

RH morning 5780/September 30th, 2019

Temple Emanu-El of Haverhill, MA

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Israel is near the core of Jewish identity. For some folks, it IS the core. It is a covenant made tangible. It is a haven for Jews under threat. It is a living, breathing land whose identity and culture grow and change and thrive almost independent of its Biblical history. It is also a political entity, a nation with laws and elected officials and international interactions.

I am not going to talk to you today about Israel and Palestine. I want to talk today about Israel as a unique, precious place for Jews - where we can feel, smell, taste, touch, hear, sing, dance and pray in a concentrated richness of Jewish culture that is simply not available to us anywhere else in the world. It's the only area its size where a Jew can live and not be in a minority. (No offense, Brooklyn and Brookline!) Our relationship with Israel is a family relationship, for Jews all over the world, and for us here in Haverhill. I believe that every Jew can connect in some way with Israel.

In this morning's reading, we heard a story of a family divided: Hagar, Sarah, Yishma'eil, Yitzchak, and of course the man at the center of all this tsuris: Avraham. Inheritance is the currency of this drama. "Let not that woman's son inherit with my son," Sarah decrees, and urged on by God, Avraham nods and obeys.

The stakes of this inheritance are high. Avraham and Sarah are the first Jews. The family inheritance that Sarah guards so fiercely for Yitzchak includes not just wealth and real estate, but covenant: a promise to the pair, of generations of Jews to follow. That earth, with that covenant, has become our most fiercely guarded treasure as Jews. Both are made real in the Land of Israel.

The word "Israel" refers, of course, to more than the modern country's soil. The Hebrew "Yisra'eil" means "one who wrestles, or struggles, with God." It became the name of our patriarch Ya'akov the night he hurt his hip

wrestling with an unnamed holy figure, who blessed him to end the fight. The Jewish people descended from Yisra'eil carry this name. "Am Yisra'eil," the people Israel, is a concept at once tied to the land and distinct from it. Every Jew in the world is considered to be part of Am Yisra'eil. The country of Israel promotes this concept of worldwide Jewish identity rooted in the land of Israel, by offering an opportunity to make aliyah, move to Israel, to every Jew living outside of the country. The offer is complicated; the ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate of Israel determines, for diaspora Jews, whose lineage, and conversions, "count" as Jewish for the purposes of making aliyah. But Israel's affirmation of a global Am Yisra'eil, with the land still our inheritance, is, I believe, sincere.

The stakes of this inheritance are high. They are high for me because I love Israel. I met a soft-spoken Israeli - yes, they exist! - in the Vienna airport when I was just 18 on my way to the Republic of Georgia. I confessed to never having visited Israel. She said, "Go. She is waiting for you." I never forgot the welcome proffered, so matter-of-factly. And eventually, I accepted the invitation, and spent a vivid three weeks in the winter of a year of cantorial school. I couldn't imagine becoming Jewish clergy without having visited Israel.

Though my stay there was brief, Israel has not left me. Every time our liturgy speaks of Zion or that time when the world will achieve its tantalizing, perfect, potential and be fully redeemed - that's Israel. Every time the Torah, with God's voice, speaks of "the land which I have given you...a land flowing with milk and date honey" - that's Israel. The blessings after each Haftarah we read, as we heard today, remind us: "Racheim al tziyon ki hi beit chayyeinu." Be merciful to Zion, for she's the home of our lives. Israel is our dream, and our promise.

It is also a solid reality, like God's promise to Sarah and Avraham in our parasha, realized in Yitzchak's body. And the reality is beautiful. When I visited Israel in 2014, it was winter, which meant a brief decorative dusting of snow over Jerusalem on Christmas (also Shabbat), following lush greenery a week earlier in the valleys around Ts'fat in the north, home of the Kabbalists. My husband Mike and I hiked up M'tsada, site of the legendary Jewish last stand against the Romans after the Second Temple's fall, with

our four-month-old son Jonathan strapped to Mike's chest. At the top, the sun threw every dusty grain of earth and the darkness of every bor, water cistern, into high relief. It lit up that stronghold of Jewish pride like a beacon. At Tziyon, an egalitarian Shabbat minyan in Jerusalem, every person at evening services joined in the parents' Priestly Blessing of their children, a sight and sound so happy and so embracing and so comfortably undertaken that it made me weep.

To be in Israel is to experience Jewish identity in a different way.

Here, with you all, in the Merrimack Valley, in America, I'm a Jewish American - or an American Jew. I wear my Judaism openly. I wear my kippah and chamsa in public, I use Yiddish phrases, I decline trayf (nonkosher food) politely when it's offered to me, and I explain why I do so when I'm asked. I practice my leyning, my Torah reading for the week, while I'm on the ellipticals at the Andover/North Andover Y, and I don't worry about people hearing me or seeing the Hebrew. In the community, I'm proud to be known as the cantor of this Temple. I talk and learn and visit and work with my interfaith colleagues. I answer their questions about Judaism. Sometimes their questions spark questions of my own.

I live a full, rich Jewish life here. And yet my Jewish identity is infused with "otherness." Our national and local calendars do not run on Jewish time. Everything is open for business on Shabbat; Christmas and Easter dictate the seasonal decorations. Jewish life and practice are a curiosity to many if not most of the people in our wider communities. As a result, we are encouraged to compartmentalize our Judaism. We may feel most Jewish when we're "doing Jewish," celebrating or praying. Usually this happens either in our homes, or in our Jewish communities, rather than with every breath we take.

Jewish communities in America function as both safe spaces and greenhouses for Jewish identity, protecting and nurturing all at once. This is a wonderful thing. Judaism is a communal endeavour. Our "pack identity" is powerful; we require a minyan, a quorum of 10 Jews, to say Kaddish for our dead, to ensure that when we're mourning a loved one, when we're vulnera-

ble in that way, we have our community around us. Throughout our liturgy in these High Holy Days, how often is a b'racha said in the first person, from the "I" voice? Almost never. Everything is "we, we, we." Within an American culture of clear individualism, Jews concentrate on our Jewish community organizations as the cornerstone of our own personal Jewish identities, despite our enormous range of choices regarding Jewish theology and practice. We're a minority here, hovering at about 2% of the American population. As a minority, we stick together. We get most of our feedback and input about our Judaism at our shuls, chavurahs, Hillels, and youth groups - unless we find ourselves defending our Judaism, or explaining it. We all choose to be Jewish every day, in America, and making that choice takes effort, and explaining our choice carries even more.

Israel is a different ball game. As an American Jew in Israel, I felt at once "rooted and disoriented," in Yossi Klein Halevi's words (Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor). I felt comfortable because everything in the society is set up to support Jewish religious practice (though the country certainly doesn't lack for secular life!). In Jerusalem, nothing, I mean, NOTHING is open on Shabbat. One Friday night when both Jonathan and I were running bad fevers, we had to skip out on a planned Shabbat meal with a friend. There was nothing to eat in the apartment, and the only place Mike could find us food that night was the Arab-owned MacDonald's! Jerusalem itself is shomer Shabbes. The calculations and adjustments that I make here, as I present as a visible Jew in a mostly non-Jewish culture, the emotional energy it sometimes takes simply to explain why I do what I do - suddenly, none of those were necessary. I had all of this extra attention available, to spend on enjoying where I was. Being Jewish as part of a majority was a powerful feeling. I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, and it never did.

The closest it got was when I had to explain that yes, women cantors DO exist, to an older Israeli woman on the bus to M'tzada. She entertained Jonathan while quizzing me about my headscarf (purple, with silver stripes). Female clergy are still very much the exception in Israel, and female clergy who choose to cover their hair are fewer still. Hair coverings are typically a marker of Orthodox Judaism, in which women are not ordained. Reform Judaism is growing in Israel, but the country is still largely divided into a dramatic binary that's quite foreign to American Jews. Jewish people

are classified as either "dati" - religiously practicing, usually Orthodox - or "chiloni" - secular. Almost every synagogue I entered, and the Western Wall itself, had either a m'chitza - a divider running along the prayer space, dividing the larger area for men from the smaller space for women - or an ezrat nashim, a women's balcony. (Up there, in this space, is not an ezrat nashim. It's a former choir loft.) One morning in Ts'fat, I got up early and left Jonathan and Mike asleep to go pray in one of the city's old stone synagogues. When I and my friend arrived, he was quickly ushered through the door to the main sanctuary. The man who greeted us impatiently motioned me to follow him up an outside set of stairs. He showed me into a small room on the side of the main building. The door shut behind me and I looked around at the empty pews and the small windows, lace over them, through which no light came. I realized that I was in the ezrat nashim, and that the little windows looked down into the main sanctuary, where in tallitot and tefillin, a large group of men sang loud praises to God. The plastered walls were so thick I could barely hear the prayers. The cantorial, ritually knowledgeable and involved, and emphatically female parts of my Jewish identity, which I'd been cultivating with such energy in America, felt abruptly boxed out of that "religious" space. I spent about five minutes raging. Then I settled down with a prayerbook and a box of tissues for my streaming cold, and thought, well, I wanted an authentically Israeli prayer experience. Here I am. Hineini. Let me try out what I'm offered. I prayed privately, and blew my nose loudly whenever I felt the need.

My trip taught me that Israeli Jewish identity has lots for me to learn from - but that American Jewish identity also has plenty to teach, as I heard URJ president Rabbi Rick Jacobs affirm at the URJ Biennial in Boston in December 2017. American Jewish identity is both multi-denominational and pluralistic. We are enormously creative, in our Jewish rituals and prayer languages and prayer spaces. We are democratic in our power structure. Individual spiritual leaders and communities have first say over what happens in our own organizations. There's no national rabbinic authority that comes close to the power of the orthodox Chief Rabbinate of Israel. I was grateful, as I prayed in Israel, to come with a homegrown, unshakeable conviction in my own right to be involved in Jewish prayer in an egalitarian way.

Often, Israelis traveling here in the States to Jewish communities have their

own experience of foreign identity - similarly enriching, similarly complicated. This summer, I had the opportunity to spend an evening with the teenagers of Friends Forever International. This is an organization based in Portsmouth, NH that brings together Arab and Jewish teens from Israel, and Irish and British teens from the UK, for a joint camp session in America. It's a program that builds trust and respect between them. They learn, teach, and engage in community service during their two weeks here. Our Rabbi Emeritus, Ira Korinow, was instrumental in establishing the program in 2008. I met a session of Friends Forever in July as they cooked a delicious stew, served it to the Mitch's Place residents, and then ran an educational-cultural program for kids and adult residents at Emmaus House, a homeless shelter in downtown Haverhill. At the end of the evening, the students - 5 Arabs and 5 Jews - presented about their experiences together. One pair of boys, a Jew and an Arab, had become particular friends and they spoke honestly and humorously about the process of unpacking their own stereotypes, learning to laugh with each other, and finding some common interests. The teens prepare for this trip throughout the foregoing school year, and when they go home to Israel, the learning doesn't stop - they have to create and then implement a joint community service project. Some of the graduates go on to become advisors. The group I met had a former student as a leader. One of the other Jewish trip leaders, a teacher at a high school in Eilat, told me it was her 3rd Friends Forever trip, and that she found enormous value in the program. She could see her students gradually open up. The Arab school from which this session's students came is in the north of Israel, and Eilat is in the south, which added a layer of geographical complexity to getting the students together during the year. But she never doubted how necessary such efforts are. They plant hope for Israel's future.

Meeting these young students was also a powerful learning for me. I got to share with them, what American Judaism is like, and to hear from them what Israeli impressions of us are! After a little, uncharacteristic hesitation, they outed with the two main assumptions about America that their visit had at least partially debunked. The first was that most Americans are rude and nasty to each other. (I know. I know. They mostly get it from our movies, though.) The second was that to live in America as a Jew, is to constantly endure antisemitic attacks. A trip leader said quietly, "Do you feel safe here? I mean, we know you're not all making aliyah, so it can't be as

bad as the news makes out, but...." I was startled by this statement. I don't feel constantly under attack as a Jew. But looking back at the news of this past year - international, national and local - the acts of antisemitism, large and small, which the diaspora Jewish community has endured, are sobering, and they are increasing. The violence in Pittsburgh and Poway rightly made headlines, and shocked us all to our core. But the small nastinesses that pop up in our local news, and the ones that people don't even report to the Anti-Defamation League, the ADL, are also troubling. Perhaps some of us here today have had pennies thrown at us; have overheard "Hitler was right;" have seen a swastika scrawled in some out-of-the-way but public spot. Or maybe we've encountered the subtler antisemitic tropes, sometimes even well-meant: You Jews are so good with money. You're all too educated for your own good. You're globalists. It hurts us. It enrages us. It is not normal, thank God; it is not at most times, it is not in most places. But experiencing and fighting antisemitism are part of our diaspora life in America, and I for my part am glad that Israel is a place where that battle is not necessary.

Still, we don't fight this fight alone. This year has also brought friends and allies to the table, ready to learn more about antisemitism and how they can counter it when they see it. I had an opportunity this month to speak with a high school elective class in New Hampshire that's spending this whole year on antisemitism. On Sunday, October 27th, in Newton MA, the ADL is sponsoring a day-long forum on antisemitism - identifying it and combatting it. Scholars and politicians alike will speak to this issue; Governor Baker is one of the featured speakers. Our Temple is a community partner for this event, and I hope you'll join me at it. Israel's existence does not immunize us here from antisemitism. But the pride in being Jewish that experiencing Israel can help us cultivate, becomes a shield in our hands.

My time in Israel, with glorious complexity, gave me an enormous infusion of its own potent cocktail of Jewish identity. I know that the experience of going to Israel has been as powerful for some of you as it was for me, because the Temple last ran an Israel trip in 1992 and you're STILL talking about it! :)

It may be a few years before we take such a trip together again, but there are

many other ways for us here to connect directly with Israel through personal experiences. We have our Temple's monthly Israel chavurah, our monthly discussion about Israel, following Shabbat morning services. When I was looking at the Temple's website, considering whether or not to apply to work as your cantor, I was bowled over when I found the Israel Chavurah. Israel is often - and to me, this is tragic - a complete third rail for Jewish conversation, for laypeople and clergy alike. Jews are afraid to talk with one another about Israel, for fear of offense or even rupture in their relationships. Here, we talk about Israel every month! And we do it with honesty, and respect for each other, and different perspectives. We bring our whole selves to the conversation.

Together, we can share first-person experiences of Israel - the experiences of our members who have traveled and lived there, me, our Rabbinic Intern Jen Stevens, our shaliach tzibbur Phil Platcow. We can study together. We can sing Israeli folksongs together, in a spring singalong on May 17th. (Mark your calendars.) We can pick a project of tz'dakkah, justice work, in Israel, support it and track its progress - Mazon, Magein David Adom (the Israeli Red Cross), the Jewish National Fund, or a host of others. (There's JNF literature on the tables outside.) We can learn from organizations who make connecting American Jews with Israel their work, including Combined Jewish Philanthropies, which runs Israel "mission" trips. We can learn from Israeli artists and teachers, here and in the greater Boston area. Limmud Boston is coming up. We can teach and taste Israel right here in Haverhill.

As individuals, and as a community, my hope and my goal is for us to continue to actively engage with Israel. Daniel Gordis wrote of Israel and America in a New York Times opinion piece just last week, "In a world that is darkening for the Jews once again, we need each other now more than ever." [<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/23/opinion/international-world/benny-gantz-jews-israel.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>] If, as I hope, you do make your own connection with Israel, by studying its culture and history or by traveling there, you will also have to reckon with it as a political state, with all of the ramifications that carries - one that makes decisions you may or may not agree with. No country is perfect. But Israel - Yisra'eil - is ours to **grapple** with.

There are as many Jewish kinds of connection with Israel as there are Jews. My prayer for our relationship with Israel, yours and mine, is this: let's engage with Israel knowing that our grappling is as holy as Ya'akov's was. May we, too, find blessings in these encounters. And most of all: let it be done with love.

L'shanah tovah.