

Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow
Kol Nidrei 2006/5767
October 1, 2006

A story. A woman gets on a bus, and takes the only available seat, next to a man with a long black coat, big brimmed hat, and a full beard. She sits down and mutters, "You Jews." The man does not respond. So she says it a little louder: "You Jews!" The man looks at her strangely, and finally says: "I beg your pardon?"

Waiting for the opening, the woman pounces. "You people," she says, "you're slaves to the past! You think you're superior! A *shanda* for the *goyim*! It's Jews like you who give the rest of us a bad name!"

The man blinks, totally taken aback, but then decides to see how gullible she is. "Madam," he says, in his best pass at a Midwestern accent: "You do not think I am Amish?"

The woman turns red. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she says. "I think it's so wonderful the way you people keep all your traditions!"

We are so open to others, we liberal Jews, so sure to be politically correct and sensitive and welcoming, so keen to understand and appreciate other cultures and countries. But do we go too far? Do we, perhaps, forget to stand up for ourselves? We have learned the second part of Hillel's injunction well: "If we are only for ourselves, what are we?" But have we, many of us, forgotten the words with which he began: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

“B’yishivah shel ma’alah, uv’yishivah shel matah, al da’at haMakom, v’al da’at ha’kahal, anu matirin lihithpaleil im ha’avaryanim...
 By the Heavenly tribunal, and by the earthly tribunal, with the consent of God, and with the consent of the congregation, we are permitted to pray...with those who have transgressed.”

These words were written in the 13th century, by a Rabbi Meir ben Barukh of Rothenberg. They form the framework, the introduction, through which we approach the prayer of Kol Nidrei.

In our *machzor*, however, in the prayerbook of our movement, we did not recite a literal translation. What we said as we came together this night follows a scholarly interpretation that these words were *not* a generic reference to the ordinary and ongoing accumulation of sin which each of us, inevitably, brings with us. They are, rather, a specific reference to a particular transgression: that of pulling away from the community. Even, perhaps, apostasy. These words are a reminder that, in the words of *our* translation: “no matter how far some of us may have transgressed *by departing from our people and our heritage...we pray as one... on this Night of Repentance.*”

My friends, we can depart from our heritage by apathy. And we can depart from our people, also, in anger. Through impossible expectations, extravagant disappointment, even, indeed, by too high a standard.

Last week, on Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about God, Judaism, and spirituality... for each of us... as *individuals*. Tonight I want to speak about part of our *communal* identity, our relationship with Israel. What I am going to say is complicated, and it is difficult, and it may be offensive to some of you. Remember, if you can, that my aim is not always agreement. I have three goals: to touch your heart, to make you think... and to keep you awake. We'll see how we do, with any of the three...

To speak of Israel is fraught with potential pitfalls for another reason as well. We stand together now, on the night which is, perhaps, the most intensely spiritual moment of the Jewish year. But Israel is an arena in which what is commonly called "politics" is so tangled up with questions of identity and loyalty and emotions that it is hard to tell where a "spiritual message" ends and a "political speech" begins. Judaism is a "religion," some would say; Israel is about "politics."

There are even those – and I believe they are the enemies of our people – who try to exploit this distinction, who claim that they have nothing against Jews or Judaism; it's just Israel that should not exist. As if an authentic expression of Judaism could exist without a longing for the land, an eye towards Zion, an umbilical bond between people and place and God. As if it is really possible, in this post-Holocaust world, to be truly anti-Zionist without being anti-Semitic.

By Zionism I do *not* mean agreement with every policy of every Israeli government, any more than patriotism in this country means

supporting any particular administration. I mean the basic right of the Jewish people to live in Israel in a Jewish state, in safe and secure borders. Without even being specific...about what those borders are.

I know there are even some *Jews* who are not Zionists, who do not care about or believe in the right of Israel to exist. Some of them, a tiny minority, are ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionists, and even met in New York last week with the Haman of this generation, the Persian plague, the president of Iran. But more, far more, of those who do not support Israel are liberals, who cannot fathom the idea, the concept, of a *Jewish* state.

To me, it is a red line. It is a transgression. It is a separation from our people. And the problem is: no words I say can make anyone feel a different way. This connection... this feeling...it's either there, or it is not. By and large, those who have been to Israel... overwhelmingly... "get it." To those who have not... these are just so many words.

But even among Jews who support the concept of the state, there are those for whom Israel is so wrong, so often that it leads to a kind of continental drift, a silent separation.

I believe that being a committed Jew today means caring about Israel, feeling connected to it.

Images, and insights, from our Temple Shalom trip this past summer. Wednesday, July 12. The port city of Haifa. We look down on the lavish gardens, world headquarters of the Bahai faith, and out over

Haifa bay. We hear a rumbling in the distance. Our otherwise wonderful tour guide mutters something about sonic booms. A recent West Point graduate on our trip approaches me, and tells me what kind of artillery is in play, and how far it is away. The Israeli response to the kidnapping has begun. And we were there.

Thursday, July 13. The mountain city of S'fat, center of medieval mysticism, cradle of the Kabbalah long before anyone ever heard of Madonna. A shop owner points out a mountain on the other side of the valley. There are wisps of grey smoke, as if from an iron left for too long in one place: remnants of a rocket which had hit Mt. Meron earlier that morning. We leave S'fat around noon. At three we hear that S'fat has been hit... not right where we were, but still... We realize we are the last tourists S'fat will see all summer. And I am suddenly deeply glad for the time – and the money – that we spent there that morning.

Saturday, July 15. Shabbat in Jerusalem. No fear walking the streets, no insecurity. A 13-year congregant, Ariel Schwartz, leads the service, and chants from the Torah on the rooftop balcony of Hebrew Union College, overlooking the Old City. It is the single most spectacular setting at which I have ever officiated at a Bat Mitzvah.

We make several minor adjustments and one major change in our itinerary. We traveled south, and the majority of the group had planned to go to Petra, an add-on into Jordan. As much for solidarity as safety, we decide not to go. We remain in Israel.

The most important decision we make is unvoiced, unspoken, and, as far as I can tell, unanimous. Not one person suggested we leave early. Not one person said we should pack up, and fly back.

By the time we return to Jerusalem the country has come together. I have never before felt such a powerful sense of unity, of purpose, of grim determination. Everywhere organizations of our movement and institutions of all kinds are mobilizing: hosting families, bringing kids to camps in the center of the country, even heading up north to bring support. There are heroes in our midst! I mention at this time only one, my colleague Edgar Nof, an Argentinean-born rabbi of Congregation Or Chadash in Haifa, who held his community together, brought solace and comfort, ran a pre-school out of a bomb shelter, and kept the rest of the world connected through his ongoing email reports.*

A million Israelis were displaced citizens in the days we were there. Despite that, in those first days of the Katyusha War, while the dangers were real, hopes were high. This was, it seemed, not an overreaction to an incident, but an overdue response to an imminent threat.

As to Israel's conduct in the war, condemned throughout the world, criticized even by many American Jews*... In Jerusalem, we met one of the leading liberal voices of in Israel. Rabbi Serotta mentioned Rabbi David Forman on Rosh Hashanah. He is the founder of Rabbis for Human Rights. It is the *only* organization in Israel in which rabbis from all denominations are able to work together. Formerly he ran the

Reform movement youth programs in Israel. I met him on my first trip to Israel, in 1977, so I have known him for nearly 30 years. When I asked him to speak with us, I expected him to address the morally problematic aspects of Israel's interactions with the Palestinians. This is a position from a place of patriotic pain. It is an internal critique, a pro-Israel, pro-Zionist, *pro-religious* reminder of the humanistic values that are at the heart of our Jewish tradition. For all he has done, for all he has stood for no one – no one – can question Rabbi Forman's liberal credentials.

But we did not speak, that night, about Rabbis for Human Rights. Rabbi Forman spoke about war, out of his own experience. We didn't meet a peace-activist protesting policy; we heard someone born an American who now calls himself Israeli, a Reform rabbi who made aliyah, a man for whom Israel and family are the two deepest loves of his life.

Two stories stay with me. The first has to do with the Palestinians, the second with Lebanon.

Rabbi Forman's job, during one tour of reserve duty in the territories, was to check ambulances. This is a practice many of you have heard about, and condemned. People die when you stop ambulances. Babies get born in places they should not, injuries are not treated in time, victims of cardiac arrest not saved who could have been.

The world screams at Israel for this practice, it equates it, God help us, with genocide. David Forman knows this. He also knows, because he saw it with his own eyes, that, on average, five percent of the time...

one out of every twenty ambulances he stopped... was carrying not patients and caregivers, but arms and explosives. One out of twenty.

The second story came from Lebanon, in 1982. There were twenty tanks in his unit. They entered Lebanon, with a rendezvous point several kilometers away. Every tank saw movement behind trees. It might have been Lebanese civilians hiding for their lives. Or it could be Hezbollah-like fighters, with antitank weapons. Most military rules of engagement in this situation are clear: shoot first, ask later. Our West Point graduate definitively confirmed that this is what *he* has been taught. But not one of the twenty tanks in Rabbi Forman's group fired on targets behind trees when they could not clearly identify who was there. Not one. And only seventeen of those tanks made it through.

So which is it? A brutal and disproportionate use of force? Or ethical restraint bordering on suicidal? Maybe it is harder to second guess military ethics than it seems from afar. And *what*, Rabbi Forman asked... what do you say to the parents of the soldiers... in those three tanks that didn't make it?

So what are we left with, after a summer of war? Where are we now? We are back – geographically... but also emotionally. It seems a distant dream, that trip of just two months ago. The clarity, and determination, seems to have vanished like so much mist.

This is a mess, the Middle East right now. It is a physical mess, and a moral one. There are few clear answers; it is not black and white. Leonard Fein, founder of Moment magazine, columnist for the Forward and a prominent voice for social justice in our Reform movement writes: “My hunch is that I am not alone in having felt just about every emotion there is as the war exploded onward longer than anyone initially anticipated: anxiety, outrage, shame, relief, sorrow and on and on. Every emotion, and very substantial confusion. From day to day, I did not know whether to hope for a decisive victory in battle or for an immediate cease fire. I careened back and forth, experienced cognitive whiplash.”

Say what you will about any particular policy, question the wisdom of its leaders, or cry in frustration at the madness that hanging on to all of the West Bank has led to. I, myself, before the withdrawal from Gaza, challenged the Israeli ambassador in public about the “messianic monster” we have created in the settler movement. So I am not, as is the case with many of the mainstream Jewish defense organizations, I am not one who believes it is never appropriate to criticize Israel.

But this summer I saw something which I believe is also true. If Israel’s enemies were to stop using violence, this conflict would cease to exist. If Israel were to stop using violence... Israel would cease to exist.

My friends, for God’s sake, there *is* a difference. There is a *difference* between those who kill innocent civilians by mistake while trying to strike military targets... and those whose *entire strategy* is to

kill as many civilians as possible. There is a difference even if the numbers stack up the other way, even if, in the end, more innocent Lebanese were hurt than Israelis. There is a difference here that is not of quantity, but of kind. Sometimes morality is not merely a matter of utility and consequence but of right and wrong.

And what has been the fruit of our pounding away on Israel for its problems and its shortfalls, its very real inequities and absurdities? *Al cheit shechatati lefanecha*, for the sin I have sinned against you, O God. I have been among those rabbis who railed against Israel for its failures of pluralism, and its failures to pursue peace the way I wanted her to.

But what has been the result? Have we made, in our communities, more caring, more committed Zionists? Or has the result of our fault finding been to breed a generation of outright non-Zionists, those who feel distant and disgusted and without the basic personal experience to evaluate what is going on through the long-view lens of Jewish history and the Jewish people? Why go? Why care? They don't pray like us, they don't act like us, they don't speak like us. Why bother with them at all?

Numbers and anecdotal evidence alike bears this out. Research on the American Jewish community reveals that, of affiliated members of Conservative congregations, 49% have never been to Israel. The comparable figure for members of Reform synagogues... is 73%. Although it may be the case for *individual* families, as a general trend

this is *not* a result of affluence or ability. It is an indication of interest. A question of commitment.

But you think you can hide? You think if you don't go the pull of this place will pass you by? You think, in the end, the head of Hezbollah makes a real distinction between the Jews of Tel Aviv and those of Chevy Chase? It doesn't matter how often you come. It doesn't matter how much you care. We are bound together still, in history and destiny, in ways you can ignore but cannot escape. So long as within your veins a single Jewish connection lives, so long as anyone can link you with any Jew, anywhere... look, this isn't the 1930's, and this isn't Europe. But to my sorrow, and although I once believed it wasn't true, I once thought it was just a fund-raising ploy by those who saw a Nazi behind every tree, and even though I *still* believe that appeals to anti-Semitism are not a healthy foundation for Jewish identity, nevertheless: our enemies are real. They are still out there. They may seem like cartoon caricatures of themselves, but we had better open our eyes, we had better take them seriously, because in their eyes it's *not* what you do... it's who you *are*.

What, then, can we do? Is there a way to approach Israel in terms of our own identity, a way which we can apply in this season of introspection and growth?

This is a time to come together. That does *not* mean to lend only uncritical support. In fact we should make every effort to learn about the

debate going on inside Israel, arguments over who should be held to account, over what kind of inquiry to launch, what path to pursue. All the old paradigms have fallen: that of keeping the whole land, and that of finding a friend as a partner for peace. Now even the newest approach, the panacea *de jour* which led to this current government, unilateral withdrawal, now that is off the table as well. Israel enters this High Holy Day season with its psyche laid bare, open to and in need of the greatest *cheshbon hanefesh*, its greatest soul searching of any time in the past several decades.

For American Jews, though, this is a time to come together in terms of our own sense of connection with Israel. And it is a time to show our support. Two years ago on this pulpit I said words which I think bear repeating: critique may be called for, but, when it comes to ties to Israel, you've got to *cement*, before you *dissent*.

How can we be critical, *and* connected? How remain true to our own values of equal rights and pluralism and peace even as we express our commitment to Israel and its survival? Perhaps it is by framing our questions and concerns, not out of absolute moral pronouncement, but with a softer tone, in a gentler voice.

In this country, at a political convention in 1992, a whole campaign was given shape by the words of a song. That song remains with me. "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow."

By this standard, out of love, we can ask of Israel not – are you good or evil, but will this work? Not: do you have the right to do this, but will it bring about the result we want? Will it get us where we want to go? Not: are we more in the right than they are, but how can we find a way to live together? And if the answer is: we can't, today, then we'll just... try again tomorrow.

Because... remember... it wasn't that long ago when the world was different. It wasn't that long ago -- six years -- when hope was in the air, Israelis shopped in Bethlehem, the Palestinian economy was growing, a bright future was on the horizon.

It wasn't that long ago. It can be that way again. No, I don't know how to get there. But I remember what it was like. I *know* there is a way.

Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow. Because we'll never agree, Jews and Arabs, on what happened yesterday. We have conflicting stories, we see the same history in a different way. We are at risk, both of us, of being slaves to the past. But there is a chance, a hope, a prayer that we might come together... on what we choose for our children.

Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow. We ourselves, this congregation, will be returning to Israel... at some point this year, God willing, on a support mission; in December of 2007, I hope, with Confirmation and Post-Confirmation students, if we can get that trip off the ground. And then, with hope in our hearts... in July of 2008, with

you coming with us...a bustling, fully-filled family congregational trip to Israel once again... Israel... and Petra as well.

Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow. Perhaps it is a standard we can live with, a question that can be heard.

Not just about Israel. It is a compass for the conscience, for any of our actions – not the harsh rhetoric of accusation, but the gentle invitation to consider the consequences, to join together in hope, to work for the future, to make the world of tomorrow just a little bit better... than it is today.

Throughout the ages our people has never stopped thinking about tomorrow. *Od lo avda tikvateinu, hatikva sh'not alpayim...L'hiyot am chofshi b'artzeinu... b'erezt tziyon... vityerushalayim.* Even now, our hope has not been destroyed... to be a free people, in our land, in the Land of Israel, and Jerusalem.

This Yom Kippur, let us hold fast to an ancient tradition of our people. We pray as one on this Night of Repentance. Let us, always, keep hope alive.

L'shanah Tovah.