

Erev Rosh Hashannah-5775\2014

Temple Micah, Washington, DC

Israel: The Place I Love That Does Not Love Me in Return

Or

I Am Still a Zionist

Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel

Sometime around the year 1900 or 1901 there was a group of Jews in Minsk or Pinsk—or perhaps it was Kiev or Odessa, or Krakow. I have forgotten where and it matters not. This particular group of Jews comprised the membership of a particular Zionist club. There were many such clubs scattered all across Europe in those days. This club, the one of which I speak, would meet every Saturday night after Shabbat ended. They would read the Bible—passages describing the land of Israel, they would read the Psalms—"If I forget thee o Jerusalem..", "Come let us ascend the mountain of God..", they would tell Zionist stories and sing Zionist songs—the songs that came back to Europe from the Yishuv – the name given to the new Zionist settlement. They would discuss the news that came to them ever so slowly over great distances about the fledgling Jewish communities being built in the land of Israel- Palestine, at what was still the dawn of the Zionist project. They would dream of how life would be when some day they too would leave Minsk or Pinsk or Krakow and join in the great adventure of return to the homeland. Occasionally, as these meetings went late into the night, a member of the group, the youngest member and newest would ask a simple question. If the land of Israel is the land of our dreams, if this is Jewish destiny—why do we stay here in Minsk? Why don't we leave and go join our brothers and sisters in the Yishuv? This newest member would invariably be silenced by the group for in their hearts they all knew that it was easier to dream the dream and sing the songs than to go and do. The more you talk the talk can sometimes make it harder to walk the walk.

Now this group of which I speak was a somewhat unusual group. This group's members were all sons and daughters of what was once known as the Haskallah, the Jewish enlightenment. They had left the world of the intellectually self-contained Jewish ghetto behind and as such they had non-Jewish friends. On one occasion, as their club met, they invited a particularly close non-Jewish friend to join them. This friend was there as they sang their songs, told their stories and dreamt of the land of Israel. As the night grew late and their club gathering drew to a close, a member of the group asked their non-Jewish friend what he thought.

The non-Jewish friend replied—oh your club is wonderful—you sing your songs of the land of Israel, you tell your stories. It was a very special evening.

Yes—not that—what do you think of us? What do you think of Jews?

Oh—I think you are wonderful, your sense of community—the way you care for each other and educate your children—almost everything about you is wonderful!

Now Jews can never fully accept a compliment—hearing a slight wavering note, the leader of the club asked--

Almost everything? Is there a problem?

Now with some hesitancy, the friend continued, Oh—I say almost everything because you Jews think you are better than the rest of us. You think you are special.

The leader responded—“You are correct—we do think we are better, we think we have a refined moral sensitivity. You see, we don't use guns, we're not hunters. Jews aren't hunters.”

With that the non-Jew laughed. “Of course you’re not hunters -- none of you -- and there is a reason for that. Here in Czarist Russia, it is against the law for a Jew to own a gun. There is nothing special about you.”

There was an awkward silence for just a brief second and then--

The leader of the club turned to its members—especially the youngest and newest and said —“ All of you--Pack your bags—tomorrow we leave for the land of Israel—tomorrow—and there we will show that in a land and a country where we can own guns, we will never become hunters.”

This has always been my favorite Zionist story—always--forever—“in a land where we can own guns, we will not become hunters.”

For me, this story captures the Zionist dream in a nutshell because it not only conveys the Zionist dream to establish a homeland, but it also captures the Zionist ideal of creating a place infused with Judaism’s refined moral sensitivity.

It has been five years since I have devoted an entire High Holy Day sermon to speaking about Israel. The reason for this has been rather simple. I have not stopped being a Zionist. It is rather that for several years now I have focused most of my thinking and reading on Jewish spirituality and the challenges to Jewish religious life in secular America.

This evening is different. This evening is Erev Rosh Hashanah. Tonight we celebrate the creation of the world, but in this season we also take a look at ourselves – we acknowledge our past, our errors, who we are. What better

time to look in the same way at the only Jewish country in the world. We can celebrate the creation of the land of Israel while taking stock of its history and future.

I could say that this year, it was the summer war with HAMAS in Gaza that moves me to speak about Israel and there is certainly some truth to that. But in reality, the events of this summer actually only strengthened my decision to speak about Israel and American Jewry's ongoing and evolving relationship with that mystifying, infuriating yet enchanting place. Because it is also, most certainly Louise's and my experiences there in the past two years that bring me to speak about Israel. As you all know, through the great generosity of my Temple Micah sabbatical, we were privileged to have the time to spend approximately two months in 2013 and two months earlier this year in Israel—in a wonderful apartment that we rented in Tel Aviv.

This evening's remarks are borne out of a conversation that I did not have and for which I was not present but seemed to capture much of what I wanted to say in my own thinking about Israel. Louise was talking with an American Jew who had made aliyah many years earlier and had raised his children in Israel. Louise told the gentleman that her husband was a reform rabbi and described how we both love Israel. Her new friend said in response something that struck me to this day. He said—"Well, Israel sure doesn't love him back."

That is how I come to think about Israel—as the country that I love that does not love me back.

Now—when I say that Israel doesn't love me back, I mean more than rights for Reform Jews-or all non-Orthodox forms of Judaism. I mean much more:

The growth of the union between Orthodoxy and Nationalism.

The growth in a vehement ultra nationalism

The growth in an ultra-ultra –Orthodox brand of Judaism which is alien to the historical Jewish experience

The growth in certain forms of intolerance and prejudice

The growth in the boisterous ideology of some of the settlers and what I will call the settler movement.

The growth in insensitivity toward minorities

The forces that seem to separate large parts of Israel from the tolerant, moderate center are of an ever-growing concern. Israel as Fortress Israel gives me great pain. These forces conspire to form part of the personality of a country that doesn't love me back.

Having said that – and this is huge---Tel Aviv is my favorite city in the world-including Chicago. There are more people and places in Israel that make me cry with joy than I can imagine. Israel is home to the most selfless, warm, outgoing people that I have ever known. There are more people in Israel committed to a great moral vision of Zionism that inspires me to this day than I can imagine. There are more people living in Israel whose lives are infused with a sense of noble purpose that I feel like saying *dayyenu* many times a day whenever I am there. Israel remains a miracle for me at

every possible level and at every turn. It is a constant source of hope and strength in my life.

Sometimes a picture is worth far more than a thousand words. Every Friday in Tel Aviv is a kind of street fair all over. Vendors set up tables selling their crafts. Doors to stores are kept open—as shopkeepers give out samples—and every Friday Louise and I would walk to a particular corner where two 10-11 year old boys would be playing their Saxophones, busking on the corner. These two boys drew great crowds as they played Star Wars music and themes from the Harry Potter movies on their saxes—they would make mistakes and grimace at each other and the crowds would simply love them some more.

On our return to the States from Israel, we stopped in Paris for a few days—we went to the Holocaust Museum there especially to see the temporary exhibit—photos from the ghettos of Europe under Nazi occupation, the first step of the round ups for the Final Solution. This was a breathtaking exhibit of a collection of official Nazi photos, smuggled photos taken illegally by Jews in the ghettos and photos of off duty German soldiers. The exhibit was more than horrifying. Louise and I paused before one picture—a young emaciated boy in the Warsaw Ghetto playing a violin. We looked at that photo—we looked at each other as we both simultaneously thought of our saxophone players in Tel Aviv. I said to myself—L'hiyot am chofshi bartzeiunu—to be a free people in our own land.” That is it.

You see, I love Israel with a deep passion –yet I see it today –im chol zot-- even with all this-- as the place that is currently unable to love me in return. And then came this summer's war.

This brings me to this evening. You may not agree with everything I have to say tonight -- but that's okay -- I don't expect you to. We're dealing with a controversial subject that evokes strong emotions, but I feel that I must ask...

Why has Israel become the topic that American Jews find most difficult to discuss—or put another way: in many segments of American Jewry one is free to disagree with the president of the United States but the prime minister of Israel is sacrosanct. How patently absurd! We are Jews. Our DNA is to even argue with God.

Point number 1-

American Jewish organizations, the media, web sites and the usual list of suspects of American Jewish life hinder the ability of a more sophisticated conversation; these public platforms seem unable to articulate complexity and understand contradiction. There are no shades of gray. If you were horrified, shocked and dismayed at the scenes of carnage and death wreaked upon Gaza this summer you were a betrayer of Israel. If you supported Israel's war effort against Hamas with all that entailed you were a militant right wing hawk.

If you sincerely believe as I do that the IDF makes extraordinary attempts to fight as clean a moral war as a country can wage, you are viewed as militant hawk who swallows the Israel publicity line. On this particular subject I will offer a word of explanation as I had the privilege this summer to be in a

group with Professor Moshe Halbertal, the Israeli scholar, Talmudist, philosopher and ethicist who is one of the co-authors of the IDF Code of Ethics. He spends much of his time talking with and educating Israeli soldiers. My three hours with him left me convinced that Israel does the utmost to maintain a high moral code and discipline for its army. The stories he tells are heartwrenching.

As I think about the utter inability of American Jews to have a complicated conversation about Israel, I am regularly drawn to that great statement of Ben Bag Bag from Pirke Avot—(that also proudly is included in the texts on the frieze of our sanctuary back at Micah.) Ben Bag Bag says referring to Torah, “Turn it and turn it, because everything is in it.” (Avot 5:22). I like to think that when Ben Bag Bag said “everything” he meant “everything”: wisdom and ignorance, love and hate, good and evil, joy and sadness: in short—everything. The Hebrew Bible gives us all of it—the nobility of Abraham arguing for the lives of strangers in Sodom and Gomorrah, but also Cain killing his brother Abel. Isn’t every reader of the Bible shocked to discover that we go from paradise to fratricide in a mere eight verses? We have the ironic wisdom of Ecclesiastes and the buffoonery of Ahasuerus; the devotion of Ruth for Naomi and the rebellion of Absalom against his father David.

Our texts and books from the Bible on are explorations of subtlety, nuance, contradiction and the ability to hold two thoughts and values at the same time. Yet, when it comes to American Jews and Israel we become black or white, for or against, hawks or doves, J Street or AIPAC. It drives me crazy.

Personally, I find myself to be either none of them or pieces of all of them. My love for Israel is the only constant.

My position on any matter at the moment is complex. I am regularly drawn to that great statement of Deborah Lipstadt who said something to the effect that when she is sitting at a table of people who say that Israel can do no wrong, she becomes to the left of J-Street and Peace Now. When she is with a group of people who blame Israel first for every problem in the Middle East as well as the outbreak of anti-Semitism in Europe she becomes to the right of American Friends of Likud. I would like to sit at a table with Deborah Lipstadt and sort it all out slowly.

Our communal Israel conversation needs nuance, patient deliberation and mutual respect.

Point number 2

I truly believe that Israel's war this summer against Hamas was a war of self defense that I wish to God did not have to be fought. Having said that, I view Hamas as evil, and Judaism, I believe, teaches all of us to oppose evil with every fiber of our being.

There is something in the civilized mindset that makes it very difficult to recognize evil even when we are seeing it. Since evil is unbelievable to the normal human experience, when we witness it, it is incomprehensible. This is why evil requires endless study because it never quite sinks in. I find myself resonating to the words of Israel's minister of finance, MK Yair Lapid, in a speech he gave in Germany this summer.

He spoke these words —

“The suffering of Gaza is the main tool of evil. When we explain to (the world), time after time, that Hamas uses the children of Gaza as human shields, that Hamas intentionally places them in the firing line, to ensure they die, that Hamas sacrifices the lives of the young to win its propaganda war, people refuse to believe it. Why? Because they cannot believe that human beings — human beings who look like them and sound like them — are capable of behaving that way. Because good people always refuse to recognize the totality of evil until it’s too late.”

I think Lapid is correct.

Having said that, when I consider the wider context of this war, I am very sad and disheartened. My greatest sadness with Israel is that Israel has not been able to bend the will of Jewish genius to make peace with the surrounding Arabs and the people amongst whom they live. In a land where we can own guns, in some places, hunters have begun to appear. The first was Yigal Amir and then, this summer, the reprisal murder of an Arab teen. We should be ashamed. I am ashamed, humiliated.

You see, I am an unabashed believer in Jewish genius. When people wonder why be Jewish, my answer is that we know that the purpose of being a person is to in some way contribute to what I have learned to call the human project. We know that. We conceived that as an essential universal human idea—the human project. Our entire mythic structure is that we left Eden as paradise in order to effect a return. We believe in advancing the human project towards universal human redemption—as close to Eden as we can get.

That is why we gave the world the Shabbat—the gift of differentiating time so we don't simply live from one day to the next—with nothing to exalt us as human beings. Shabbat is a grounding of human dignity.

That is why we gave the world the Ten Commandments because we believe that all human beings are entitled to be governed by a just law and that human life is priceless—infinite in value—all human life.

That is why we believe in God. We believe in lives of service not to another human being—we abhor slavery and the denial of freedom for anyone. We believe in universal service to an infinite, creator God for all people---no one lineage is greater than any other.

That is why we advance science and the arts—we are committed to the human project, and Jewish genius in every age bends itself to advance the human project.

Classical Zionism itself is a form of advancing the human project—to give us the ability to create a society where we are not bound by the vicissitudes of those around us. We wanted to go back to the land of the Bible in the hope that in returning home, we would produce more great gifts for the world.

This is the aspiration of Israel's own Declaration of Independence.

In 1939 with Nazi rage rolling across Europe, the British government issued the criminal, damnable White Paper on Palestine severely limiting Jewish immigration into what was then called Palestine---leaving our parents and grandparents with no place to go.

At that time Ben Gurion made the famous pronouncement. "We will fight the White Paper as if there is no Hitler and we will fight Hitler as if there were no White Paper". He could hold two contradictions at once.

In the days of the Oslo talks, when Arab terrorists were attacking Israel in opposition to the peace talks, then- Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin said, "We will fight terrorism as if there are no negotiations and we will advance the peace process as if there were no terror". He could hold two contradictory thoughts at once.

The current leadership of Israel seems incapable of holding two contradictory thoughts, and the culture that has created this leadership is antithetical to all historic Jewish ways of thinking. Yes— Israel lives in a tough neighborhood. Zionism teaches us to defend ourselves. But that is not the only lesson! Judaism teaches us to change the thinking of the neighbors. Change the neighborhood!

We need both ways of thinking!

Today, I believe that Israel must fight the evil of HAMAS, Hezbollah and their like while it simultaneously bends the will of Jewish genius to help forge a moderate Palestinian center that sees that the only way forward is to live side by side with a Jewish state.

Finally—why is this all so hard for us? It is hard because it is messy and complicated and it has to do with not only ourselves, but the way we meet the world.

Everyone should read the Matti Friedman piece in the online Jewish magazine, Tablet. Friedman is a veteran journalist who has covered the

Middle East for years. In this article he meticulously explores the media's inability to objectively report the news coming from Israel – some is willful, some is ignorance, and some is knee jerk anti-Semitism. Read the article with an open mind – it is rather amazing.

Earlier this year, I was a guest at a dinner table as the conversation turned to the growing BDS movement against Israel. The talk at the table was sympathetic to the BDS effort. Our hosts, who were not sympathetic, saw me struggling to contain myself and remain polite. After a few minutes one of the hosts nodded to me as if to say, “go ahead and explode.” After one of the great liberal minds at the table, a non-Jewish woman born in Europe said, “well, we expect so much more from the Jews,” I uncorked.

“To tolerate in others what you condemn in Jews is a classic definition of anti-Semitism.” I went on from there. It was not pretty. This summer saw anti-Semitism unleashed across Europe. Attacking synagogues because of a war on Gaza? What year is this? Pascal Bruckner, a French intellectual who I greatly admire writes passionately in his book, *The Tyranny of Guilt*, about how the world has turned Zionism into “the criminal DNA of humanity.” For me, there is no question that there is a dangerous anti-Semitism at loose in the world. And yes, I bridle when the world expects more from Israel. How dare they?

On the other hand-- That is our job! We expect more from Israel. It is not for the world to tell us how to conduct our affairs. We hold Israel to a higher standard.

That brings us to the second reason why this is all so hard. We demand a lot of ourselves—this is our DNA.

Today there are about 14 million Jews in the world. (In 1939 there were about 17 million) We are simultaneously the world's oldest and smallest people.

Despite God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky, by Deuteronomy the Bible recognizes that we were going to be a small people and still later, as if to prove the point, ten of our twelve tribes fade away.

Being a Jew is hard—we demand of ourselves. We have to be strong enough to defend ourselves while retaining the moral sensitivity of my opening story. We are a people who demands a lot from ourselves—that is our very self definition. Because of that, we will always be small in number.

We must never forget that we are guardians of the human project.

We hold two contradictory thoughts—

We are in a tough neighborhood but we went there bringing with us the vision of that Zionist club from Minsk or Pinsk.

Israel is the country I love that does not love me back.

In some ways my relationship with Israel can be compared to the rebellious son of Jewish life. Avinu, Malkeinu we pray in these days. The Torah tells us the answer of Malkeinu – the sovereign lawgiver. The punishment for the rebellious son is that he is to be taken outside of the camp and stoned until he is dead. (Deut 21)--in other words-forget about Israel.

The Hassidic take on the rebellious son is different – it is the response of Avinu, the loving parent. The parents come to the rebbe—our son is rebellious what do we do?—

“Love him even harder,” is the wisdom of the rabbi.

For those of us—whose hearts are in the East—we must love Israel even harder—sharing all of our love and critique, our passion and disappointments, our wisdom and aspiration, our rebuke from the heart and the very essence of our souls.

Od lo avda tikvateinu—

We have not yet lost our hope—