

Rosh Hashanah 5775  
Day 1 - Epstein

Shana Tova.

In a recent post on Ha'aretz, Peter Beinart implores American rabbis not to talk about Israel this High Holy Day season. Congregations have had enough of B-rate pundits, he says. What they really need is some strong text learning, because it is connection to Judaism - not Israel - that will save future generations of Jews.

I could not disagree more. In many ways, Israel and Judaism are one and the same; Israel is a central theme in our liturgy, our modern lives, and our future. Avoiding a discussion of all that has taken place in the Jewish state this summer would leave a giant elephant in the room.

Yehuda Kurtzer writes that

in reality, the appearance and complexity of a modern Jewish state is one of the most astounding, interesting, and important things to ever happen to the Jewish people. Many of the most interesting Jewish questions of today - the meaning and use of power, the responsibilities of sovereignty, the challenges and opportunities that come with managing minority rights and religious pluralism - are embedded in the story of the state of Israel and its meaning for the Jewish people.

Backing away from this conversation, whatever the reason, would only exacerbate one of the biggest problems facing Israel - Jewish stagnancy.

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That all said, I also love teaching texts, so let's start with the Talmud. As one of Judaism's foundational texts, the Talmud is often a serious text - so always catches my eye when there is a conversation that seems slightly absurd. One such example is the matter of a two-headed baby. The father of the child - or children, since we might assume it is conjoined twins - asks how many shekels he should give to the Cohen to redeem his offspring for the Pidyon HaBen. Is the price 5 shekels, because it is one child, or should he pay 10 shekels because it is two? [If you're curious, the Talmud rules that he should pay 10 shekels.]

More relevant, though, is the alternative explanation in Tosofot, medieval commentaries on the Talmud. They share a midrashic story about a two-headed man who produces both two-headed children and one-headed children. The time comes to divide the inheritance, and the two-headed children want double what their single-headed siblings receive. Like all good debates over children, the case was brought before King Solomon, who resolved it in a particularly definite, if cruel, manner: he boiled water and poured it over one of the heads while the other head was covered. Since both heads screamed in pain, Solomon ruled, "it can be deduced that both heads have a single source, and [the twins] should be deemed a single person."

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Rav Soloveitchik looks at this midrash and says, “If boiling water is poured on the head of the Jew in Morocco, the fashionably attired Jew in Paris or London has to scream at the top of his voice, and through feeling the pain, he will remain faithful to his people”.

This speaks to our experience as Jews outside Israel this past summer. We’ve had a tumultuous past few months. Rockets fell all over Israel. Sixty-seven Israelis were killed in Operation Protective Edge, while thousands of Palestinians, many of them innocent bystanders, died as Hamas forced Israel into a “kill or be killed” scenario. In Europe, anti-Semitism is on the rise in a way that we haven’t seen since the 1930’s. And at the start of it all is those three teenage sons who we lost at the beginning of the summer. Like a knife to the heart, these losses shocked us to our cores and we felt twisted with anguish when their bodies were discovered.

Watching the events in Gaza unfold, we asked ourselves: is the Jewish people a single entity with two heads (Israel and the Diaspora) - or are we two distinct beings? When rockets fall in Israel, we Jews in Boston feel something - but we struggle to define our emotions. Are we afraid - and if we are, do we fear for our fellow Jews or for ourselves? Are we anxious - and if so, are we anxious about the present or the future? Do we feel guilt - and if we do, is it because we are not able to help, or because we are not doing the things that we are able to?

Rahel Frankel, the mother of one of the teens, has spoken eloquently about the tragedy. Time and time again, she has remarked on how touched she felt by the outpouring of love, support, and affection she received - not just from all over Israel, but from around the world. For one brief instant, the tragedy of her personal loss created an Am Yisrael - a nation united in love. In a country where people will debate anything and everything, there was a uniformity that bound everyone together in a sense of loss and mourning for Rahel’s son Naftali and the other two boys, Gilad Shaar and Ayal Yifrach. The challenge is maintaining and utilizing that unity. For much of the war in Gaza, Israelis put aside politics - there was no left or right while everyone was united against the threat, fighting for survival.

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Unfortunately, while Israelis were experiencing national unity, the other half of this two-headed people did not feel the same urgency and pain. It’s difficult to watch a friend struggle without being able to help; in much the same way, it was agonizing for many of us to be here in America this summer, feeling powerless to help our fellow Jews. In Israel, life went on almost as normal, with the occasional interruption of running to the bomb shelter. The siren would go off, you’d pack up your kids, run to the safe room, wait to hear the “boom” of the Iron Dome, wait 10 minutes, and go back to doing whatever was interrupted by the siren. Of course Israelis experienced fear, anxiety, and restlessness - and I don’t mean to minimize that - and the soldiers fighting in Gaza confronted atrocities that many of them could never have imagined. But there was also a national resilience and a strong sense of defiance. Buses continued to run on schedule. Parents still sent their kids to daycare. Coffee shops remained full. And through the suspension

of flights, the funerals, the calls for Israel's destruction or delegitimization, life went on mostly as usual for most Israelis.

Meanwhile, here in America, many of us did all that we could to feel connected. We downloaded the Red Alert app on our phones and received dozens of daily alerts - one for each time a rocket was fired at Israel. We allowed our lives to be consumed by checking the news, wishing for a glimmer of hope that the fighting would end. For many of us, work productivity suffered because we couldn't go more than a few hours without finding a new reason to obsessively check for updates on the war, on the state of Jews around the world, and on anti-Semitic encounters here and abroad.

In Israel, there is, as they say, a clear and present danger. The enemies of the Jewish state may be many and loud - but at least that means you mostly know who and where they are. In America, and across the Diaspora, hatred may live thousands of miles away - or it may lurk around every corner, in the form of a rally turned ugly, or an attack on the soccer field, or a Jewish business being burned to the ground.

We suffered a different level of anxiety - not from wondering if the stranger on the bus might blow it up, or if death will rain down from the sky, but from watching our brothers and sisters suffer these daily fears without knowing how to help. And unlike those in Israel, we never got to experience the resiliency - one of the most uniquely Israeli traits that has kept the country together through so much adversity.

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Daniel Gordis, the founding dean of the Ziegler Rabbinical School and a prolific author on Israel, wrote an excellent piece in the Jerusalem Post at the beginning of August. In his article, entitled "When the Guns Fall Silent," Gordis notes that when this war is over, we're going to need a vision. We will have to be able to answer: why are we here? Why do we choose to live in a neighborhood that wants to destroy us?

For some Israelis, theology is answer enough: God gave us the land, so we're here to stay. Other, more secular Israelis have their own history with the land; like an old married couple, Gordis says, they can't imagine life any other way. They are the Israelis of Nahal Oz when it was attacked in the 1950s, and they were the same ones who were there this summer. Shaken but unmovable, they are, Gordis notes, part of our landscape. Neither of these groups represents the majority of Israelis; neither does the high-tech community nor the cluster of world-class wine producers.

"So why are we here?" Gordis asks. This is the overarching question that hangs over Israel, now that the guns are being put away and the soldiers are returning. It's the question those same soldiers will want to hear their society debating - discussing, but unlike so many debates in

Israel, this one truly begs an answer. “They want to believe,” writes Gordis, “that this fight is worth the lives of the children they haven’t yet had.”

He goes on:

When we’re not at war, there’s no national conversation about how Jewish Israel should be, and how Israel should be Jewish.

When the guns go silent, we’re going need to renew a vision that blends resolve with tolerance, strength with utter decency, individual freedom coupled with a sense of serving something greater than ourselves.

Perhaps this is our best opportunity to help. America and Israel have long had a relationship of mutuality, if not outright equality. We may not always want to listen to one another, but we always have something worth teaching. Perhaps a true Jewish homeland takes into account a non-Israeli vision for a Jewish state. Perhaps what Israel needs is a little outside perspective.

Israel is THE place where Jewish values can be lived out. More than Brookline, New York City, Lakewood, and Boca Raton put together, Israel is the one place where we live our lives on the Jewish religious cycle - from a weekly Shabbat to the Shmita year. It is also where our Jewish social values should be lived. Israel is the epicenter of Jewish religious life, but it is America that provides most of the fresh ideas that keep Jews from polarizing: creative Judaism, liberal yeshivot, and pluralistic rabbinic organizations. Rather than being a single state with two populaces - Orthodox and non-religious - Israel should be abuzz with modern Jewish life in all its forms. Knesset member Ruth Calderon made a splash when she taught Talmud in her opening speech at the Knesset. Women teaching Talmud should not be note-worthy because our tradition, particularly in the Jewish state, should be accessible to everybody, regardless of gender.

In many ways, religious Judaism is used as a weapon against secular Israelis; a punishment for not being observant. This inflexibility is everything that millions of Jews fight every day, simply by identifying as Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, or, even, Modern Orthodox. Judaism should be creative, exciting, and inspired - a gift for those who choose to accept it - not stifled and shuttered, or wielded as a sword against those who see 2014 as different from 1814.

There is a tremendous danger in a single sect of Judaism claiming a monopoly on the authentic Jewish voice of Israel. Jerusalem should not be the city where I remove my kippah for fear of harassment. At Judaism’s holiest site, every Jew should be able to pray in their own most meaningful way. If that includes putting on holy prayer garments - tallit, kippah, tefillin - then every Jew - male, female, black, white - should be able to do so without fear of physical attack.

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One of the most troubling trends of this past summer took place outside of Israel. I’m not talking about the rampant anti-Semitism demonstrated around the world, although that should certainly be a wake-up call to the ever-greater relevance of Israel as a Jewish homeland. Perhaps worse

than the anti-Semitism masquerading as anti-Zionism was the ambivalence of so many otherwise good people. The inability to know what (or who) to believe about what was really happening in Israel and Gaza paralyzed many. The Hamas PR machine, coupled with Israel's own inability - or unwillingness - to pander to the world media, created a dearth of unbiased news sources. Was Ha'aretz pro-Israel, or pro-truth? Did Times of Israel speak for Israel, or for the facts? What about the New York Times, the Boston Globe, or CNN? Could we be expected to believe everything we were reading?

This uncertainty led to ambivalence around the world, as intelligent adults - even self-proclaimed intellectuals - struggled to find the needle of truth in the haystack of propaganda. And for many, ambivalence led to inaction, both at home - by not supporting Israel as loudly as possible - and in Israel. If we, as confident Jews in a country whose first amendment protects freedom of speech, don't feel comfortable standing up for Israel... who do we think will?

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Rabbi Milton Steinberg, best known for his book "As a Driven Leaf," taught that the blasts of the shofar serve a necessary purpose every year - particularly this one. The Tekiah is a wake-up call for us. In some years, it begs us to make a change in our personal lives; in others, the clarion call takes us out of our complacency in our work, with our family, or in another aspect of life.

This year, I hope that the shofar calls for us to make a change in our collective life as a People. Tekiah - have we done enough to support Israel in her quest for peace and reconciliation? Tekiah - have we spoken out for Israel as often as possible, in as strong a voice as we can? Tekiah G'dolah - have we done all we can to make sure that Israel survives - and thrives - well beyond our own lifetimes?

In contrast, the brokenness of the Shevarim mirrors our own conflicted emotions as we play witness to a nearly unwinnable war. We mourn the loss of innocent lives on all sides. Our hearts break when we see children used as human shields against weapons aimed for harm and destruction. We weep with the families as they bury their child, their parent, their loved one, their friend. Shevarim - we feel conflicted and broken - we know Israel must defend herself, but cry at the cost of civilian lives. Shevarim - We want Israel to maintain the moral high ground, but not if it means the death of our own.

Finally, the Truah compels us to action - its sound says, "Stand up! You know what to do!" Truah - cry out when your brother is in pain! Truah - do something about a world in which injustice, aggression, and intolerance are commonplace!

Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, who lived in Prague and Jerusalem in the seventeenth century, noted that each grouping of Shofar sounds begins with a tekiah, a whole note. It then proceeds to a shevarim, the "broken" note, or even to a teruah, an entirely fragmented sound. But each broken note is followed by a whole note, another tekiah. This, he says, is the message of Rosh

Hashanah: "I started off whole, I became broken, even splintered into fragments, but I shall become whole again! I shall become whole again!"

So too is it with the Jewish people. We have been broken, splintered into so many fragments that it is sometimes hard to recognize one another. But we will become whole again.

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How do those of us not in Israel help accomplish this? By remaining engaged with world-wide and Israeli Jewry. By working toward a pluralistic vision for the Zionist dream. And by continuing to share that vision with others, no matter how hard it gets. When boiling water is poured on the head of the Jew across the world, even though he may look different from us, believe different things from us, and act differently, we must scream at the top of our voices - not only because we feel his pain, but because we want to help alleviate it as well. We become whole again by engaging; by stepping forward, standing up, and lending our voice to the larger debate.

Woody Allen said, "80% of success is showing up." A great way to support Israel - to help it grow and thrive, and to bring it home - is to simply go visit the country. This is why KI is sending FIVE trips to Israel in the next 14 months.

From a trip in November with Rabbi Hamilton to an opportunity to volunteer on an Israel Defence Force base a few months later with our Board President, the Kehillath Israel community is taking the time - making the effort - to show up and support the country, the people, and the vision of a Jewish state.

In April, as the culmination of a two-year course of study on Zionism, Rabbi David Starr is celebrating Israel Independence Day IN Israel, in April, with class participants. And once again, we are participating next summer in the unparalleled learning experience that is the Hartman Center.

Finally, over New Year's week 2015 to 2016, I will be bringing my family - and hopefully yours - to Israel for a once-in-a-lifetime, intergenerational trip. This is a tremendous opportunity for everyone to explore the land in a way that is meaningful - singles, couples, families with children, grandparents - in short, it's for YOU. Together we'll see Israel through a different lens, sharing the wonders of the both ancient country and the modern state.

Each of these trips is designed in a way that lets the visitor encounter Israelis face-to-face, as brothers and sisters. The goal is to understand that we are not tourists in the Land of Israel; we are traveling home. We are engaging with the land, with people, and with the texts that connect us all.

Many of us travel to Israel regularly. Some of us are drawn there by our family; for others, it is a professional interest - in business, healthcare, technology. There is something different, though, something very special about sharing a visit to Israel with your home kahal, your American

Jewish community. The opportunity to return from the Holy Land with a shared experience promises to have a profound impact on KI as a whole.

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Even if you aren't able to join one of the trips, I urge you to make your voice heard. Ask questions, voice your concerns - have a conversation. You need not agree with everything Israel does to build a relationship with Israel - but you do need to start somewhere.

Let this year be the year that we heed the call of the shofar and let it spur us to action. Tekiah - this is the year that our voices lift up Jews around the world. Shevarim - this is the year that we ask questions, and understand how we can criticize Israel and still support it. Truah - this is the year that we visit Israel and gain a true appreciation for what it means to be Israeli in 5775.

Tekiah G'dolah - this is the year we proudly say that we did all we could for Israel and the worldwide Jewish community. Shana tova.