

Out of Darkness
Rosh HaShanah Morning 5775
September 25, 2014

One of my teachers made Aliyah, he moved to Israel as a young man with his family, right before the Yom Kippur War. He remembers the feeling in the air, the atmosphere. Fear, yes, but also hope. And hopes and dreams had a way of coming out. Visions and values were given a voice, through music.

And so my teacher remembers the songs. Such as this, the Ballad of the Tank Commanders: "*Ani mavtiach lach, yalda sheli k'tana, shezot tihiyeh hamilchama ha'achrona.* I promise you, my little girl... that this will be the last war." A hard fight was on hand. But peace was on our mind, on our tongue...and in our heart. "My soul," my teacher said... "my soul was carried on those words."ⁱ

Today, however... today, my teacher says... "we're not singing of peace anymore." What we want to say is not coming out as music, if it is able to come out at all. What we heard this past summer was no song lifting us in harmony with hope for a better future. Instead it was noise, chaotic, and dischordant. With apologies to Simon and Garfunkel, it was the sound... of sirens.

Sometimes the news of the day is so dark I have to take it with a dose of lightness and laughter. Hence, Jon Stewart is one of my rabbis. And *The Onion* is part of my Talmud.

I still believe in two-states. But sometimes, in frustration but mostly in jest, I think, instead, about a four state solution. There would be Palestine, consisting of most (but not all) of what is now called the West Bank. There would be a country called Hamasastan, in the Gaza Strip. There would be Israel, of course. And then there would be one more. Charedistan. Charedi is the term for the ultra-Orthodox, and this new land would be for all the ultra-Orthodox extremists – a radical fringe but with large families and loud voices -- who don't recognize the government, don't pay taxes, put women in the back of the bus, and won't serve in the army! Separatists in spirit, let them have their own country! Four states, for four very different visions of the future!

But this summer *The Onion* did me one-better. Or more than one better. They had had their own plan for peace in the Middle East: “Marking the latest and most ambitious attempt to bring stability to the region, the United Nations announced that every single person in the Middle East will receive his or her own sovereign nation as part of a historic 317,000,000-state solution. The broad and extensive compromise, which affects more than 3,000,000 square miles formerly occupied by the territories of Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Oman, Yemen, Egypt, and Jordan, will reportedly draw over 750,000,000 new borders in what experts claim will help drastically curb sectarian violence.”

The satire made me smile. But it begs a serious question: what does it mean to live together, in the midst of difference? How much variety can a community take? How much do we depend on being similar to one another? At what point is that sense of solidarity so rent asunder that we have to go our separate ways. Where is sovereignty and self-rule a good thing? And where is it a retreat from the basic human task... of getting along with each other, as "other?"

With Israelis and Palestinians, the fear and distrust are so high that even obvious shared self-interest and occasional convergence become a new source of division. They even disagree about what they agree on! A true story, from inside the circle of negotiations during the Bush and Olmert administrations: At the second Wye River conference, Prime Minister Olmert, President Bush and PA President Abbas were about to go on stage to announce something they had agreed to earlier that morning. The PA team however, had some "last minute changes" to the arrangement they agreed on just a few hours beforehand. They showed the changes to an Israeli aide I know, and his team. The team conferred, nodding their heads. They were, in body language – and in fact – amenable to all of the changes. The PA team was in ear shot of the Israeli team and could tell they were not raising objections. And so, on the theory that anything the Israelis agreed to could not be good for them, the Palestinians retracted their own proposal, and scuttled the imminent announcement.ⁱⁱ

Fear and distrust. But it is not only between adversaries. Can we even, now, still speak and be heard, amongst ourselves?

It was a powerful, intense, and very important experience, being in Israel this past July. On a personal level I have never been more proud to be with any other group of people. No one – not one – wanted to head home, to give up. I stood on the bus, the morning after the first run to a shelter in Tel Aviv, less than two days after the group arrived, and said that our vacation had become a mission, and I asked everyone what they thought the mission was. But then I didn't have to say anything else. They came up with all of the answers any Jewish leader could have hoped for: that we should be careful but not run away, adjust but not abandon, that we should reach out to Israelis who deal with this all the time, that we might be nervous but should not succumb to fear.

For me, I am... look, what was that old bumper sticker? "One Nuclear Bomb can ruin your whole day?" So obviously I wish that none of the violence had taken place at all. So I don't want this to come out the wrong way, when I say: I'm glad we were there. Because this is family. And when your family is in pain, you want to be with them. Sometimes, when times are tough and Israelis are under attack, sometimes I would rather be there than there.

Of course, there are fights within families, and the fights can be fierce. Rabbi David Forman, of blessed memory, used to acknowledge American criticism of Israel but asked only this: "Yell at us if you have to," he said – and

he was himself a frequent and forceful critic of Israeli government policy. “But yell at us as a mother,” he said... “not as a mother-in-law.” [Not sure that’s fair to all the many really wonderful mothers-in-law in the world – some of whom are sitting right here – but I got the point he was trying to make.]

What a difference was the view, from here and from there. It was like being on the field, instead of having a seat in the stadium. The images, the issues, the passions, the perspective, certainly the preponderance of coverage were radically different. In Israel, while people carried on as best they could, and one friend who lives in the South welcomed me via Facebook to “our summer thunderstorms,” and people joked that now they knew how long it *really* took their spouse to get out of the house, there was an edge underneath. It was, perhaps, only a surface calm. Normally crowded streets were often empty, shopkeepers were desperate and suffering, visiting tourists who had nowhere else to go made it to most of the sites but Israelis hunkered down and stayed home. And, of course, some missiles made it through. These aren’t toy rockets, as I heard some Europeans say... and this can’t go on. Thank God for Israeli technology and American assistance, or things would have been many times worse. Iron Dome, in Hebrew, is called, well, *kippat barzel*. Iron *kippah*. So, now even most Reform Jews...believe in *kippot*.

And in Israel, we saw the stories, and heard the reports, of hundreds of sorties scrubbed, air raids called off when civilians were visible, the efforts an army took to be aware, and take care, of where they were, of who and how they fought, to behave with restraint, under impossible constraints.

The view from here, of course, was quite different. The reporting here, once again, the coverage and the conversations, focused on impact, not on intent. So Europe and the West saw *much more* of the devastation in Gaza, the suffering caused by the Israeli response... so much so that headlines of major newspapers even forgot that it *was* a response.

In this competing calculus of pain, in this mantle of victimhood that is an essential strategic aspect of modern conflict, innocent eyes from one side or the other pierce our hearts, and shape us, our world-view and our words alike. And the images are... not the same. So our reactions are not the same, either.

It was no surprise to me that, in the midst of the war, the American Jewish community organized rallies of solidarity and support for Israel. And it was no surprise to me that, in search of nuance that would not be there, yearning for a genuine expression of compassion for all of God's children that you were afraid would be absent, some of you declined, resisted, even affirmatively refused to go to such rallies. Indeed, I received several notes of protest from members of this congregation, when I encouraged attendance at the Washington rally in support of Israel.

And I "get it." Solidarity has become a one-note symphony. Those whose hearts are torn, those with questions, those with doubts are expected to check at least some of their values at the door.

Most of us feel very strongly about Israel. And we believe that what we feel is an authentic expression of Jewish values. It's just that we feel very strongly... about different things! We have competing opinions, indeed, very different visions and values that speak to us.

And those of us who are unsure, or ambivalent, hesitant or less engaged – sometimes it is, indeed, the clamor and the clash, the extremist language, the stridency and strife of such significant disagreement that is causing you... to hold back. Hold back, and even, perhaps, to turn away.

And I know that through it all, the passionate critics, the ardent advocates, the dismayed and put-off, the words are so hot, the feelings so raw... look, siblings have stopped speaking to one another, families are fractured, social ties strained, long-lasting friendships come to an end. People feel they can't even be in a room with those they disagree with about Israel.

The thing is, though, there's nothing new here. Through the whole history of Judaism there has been competition and disagreement about what we see, and who we are. Often we use the term "the Biblical view," but remember, the Bible itself is an anthology. And an anthology is a work that has many different elements in it; you go to part of it in one mood, or facing one situation, and another part when you need something else.

We speak of the values of the prophets, but the prophets were very different from one another. This past summer another of my teachersⁱⁱⁱ showed

how Ezekiel and Isaiah have vastly divergent views on the end of days, centering on the question of, well, what will happen to all those people in the world who, um, are not “us.”

In Ezekiel there is an enormous apocalyptic upheaval, a terrible war, a massive and aggressive invasion of Israel, a huge battle right at the site where our congregant, Eric Cline, co-directs the dig – Mt. Megiddo, Armageddon, and in the end, as we hear in the Haftarah portion read during the holiday of Sukkot, “and then all our enemies will die. *Chag Sameach*. Have some gefilte fish!” Isaiah uses the exact same phrases, and the same language, about the end of days. So we know the setting is the same. But the substance is completely reversed! In Isaiah, all the nations flow towards the mountain of the Eternal and there, instead of being met with the sword, the sword is beaten into a plowshare! There is something about vines and figs, and nations do not learn war anymore. Another chapter in Isaiah even has God refer to the Egyptians and the Assyrians – border empires and deadly enemies – as “My Children,” right alongside of Israel, all three held in equal divine affection and esteem!

So, the end of days, the culmination of history, the ultimate purpose and goal of our lives –just as we choose our news it seems we can pick our views: war or peace, hatred or harmony, conflict or co-existence. Could there be any better Biblical endorsement of the idea that we hold different ideas and ideals, even amongst ourselves?

A tradition that holds in its hands such different visions... has room for all of us. I think. I hope. I believe.

And to prove the point...

Well, first, I believe we should all step forward, to learn and to grow. Stay with us for the full day on Yom Kippur. This year, on October 4, on Yom Kippur afternoon, at 2 pm, we have two related offerings: our Rabbi Emeritus, Rabbi Bruce Kahn, will lead a session on **“Israel and The Palestinians: Where Have We Been? Where Are We Now? Where Are We Going? When Will We Get There? And How?”** At the same time, author, journalist, contributing writer at Religion Dispatches and Temple Shalom member Sarah Posner will lead a presentation on **“The Collapse of the American Jewish Center, How we can’t talk to each other anymore and what to do about it.”**

And then. Well, then, we are going to try to do something about it. I was speaking with our former Director of Education, JoHanna Potts, about finding a way to... lift up... different views, and she compared rhetoric about the Middle East to a trauma. What was needed, she said – and this was before Rabbi Eric Yoffie’s excellent article with a very similar proposal appeared in the most recent issue of Reform Judaism magazine – was a **safe space, a special place, where people could say whatever they wanted to about Israel, and not be attacked for it. Or, indeed, feel affirmed in whatever they bring to the table. To be open to hearing, maybe even learning from others – how they see it, feel it, wish it could be.**

To do this will take careful planning. And it will require sensitive facilitators.

One thing is clear to me. I probably can't be one of them. My feelings on this subject run so deep, they are so strong. With all my heart, with all my soul, I really believe three things. First, that whatever you may think of the policies of any particular Israeli government, Israel itself has a right to exist, *as a Jewish state*, in safe and secure borders.* Second, that it is problematic to have to keep saying this, since no other country in the world, including those actually guilty of atrocities *far worse* than anything *ever* done by Israel... has to constantly defend the very concept of its own existence.* [Does China have a right to exist? Does Scotland?] And finally: it may be an oversimplified slogan, but despite a sense that there are deeply problematic Israeli practices which contribute to the Palestinians' anger, nevertheless I really believe that if the Palestinians put down their arms there would be no more violence, but if Israel put down its arms there would be no more Israel.

With those views I may be too biased to serve as an impartial facilitator of a non-judgmental conversation. Or, perhaps, no one is really able to give up their own red lines, nor should they have to. Either way I want to try. I think we need... to create a space... where anyone in our community, and everyone in our community, feels that they can be heard.

So I issue this call, as a first step, for any who think they can help. If you are willing to try, if you would like to serve... we are going to host a meeting to train facilitators, who can then lead discussions in people's homes – to create a safe space for opening up to one another. To let each of us say whatever we want, without being shouted at or condemned as a traitor. To find our own voice, whether of support or critique or doubt. To feel that we are being heard is... too important to be... squashed by the passion of the pre-convinced and already-on-board. This year, during the holiday of Sukkot, we are going to build a **Sukkat Shalom, a Shelter of Peace**, in a first meeting, on **Sunday, October 12, at 11 am**. If you would like to play a role, if you would like to be among those who helps hold the ideologically frayed threads of a communal fabric together, then see me, speak with JoHanna Potts, or respond to the request you will see in the coming days. Because you know what: we can do this! In the midst of diversity and difference and disagreement, we can show what it is like... to come together anyway. If a sacred Scripture has room for both Ezekiel and Isaiah, surely we can make room for each other!

Most of the time, we look at the Middle East and end every conversation with: "it's complicated." It's frustrating! Give me a good dose of right and wrong, a clear conscience and an easy answer!

But then, yearning for clarity, despairing at the state of the world, suddenly, unexpectedly... a song came to my rescue! I was driving to

Baltimore a few weeks ago, and I put in a CD I had been given by Nava Tehilah, the Israeli prayer group that was here with us this past May, as Cantor Levine and I celebrated our respective 25th anniversaries as rabbi and cantor. And one of their songs struck me like lightning. It was a verse from Psalm 99, a verse I had heard a hundred times before, but never thought about. “*B’amud Anan Yidabbeir Aleihem.*” One line, repeated, chanted, a mantra. “*B’amud Anan Yidabbeir Aleihem.*” Based on a story from Exodus, from the wilderness, the line means “Out of the pillar of a cloud will God speak to them.”

I know we want the world to be black and white. With moral certainty, and clean lines, demarcations and distinctions that make sense and hold firm. But this, listen, *this is Torah!* This is something, at least, that speaks to me! That sometimes God speaks to us out of the grey, out of the fog, out of that which is not clear and obvious, but hard and complicated. We cling to borders and boundaries, but maybe it is in the blurring of the line that something new and unexpected emerges. We move from mist to mystery. Out of confusion, out of feeling lost... indeed, out of darkness, does God speak to us!

So yes, it’s complicated. And we are all very different from one another. But in making room for difference, in lifting each other up, in stepping into the grey, we can sense... something beyond ourselves.

In the end, this is not a talk about Israel. It’s about talking about Israel instead. And part of it is a state of mind, to be able to speak... and to listen.

We can go, from *Kippat Barzel*, to *Sukkat Shalom*; from Iron Dome, to a safe home. If we can remember that God is found in the cloud, in the complex, then we can hear and be heard, we can find our voice *and* make room for others. We can sound the right note, and find the right song. And then can our soul be carried on our words once again.

L'shanah Tovah.

ⁱ Rabbi Donniel Hartman, “The Challenges and Problematics of the Jewish Narrative of Peace,” http://hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=1427&Cat_Id=518&Cat_Type=Blogs

ⁱⁱ Tal Becker, small-group presentation at the Shalom Hartman Institute, July 2013?

ⁱⁱⁱ Micha Goodman, “Wars and Apocalypics in the Bible: Isaiah and Ezekiel,” http://hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=1420&Cat_Id=518&Cat_Type=Blogs