

Israel: Seeking Hope, Inspiration, and Courage to Act

Sermon – Rosh Hashanah 5772|

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Good yontif.....Since our return from Sabbatical in Israel, our daughter Liana – now 10 – has loved sharing her favorite joke: Four men are standing on a street corner. A Russian man, an American, a Chinese man, and an Israeli. A reporter approaches them and asks: “Excuse me, what is your opinion on the food shortage?”

The Russian responds: “What’s food?” The American responds: “What’s a shortage?” The man from China asks: “What’s an opinion?” The Israeli responds..... “What’s ‘Excuse me’?”

Even Israelis who hear the joke smile knowingly – understanding the stereotype: the Israeli who pushes his way onto the bus --- or who doesn’t know the meaning of going to the end of the line --- or the driver who is quick to honk his horn in traffic and even get out of the car to argue with another driver. During six months in Jerusalem, I came to expect these as part of the cultural experience of living there.

Anat Hoffman, Director of the Israeli Religious Action Center – the Reform Movement’s Israel-based social justice organization – once commented that ‘Israelis are, by nature, a people of argument and of raised voices. We come from a Torah tradition, after all, in which Abraham, Moses, the prophets, and even G-d are aggressive in their pursuit of their goals.’

But those of us who love Israel will also be quick to tell you that this is far from the complete picture. When Emily’s parents, Melanie and Jerry, came to visit us in the spring, they often spoke about how the very same Israelis – whether adults or even teenagers – who had aggressively made their way **onto the bus**, were the first to give up their seats to a senior citizen. For over three weeks last March, Emily was sick with pneumonia – requiring several trips to a nearby medical clinic for treatment. And because we didn’t have a car, we relied on taxi cabs to get us there and back. As we were being dropped off at the front door of the clinic – just about every driver – whether Jewish or Arab – wished us a gentle “*refuah shleimah*” – a hope for “a full recovery.” My favorite memory though is about our planned trip to Ashkelon to be with family for Passover seder. For this particular trip we had decided to rent a car. But with the kids buckled up in the back seat and the seder scheduled to start in a couple of hours – we couldn’t get the car started. Thankfully, a passer-by approached and offered to give us a jump start. But after several attempts, that too didn’t work. It was then that this man – whom Emily and I had never met – came over, with keys in hand, and offered to let us borrow his car so that we could go and have seder with our family. Thankfully – one last effort at a jump start was successful – and we were on our way. But that gesture remained with us.

The poet, Yehudah Amichai, once wrote a poem in which he wondered why the Hebrew for Jerusalem – *Yerushalayim* – is a word that is in the plural – ending in ‘*eem*’. Surely, it would have been more simple to have given the city a name that was in the singular. One rabbinic teaching tells us that *Yerushalayim* is in the plural because it refers, actually, to two different entities: An earthly Jerusalem – the place we see and experience here on earth --- and a heavenly Jerusalem – an ideal place towards which we aspire.

Another possibility is that while Jerusalem --- and Israel, by extension --- may be a single place, it is one where differing threads --- often even opposing threads -- are woven together: brusque and warm, history and modernity -- Middle Eastern culture and European culture -- religious and secular -- Israeli Jews, Israeli Arabs, and Palestinians. The complex fabric of life in Israel is impossible to ignore.

And while life in Israel in many respects mirrors that of life in America, the reality that Israelis live with every day is profoundly different from our own. Just one example: Tali Geulim, the Israeli school that Liana and Jonah attended every day, looks similar to our own Mitchell School in Needham. It's a public neighborhood elementary school where kids play soccer at recess and parents chat outside before picking up their children. However, the school building and play yards are surrounded by a fence. And there is a guard at the gate -- all day. His name is Nachum, and he carries with him the pain of having lost his daughter to a terrorist attack during the second Intifada. And there is a memorial wall set up in the school lobby listing several names of past students of the school who, over the years, have either fallen in battle or been victims of terror.

There is a culture in Israel that is created through this shared experience. It is a familiarity born amongst a people living in a small country where history is personal. It is born amongst a population where most of its citizens have either served in the army -- or continue to serve. It is born out of a recognition that Israel's sovereignty is frequently challenged either politically in the international arena OR militarily from Gaza and beyond. And it is born from a shared concern for Israel's future -- both existentially and morally - even when those concerns are raised from opposing points of view. Indeed, is it really any wonder that Israelis often seem to speak to or argue with one another **as though** they already know each other? In many ways, they do.

Many years ago, I recall a professor of Arab-Israeli history saying that no matter when you happen to be in Israel, it is never dull...there is always something going on. Certainly these past several months have been no exception.

Since December of last year, a wave of uprisings throughout the Arab world has brought dramatic change to the entire political landscape of the Middle East. Last Friday, Mahmud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, made a formal request of the United Nations Security Council -- asking them to recommend that the UN General Assembly recognize Palestine as a UN member state. From the moment Abbas made clear his intention to go to the UN, the world community has been focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict...on the need -- and stated desire by most parties involved for the creation of two states for two peoples.....and on the deep frustration that Israelis and Palestinians seem to be no closer to peace today than they were twenty years ago.

Occurring at the same time, heightened tensions with even some of Israel's historic partners in peace have raised concerns. Relations continue to deteriorate with Turkey. The situation in Egypt under its new military leadership has left many wondering about health of the treaty signed in 1979. And in Syria, as is true in Egypt, while uprisings may lead to regime change, as journalist Robin Wright has noted: "opening new space does not guarantee who will fill it."

Seen in this context, there is concern that Abbas's unilateral action will only raise unreasonable expectations amongst his people and lead to a renewal of violence. He is like that fabled politician who, one day, proudly declared to his people: "Yesterday, we stood at the edge of the abyss. But today, we have taken a GIANT STEP FORWARD."

In some respects, there has been a positive side to the recent focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Our Jewish community has come together around our shared commitment to Israel and our firm belief that peace talks must resume. Our national leaders have reaffirmed the importance of a strong US-Israel relationship – even in the face of international pressure. And the debates regarding Israel's future and the prospects for peace – have rarely been more passionate. And so, despite the fact that frustration runs deep that we are not where we should be given past promises of progress – and while seemingly impossible questions remain yet to be answered – I still believe that we must find reason for hope.

One of the most compelling experiences of my sabbatical was the opportunity to speak at length with Israelis and Palestinians. Through one particular program, called "Encounter," I was able to travel to Bethlehem to tour the city and meet a number of Palestinian residents. As the program leadership explained, their goal is to help inform Jewish leaders from across the religious and political spectrum about Palestinian life. They do this by inviting participants to grapple with the Palestinian narrative and understanding of the conflict through direct contact and conversation. Honestly, I wasn't quite sure what to expect and was cautious to differentiate helpful information from propaganda.

While in Bethlehem, I stayed with the Aqla family. Their family business is running a guest house, which I was surprised to learn is called: 'Salam Bethlehem' – or, as they translate it in English: "House of Peace." Hearing the Arabic for "Beth Shalom," I couldn't help but think that, perhaps, there was something *bashert* about my being there. The Aqlas were gracious and welcoming. While 75% of the Palestinians in Bethlehem are Sunni Muslim – the Aqlas are part of the 25% Christian Palestinian minority.

One of our group's first stops was a local elementary school called the "Hope Flowers School." We were greeted by the director, a woman by the name of Ghada Ghabon. She appeared to be in her 30's...with long red hair...and looked very much like an American woman of her age might. In addition to having received a degree in English Literature and Language from Bethlehem University, she is also the mother of four small children – all under the age of seven.

Ghada thanked us for our interest in learning about her work. The school – she explained - currently serving 300 students and their families, was founded by her father, a Palestinian refugee. He was also a social worker who believed that violence yields only more violence and that it is necessary to raise a new generation of Palestinian and Israeli children learning to live in peace.

Following Ghada's opening words, someone in our group asked her: "How do you teach about Israel?" To this, she responded: "We live under occupation and therefore our teachings about Israel cannot deny our narrative – the stories shared by our families – our everyday reality. The question that we ask is: "How do we deal with this?" – Are we teaching in order to retaliate or are we teaching in order to co-

exist?”

Ghada’s frustration, on the one hand, regarding the difficulties of the families in her school – tempered by her firm belief that peace can only come through compromise – I found to be both honest and hopeful.

Another woman that we met later that day, Siham Abu Awad, told us the story of how she had one day met a Jewish woman who looked very similar to her own mother. This, Siham recalled, led her to think to herself: “If you have the same face as my mother, maybe you have the same heart.”

And later, when Siham was asked for a single message that she wanted us to remember from our time together, she said: “Hear our stories.....I am a human being.”

Make no mistake, there **are** Palestinians who want to see Israel pushed into the sea and who view the struggle for two states only as an interim step leading to a one-state – a Palestinian state - solution. And there are terrorists – Hamas and Islamic Jihad amongst them – who continue to use any means necessary to achieve their goals. Against such threats, Israel must protect itself and ensure the security of its citizens. But the Palestinians that I met were not those Palestinians. These were parents, teachers, and professionals – all trying, despite the challenges, to somehow bring about positive change. They do this through their work, in the ways that they teach their children, and by speaking out in programs like this.

As one who is deeply concerned about Israel’s future – who genuinely cares about how a secure and prosperous Israel might one day come to stand next to a healthy and viable Palestinian state – I discovered a measure of hope through participating in this program. It was helpful to meet face-to-face with Palestinians who are also concerned and who share the desire for a peaceful future with Israel. It was helpful knowing that there are, in fact, Palestinians who are willing to speak out and to act on their beliefs. And it was helpful to learn firsthand, from them, the Palestinian narrative that informs that belief.

The work of building bridges and of tearing down stereotypes is thankfully happening in many places --- oftentimes beyond the scope of the headlines and the daily news cast. It is being done by pioneers of understanding who realize how high the stakes are. And their work has borne fruit.

In 2002, a team of four educators – two Israeli and two Palestinian – set out on a revolutionary educational endeavor. Recognizing the role and potential of teachers as agents of change, they created a unique curriculum designed to break down stereotypes and polarizing attitudes related to the conflict. Their curriculum features a high school history textbook in which key events are explored through the sharing of **both** the Israeli and Palestinian understandings of what happened. Not surprisingly, the contrasts are stark. Students are invited to discuss these differences and the reasons for them. The educators explain that the goal is not to convince students of the accuracy of one narrative over another. Rather, it is to enable the students – whether in an Israeli classroom or Palestinian – to move beyond deeply entrenched and polarizing attitudes. The curriculum is based on the belief that **recognition PRECEDES reconciliation**.

Perhaps, not surprisingly, when the curriculum was tested in classrooms, teachers reported that presenting the two narratives caused surprise, interest, curiosity, and, in some cases, resentment. Nonetheless, follow up studies have shown that their efforts have undeniably made an impact...And their work

continues.....

Closer to home, here in the Boston area, one man also had a dream of building bridges of understanding. Ted Grossman, father of Beth Shalom member Aaron Grossman and professor of business at Babson College, envisioned the creation of a special program – one that would bring Israeli Jewish, Israeli Arab, and Palestinian students to Babson for several weeks to learn about entrepreneurship and about each other.

The students, he imagined, would work in integrated teams that would create both a product and an accompanying business model. Ted's program would provide both support and seed money. And upon returning to the Middle East, these teams would then continue their work together by marketing their projects.

For years, Ted labored to develop the curriculum, establish the necessary partnerships in Israel and the West Bank, and to secure necessary funding. And this past summer, Ted's vision became a reality as forty four students from the Middle East - seven Israeli Arabs, seventeen Israeli Jews, and twenty Palestinians came to Boston. Our Beth Shalom community was proud to welcome those students, here, for a community dinner in July.

Tragically, earlier this week, Ted suffered a heart attack that took him from us. The funeral was on Tuesday. And the sanctuary at Temple Sinai in Sharon was filled with loved ones. Amongst the many who came that day was a young Israeli man by the name of Tsachi Ben Yosef. Tsachi is one of the participants in Ted's program. He had arrived from Israel just hours earlier and had to leave soon after the service in order to be home for Rosh Hashanah.

Tsachi shared that he had come representing every one of the forty-four participants – Jewish, Arab, and Palestinian – whose lives, he said, had been changed by Ted's work. On behalf of them all, Tsachi presented the family with two gifts: a special note from the group and a framed photograph of all of the students. Inscribed at the bottom of the photograph are the words: "We are proud to be part of your dream."

Ted's life was a blessing...and the work that he did to make his dream a reality is a reminder of what is possible when there is a will to make it so.

In many respects, this is the message at the heart of our High Holy Days: that tomorrow need not be like yesterday...that the sparks of hope must always be found.....and that change can happen when **desire and courage** lead to **decision-making and action**.

On this Rosh Hashanah morning we offer our prayer:

*Avinu Shebashamayim tzur Yisrael v'Goalo,
Bareich et Medinat Yisrael...*

Heavenly One, Protector and Redeemer of Israel,
bless Israel and all of her peoples.

Shield them beneath the wings of Your love;
spreading over them a canopy of Shalom.
Source of Inspiration, help us to bring peace to this land
and the fullness of joy to all who dwell there.

*Cain yehi ratzon.....*Be this G-d's will.

Amen.