

Rabbi Daniel Berman
Temple Reyim
Rosh Hashanah
5775/2014

Standing Before Israel In Humility: A Community Approach

L'shanab tovab. Happy New Year.

It is wonderful to be here, celebrating this New Year with you.

It is hard to believe an entire year has passed since we first shared High Holidays together, as I had just joined the Temple Reyim community at this time last year.

A rabbi and teacher of mine asked me recently about my experience this past year. I took a little time to think about it and answered: there is rarely a day that I come home without being able to say: what a blessing it is to be here. We genuinely are a joyful, loving, generous community.

My family and I have been welcomed warmly, with acceptance and with care.

I want to take this opportunity, as I stand before you on Rosh Hashanah, to express how grateful we are.

I want to speak today about Israel.

The North American Jewish community has struggled to talk about Israel in recent years. National studies continue to show that rabbis, teachers, and lay leaders of congregations are nervous to address Israel in public ways, fearful that as soon as you even mention Israel, someone will disagree with you and won't support you.

Just this past Monday, the New York Times lead – and most emailed - article was entitled “Talk in Synagogues of Israel and Gaza Goes from Debate to Wrath to Rage,” a chilling reminder of how fractious our struggle has been.

Almost everyone who writes and comments about this struggle in the North American Jewish community feels angry or frustrated by it. And I have to say, I have shared this feeling.

But I've come to see it a little differently.

The Jewish community has real concerns:

Concerns that we might feel alone, unsupported or alienated;

Concerns that we might not have a solid enough foundation of trust to bear the weight of difference;

Concerns that debate, or even conversation, would undermine our strong support for Israel.

We're not struggling simply because we are overly or narrowly political or strident in our views.

This is an earnest, genuine, and emotional struggle. It touches questions of identity and even Jewish existence, and that taps into some of our most vulnerable and painful fears.

The struggle doesn't need to be put down; it needs to be cared for, nurtured and lifted up.

When I consider the difficulty of this conversation in the larger Jewish community, I am even more grateful to be here at Temple Reyim. While we will always have work ahead of us, it is clear that our trust is far too strong to be shaken by difference. We care too deeply about Israel. And just as - if not more - importantly, we care too deeply about each other. We will continue to talk in open and honest ways, because that's what we do here. We thrive on the intellectual and spiritual challenges and energy that has always defined the Jewish soul.

In the prayer, hineni, which is chanted just as we begin the musaf service, our chazan, our High Holiday cantor, acknowledges his or her vulnerability and humility in offering prayers on behalf of a community. I want to acknowledge the same in offering my words today.

It was a very difficult and painful summer.

Many Reyim members were in Israel some touring the beauty of the land and visiting with Israelis, some experiencing first-hand the harrowing sounds of the sirens and fleeing to bomb shelters. Members of our community are there now, including our Gann Academy high school students, now learning at the Muss High School in Jerusalem. Children and family of our members are there, many serving as officers in the Israeli army.

There is an expression in Yiddish I learned as a child: “A heart feels a heart.” For so many of us, even though we’re here, feeling far away, across the ocean, our hearts are very much in Israel.

This summer, our hearts were full of sadness and fear. The hopes of multiple generations that Israel finally find peace, without the threat to its security and safety, felt more like a distant prayer and dream than any time in the recent past. During this late summer and early fall, thankfully, a negotiated cease-fire restored calm. Our hopes for peace have been rekindled, but, still, that calm feels tenuous.

As the conflict in Israel and Gaza began to intensify this summer, Sarah and I called our closest friend, who lives in Jerusalem with her husband and two children. By the magic of modern technology, we are able to see each other’s children grow up across the ocean.

We asked how they were doing; they told us about their family and their work.

We asked more directly about the conflict. They were among the tens of thousands of people in Israel who attended the funerals of soldiers who died. They told us their hearts ached.

Our friend, she’s one of the most loving, compassionate and dedicated people we know. She lost her father in the 1973 Yom Kippur war. Her mother was late in her pregnancy at the time he was called to service. He was killed just before our friend was born.

It’s forty years later now. Forty years is a full generation. In Torah, it’s forty years that the Israelites wandered in the desert until all those who left Egypt died. It was the new generation, born in the wilderness that could come into the Land of Israel.

A full generation later.

A full generation since our friend's father was killed and peace is still fragile.

Like all parents in Israel, our friends imagine and fear what the near future holds.

Their daughter is still young; she bounces and plays like a child should play. Their son is growing up. He's tall, strong and athletic, kind, sweet, innocent and shy. He is just 12, still a kid - but at 12 parents are starting to think about their child serving in the Israeli army.

Our friends are torn; serving in the Israeli army is a core aspect of Israeli identity, drawing upon a communal and national psyche established in the early years of Zionism. The aspiration of establishing a Jewish state meant a willingness to place the greater goal over the individual self. They understand this and they live this commitment every day.

And it is also true that our friends' fear for their children is real, and at times paralyzing.

They don't talk much about these fears, but they talked to us in honest and open ways that day this summer. We sat quietly, listening.

Sometimes silence is all we have to offer, the only possible human response to fears and concerns that does not diminish those feelings, but rather acknowledges and honors how deeply held and real they are.

As we come into this New Year, together on Rosh Hashanah, silence - and prayer - feel particularly apt.

What can we say that could possibly express the experience of those who lost their children, their parents, their siblings?

What can we say to convey the vulnerability that Israelis feel - or that we all feel when Anti-Semitism emerges through Europe, tapping into a deep-seated, raw fear?

These are the times that we come right up against the limits of human language to say what we feel.

And yet, here we are, with an obligation on these sacred ways to speak to one another, share our thoughts, connect with our families and friends, find our places of shared experience, and stand genuinely, courageously, and vulnerably before one another and God.

—

I would like to begin that conversation by sharing a glimpse of my own experience in and relationship with Israel, hoping that, as a community, we will continue to find ways to do the same.

In many ways, I stand here only because of the impact Israel has had on my identity and soul. I know that this is true for many of you as well.

My grandparents left their homes in Eastern Europe to move to Palestine as early Zionists. They raised my mother and her brother in Haifa, then under British rule. They lived through the British leaving Palestine, the 1948 War of Independence, the absorption of refugees from Europe, and the intensity of the celebration and fear of the early years of statehood.

They immigrated to the United States in 1957.

As a child, growing up in Maine, I was very close with my grandparents. I used to fall asleep in their home under framed photographs of Israeli leaders. I remember: at the top of the wall was David Ben Gurion, the early Zionist leader and first Prime Minister of Israel. Beneath him Menachem Begin, founder of the Likud party, Prime Minister of Israel and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, who together with President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, signed the Peace Treaty in 1979. Next to Begin, Moshe Dayan, Yitzchak Rabin and Uzi Narkiss in their iconic picture at the Lion's Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem in 1967. To the side, near the top, a portrait of Golda Meir, Minister of Labour

and Prime Minister. I'm pretty sure my grandmother insisted on that one. In fact, I think she carried a personal wallet size one in her purse.

The writings of Eliezar Ben Yehudah and the poetry of Chayim Nacham Bialik, pioneering revivalists of a new modern Hebrew, were strewn about the apartment and stacked on their bookcases. Hebrew flowed through their home. Even as a child, I knew where I was from.

I first visited Israel when I was 18, immediately after my grandparents died. I spent the year living in the Negev Desert, then in Jerusalem, and finally in an aliyah village, working with Ethiopian youth who had just arrived as part of Israel's Operation Solomon. I was rooted, connected.

Ultimately I spent about 3 years in Israel. But I returned to the U.S. to be with my immediate family and attend college. For that, I am immensely grateful.

But I also knew what I was leaving behind.

My most intense and greatest blessing - living and raising my family here in the United States - may also be the blessing I struggle with the most. In so many ways, Israel is home.

That struggle has become one of the more instructive teachings in my life. It demands that when it comes to Israel, I stand in complete, whole-hearted humility.

Humility teaches us to be grateful. It teaches us to ask where we come from. It compels us to continue learning. And it reminds us that our lives can change quickly.

One of the modern era's great teachers on the intersection of humility and the communal experience in Israel is Rabbi David Hartmann. Rabbi Hartmann was an Orthodox Rabbi, a philosopher, teacher, theologian and author. He studied with the Rabbi Yosef Soloveitchik, and received his ordination from Yeshiva University. At age 40, he immigrated to Israel with his family. Many of you have visited the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, which he founded. Rabbi Hartmann died two years ago.

In one of his books, entitled *Conflicting Visions*, he writes of his religious life before the 1967 Six-Day War.

Until that war, he always felt God's presence in Jewish history was merely symbolic. God didn't have an active hand in the events of the world. However meaningful and compelling the dramatic message of the biblical stories of the Exodus from Egypt and receiving the Torah on Mt. Sinai were, this history was, to Rabbi Hartmann, a symbolic history; it was the mythology that underlies the development of a religion and people.

But then, in the aftermath of the triumphant and seemingly miraculous victory by Israel in the 1967 war, Rabbi Hartmann was overwhelmed by the powerful religious significance of the war. He went enthusiastically to his Rebbe, Rav Soloveitchik, with a request: "Proclaim a religious festival! Proclaim God's hand in history!"

Rabbi Soloveitchik responded with a word: "wait."

Our reality can change quickly, Rav Soloveitchik taught his student.

Just a few years later, Rabbi Hartmann rediscovered the uncertainty, the loneliness, and the concern for survival. In contrast to the triumphant experience following the Six Day War, after the Yom Kippur War in 1973, he felt the possibility of a tragic dimension of history. Though ultimately able to withstand the war, Israel's self-identity of impenetrable strength was not only challenged but also displaced.

Hartmann is writing about humility. He learned how quickly our lives can change, our safety and security and prosperity placed at risk. His teacher Rav Soloveitchik taught him to honor the sanctity of human life and reminded him how vulnerable we are.

During times like this past summer, Judaism as a religious and spiritual tradition asks us to understand the critical and central place of Israel in our lives; it equally demands that we be humble, that we remain hopeful, and that we pray for peace, mindful how holy life is.

When I first came to Temple Reyim last year, we had a full community conversation during Shabbat kiddush. I was asked two questions about Israel.

First, how can I help inspire the community's love for Israel?

And second, how can I help create a culture that welcomes and honors different experiences and opinions?

My responses at the time were - and still are - fairly straightforward.

One, love comes from love. We inspire others by caring about what we believe in. We will continue to do that here.

Two, in response to the question about building a culture of acceptance and diversity: Jewish community thrives on that intellectual philosophy and spiritual energy. Its most treasured insights come from questions that challenge our assumptions and identify and highlight our differences.

Our rabbinic tradition is built on a foundation of honoring difference. There is a beautiful teaching and important story in the Talmudic Tractate of Eruvin (13b). The schools of the sages Hillel and Shammai were deeply divided concerning certain matters of halacha, meaning Jewish law.

At one point during their debate, a heavenly voice came down and proclaimed "elu v'elu divrei elohim chayim." These and also those - both opinions - are the words of the living God."

The heavenly voice then continued "v'ha-halachah k'vet Hillel," meaning "but, at the end of the day, Jewish law follows the school of Hillel."

The rabbis of the Talmud were confused. They asked, if both opinions are valid and honored, why, then, would Jewish law privilege the teachings of Hillel - so that his opinions are sought-after and authoritative? In typically Jewish fashion, they answer their own question: it is because Hillel, and the sages of his school, were nochin v'aluvim, meaning they were kind and humble.

Jewish law and practice follow the opinions that are taught in the spirit of humility and understanding.

This spirit is at the heart of our relationship with Israel.

Our question is: how do we maintain that spirit?

We need to have the courage to approach our relationship with Israel humbly. This may feel paradoxical – the courage to be humble; but it's the great insight and gift of Jewish thought: asking questions and listening to others does not diminish, but strengthens our core commitments.

We need to stay ever hopeful, even when our hopes for peace and security feel frail.

Reach out to our friends and family in Israel; let them know you are thinking of them and keeping them in your tefila, your prayer and your hearts, for their safety and well-being.

Be advocates of a complete and lasting peace. As Judaism insists, and as Rabbi Hartman's experience reminds us, life is uncertain and sacred.

Let's continue to come together. Many of us have stories, personal experiences and family histories in Israel to share with one another.

Let's celebrate the intellectual, cultural and technological innovation and dynamism of Israeli society.

Let's become more involved in the critical and fascinating issues of civil liberties, economic policy, and questions of religious pluralism and democracy that are so alive there. North American Jewry, well versed in these issues as a religious minority, has much wisdom and experience to add here.

We had an important year at Temple Reyim. Under the leadership of our Israel Connection Committee, we had our first full Israel Shabbaton. As the conflict in Israel deepened this summer, we sat here in the Sanctuary for a community conversation. And we are planning to come together again to talk about Israel in November after the holidays.

I'm thrilled that this fall, after the holidays, we will begin a new two-year program of study on the history of Israel and Zionism called "Tzion."

What I hope we will discover is that in fact, "Israel" has many meanings.

"Israel" is Medinat Yisrael, the state of Israel. For so many of us, our friends and family, this Israel is the land we are from, the land we have visited or even call home.

But "Israel" is also an historic people, bnei Yisrael, the children of Israel, whose stories are told in the Hebrew Bible. They guide our religious, spiritual and ethical lives.

Israel is Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel, a concept and aspiration in Torah for a homeland of protection and abundance.

And Israel is a global community, klal Yisrael, a collective group that is responsible for one another's security, prosperity and success. Kol Yisrael arevim zeh b'zeh, our ancient sages teach. All of Israel is responsible for one another.

Each of these "Israels" has a central place in our Jewish religious and spiritual tradition.

Here, in this sacred community, it's the religious and the spiritual that touches and guides our lives.

Jewish wisdom does not grow from an intellectual place alone. It asks us to keep our hearts open. It teaches us that true insight requires complete humility - and that the greatest heights of Jewish learning are achieved through the relationships we form.

As we begin this New Year, may we be genuine, courageous and humble.

May our hearts be open.

And may this year bring a full, and lasting peace.

oseh shalom bimromav hu ya'aseh shalomaleyenu v'al kol yisrael,

V'imru, and let us say Amen.

Lshanah tovah.