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Israel: A Special Place¹

We all have memories of a special place. Somewhere that we used to visit often, perhaps a home that we lived in as a child. And we have those memories that have been passed down from generation to generation. Last year, shortly after the High Holy Days, I attended a family reunion—descendants of my great, great, great grandparents from Mordy, Poland. People in their 70's and 80's sat around telling stories that they had been told by their parents and grandparents of the "old country" and the journey to this land of America. I too carry those stories with me, painting a vivid portrait of a long ago time and far away place, a photograph in my mind of a time and place that I will never really know or inhabit, but that represents a piece of me and who I am as a person.

And so it is with us as a people. Far away from family and a beloved homeland, pained by tragedy beyond imagination, we carried the psalmist's lament on our backs through the generations: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we remembered Zion."² For nearly two thousand years, our people sang this dirge, cut off from the land that we considered our homeland, our national birthplace. Shunned by the nations of the world, tormented in many of the lands in which we settled, ostracized and humiliated, we were known to the world as the wandering Jews—my own family's tale of woe recounted over 400 years as a journey from Spain to Amsterdam, to Poland and then, for my direct ancestors, here to the *Goldena Medina* of the United States.

It is the story of many of our families. But over one hundred years ago, as a spirit of nationalism swept the European intellectual elite, our own co-religionists began to dream. In France, England, Germany, Russia and throughout Europe they carried on the lament of the psalmist, dreaming of the land of their ancestors, a land flowing with milk and honey. They strived to make that dream a reality and miraculously, just 61 years ago, out of the ashes of Auschwitz and Treblinka we regained international recognition of our national homeland.

Surprisingly though, for some of the earliest Zionist leaders, the actual land of Israel was not a necessary component in their vision. They were looking for a land in which Jews could govern themselves free from persecution—just about anyplace would do for Theodore Herzl. It was in the visions of such Zionist luminaries as AD Gordon, Ahad Ha'am, Rav Kook and Vladimir Jabotinsky that a return to the birthplace of Judaism became essential. Yet even their visions of a hundred years ago were marred by a question that has continued to loom large. For returning to the land of our ancestors would require displacement of the people currently residing there. The, quote, Palestinian question, is not a new

one, it is one that has always loomed in the background, addressed in many different ways one hundred years ago as today.

This past February, my husband Michael and I again traveled to Israel. For both of us, it was a return to a land that we love and in which both of us have been more than tourists—Michael lived there for four months during a break from his college studies, and I lived there for a year during my first year of rabbinical school. This was not a first visit back to the land for either of us, but coming as it did on the heels of the most recent Israeli elections and immediately following the most recent battle in Gaza, it came during a period of heightened emotion. For me, it was a very troubling trip, and one that I knew I would need to speak about during these Holy Days.

Pondering what to say and how to make sense of my own emotions, I read countless articles, essays and sermons by colleagues. I began reading the book, *Myths, Illusions, & Peace: Finding a New Direction For America in the Middle East* by Presidential Advisor for the Middle East Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, an analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. But my love for Israel isn't an intellectual, scholarly matter, it is an emotional, deeply personal concern—bound up in the historical memory of our people, the everyday lives of family and friends who live in Israel, and my own personal experience of the land and its people.

As we enter these holy days this year, I am deeply pained by the experiences of a member of our own family, a bright, inquisitive 21 year old Israeli, traumatized by the events that occurred in the waning days of his mandatory military service. An army sharpshooter, he had the misfortune of mustering out only weeks after, instead of before, Operation Cast Lead, the Gaza incursion of this past January. The experiences of those few weeks, which he refuses to speak about in-depth, have clearly left him shattered and confused, not only spiritually and emotionally but physically as well. Confused by his fellow soldiers who broke the army code of silence in sharing public accounts of Israeli atrocities, and shattered by his own actions, whether undertaken in the name of duty, self-defense or both.

Yes, we can blame the Palestinians themselves and the Arab countries for all that has befallen the Palestinian people. But where does that get anyone at the end of the day? Hatred, recrimination, retribution and shame only lead to tragedy—from Romeo and Juliet to perhaps a more fitting analogy of the Hatfields and the McCoys, mayhem, bloodshed, and carnage clearly are not the answer. The individuals, families and communities torn asunder upon the constantly shifting sands of Middle East politics is a tragedy of epic proportions.

I am not going to stand before you this morning and profess to have the answers to this conundrum. I understand as much as anyone the constant onslaught that Israel has faced from terrorists, and I am generally in favor of the security barrier erected by Israel that has, indeed, cut down dramatically on the terrorist acts undertaken within Israel proper. But within these Days of Awe we find ourselves called to turn our attention from images of depression and despair to visions of hope and reconciliation. Sitting by the waters of Babylon crying is

not only our story, it is the story of the Palestinian people as well. I realize that hearing me say that will anger many of you, but if we, a people intimately schooled in the vagaries of displacement are incapable of showing any level of compassion and concern for those whom we have displaced, where does it leave us? Certainly not "*btzelem Elohim*" created in the image of God, "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness,"³ but rather cradling the broken dreams and shattered psyches of not one but two entire nations.

At this point, I do want to make one thing perfectly clear. I always have been and remain a proud and ardent Zionist. My earliest memories are of my grandmother recounting her own trips to Israel to visit family in the 1950's. For six long days in June of 1967 I ran home from school everyday to turn on the radio and listen to the news reports about the Middle East war, and in 1973 frustrated that my parents wouldn't allow their then 16 year-old daughter to fly off to Israel in October, I bought an Israel Bond with money from my savings account as my best available attempt to aid the Jewish state. My own personal experiences of Israel, including this past February, have served to renew and reconfirm my Zionist commitment. As my friend and colleague Rabbi Yoel Kahn notes, the legitimate claims of the Palestinians for a homeland and sovereignty does not obviate the legitimacy of Israel's nationhood. Israel's original establishment was rooted in a decision of the United Nations and the urgent need for a refuge for the displaced victims of genocide; and however many grave faults there may be with the policies and actions of the government of the state, these do not serve to delegitimize that state itself. From Tiananmen Square to Chechnya to Darfur to Kent State, My Lai and Cambodia—let alone the earlier history of this country and its Indian Wars—governments have done reprehensible things; but however much we have condemned the actions of leaders, armies or governments, no one asks whether Russia, China, El Salvador, Chile or the United States of America "have the right to exist."

I am appalled by the latest Hollywood flap of these past two weeks in which, one would hope well-meaning but obviously completely clueless actors, directors and producers have signed on to a petition to attempt to force the Toronto International Film Festival to withdraw its plans to spotlight Tel Aviv in its new City to City Spotlight program designed to celebrate international film culture. At best, some of these people, like Jane Fonda, are clearly unfamiliar with the complexities of Middle East politics, at worst some of them, like Vanessa Redgrave, are just plain anti-Zionist, always have been and probably always will be.

Indeed, our first responsibility, in the face of the continuing demonization of Zionism is to stand up and declare, "I am a Zionist." Increasingly and distressingly, anti-Zionism is thinly veiled anti-Semitism, in which vast power, sinister motives, and central conspiracy and control are disproportionately ascribed to a small group, as for example the anti-Semitic speeches of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the declarations uttered in UNESCO's last two World Conference Against Racism events, commonly known as Durban I

and II, in which Israel alone was singled out for criticism, likening Zionism to racism.

With a free press, a representative democracy and 7 million opinionated citizens in a pluralistic culture, Israeli society engages in a vigorous and critical debate about its government, its national policies and its values. In Israel, as here in the United States, respectable and responsible public declarations of dissent are not deemed subversive; they are considered a form of patriotism and prophetic duty.

Yet in Israel today there are clearly those who travel outside the boundaries of healthy public discourse. They are primarily represented by the orthodox Jewish nationalists who insist that it is the inalienable and divine right of Jews to settle anywhere within the historical borders of the Land of Israel; biblical borders which, in theory, encompass neighboring sovereign states. Unfortunately, they, and their fundamentalist Christian friends whose own anti-Jewish theology is too often cloaked as Christian Zionism, have hijacked the word Zionism for their own theological aims. Theology in a multi-faith world is not an acceptable basis for statecraft. No doubt, if we were to ask Native Americans what lands the Great Spirit had given to them as their rightful inheritance for eternity, America would not want to listen to the answer. Historical and theological claims, however deeply rooted, must yield to the realities of the contemporary world in which we live.

For more than forty years, Israel has ruled over and occupied the land of 3.7 million Palestinians, denying its Palestinian residents either Israeli citizenship rights or self-sovereignty. Many governments around the world today seem to forget that from 1948 until 1967, the Gaza Strip and West Bank were similarly presided over by Egypt and Jordan respectively. A few years ago, I became friendly with a local woman in Calabasas, an Egyptian born social worker who told me that as a young college student in Egypt in the mid 1960's she visited the then Egyptian administered Gaza territory. Even at that time, under Egyptian dominion, the strip of land on the western flank of Israel was a disgusting ghetto of human misery. Yet what began in 1967 as a military campaign to secure Israel's borders has since been fetishized into a new idolatry in which rocks and land are worshipped over peace and security. Yes, Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005 was an unmitigated disaster on many levels, but invoking the Torah to justify the continued displacement, terror and unlawful killing of Palestinians that has become a too common occurrence cannot be tolerated.

Much of my rabbinic focus this past February was on a small area in Eastern Jerusalem known as Silwan. Located downhill from the walls of the Old City, on the eastern slope of the Kidron Valley, I remembered Silwan from my rabbinic school days as the historic site of the original City of David, a craggy hillside that we visited one day along with the nearby Gihon Spring and Pool of Siloam. A teeming Palestinian neighborhood, the area was just a few minutes walk from the Jerusalem Cinematheque where we gathered as students to see the latest films from around the world.

In anticipation of our trip, I knew that recent excavations in the Silwan area had led to the opening of a new Israeli archeological site there, and on our first day Michael and I set out to visit it. On a docent led tour through excavated tunnels and hillsides, we were reintroduced to a vision of the city that King David was believed to have settled 3,000 years ago. As we were led through underground warrens, our docent remarked that further excavation of the tunnels had been stopped by Israeli court order because of complaints of damage to the foundations and walls of the homes directly above ground. Michael innocently inquired as to whether they were Palestinian owned homes or Israeli. Before our docent was able to respond, one of the other visitors, a modern orthodox gentleman from Argentina growled, "What do you mean Palestinian or Israeli—all of it belongs to Israel." Indeed, as I came to understand in subsequent days, the Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan has been under siege. The excavations in Silwan are not being undertaken by the Israel Parks Authority. Rather they are being overseen by a wealthy ultra-orthodox entrepreneur and are being conducted in a manner that is damaging Palestinian homes surrounding the excavation site. As I spent time with representatives of Rabbis for Human Rights and Palestinian residents of Silwan, the political machinations of Israel today and its potentially tragic human consequences became all too clear.

Because the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan may once have been the City of David, and unquestionably archaeological treasures are buried there, a plan is underway by Jerusalem authorities to demolish 80 Palestinian homes and recreate the Garden of David's fortress. Over 80 families to be forcibly removed in order to restore what might have been the site of a garden 3,000 years ago. In a meeting a few days later with Israel Kimhi, the Director of the Jerusalem Studies Desk at the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, rabbinic colleagues and I were told that the idea is to create a greenbelt around the outside walls of the Old City, as was maintained in the original plans of the British Mandate. Kimhi speaks fluent English, but when we started to press him about the fact that on the West Jerusalem side there were new parking lots and a brand-new high-end shopping mall just outside the Old City walls and nary a green belt in site, he suddenly seemed to lose his ability to understand or respond in our native tongue. And when the question was rephrased in Hebrew, he moved on to another topic. The really sad fact is that Kimhi is an Israeli who cares deeply about the plight of Palestinians and who is appalled by the way that the Israeli government has underprovided resources to the Palestinian population for the past 42 years.

Not only in East Jerusalem but throughout the West Bank, Palestinian neighborhoods and villages are under siege and their lands are being confiscated. The West Bank and its Israeli settlements are not integral to the state of Israel. In a summer 2008 survey, when Israeli respondents were asked "how many times have you visited settlements in the Judea and Samaria territories over the past five years?", it was found that 73% said they have never visited the settlements, while 22% said they have visited the area once or several times as part of a trip, a visit, a family event, military service or business.⁴ In other words, for 95% of the Israeli population, the settlements are far outside of

their own daily lives. The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the 2008 population of the West Bank settlements at 285,800 residents, scattered over 121 settlements, and some 100 outposts that the Israeli government does not officially recognize. The most troubling aspect of these settlements is that the CBS also estimates that in 2008, the settler population rose by 4.7 percent, appreciably higher than the 1.6 percent growth rate inside Israel. In the first half of 2008, the CBS documented about 1,000 housing starts in the settlements, an increase of 42.5 percent over the comparable period in 2007.⁵ In the past 18 years, the number of West Bank settlers has more than doubled.⁶

Unfortunately, a small percentage of the Israeli populace and their supporters, many of whom live here in the United States, continue to hold the state of Israel hostage to their extreme views—consuming vast amounts of goodwill, security resources and the lives of young soldiers who defend their often illegal outposts. In recent years, on the floor of the Knesset and in public debate, Israelis have begun to speak of “transfer”—the involuntary expulsion of Arabs from the territories so as to make these areas safer for Jews. Surely we, as a people, know ethnic cleansing when we see it, regardless of its name; and out of our values and our recent history, we cannot justify it for a moment. While many Israelis are repelled by this idea, it is a plausible solution if one subscribes to an imperialist world-view of Jewish superiority and God-given privileges to the exclusion of others. We call such a system of thought racism and its application—with two classes of citizens, one privileged and one not, one with freedom of movement and the other without, one with access to benefits and services and one denied them—we call that apartheid.

The stream of Zionism that I subscribe to is neither a racist ideology nor an imperialist movement and, at least thus far, Israel is not an apartheid state. On an individual and on a political and communal level, there has certainly been discrimination in Israel and unequal treatment throughout Israel’s history—and a long history of court rulings, public demonstrations and private resolve in support of Israel living up to its promises and core values. But let us speak the truth: Israel is inevitably headed towards a permanent colonialism until and unless it disentangles itself from its occupier status. Within the pre-1967 borders of Israel, Jewish culture is the majority culture. What I am focusing on this morning are the territories that Israel captured in 1967, in which Israeli governmental support of 285,000 settlers (many of them, by the way, born and raised here in the United States) holds dominion over 3.7 million Palestinians craving their own right to sovereign statehood.

We certainly all realize that it takes two to forge a peaceful resolution. I have often said that what the Palestinians need is a religious leader like Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr., an advocate committed to non-violent struggle who is revered by his people. I have no doubt that it would completely change the face and dynamic of the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Hear me clearly, Israel has as much right as any sovereign nation to demand and expect permanent and secure borders with its neighbors and any peaceful resolution to the conflict must be incumbent upon such agreement. In the meantime though, Israeli leaders continue to throw fuel on the fire in their

continued encouragement of Israeli settlement activity. The vast majority of Israeli citizens expect an eventual withdrawal from the territories; for the alternative can only be the destruction of Israel, from without or from within.

On our one Shabbat in Israel in February, we sat on the couch in a cousins' home in Ranana, a suburb of Tel Aviv. As our Israeli-born cousin gazed lovingly at her newborn first child, cradled in her arms, she remarked that if she held an American passport she would use it to return to the States to raise her son. To save him from the tragedy of growing up in Israel, from the mandatory armed services that she knows someday awaits him and the sense of hopelessness that more and more Israelis are living with every day. Her sabra parents, a retired general in the Israeli army and a sitting Tel Aviv Court judge, sighed in acknowledgment and understanding of their daughter's statement, themselves worn-out from a lifetime of conflict.

As Rabbi Donniel Hartman, the modern orthodox co-director of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem notes, "Dreaming of peace is not the same as building a peace, and Israel's legitimate security concerns, which will result from relinquishing military control over the West Bank, must be addressed."⁷ He goes on to argue for the continually proud and vocal adoption of the two-state solution as the only political horizon. To do so, he asserts, is to maintain the quality of Jewish values, and to fail to do so is to seriously damage the moral and Jewish fiber of Israeli society. Hartman reminds us that the holiness of the people must continue to be more important than the holiness of the land. He argues, "We don't want to accept a moral discourse that deems it legitimate to deny the authenticity of another people's yearning for sovereignty and which validates treating Arabs as second-class citizens."⁸

I was sickened to read an article earlier this week that recounted how Tzipi Livni, Israel's former foreign minister, head of the Kadima opposition party and the daughter of leaders in the pre-State underground Irgun movement was the focus of harsh and rude criticism at a large party here in the Los Angeles area last weekend. Apparently Livni had the temerity in a before-dinner address to justify the need for a two-state solution and certain concessions to Palestinians, if Israel is to continue to function in the long run as a democratic state with a Jewish majority.⁹

Of course, we all realize that if only the imams and mullahs around the world were giving sermons in their mosques and madrasahs during this period of Ramaddan which ends this weekend, exhorting their flock to seek the peace and asserting the moral responsibility that can be found in their holy books too, we would certainly be closer to some kind of healthy, positive closure. But I am a rabbi, and my flock is the Jewish people. Therefore I must continue to exhort our people to focus on the passages in our holy books that implore us to seek peace and pursue it.

During this period of holiness on our own calendar, let us try to turn from a vision of hatred and recrimination towards one of hope and reconciliation, remembering that there is another people, sitting by the waters of Babylon weeping.

After all, in 2003, an actual peace treaty was drawn up and signed in Pikeville, Kentucky by members of the Hatfield and McCoy families proclaiming that the families "do hereby and formally declare an official end to all hostilities, implied, inferred and real, between the families, now and forevermore."¹⁰ And who can forget the ending to Romeo and Juliet, as the Montagues and Capulets reconciled by their children's deaths agree to end their violent feud, "For never was a story of more woe/ Than this of Juliet and Romeo."

Kein y'he ratzon—may it be so, that Israelis and Palestinians find their path to peace, too.

¹ I would like to particularly thank my colleague and friend Rabbi Yoel Kahn whose intellectual prowess helped move me, and this sermon, beyond the emotional and personal to a fuller and more complimentary understanding of my own thoughts on this subject.

² Psalm 137:1

³ Exodus 34:6

⁴ "Peace Now Organizes Settlement Tours," Efrat Weiss, June 7, 2008.

<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3564543,00.html>

⁵ Statistics cited in the *2008 Annual Report of B'tselem*, "Human Rights in the Occupied Territories," pg. 15.

⁶ "New Settler Housing Seen As Compromise," by Richrad Boudreaux. *Los Angeles Times*, September 8, 2009, pg. A14.

⁷ "The Two State Solution: A Jewish and Moral Obligation," Donniel Hartman, April 21, 2009.

http://www.hartman.org.il/Opinion_C_View_Eng.asp?Article_Id=324

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "Tzipi Livni Confronted at Beverly Hills Fundraiser" by Tom Tugend, *The Jewish Journal*, September 15, 2009. http://www.jewishjournal.com/community/article/tzipi_livni_confronted_at_beverly_hills_fundraiser_20090915/

¹⁰ "Official End of Legendary Feud," Rome Neal, June 14, 2003.

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/06/13/earlyshow/saturday/main558660.shtml>