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DEFENDING THE LIBERAL ZIONIST BRIDGE II

My colleague Rabbi Laura Geller of Los Angeles wrote, wisely I think, “Forty is a powerful number. The Torah tells the story that it rained (on Noah) for forty days. Moses was up on Mount Sinai alone for forty days. There are forty weeks of gestation. A mikveh has forty se’ah of water. Our ancestors wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and just as the wandering ended Moses told them: “God has not given you a heart to know, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, until this day” (Deut. 29:3–4). Forty suggests renewal, clarity, rebirth, the conclusion of one phase of a journey and the beginning of the next. And if you are lucky, after forty years you have a heart to know, eyes to see, and ears to hear.”

Rabbi Geller wrote these words when she reached her forty year anniversary of becoming a rabbi. This past June, I reached that forty year milestone and as June 10, 2019 came and went, I found myself ruminating deeply, almost incessantly about the wisdom that all theology is a form of autobiography. How could that not be true? How can our life experiences as they shape who we are, not only simultaneously inform, but also really determine what we believe.

Last week on Rosh Hashannah I attempted, in what for me was new territory, to delve deeply into my understanding of God.

Kol Nidre, our holiest evening, is perhaps the safest time to discuss the most difficult contemporary Jewish topic. Kol Nidre, we are reminded is, as if, a moment out of time. It is an evening of pledges and pledges annulled. All is suspended. Reality comes to a stop as we ritually step outside of ourselves for just this moment. What better backdrop to engage in a conversation about Israel. I may drive half of you away with what you will hear but oh, will that not make for a lively “Ask the rabbi” tomorrow afternoon.

I am a Zionist. I was born and raised to be as much a Zionist as I am a Jew. It has become a kind of joke between Louise and me when new visitors come to our home as to what point I will show them the photos in a favorite corner of the house. There is my Grandpa Goldman speaking at the World Zionist Convention in Zurich in 1939. I told you about this last year. Sitting at the podium as he speaks one can see Nahum Goldman, Menachem Ussishkin, Jacob Zerubavel and Rabbi Judah Leib Fishman, the luminaries of the Zionist world of that era. Looking at that photo and seeing Rabbi Fishman sitting and listening to Grandpa Goldman is always a thrill. Rabbi Fishman was a leader of the Orthodox religious Zionists of pre state Palestine and Israel's first minister of religion. An accompanying photo shows Grandpa Goldman conversing with Chaim Weizman, premier leader of British Jewry and first president of the State of Israel. If theology is autobiography, my Zionism came to me with my mother's milk.

That was then, and that was my personal experience. There is no need to dwell on this except to see the rootedness of my convictions. I know that we in America can no longer take this kind of Zionism for granted. We must move on. I have learned courtesy of Richard Rorty, America's great philosopher of the last century that progress is made only when new questions are asked. What are the new Zionist questions for this era, I ask myself. How can we lay claim to a strong American Zionism?

My questions are four:

Is it at all possible to reduce the extent to which politics informs and therefore possibly distorts the Israel conversation?

Can we have a rational conversation on the use of the word Zionism?

Can our understanding of Jewish history actually be allowed to inform the conversation?

Can our understanding of Jewish theology and Jewish spirituality inform our sense of Zionism?

We start with Politics—

Israel, much to the dismay of every responsible lover of that country and land and what they each represent, has become a political football in this country. This is horrible for Israel, horrible for Jews and impacts profoundly on our ability to have a decent Israel conversation. This has been brewing for many years. It is now a boiling pot. We can only hope that a new government in Israel will work to right this most dangerous trend.

For the sake of clarity:

I am here to defend liberal Zionism against the left and the right.

Therefore, I am not one who equates the anti-Semitism on the Left with that on the Right. The Jew hating of the AltRight, White Supremacist, “Jews will not replace us” shouting American Nazis is a despicable form of bigotry and hate that stands beneath contempt.

I also see the anti-Semitism of the Left for what it is. There is a double standard in the world that calls out Israel for every misdeed and singles out Israel’s every mis-step. This is unconscionable. It is beyond frustrating. It is the source of the deep frustration that causes one of the smartest, savviest, learned and most liberal icons that I know to write to me in an e-mail: “I think the word (anti-Semite) has lost all meaning.”

We spin our wheels when trying to pinpoint a definition. It is an ever morphing disease. We know it when we see it. However to paint all of academia and all campus protest against Israel as Anti-Semitism is both wrong and foolish.

Susie Linfield hits the nail on the head when she writes about the plight of liberal Zionists today and what she terms our double bind:

“The double grief is, first, the unreflective and ugly anti-Israelism or anti-Zionism of the Left ... its obsessive, laser-like denunciation of everything about Israel, including even its progressive policy on gay people, which is denounced as

‘pinkwashing’ the occupation. Israel is now written about in the way North Korea is written about: as a kind of prime evil. And egregiously bad histories of the conflict abound. There is a game of telephone in which an incorrect fact is relayed by one person, and then footnoted by someone else, and so on, until the origins of the conflict are falsified. I feel grief about all that.”

She continues, “But mine is a ‘double’ grief because of the way Israel itself has moved so far to the right, both domestically and of course in terms of the occupation, which has now lasted for decades. Both of those trajectories, both of these failures – of the Left and of Israel – fill me with sorrow.” [END OF QUOTE!]

We on the liberal Zionist bridge call out the repugnant policies of Israeli governments and the bigotry that has emanated from the prime minister’s office, the corruption and the hate of the ultra nationalist Orthodox political parties and religious sects. These have combined to drag the proud name of Zionism into the dirt.

But I wish to take politics out of our conversation and for now wish to simply proceed while stating the hope that the recent elections and the new government that will come about will hopefully lead Israel into a different internal conversation on human rights, democratic norms and shared society.

Question Two. Zionism—Can the word be part of a rational conversation? It pains me that it has become a dirty word in some circles. People have said to me, “You’re not really a Zionist.” I always insist that I am. Recently a young rabbi in our community sat in my office and said to me rather matter of factly that he is anti-Zionist and leads an anti-Zionist congregation. He questions the need for Jewish self determination. I said to him that that did not work out so well the last time we tried it.

There was a time when we were a homeless people: No country was home, no safe haven that was secure for us.

In the East, we were convenient scapegoats to distract the peasantry from harsh and corrupt regimes. We were the "Christ Killers."

In the West, a more subtle game was played out. A door called Emancipation was opened, welcoming our participation as equals in liberal society. But as we tried, an invisible door, called Anti Semitism slammed in our faces. It didn't help to convert to Christianity. If one was not a Frenchman, a German, an Austrian, one had no place.

We were a nowhere people. What does it mean to reside without a place in the world? What does it do to the soul? What does it do to a culture, to be constantly excluded and demonized?

That was the Jewish question for nearly two thousand years.

Clearly, there was and there remains a need for Jewish self-determination.

Therefore, we need a compelling new understanding of Zionism for our young, for our next generation.

So let us go back. Let us turn to my third question, Can our understanding of Jewish history actually be allowed to inform the conversation?

On August 29, 1897, in Basel, Switzerland, Theodore Herzl called the First Zionist Congress to order and thus began the process that gave birth to the State of Israel, answering the condition of Jewish placelessness. The challenge was enormous and Herzl, a secular, assimilated Viennese journalist in Paris was a most unlikely Zionist leader and prophet.

Herzl's coverage of the Dreyfus trial led him to realize that the emancipation and enlightenment promise of 19th century Europe was a lie. In 1896, he published his conclusions as a pamphlet entitled, "The Jewish State". The only way for Europe's Jews is out, he argued, to a state of our own.

Zionism sought to recover a Jewish place. But "place" has many meanings. Theodore Herzl thought of "place" in terms of geo political territory. "Zionism," he proclaimed, "seeks to secure for the Jewish people a publicly recognized, legally secured, home in Palestine." What unites Jews, in Herzl's mind, is neither faith nor culture, but the condition of anti-Semitism which is an inevitable and indelible part of European culture. He could not have been more prescient.

Herzl knew that Europe was no place to be a Jew. The greatest failure of Zionism was its inability to save the Jews of Europe from Hitler. And its greatest achievement was the fact that Israel became home to more survivors and refugees of the Holocaust than all the other countries of the world combined. This was Herzl's dream: Israel as haven to Jews from Europe, North Africa and Iraq, from Yemen, the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia.

Herzl was the most well known of those at this first Zionist gathering. At that First Zionist Congress there were at least two others who each brought a different idea of what it meant to establish a place for the Jewish people in the world. Herzl was the leading spokesperson of what we have come to call political Zionism. Rabbi Tzvi Mohliver was also in Basel in 1897. He was one of the very few leaders of Orthodox Jewry to throw in with Herzl from the very beginning. The Orthodox were by far on the whole against this movement. For them the return to Zion could only be brought about by the Messiah. Mohliver and very few others saw the holiness of the land of Israel itself as reason enough to support what was otherwise a radically secular movement. The thinking of this radical unusual union of Zionism and Orthodoxy rested on the premise that even a secular Jew could perform a mitzvah and there was no greater religious obligation than settling the land of Israel. Now—to be sure, this theology has become rampantly destructive in the hands of extremists but keep in mind that the first of the Zionist Orthodox were of a much more moderate temperament and theological disposition. One need only read histories of the weeks and events leading up to Israel's Six Day War to know this. The National Religious Party was the most cautious party in the Knesset and urged great caution and deliberation before agreeing to go to war. We live in an era when the extremes have come to dominate, but the early coming together of Orthodoxy and Zionism was wrought by far ranging thinkers—we might even call them Orthodox religious liberals.

This is all Jewish history, but can our understanding of Jewish theology and Jewish spirituality also inform us? Or to ask Question Four in another way — can the religion of Judaism be included as part of the discussion of Zionism?

What I am most interested in here is the theology of a Judaism that is Israelcentric. My Reform Jewish theology has an Israelcentric pull. My firm belief is that Zionism is that understanding within Judaism that comprehends that Judaism is a religion that rests on the inclusion of both peoplehood and home. I say this all the time. Each religion needs to be understood on its own terms. Any understanding of Judaism is incomplete, I would say even artificially forced, without peoplehood and home. This severing was a shortcoming of early Reform Judaism that we have thankfully reclaimed

Many of my colleagues—perhaps especially the younger ones would have preferred it if God’s first words to Abraham had been “Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof!” “Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue!” Certainly there were great immoral crimes being committed in Ur Chasdim and Haran, the great Southern Mesopotamian cities of Abraham’s native land. Certainly there was injustice there, but no, God’s first words to Abraham are “Go to the land that I will show you and there I will make you into a great people.” Land and nation are the beginning of the Jewish story or to use my preferred more theologically nuanced words—home and family, extended family, people. There is simply no getting around it.

This is how Torah unfolds. Creation goes awry from the beginning as Adam and Eve are expelled from their paradise home due to their ignoring of God’s instruction on what to eat. Fratricidal murder follows on their heels once evicted from paradise. Humanity continues to spin out of control causing Noah and the flood. Lawlessness and arrogance remain the order of the day as we see with the Tower of Babel story.

Abraham and Sarah are a kind of Divine plan B. Can God try for one family to get it right? It is as if God is putting on hold for a bit the grand plan of a righteous humanity. God is trying with one family—they will be a model and as God says to Abraham—through him will all the peoples of the Earth come to be blessed.

This new plan requires Abraham to move his family to the place that God shows him. The life of a mensch requires a sense of place. We know this from our own experience and from modern psychology and sociology. A nurturing home life is critical to a healthy adulthood; wandering and abuse are formulas for a life of struggle.

We know all of this through our prayer life. It is simply always there so we do not see it. We are blind to our own essential reality. Every time we gather in prayer, we invoke our prayer by reading the names of the patriarchs and matriarchs of our family—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel and Leah. Jewish prayer is an affirmation of Jewish as family. This is who we are.

We then, literally, turn the page and we ask God, in the very next prayer to take care of our home—“Maariv ha ruach u moreed ha geshem—in winter or morid ha tal in summer—Let the winds blow and the rains fall or let the dew fall heavy. This is a prayer for the family’s biblical homestead.

Zionism—family and home are there every single we time we pray. To be a faith with a landed theology of family is to know that homelessness is a tragedy, a right that must be wronged. To feel unconnected, isolated, unmoored is the life of hell.

Zionism has a deep religious mooring. This understanding was all there in Zurich in 1897 embodied by Rabbi Mohliver. This is what it once meant to be a religious Zionist, yet this is an understanding that has been laid waste by today’s Israel’s Orthodox ultra Nationalist sinners who try to claim the mantle, and in doing so have polluted the sacred.

There was a third person there in Basel in 1897—I love this man –for what he represented—Ahad Ha-am. Ahad Ha-am understood Jewish life in a somewhat different way. Even as a committed secular Jew, his Zionism demanded a spiritual and moral underpinning. He is sometimes called the Zionist who was an agnostic rabbi. Ahad Ha-am understood, perhaps deeper than anyone else, the true meaning of Jewish place.

For Ahad Ha-am, the placelessness of the Jewish people is a matter of culture. Instead of place, instead of real life, instead of a real living culture, for the last two thousand years, Jews have only had a book. What so many Jews take as a badge of honor he decries: "A people of the book, is a slave to the book. It has surrendered its whole soul to the written word. The book ceases to be what it should be, a source of ever new inspiration and moral strength; on the contrary, its function in life is to weaken and finally to crush all spontaneity of action and emotion, till men become incapable of responding to life without its permission and approval. The people stagnates...the book stagnates."

Galut ha nefesh, the wasting away (or the exile), of the Jewish soul was the problem that Ahad Ha-am's Zionism came to answer. "It is not only Jews who have to come out of the ghetto, Judaism has to come out, too." Zionism is not only about saving Jews, but saving Judaism. Judaism can only be saved by Jews returning to real life in a real land where their culture will again become real.

Ahad Ha-am foresaw a renaissance of the Jewish spirit that would serve to revitalize all the Jewish communities of the Diaspora.

Ahad Ha-am worried deeply about the whole business of political statehood. Such a project, he wrote, "is apt to seduce us from loyalty to our own inner spirit, and to generate in us a tendency to find the path of glory in the attainment of material power and political dominion, thus breaking the thread that unites us with the past and undermining our historical foundation."

At the heart of both Herzl and Ha-am's vision is the idea that Jews take power. But power is both a blessing and a curse. Power means security. Power means freedom. Especially in the shadow of the Holocaust, power is a necessity for life. But power can blind the eyes and turn the heart. Power becomes a narcotic. Can Jews take power without repressing or relinquishing our ethics, without losing our souls?

In Herzl's vision, there is no alternative to taking power. In Ahad Ha-am's mind, power seduces, corrupts, and ultimately, threatens to betray the essence of

Judaism. This dialectic is the great unanswered question of Zionism. What happens when Jewish ethics meet the real world of power? What happens when Ahad Ha-am's idealism meets Herzl's reality?

What we really needed, Ahad Ha-am argued was not simply a state for the Jews, but a genuinely Jewish state—a state embodying the deepest values and commitments of Jewish culture. And that will not be created by politics, he said. Nor will it come into being instantly. It will take generations to evolve. It took a thousand years to create France. It took nine hundred years to create England. For Israel, seventy-two is only just a start. Look at the challenges of our own American republic in its 243rd year. I beg you my friends—those of you want the perfect Israel now—the heavenly Israel now—remember Ahad Ha-am. He foresaw the challenges.

The Jewish question of 1897 and its era was how to fit in. The Jewish question of the 21st century is how to remain distinct. How do we inspire all of our children that there is a beauty and wisdom to Judaism that can inform their lives as well?

A culture survives when it provides its children with a compelling interpretation of life's purpose. And Judaism will endure so long as we can articulate for our children a powerful, beautiful, Jewish understanding of life: its meaning, the values that make life worthwhile, the pursuits that bring not only satisfaction but a sense of the sacred.

In the great, free, Enlightenment, American Diaspora, we do this as individuals, as families, as small voluntary communities, in a larger, pluralistic culture. We speak about our own search for meaning, our own ethical struggles, the way in which we, as individuals, find life wisdom in Judaism. This is a unique historic gift of this great nation that we treasure and must work to valiantly preserve.

Zionism offers the other perspective. Israel presents us with another unique opportunity to seek a Jewish understanding of life, not as individuals, but as a normative public—an embodied spirituality—Remember God's call to Abraham. Judaism doesn't live in a book. To be fully realized, Judaism requires a real

physical community: a community that governs itself, making the trivial and momentous decisions for the lives of its citizens. A community where the law of the land expresses Jewish values and is enforced by Jewish police officers, and adjudicated by Jewish judges. A community where public policy and Jewish heart, where pragmatics and *rachmonis* find some meeting point. Such a community becomes the supreme test and the supreme expression of the Jewish spirit. This is the battle of Israel today.

The Zionist dilemmas and debates of 1897 remain alive. Their urgency only increasing, the pressure building. The question for us is, can we answer the call to enter the debate with ferocity and passion?

Ahad Ha-am was an idealist, who believed the spirit of the Jewish people would flower once planted in the soil of Israel. But real people come with baggage. And after two thousand years of placelessness, our people returned from exile traumatized. Chauvinism, intolerance, fundamentalism, rage, self pity, self righteousness. We know the effects of homelessness and abuse. What happens when these surface as a response to years of denial, placelessness, and death?

Then what happens when years of war and suicide bombing leave a country with a kind of PTSD as Matti Friedman wrote in the New York Times just days ago on the eve of Israel's elections.

These are the challenges of Israel today.

These are the issues that keep Liberal Zionists up at night.

Israel is a political experiment made necessary by the real historical experience of our people yet struggling to be informed by our spiritual and theological legacy. To this date, the Liberal Zionist community in the great North American Diaspora has been a muted voice. We can do better. Remember those photographs in my home? The World Zionist Congress is reconvening next year with the vote this coming winter. Be sure to vote the Liberal Zionist ARZA slate. It is one significant way to make your voice heard in Israel. The World Zionist Congress controls and

allocates millions of dollars that with our influence can be directed to fund the kinds of organizations that work for a better, Israel, a truer Zionist Israel. Let our Micah community have 100% voter participation.

I implore our community—Do not abandon our Zionist project.

We cannot leave the field to others.

The answer is not a one state solution that is not a Jewish state and the answer is not a one state solution that is not a free democracy for all. Abba Eban said it best: Israel was born with the word partition stamped on its birth certificate. The battle for the soul of Israel is the Jewish struggle in our time.

There is no other way to say this.

I implore you lend your voice and your strength in this year 5780.

Consider our Micah Israel Fund which supports our partners in Israel who work every day to make Israel a better Israel. These friends are the very flower of modern Jewish life.

Vote in the upcoming World Zionist Congress and if you wish to work on behalf of a Micah-get out the vote group for this critical election, please, please send me an e-mail.

Join me in Israel on Micah Israel 2020—early December, 2020. Give strength to Ahad Ha-am's great moral vision. Remember Rabbi Mohliver's religious moderation and spiritual vision. Defend the Liberal Zionist Bridge. And –perhaps most of all- teach this vision of Zionism to your children. Gmar Chatimah Tovah!