

KOL NIDRE 5778

IS ISRAEL BREAKING THE JEWISH PEOPLE?

Fifty years ago, something monumental happened to the Jewish people, something that had not occurred in 2,000 years. What happened 50 years ago is that Israel became the organizing principle of the Jewish people. What brought American Jews together with one another and with Israeli Jews, with Soviet Jews, with European Jews, was the State of Israel's victory in the Six Day War.

In May of 1967, there was genuine fear of another Holocaust. Arab armies were poised to invade and wipe out the tiny Jewish state, which was only 19 years old. Arab leaders promised to slaughter every Jewish child, woman and man left alive after battle. In Israel, and in the United States and abroad, it was believed that this would be so. It's hard to imagine now, 50 years later, but people believed that Israel and Israelis would not survive. There would be wholesale slaughter and the Arab enemy would make good on the 20 year threat to drive Israel into the sea. Then in June of 1967, over the course of six days, the Israelis not only defeated the Arab armies determined to destroy them, but emerged as the supreme power in the Middle East. If you were not alive then or if you were not of age, it may be impossible to convey to you the feeling of horror, anxiety and dread in the weeks leading up to June, '67 and what it felt like in the aftermath. It was like the Messiah had come – literally.

Elie Wiesel wrote of his belief that the dead of Auschwitz and Buchenwald and Treblinka must have risen from their graves to fight alongside the Israelis. Religious Jews in Israel, led by the mystic Orthodox Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook believed that the coming of the Messiah was imminent. In 1947 when Israel was partitioned, not a single Jewish holy site was assigned to the Jews; not the Western Wall, not Hebron, not the Temple Mount, sit of the two ancient Temples, not the graves of our ancestors.

From 1948 on, Jews were barred from even visiting these places, and then in 1967 when General Motta Gur, commander of the brigade that broke through and recaptured the Old City declared, "*Har habayit beyadeynu*, the Temple Mount is in our hands." And when Shlomo Goren, Chief Rabbi of the Army, sounded the shofar at the Western Wall for the first time, it was like God himself had declared, "Never again!" And not just the Temple Mount, but the Holy City of Hebron, graves of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebekah and Leah. The tomb of Rachel. Shiloh, the place of Hannah and Samuel. The graves of our ancestors on the Mount of Olives were in our hands. From that moment, Israel became the organizing principle of the Jewish people. Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, Secular, Democrat, Republican, it didn't matter. Our support for Israel was what united us – what organized us – what brought us together. We may have disagreed on how to pray, on what to eat, whom to vote for, or whether to drive on Shabbat. But by and large, we did not disagree on Israel. Rabbis who normally would not even be seen together, would stand together at Israel rallies and events.

In Hebrew school, we learned Sephardic Hebrew rather than Ashkenasic because that is what was spoken in Israel, and it was Israel that gave us pride. If you attended Hebrew school in the 70's, you know exactly what I mean. Our textbooks were not about the prayers or the patriarchs, they were about the wonders of the State of Israel. The victory in 1967 led us to organize and fight for the rights of Soviet Jewry. This congregation marched in the streets of Westfield right outside on East Broad Street to the downtown to call attention to the plight of Soviet Jews. None of this would have happened without the victory of 1967 and the renewed sense of pride and activism it led to amongst the Jewish people.

The old United Jewish Appeal had as its slogan in the 70's, "We are One", but as Seton Hall Professor Edward Shapiro has written that one-ness, that unity did not refer to the Jewish religion or even Anti-semitism, but to Israel. For fifty years, Israel organized us, Israel united us, Israel kept us together. Yom Kippur is a time for asking hard questions of ourselves; of stripping away pretense and deceit, of experiencing discomfort – physical, spiritual, and emotional; a day for trembling before God and before one another. So on this Day of Atonement, with the greatest humility and with some trembling, I ask this hard question of ourselves; maybe the hardest question I can ask you in 2017. If in 1967 Israel brought us together, in 2017, 50 years later, is Israel breaking us apart? Will the unity of the Jewish people break apart over Israel? There is evidence to suggest that the answer is yes. In 2013, the famous Pew research poll revealed that support for Israel was increasingly slipping among American Jews. Amongst younger Jews, only 25 percent report feeling very attached to Israel. 50 percent – half of American Jews 35 and under say that if Israel were to be destroyed, God forbid, it would not be a personal tragedy for them. Support for Israel among American Jewish college students has declined by 30 percent in just 6 years. This has led to a rift in the American Jewish community. The Pew study showed that 77 percent of American Orthodox Jews declare themselves very attached to Israel while only 47 percent of Conservative Jews, 24 percent of Reform Jews, and 16 percent of unaffiliated Jews said they felt very attached.

For fifty years, support for Israel was what unified, motivated and inspired us. It now increasingly divides us one from the other. Disagreements over Israel divide synagogues, Hillels and Jewish institutions. There are Rabbis I know personally who are terrified into silence as they fear to even speak on Israel from the pulpit out of concern over losing their jobs. Just a few years ago when we hosted a series of speakers on Israel, this very room was marred by shouts and catcalls as the founder of the left leaning pro-Israel lobby, J Street, tried to speak from the very spot where I am standing now. I am thankful to say that none of those who desecrated this sacred space that day were members of our congregation. There is also an unmistakable rift growing between Israeli Jews and American Jews – a rift that led Thomas Freidman to state recently that as far as Israeli Jews were concerned, American Jews just don't matter anymore.

Gidi Greinstein, a public policy analyst in Israel, wrote not long ago, “Whereas once Israelis saw their country as dedicated to serving the existence of the entire Jewish people, increasingly it appears that it is concerned only with itself and not with the more than 60 percent of Jews who live outside of Israel”, a massive change in the original vision of the Zionist founders of the state. Increasingly, it seems that American Jews and Israeli Jews have less and less to say to one another.

When I met with Brigadier General and Knesset member, Nachman Shai two weeks ago, he said to me that he feels the greatest crisis our two communities face is the growing rift between American and Israeli Jews. So from 1967 to 2017, what led Israel from being the premier organizing principle of the Jewish people to the premier disorganizing principle? I think you already know – primarily two things – the conflict with the Palestinians and the growing power of the ultra-Orthodox within Israel. The conflict with the Palestinians is complex, difficult, and does not lend itself to easy solutions. But some of the actions of recent governments, particularly over expansion of settlements and appropriation of Palestinian lands have led many American Jews to believe that support for Israel is now in conflict with the humanitarian and ethical values that they have been taught to believe Judaism is founded upon. They would say that the very ethical values that they learned from Judaism are the same Jewish values that are leading them to disavow the Jewish state and repudiate its actions.

Before you start texting me, whether you or I agree with this view is immaterial. The fact is that where once Israel united American Jews, the Palestinian conflict now divides us. The Israeli government’s increasing embrace of the ultra-Orthodox is the other factor driving American Jews away from Israel and from one another. The majority of the world’s Jews are not Orthodox, and do not choose to be. Yet increasingly, the Israeli government is empowering the far right ultra-Orthodox. That is what lay behind Prime Minister Netanyahu’s recent rejection of the plan to create an egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall – where women and men could pray together. That’s what allows the Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar to say just the other day, that Reform Jews are worse than anti-Semitic and Holocaust deniers – and nothing happens to him. When the left leaning politician Shimon Peres died last year, 50,000 people attended his funeral. When Ovadia Yosef, the former Chief Rabbi known for his racist comments about blacks and gentiles and his hatred of Reform and Conservative Jews died four years ago, 800,000 people came to his funeral.

This summer, I attended worship in Jerusalem with Women of the Wall, a group of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform women who pray once a month at the women’s section of the Western Wall, wearing tallises and reading from a Torah both of which are forbidden by the strict Orthodox rabbinate that controls the Western Wall, the holiest site in Judaism. I watched in shock as Ultra-Orthodox women and men and children shouted curses, threw water bottles, and literally spat on the praying women as they chanted and sang and read Torah – children who looked as young as 8 or 9 spitting on grown women. The police did nothing to intervene and guards placed there by the government and in the employ of the Orthodox rabbinate not only refused to protect the

praying women, but intentionally lit cigarettes and smoked and spat on the ground as the Torah was read in a deliberate sign of disrespect.

By collaborating with this extremism by funding this extremism, the Israeli government is, in the words of the Jewish Daily Forward, giving the back of the hand to the large percentage of American Jews who value Egalitarianism and equality and equal access to the holiest space in the Jewish world. This past summer, several prominent American Jewish philanthropists said they will no longer give to Israeli causes because of Israel's disdain for the views of the American Jewish community.

All this has led my teacher, Rabbi Donniel Hartman, President of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, to declare recently that the Jewish community is now broken, broken apart over the very thing that once united us – the State of Israel. But despite these trends, I believe my teacher is wrong. I do not believe in my head and in my heart that the Jewish people will be broken apart over Israel. I do not believe that the essential unity of the Jewish people will disintegrate over disputes concerning Israel. I don't believe this for three reasons:

1. There has always been wide diversity among the Jewish people, yet we have maintained our essential unity as our greatest strength. Tomorrow morning, we will read from the Book of Deuteronomy as the Jewish people stand ready to enter the Promised Land, Moses says to them: "You stand this day, all of you in the presence of the Lord your God, your tribal heads, elders, and officials, every man, woman and child of Israel and the stranger in the midst of your camp – from the one who cuts your wood, to the one who draws your water, to enter into the covenant with the Lord your God, I make this covenant not with you alone, but with those future generations who do not stand with us this day. Rabbi Moshe Alsheych, a Torah scholar and Kabbalist who lived in the 16th century in Sfat in northern Israel, looks at these verses and says, "Yes, there are many different types of Jews, but before God we are all the same:. He goes on to say whatever differences might exist between us, pale in insignificance in comparison with the fact that we are all God's creations. Yes, he says differences become important from our perspective; yes, sometimes we view some types of people as better than others, but this is wrong. In God's eyes, we are all standing before God. In God's eyes we are all the same. Alsheych teaches that it is *our* great weakness, a human weakness, to see the differences between us rather than our essential one-ness. But the Torah comes to remind us that in the end, before God we are indeed the same – in covenant with God and in covenant with one another. Diversity has been a hallmark of the Jewish people from the time of the Torah itself and we have always managed to remember our essential unity before God, and I believe we will do so again. Even in these divisive times, if the Torah does not push us to be better than we are, then it is a poor Torah indeed.
2. While currently the ultra-Orthodox and their intolerance and bigotry is ascendant and powerful, there is another force at work in Israeli society. A force that is attempting to forge a new Judaism in Israel, a Judaism that embraces tradition, but equally embraces the principles of equality, democracy, justice and compassion. Such Orthodox Rabbis as Benyamin Lau and David Stav,

Conservative Rabbis such as Tamar Elad Applebaum, Reform Rabbis like Naamah Kelman, educators and politicians like Ruth Calderon, all are working to create a new uniquely Israeli Judaism that is increasingly appealing to Israelis who crave spirituality, but want democracy and modernity and social justice as well. This exciting movement is no different than the movement 2400 years ago led by the Prophet Isaiah, who declared to a corrupt Israelite society in words we will also read tomorrow morning in our Haftarah “s not this the fast I desire, to break the bonds of injustice and remove the heavy yoke; to let the oppressed go free and release the enslaved. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to take the homeless poor into your home and never to neglect your own flesh and blood? Then shall your light burst forth like the dawn, and your wounds shall quickly heal, your righteous one leading the way before you.” Tomorrow morning, we will remind ourselves how a prophet named Isaiah challenged the religious authorities of his day and demanded a Judaism of righteousness and compassion and it is his words, not the words of his intolerant opponents we read on our holiest day! Small minded ultra-Orthodoxy may be ascendant now, but I believe with all my heart that a growing and empowered Israeli Judaism devoted to tradition and compassion, Torah and democracy, Jewishness and justice, will defeat the bigoted and intolerant elements of Israeli society – just as it happened in the days of Isaiah.

3. Finally, a poet once said that Israelis are dreamers with their feet on the ground and their heads in the clouds. I think that is true, in the end of every one of us here. I think it is a Jewish condition to be something of a dreamer. I say to you tonight that I believe that Israel and the Holy City of Jerusalem should always be pushing us to dream. Our ancestors in Babylonian exile 2400 years ago said in the words of Psalm 126, *Hayyinu Kecholmim* – we are as dreamers and we remain dreamers still. In the face of challenge, why must we stop dreaming? As Theodore Herzl, the father of modern Zionism said, *Im Tirzu Ayne Zo Agadah* - If you will it, it is no dream. We dream of Jerusalem, we dream of an Israel that embraces all humanity, recognizes the Judaism of all of us, values women and men equally – a Judaism that gives to intolerance and hatred no sanction. This summer I sat in a Tel Aviv restaurant with 8 of our young people, some of whom had made Aliyah, some of whom were in Israel for long stays, and on their faces, I saw the dream. This summer, many of our members spent significant time in Israel and when they returned, on their faces, I saw the dream. I have seen that dream in the eyes of our young people who have returned from Birthright. As long as we have the dream, as long as we remain Kcholmim – dreamers – the Jewish people will remain as one.

Many of us are familiar with the song Hatikvah, the national anthem of Israel. What most don't know is that many Israelis were eager to choose another song as the national anthem' a song based on a poem called *Sachaki Sachaki*, Laugh, Laugh by the Israeli poet Saul Tchernikovski. These are the words of the song that almost became the Israeli national anthem –*Sachaki, Sachzki* – listen:

*“Laugh, Laugh with my dreams
I am the dreamer that wanders.
Because in humanity I believe,
And I still believe in you.
Because my soul aspires to freedom*

...

*Laugh because I believe in friendship,
I shall believe in the future,
Even if it's not today,
But it will come – to carry the peace
And we will be a blessing from nation to nation.*

*No – Israel will not be the force that breaks the Jewish people
Because Israel remains the repository of our Jewish dreams
And as the poet said long ago,
I shall believe in the future
Even if it is not today
But it will come...*