by many individuals who identify as secular.

2. In Israel, Jewish history comes to life around every corner. We visited an ancient synagogue called Beit Alpha, with an amazingly preserved mosaic floor, discovered in 1929 by kibbutznikim as they were digging irrigation channels. From construction work to farming, Israelis never know what they may find beneath the surface. History can be found around every corner- as evidenced by this synagogue, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, that also happened to be located just steps from the mountain where the Bible tells us David fled from King Saul.

3. ישראל היא מדינה כשעברית היא שפה חיה שמדברים בה ולא רק מתפללים בה.

Israel is the place where Hebrew is spoken as a living

language, and not simply reserved for prayer. For two and a half weeks, we were surrounded by Hebrew. We shopped in Hebrew, asked for directions in Hebrew, listened to the radio in Hebrew, and even paid for a parking ticket in Hebrew. Modern Hebrew is as fascinating as it is amusing: popular Israeli writer Etgar Keret noted¹ that Hebrew is a beautiful language filled with ancient and modern tension. In what other language would one be using the language of the Bible along with modern words like "internet" and "cell phone" in the same sentence?

4. Israel is a place where the old and the new blend together in a profound and unique way. Throughout our trip we would be driving along a modern highway with high-rise buildings, traffic,

¹ <http://www.npr.org/2015/06/16/414896816/what-etgar-keret-learned-from-his-father-about-storytelling-and-survival>

billboards, and then we would just happen to drive by a random ancient archeological remnant of some sort. Walking the streets of Jerusalem the experience is the same – you see neighborhoods as ancient as the Bible alongside a mall built in the last decade.

6. Israeli technological ingenuity and medical discoveries are incredible. Many of Israel's inventions and innovations we have come to take for granted. Everything from driving around via directions on *Waze* to calling around the globe for free via *What's App* to saving pictures and documents on tiny microchips and flash drives – these are all examples of Israeli technology that have truly changed the world. And the medical research and advances coming from this tiny country continue to lead the world, from new treatments for cancer, to breakthrough discoveries that may lead to slowing or stopping the progression of ALS.

7. Did I mention that while many areas of the world are struggling with issues of drought, Israel (in the desert) is doing just fine? Thanks to a major national effort to desalinate the Mediterranean seawater and recycle wastewater, Israel has enough water for all of its needs as more than 50% of the water for Israeli households, agriculture, and industry is now artificially produced.²

To quote former Prime Minister and President Shimon Perez (z"l):

In Israel, a land lacking in natural resources, we learned to appreciate our greatest national advantage: our minds. Through creativity and innovation, we transformed barren deserts into flourishing fields and pioneered new frontiers in science and technology.

² NY Times, May 2015

With all of these Technological, Agricultural, and Medical advances- imagine what Israel could do if it was at actually at peace with her neighbors.

8. While travelling around Israel I also noticed that, despite what one might expect, Israelis are, in general, seem much less stressed out than American, and seem to be incredibly happy. Evidence of these attitudes can be found in the following Hebrew lesson that I learned on this latest trip. When you were younger and you learned to say, "thank you" and, "you're welcome" in Hebrew- you said: "Todah Rabah" and "Bevakasha." Now, when you go to Israel and say "Todah Rabah" (thank you), the response is usually "B'kef" meaning, "that was fun!" Many Israelis are *very happy* with their lives, despite the true strains and stresses that come with living in the Middle East. Indeed according to the World Happiness Report put out this year, Israel ranked 11th out of 156 countries (well ahead of America by the way) in terms of the happiness of its citizens.

9. Israel still plays a critical role as a safe haven for the Jewish people. Most of us in this room live comfortably in America, without much fear of anti-Semitism. Of course, there are isolated incidents in America, and this election cycle has brought out a particularly nasty undertone of anti-Semitism at certain points, but by and large most of us in this room do not fear for our safety on a daily basis. Do you know what language I heard more than ever before in Jerusalem last month? French. Why? In part because French Jews are fleeing for their safety. Nearly 8000 Jews immigrated to Israel from France in 2015 alone. And as we walked down the steps of the Old City towards the kotel, we passed a group of Israeli soldiers walking the other direction,

and in one small group overheard French, Russian, Spanish, and English- all spoken by these young members of the Israeli IDF. A beautiful reminder that Israel is home to Jews from around the world, and it must continue to serve as a place where all Jews can feel safe and secure.

Why share all of this with you here tonight? Because Kol Nidrei is a time to look in the mirror and reflect on our individual and collective shortcomings. And Israel- a critical piece that each one of us here should identify with as members of the Jewish people, seems to have taken a backseat. *It is too complicated to talk about- we say. I don't agree with all of Israel's policies- we think. The Orthodox political parties make Israel a Jewish state that does not allow for freedom and diversity of Jewish law and practice - we complain.* Yes, all of these things are correct. BUT here is the thing: Israel is too important for us to simply disengage. Israel's existence and relevance are too critical to be ignored.

So here are my challenges for this year.

1. Who wants to go to Israel? If you are interested in organizing a trip as a group, or you want to go as individuals- find me and let's see how we can make that happen.

2. I am going to the AIPAC policy conference in the end of March. It is open to everyone and the sooner you sign up, the lower the cost to attend. It is an incredible learning opportunity with much more diverse participation than the press would have you believe. There is a huge sign outside with more information. Flyers are available to take home and fill out after Yom Kippur. Who wants to join me? Please follow up

with me in the coming days. I would love to have you join us as a part of our Torat El delegation.

3. This winter I am teaching a class on the Israeli Palestinian conflict, using new materials from the Shalom Hartman Institute. You have plenty of time to put this on your calendar. Will you join me?

4. We have talked about offering a modern Hebrew speaking class here at the synagogue. If ten people commit to studying together, I will commit to finding you a teacher.

5. Finally, the fact that our synagogue has no Israel Action Committee is a problem. It is also a great opportunity. If we are going to take Israel seriously as a community we need a handful of volunteers who are passionate and thoughtful, and who can help us promote Israel education at Torat El. Who is ready to step up for this important leadership role. Email me this week, or call the office to speak with me.

On this Kol Nidrei, as we reflect on the fragility of life, and on our mortality as individuals, let us also recall that we cannot truly be spiritually alive without a deep and sustained connection to Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel. As we confess our missed steps, let us admit our missed opportunities when it comes to engaging with the State of Israel, and let us strive to engage in teshuvah- in a return, to the land of our people, our history, and our heritage. Because with all of its complications, and all of its challenges-every Jew who gathers in synagogue tonight, and even those who do not, are all a part of the people of **Israel**.

G'mar Hatimah Tovah- May you have an easy fast, and a meaningful Yom Kippur experience.