

Are We One?
Peoplehood, the Collective and Engaging Israel
Kol Nidrei 5772
October 7, 2011

“Kol Nidrei. A whisper of wings, as promises are remembered. Saint and sinner alike communes with the Most High. We are at one.”

But are we? At this very moment of spiritual unity, when we are supposed to come as close to God and to one another as we possibly can, at a time when external threats and tensions are rising, where are we as a Jewish community? Is there a sense of connection, or alienation? Do you still feel tied up and bound together with a Yemini taxi driver, a Charedi (ultra-Orthodox) isolationist, an ultra-nationalist settler perched on a hilltop outpost in the middle of the West Bank? Does a modern, educated, almost assimilated American Jew feel anything in common with them, something... something not shared with a Presbyterian neighbor? Can we sense that connection still? Should we? What does it mean if we do? What does it mean if we do not?

I think there are ways in which this is a really hard question to answer. And it gets tougher over time, the rougher we are with each other.

The ritual with which we began this evening is an ancient formula, meant to release us from the grip of unkept promises. The somber setting, the haunting melody, its chilling power conveys, in so many ways, a fundamental lesson: that language matters. That we must take care in the way we use words.

And yet it sometimes seems that just the opposite is the case within our own community. No shot is too cheap, no angry accusation too harsh to refrain from hurling at one another.

One issue, especially, in the past a source of pride and unity, now brings out the worst of our words, exposes the deepest of our divisions. I once said that when it comes to talking about Israel, “the words are so hot, because the stakes are so high.” But let’s be honest. It’s actually more than that.

It’s not just that hawks are convinced that doves actually endanger the existence of the state, and vice versa. No, the old divisions shift somewhat as the current reality is more of an intractable mess than ever a pure rightist or pure leftist could have imagined.

In fact, I think... I believe... that the words are so hot not only because of differing opinions about possible outcomes, but as a reflection of increasingly divergent internal construction of our identities. What’s at stake is not only a real-world result, but a psychic self-image. How we relate to Israel reveals as much about us... as it does about anything else.

Who are you, as a Jew? Are you alone, a single soul, an individual able to put on and take off different masks and different aspects of the self at will? Or are you part of something larger, connected despite moments of distaste, bound up with a collective, a group, a people? Or, more likely, is it not one and

not the other, but back and forth between them, at different times and at different stages of your life?

Moments which tear at our masks, reveal our inner passions, serve as Rorschach tests of identity emerge at the most unexpected times, and often in the strangest ways.

This past June a good man got a big promotion. Our North American Reform movement named my colleague Rabbi Richard Jacobs for the position of the next President of the Union for Reform Judaism. Basically, he will be the leader of Reform Judaism for the next decade or more, setting the tone and direction of our denomination, shaping our priorities, setting our agenda and representing Reform Judaism to the world. You can meet him... you can hear from him yourself this coming December, as our movement's biennial convention comes to the Washington area, to the National Harbor, for the first time in many decades. Our congregation already has a large contingent of volunteers, but we would like even more, and those who are able to spend Shabbat together with 5000 other Reform Jews will have a better sense of who we are, and why we do what we do, than can be conveyed in words alone.

I look forward to the biennial. But I also look a bit backward over these past few months. Something serious and disturbing happened, as soon as Rabbi Jacobs' appointment was announced. No sooner had his name emerged than was the selection viciously attacked. All because of his association with

two organizations: J-Street, and the New Israel Fund. Rick Jacobs was called all kinds of things, but mostly he was labeled a hater of Israel. Ad campaigns questioned our entire movement's commitment to Zionism, all on the basis of hearsay about his views.

This tempest brewing in the Jewish world did not spare our own community. I heard genuine questions and unrestrained anger, all over what people thought they knew. Even in trying to address these concerns, I was attacked as an extreme leftist and a right-wing stooge, all in a single week. One person declared this appointment "anti-Zionist."

For the record, Rabbi Richard Jacobs is about the best model of a Zionist I know. He owns an apartment in Jerusalem, speaks Hebrew fluently, and has been studying at the Hartman Institute every summer for 20 years longer than I have. In fact, he is *not* a major supporter of J-Street; he signed one of their letters, supports some of their goals, and has reservations about some of their other positions, as do I. But, as I heard from him directly over the summer, he stands by his involvement with the New Israel Fund, one of the most important and creative sources of support for progressive values in the Jewish world today. I've known Rick myself for almost 30 years; I used to serve on *batei din*, rabbinic courts for conversions with him when I was in rabbinic school, and even then I thought of him a terrific role model and a natural leader.

This runaway reaction is not about one man. Something is going on... in the way we react to each other, over Israel. It's a form of madness, as if we can't deal deeply with real issues, we are unable to wrestle with nuance, we are reduced to slinging sound-bites and speaking in slogans.

But if there is one thing I know about Israel today, the one thing that I keep saying to myself over and over again, it is this: "It's complicated." I went on a tour of the West Bank this summer, and absorbed three outlooks in one day, a security-oriented Israeli perspective, a demographically aware justice seeking Israeli perspective, and an economically-focused pro-growth Palestinian perspective. We stood in one Israeli settlement on the West Bank – a secular community, filled with mostly engineers rather than religious nationalists, people willing to move for the sake of real peace. But as we stood on contested ground and looked down from the hilltops there, before us and within easy reach of a modest mortar, were the runways of Ben Gurion, and there, just a little farther in the distance...the skyline of Tel Aviv. Later that day we saw ground being broken in the construction of Rawabi, the first planned Palestinian city, an investment in the peace economy, a great sign of hope... Except that the city has 12 of the 13 permits it needs to fully proceed with construction, the 13th one, pending for ages already... is from the Prime Minister's office. The Israeli Prime Minister. It's complicated.

Israel faces two fundamental challenges. There is the external challenge of security and legitimacy, a much more daunting picture than it was even a year ago. And there is the internal challenge, one of national character, settlers striking at soldiers, mosques set aflame in the North, democracy under assault, fear wielded as a weapon to squash religious pluralism, harass and intimidate political opponents, stifle voices of dissent.

One writer I know recently spoke of his fantasies about sermons in North American synagogues during these Days of Awe. It is a season, he said, of *cheshbon hanefesh*, a “reckoning” or “accounting of the soul.” That is a process which is supposed to involve introspection, and discomfort. Honesty, and facing hard truths. Instead, though, instead... this writer imagines that sermons in mostly Orthodox synagogue will focus on the external challenge, Israel under attack, and those in progressive ones will focus on the internal one: what kind of nation have we built? But that’s not much of a reckoning, to say things that the people you are with will essentially agree with already, to direct your criticism almost entirely at others, to say “look at what *they* are doing!” That’s not a *cheshbon hanefesh*, a hard look at the soul; that’s a *cheshbon* of someone else’s *nefesh!* Wouldn’t it be more powerful, he said, if the leaders of liberal synagogues showed a heart-felt, gut level emotional awareness of the security situation, a sense of solidarity with fellow Jews who feel their lives are on the line... and traditional synagogues focused on the importance of Israel as a modern, pluralistic democracy?

Well, I will leave political, military and security matters for another setting, even as I do understand the dangerous nature of the moment, the sense that the status quo cannot hold. **But I have my own uncomfortable truth about Israel. It is something I deeply believe, and which I think is vitally important. But it is also a perspective which I am not certain that all of you will share.**

I believe that even in this era of freedom and liberty, the reign of the individual and the spirituality of the self, we are also part of an ancient and ever evolving people. Being part of a people means that we *are* connected even to the most...colorful members of our clan, the craziest of our cousins, that those who contradict our most cherished values or who confront us in the most obnoxious ways or who would cast us out or put us down are still a part of the “us” that we see. *Am Yisrael Chai*; the *people* Israel lives.

And I believe that the entire question of Jewish peoplehood is confronted and explored, at its core, primarily in Israel. Put another way, I believe that Israel must play a central role in the identity of *all* Jews because I believe that Israel is nothing more, and nothing less, than the collective expression of the Jewish will. It is the project of our people, the testing ground, the most crucial crucible of Jewish values. As such, as someone once said – and I was not quite sure how to take this, and I repeat it with caution – Israel is far too important... to be left to the Israelis.

And how can we, sitting in the cities and suburbs of North America, best connect to issues that I see as central to Jewish identity? I place before you three upcoming opportunities, and I invite your participation in as many of these efforts as possible.

First, beginning in just a week and a half, we will be the first site in the area to offer *Engaging Israel: Foundations for a New Relationship*.

Engaging Israel is a project of the Shalom Hartman Institute. It is an attempt to address the deeper issues raised by the existence of a Jewish state, rather than just jumping from crisis to crisis or reacting to the disaster de jour. Questions include: the use and meaning of power by a Jewish polity; what it means to have an “other” in our midst rather than being a minority in someone else’s land, a guest in another’s home; whether and how words written at a time of powerlessness can guide a sovereign state; morality on the battlefield and standards of conduct during occupation; how to be Jewish and democratic at the same time, and the challenges of religious pluralism and human rights.

We will confront, head on, the issue of growing estrangement from Israel on the part of many North American Jews, and explore whether alienation and apathy are, indeed, the result of particular Israeli policies or, as Peter Beinart has claimed, the “failure” of the American Jewish establishment, to find a place for voices of disagreement and dissent. In fact, the project opens with Beinart’s provocative 2010 essay from the *New York Review of*

Books, which generated so much controversy. The background articles, video lectures and guided discussions are of high quality; I am excited about these coming evening sessions, and I hope that many of you are able to join us on this journey.

Part of our commitment to this project is a survey which will be sent to every family in the congregation, so you will have a chance to voice your own views, and participate in your own way, even if you are not able to attend the sessions themselves. But come if you can, and bring friends with you.

Secondly, at this time we are announcing the next congregational trip to Israel, from July 22-August 5, 2012. Two weeks together cannot give us answers to some of the most important questions facing our people in the past 2000 years. But ask those who have gone with us or been before: this is an experience that can change lives, give a living context to our understanding of the Jewish past, and frame the future for us in ways beyond what we could have ever imagined without it. It is possible... I believe... that my single most significant accomplishment as the rabbi of this community has been the encouragement and support I have given to bring many of you to Israel.

There is an introductory meeting for anyone who might be interested in such an experience, on Sunday, October 30, at 12:30pm. Come with questions, and we can shape this experience around your interests, and your needs.

Finally, I am a great believer in hearing different narratives, weighing different perspectives, and coming to our own conclusions. So we will continue to open our doors – and our bimah – to voices we might not agree with.

As I indicated a few minutes ago, I have some significant differences with the approach taken by the new, very liberal Jewish lobbying group J-Street. I wanted to support them; I signed more than one of their letters when they were first created, and I thought there was a place for them in the pro-Israel community. Then they took positions which I thought were naïve or even, perhaps, dangerous. They opposed Operation Cast Lead immediately, as soon as it began, a week before the Israeli peace-camp raised any objections to it; they opposed a U.S. veto of a resolution at the U.N. whose content I almost agreed with, but whose venue and context I did not trust. And I am uncertain and uneasy about their basic stance, attempting to give the United States government political “cover” as it pressures Israel. All of these things trouble me and I disagree with them.

And yet I am aware that J-Street has been terribly mistreated by the mainstream American Jewish community. Their leaders have been subject to personal attack rather than reasoned disagreement, they have been disinvited from forums, banned from pro-Israel circles, shunned as if they had a communicable disease. The current Israeli ambassador to the United States began his service to this country by refusing to meet with them.

This is not a model of behavior I am willing to tolerate. I disagree with J-Street on important issues, but they raise good questions. They deserve a voice; they should be seen as in our camp, under our tent, and on our side.

Years ago, I remember, as a college student, crossing through a picket line of screaming self-appointed guardians of Jewish boundaries, to hear, in the Social Hall of Temple Sinai, two Palestinian mayors share their views on the future of the Middle East. What they said disturbed me; I did not agree with them; I thought they were too radical for what I was able to imagine. And yet their views, then, are not too far removed from what the Israeli government, now, claims it is willing to consider. I didn't like what I heard. But I am glad that I heard it for myself.

In a similar spirit, I have invited Jeremy Ben Ami, President of J-Street, to Temple Shalom. He will be with us, and address our congregation during Erev Shabbat services on Friday, November 18. We will not be intimidated by those who would excommunicate anyone they disagree with. And we are open, of course, to hearing right-wing voices here at some point as well.

“Listening” does not imply agreement, “hosting” does not automatically indicate endorsement, and exposing yourself only to those with whom you already share a world-view is to live in an echo-chamber. It may be resonant and reassuring, but it is emotionally stunted, intellectually dishonest, and an impediment to growth.

It is not only, actually, what we say, that shapes who we are. It is what we say – and how we hear. It is what we stand for, and who we stand with.

This night I remember... that I do not stand alone. Saint and sinner, enmeshed and estranged, hawk and dove. This night, we all stand together. All sides of the Jewish story, all streams of Jewish life are part of me.

This night is not about agreement. It is about attitude. This night I see shades of connection I never imagined before. This night, I am “all in.”

As I am drawn, here, I am also far away. I feel the magic of the moment, the pull of my people...and in that pull, a renewed sense... of the power of place.

We vowed, we Jews. We made a promise. We took an oath, that we would not forget, that we would somehow return, that we would some day come back.

Not necessarily for all of us as individuals, but as a whole, as a people, as a collective that is an oath... that does not need to be annulled.

L'shanah Tovah.