

**For Others and Ourselves:
Hillel's Words for Haiti and for Israel
Parashat Bo; January 22, 2010**

So the plagues are upon us.

They began last week, and unfold unrelentingly. Blood, frogs, boils and lice, darkness and disease, pestilence and famine. It all seems like the physical world has risen up in rebellion, nature gone mad, the very air against you.

But it is not natural. And that is the point, the lesson, the essence of the experience. Maybe it took all the way until the final plague for the Egyptians to get it. After all, crops can go bad. Even water can turn strange colors. But selecting out, of mice and men, beasts and babies, that which was the first born? *Nothing* natural can do that. It is, you should pardon the pun, the dead giveaway. The point of the story is that the poor Egyptians are up against something *supernatural* here. It is for them to relent. And for us... it is for us to see, and give witness.

The response of the heart, to the world around us. The offering up of the self, in awe and dread, in joy and celebration, all in the sense of a presence, a power, something that is larger than life. Or, in the immortal words of Milton Berle, "baby, it's bigger than both of us."

The Israeli reform prayerbook, the *siddur* of the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism is called *HaAvodah SheBalev*, the Service of the Heart. How profound are the examples around us? In the face of poverty and plague, of the devastating earthquake that has nearly

vanquished Haiti, the people lift up their voices... in spirit and solidarity, in song and in prayer. Disparate faiths unite in evidence of the power of the planet. Differences disappear in the face of need, and humility emerges when the unimaginable becomes real.

Some may believe that God caused the quake; certainly we know the vile and vicious voice in our midst who glibly gives away the secret knowledge of the Creator, proclaiming the poor Haitians victims of a supposedly historical deal which took place only in the hysterical rantings of his own deranged mind. Religious extremists know all the answers – a theme to which I will return in a few moments. But the open heart of the spirit offers up not answers but questions, and lives in the light of not hatred but hope, not standing firm but reaching out.

An act of God? Hardly. Even if you do believe that God controls the tectonic plates – which I do not – note the words of one columnist in recent days, comparing the quakes of Haiti and San Francisco. Same magnitude, different scale of destruction. A supernatural act? Or a natural one, caused by poverty. The killer here was in small measure the moving of the earth. In larger part it was the shoddiness of the walls, the conditions of everyday life. Some would have died in an earthquake even in the richest and best-built city in the world. But... not this. Not this.

And now, as Jews even more than as Americans, in limited arenas and in sad comparison, in Port au Prince there are points of pride.

Haiti, Day 6. CNN reports – in a clip available on You Tube – that “no one but the Israelis have come to help any of our patients.” And the CNN reporter notes: “to look at the Israeli field hospital, it’s just a different world.” “Imaging, ventilators, machines – they have actual operating rooms here,” treatment and facilities being offered nowhere else, by no one else. And they came from halfway around the world. January 21: Time notes that the Israeli field hospital can only treat 100 people a day but it is “the paramount” medical facility operating in all of Haiti. One blogger notes, with bitter irony: a country of 7.5 million people that sends 220 rescue workers, compared to all of China, which by then had sent 60. Maybe someone should label *that...* a disproportionate response. And last night, Haitian president Rene Preval singled out Israel for praise and appreciation, for the extraordinary level of assistance it has given and continues to provide.

So here, now, in the face of need, we see Israelis acting with a helping hand, and an open heart.

Would that... would that were true for Israelis back home. Would that we could learn to treat each other with the same love we are willing to give... to those in need, in places of crisis, anywhere else on the planet.

The whole world watches the suffering and crisis in Haiti. Less well known at the moment, on the radar screens only of those who follow

the Jewish press, is the latest flashpoint of internecine oppression and extremist intolerance in Israel.

Long ago and far away, another building came tumbling down. The cause then was an earthquake of a different kind, known as the Roman legion. Suppressing a rebellion, ruling with an iron fist, the Romans destroyed one of the wonders of the world, and only small bit of a platform remains, not even the building itself – just the retaining wall of the platform which supported the Temple itself.

But that remnant is seen by many as the heart of Judaism. Revered more than worshipped, that wall has a place in our hearts as a symbol of endurance and perseverance, a memory of what was lost... and a symbol of what is regained. There is no space, there is no place more redolent with the power of prayer, the mingled imagery of heaven and earth, the focal point of yearning and supplication than the Kotel, the Western Wall.

Recaptured in 1967, anything could have happened with that space. Distracted by “more important issues” of life and death, perhaps, willfully malicious or secularly disinterested, successive Israeli governments have let the space develop not into a welcoming connection to our heritage available to all Jews, all over the world, but, instead, to essentially an ultra-Orthodox stronghold giving voice and value to an expression of our faith adhered to by only the smallest minority of the world’s Jews.

Against this fundamentalist seizure of what should be the most unifying spatial symbol of our people, stand every group which comes and prays in their own Jewish way, even if it is in the central plaza a bit removed from the wall. Hassled in person or greeted with hatred, joined by supporters or stared at by curious onlookers, these experiences of bringing our most authentic selves to this most auspicious place have been powerful parts of my own experience in Israel.

But I... much as it is difficult to admit, but as an American Jew I am, partly, a guest in Israel, or, at least, a visitor. It is, paradoxically, a home I come back to, when I am “away” from home.

There remain, however, Israelis who refuse to surrender the space, yield their place, bend their souls and selves to the tyranny of the ultra-Orthodox. There is, especially, one group who continues to offer up its own authentic heart, a prayer of the soul and spirit, based on who they truly are... in response to and even defiance of... the man-made reality around them. For those who do not know about them, let me tell you the story of the Women of the Wall.

Women of the Wall is a group of Israeli women – Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, post-denominational and even liberal Orthodox women -- who have organized a series of Women's prayer groups at the Kotel each month on Rosh Hodesh, the holiday celebrating the new month and traditionally considered a “women’s” holiday. These groups have included women wearing tallit, tefillin, and kippot. Women

of the Wall read from a Torah scroll in December of 1988, and have been meeting – at times despite being confronted by violent and abusive protests -- for 21 years ever since.

A whole series of court cases and Knesset debates followed the chutzpadik act of these women praying in a fashion which would be familiar to the majority of the religious Jews of the world. The Israeli Supreme Court first sided with them and then, in a country without an accepted tradition of judicial review and in the face of a possible legislative solution that would have explicitly made it a crime punishable by up to seven years in prison for a woman to wear a tallit at or near the Wall, the Court reversed itself, and instead ordered the government to find a compromise solution. The Court required the government to provide an alternate site, Robinson's Arch, along what might be considered the “Southern” Wall, and that site has been the location of Reform and Conservative services ever since – including a Bar Mitzvah last month attended by Scott and Evelyn Schrieber of our congregation.

It seemed, then, that in terms of the rights of non-Orthodox Jews to practice Judaism as we believe it should be practiced, there was a rough and almost unacceptable kind of status-quo, a loss of access to the central part of the wall, but an accomodation with access to Robinson’s Arch. Inexcusable, unacceptable but... the way it was going to be.

It seemed that way, until a few months ago, when, on November 18, a young medical student named Nofrat Frenkel, an active

Conservative Jew, was not only harassed, but actually... arrested... for wearing a tallit and carrying a Torah scroll to a service of Women of the Wall. And then, on January 5, the leader of the group, Anat Hoffman, familiar to many of us as the Director of the Israeli Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center, was brought in by police for questioning, and told that she was being investigated as well. Not that the police have ever, once, done anything at all about the actual violent behavior of the people who protest against Women of the Wall. Instead, these women are being charged with offending public standards, and face the possibility of felony prosecution.

Here are Ms. Frenkel's own words, her description of what happened in November:

Then, just moments after we had removed the *sefer* Torah from its bag, two men entered the women's section and began abusing us.

All we wanted was to conclude our prayers in peace, so we decided to forgo the Torah reading there and go, as on every other Rosh Hodesh, to read the Torah at the alternative site. As we were exiting with me carrying the Torah, a policeman met us and began forcefully pushing me toward the nearby police station. Our pleas and explanations that we were on our way to the alternative site were of no use. I was transferred for questioning to the station at David's Citadel. All I had on me was my tallit, my siddur and a *sefer* Torah.

In my interrogation, I was asked why I was praying with a tallit when I knew that this was against the Law of the Holy Places. I am an Israel Defense Forces officer, a law-abiding citizen, a volunteer for the Civil Guard — I have never incurred even a parking fine — and the idea of having broken the law was most trying. Nevertheless, I cannot allow my basic right to freedom of religious worship to be trampled because of a court ruling given years ago.”

My friends, how are we to respond? We hear that our national Reform movement is considering organizing deliberate civil disobedience in Israel – defying the law, by being ourselves! We know that the status quo was barely tolerable. And we know that we cannot allow Israel to become even more like Iran and Saudi Arabia, complete with theocratic tyranny, modesty police, and a systematic bureaucratic misogyny which should have been left behind in the Middle Ages long ago.

This night, then, I am asking you two things.

I am asking you to continue your efforts in support of Haitian relief, through any of the organizations I promoted in the Wednesday email, or through whatever charitable contributions you can make to other sources.

And I am asking you to look at the sample letter prepared by our Reform movement, to be sent to the new Israeli ambassador to the United States, Dr. Michael Oren. Ambassador Oren is himself, I believe, either embarrassed by or in disagreement with the actions of the police in Jerusalem; what I know for a fact is that this American-born scholar has been a member of Reform, Conservative and modern-Orthodox congregations in the course of his life, and that he was furious with what he called misinformation that he was given by his own government about this incident.

My friends, there are plagues around us. They are the pain caused by the forces of the planet, and the pain we bring to one another. They are the products of poverty of the body, and poverty of the spirit.

There are plagues around us. And there are those who respond, with an openness and yearning, with honest questions and soulful searching, with action and with loving prayer.

I was told, once, as a student, that the worst thing that could be said about a sermon is that it was “many good sermons.” And this night I seem to be speaking about such very different things.

But I remember... I remember the familiar words of Hillel the Sage, who taught us that *im ein ani li mi li*: if we are not for ourselves, who will be for us? *U’k’she’ani l’atzmi mah ani?* But if we are only for ourselves, what are we? *V’im lo achshov, eimatai?* And if not now, when?

This night, then, we resolve: to speak up for our own rights, even in a Jewish state where we should not have had to fight to pray and give voice to our own values as Jews. To reach out for others, who are helpless in the face of tragedy and misfortune. To act, now. And to realize that our Israel, our Jewish state... is a place where flourishes the greatest depth of the Jewish spirit, the outpouring of aid, the sharing of skills and the giving of life... and the narrowest pettiness of Jewish parochialism, the crushing of the spirit, the darkness of extremism. Both are real, and both coexist, together, in the very same place. In our Israel, and our Jewish world.

I ask, in conclusion, that you join me in words of prayer [and song], beginning first on page 377 [and then, with more familiar words, I hope...on page 678.]