

“Seeing Beyond What Is Visible”

Rosh Hashanah 5772

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If I could, I would send you all home to come back in a few weeks on Simchat Torah – not that you’re not welcome now **J** - but I hope we can build Jewish identity not only on solemnity but also on celebration. In case a few of you don’t take me up on the invitation, I’ll tell you that we will take two Torahs out of the ark: we’ll read one rolled to the end – and when we do, the last word of the Torah is: Israel. In the very next aliyah, we bring forward the 2nd Torah and begin anew with the word: “Bereshit” – in the beginning. From Israel to beginning – for me this year, the journey feels not just ritual; it feels autobiographical.

I was walking with Jen and the kids in a mall and I saw a backpack sitting by a table, unattended. I looked around. Nobody had noticed it. So I walked over to it, took a deep breath, picked it up, looked inside, ruffled through some books and found the phone number of the owner. I walked it over to the information booth...at Northgate Mall, and realized that coming back from Israel was going to take some getting used to.

Life is easier here, less stressful. I was relieved to come back. I debated, by the way, over how to write that last sentence – should I say “I was relieved to come back” or “to come home?” What is “home?” Is it how long you live somewhere? We have lived here a few months; some of you have lived here five years, ten years, fifteen years, all of your lives - when is a place finally home? Is home always where you grew up? Is it where your family is? Which family? Where your parents? Where you and your partner or spouse live? Is home where “my love lies waiting silently for me...”? Is home wherever those things are? Or is home for a Jew where people speak the language of the psalms and where stores close on Friday afternoons and a siren sounds minutes before candle lighting to tell you Shabbat is beginning soon? Is it where homecoming doesn’t happen on Kol Nidrei and nobody goes to school on Rosh HaShanah and your kids hear Hanukkah songs on the radio in December and don’t feel different from anyone else because they’re Jewish? The Jewish people have a State for the first time in 2,000 years. Jennifer and the boys and I lived there for a year and returned to North Carolina – did we come home? I don’t know, but I think it’s important for the questions not to remain unasked.

It makes me sad how nervous I am about this talk. My topic today is not Israel, per se; it is the importance of asking unasked questions; it is the importance of looking at the hidden costs of our lives. I’m sad because people have said to me – don’t talk about Israel, like it’s a third rail of our community; that it’s too painful, that people disagree too much, that you’ll hurt people and alienate people, which is not my aim, God forbid. But there is a cost too in keeping silent; in, on the one hand, blunting criticism, and, on the other, remaining silent when we should stand up, in avoiding subjects because they are hard.

Others say talking about Israel on the High Holidays not only risks alienating people, but risks profaning holy time and holy space. I agree - we are here to reflect on what is timeless, not just timely, but the significance of Israel for modern Jewish identity lies far beyond a particular policy or government; Israel is the most audacious project of the Jewish people since the Temple was destroyed 2,000 years ago and it has deeply impacted Jewishness in our time. In a book called The Jewish Body by Dr. and Professor Melvin Konner of Emory University, he writes about how Zionism literally transformed the Jewish body. After centuries in which Jewish resistance to persecution become “quiet and spiritual,” or confined to “the realm of fantasy” in characters such as “the golem, a sort of Frankenstein monster created by a Rabbi to protect the Jews of Prague (Konner, 121),” Zionist thinkers such as Dr. Max Nordau and the poet Emma Lazarus wrote about the importance of literally re-creating the Jewish body and moving Jewish existence from inside the beit midrash – the study hall – outside to the field, the earth. It

is no exaggeration to say that you and I would not look the way that we do, dress the way that we do, were it not, at least in part, for the movement that created the State of Israel.

What is timeless about Judaism is not only ideas we argue about; it is the story of the Jewish people. The philosopher David Hartman points out that before we received the Torah, we came out of Egypt; before we were a religion, we were a people. A sense of peoplehood – of connection with Jews all over the world, with Jews of the past and the future – this sense is the soil in which the Jewish ideas grow and in which ritual observance flourishes; a commitment to Jewish ideas will wither if cut off from the roots and nourishment of the Jewish people. Subscribing to Jewish beliefs absent love for the historical family that gave them to us is a misshapen, frail conception of Jewish identity that cannot last. If only because Israel is home to the largest population of Jews in the world, Israel deeply affects our collective sense of what it means to be Jewish. For some, this is a source of pride and celebration; for others, it is a source of pain and anxiety. Not to talk about Israel on these High Holy Days, while perhaps easier, risks weakening our connection to the Jewish people around the world and, in doing so, we avoid confronting an important part of our own identity too.

I said before coming back was a relief, that life here is less stressful. Stores are bigger. We thank God for Costco – is there a blessing for things that come in bulk? People drive more nicely here – perhaps because policeman can spend time on things like giving speeding tickets. Things seem more calm here, more peaceful. But I wonder if it's more peaceful here, or if the peace I feel is just because something else is more hidden, distant.

I remember our last Shabbat in Jerusalem, sitting in synagogue with my sons when a group of young men and women came in for kabbalat Shabbat, the women in dresses, the men in khakis, slacks and sandals. They all sat down, but before they picked up their siddurim, they lifted their M-16s over their shoulders and placed them beneath their seats, making sure to place the straps around their ankles because they are required to wear their guns all the time. If a group of young people came into Beth El with M-16s, we might be worried, even disturbed. There, I found it strangely beautiful. Don't misunderstand me: I yearn for a day when young Israeli men and women won't carry guns, but I found it beautiful because it was real. What I mean by that is that the army wasn't some anonymous group of people sleeping in the dust 10,000 miles away overseas; they weren't a soldier or two who we applaud for on a plane or thank for their service in an airport; they weren't a headline; the army was these kids home for the weekend, home to pray and eat Shabbat dinner with family. Life here may feel more peaceful, but I wonder if we just make ourselves feel that way because the things that are done so we can go to the shopping mall happen farther away, and are done by strangers? I don't know if I live in a more peaceful place, but, as Arthur Miller once wrote, "Attention must be paid." I want to better understand my life.

Carbon footprint is an interesting term. It points to how the cost of a phone or a computer or a car cannot be adequately calculated by what an item costs to create it and bring it to the store; that cost is measured from past to present. But there is a future cost – hidden from our eyes – associated with using and disposing of the things we use, costs we kick far down the road until we can't see them. We convince ourselves that because we can't see them, they are, somehow, less real. But one of the major insights of the Jewish tradition is that ***we must pay attention to things beyond what we can see.***

The prohibition against idolatry is essentially a prohibition against believing that we can satisfy ourselves with what we can see, against believing that God can somehow be contained within what can observe. We must search beyond the surface and, as best we can, take responsibility for the hidden costs of our lives. Returning to the United States this year, it wasn't the difference in language or food that was most jarring; what struck me is how many of the costs of our lives are, in some ways, more deeply hidden beneath the surface.

Is Israel so different? Sometimes, "no." Our family was able to live in West Jerusalem, walk to schools, take buses, even drive on restricted roads that run past Jericho down to the Dead Sea, and

never focus on Palestinian cities and Israeli settlement communities on the other side of the fence. Except for a few cars with green license plates and some construction workers here and there, we could shop, swim, even vacation and never see a Palestinian, never focus on how my life in West Jerusalem is connected to life in Palestinian and Israeli communities across the Green Line.

On the other hand, the costs of the conflict are not so hidden, even in West Jerusalem. Jen and the boys and I shopped and ate out and did all the normal things people do. But the kids soon noticed how at every mall and restaurant and café, there was a security guard who checked our bags and asked each time: “יש נשק? Do you have a weapon?” It was one of the first Hebrew phrases they learned. We took Tuesday tiyulim – Tuesday outings – around Jerusalem and, as we waited for the bus to the Science museum or the shuk, our older boys would inevitably read the plaques on the wall next to the bus stop: Here on February 2, 2004, 8 people were killed in a terrorist attack on Bus 14a. As they read the plaque and scanned the bus numbers that went by, I wondered during those awkward moments if they felt safe, or if they wondered why we brought them to a place where people blew up buses. Later in the year, when there was a bus bombing in Jerusalem at a place we’d been to many times, it was not possible to ignore the conflict; just living there felt like placing your child on the front line.

Is life here more peaceful because our children don’t see plaques in parks in memory of people who died on their way to work and school? Or is America just better at erasing its past and plunging headlong forward into the future. I don’t know the answers to these questions, but I think it is important they not remain unasked.

When I was in Israel, I wanted to know more about the cost of my cup of coffee; I wanted to better understand its “security footprint,” so I arranged with a friend of mine, a fellow Mandel fellow, Dr. Daniel Moses, to take me to spend a day in the Territories. Daniel is the Executive Director of Seeds for Peace, a summer camp in Maine whose mission is to help young people from regions of conflict develop leadership skills necessary to advance reconciliation and coexistence. Through his work Daniel has strong relationships with Palestinian educators so we hired a driver and spent the day visiting a school in East Jerusalem, a school in a United Nations Refugee Camp, a Palestinian village, and finally, we walked through the Palestinian half of Hebron to Ma’arat HaMachpela – the Cave of the Patriarchs – which is home to a mosque and a synagogue. As part of our day, we visited the Kalandia checkpoint near Jerusalem. Instead of just driving through the checkpoint, I told Daniel I wanted to get out and walk through the checkpoint to the Palestinian side and then walk back to the Israeli side. I’m glad we did – not because it was easy, but because it was important to see more clearly the truth of my cup of coffee.

The checkpoint is a complicated, difficult place. I saw Palestinians wait in single file lines demarcated by large metal fences that go from floor to ceiling; they are called forward one-by-one, pass through metal detectors, all under watchful video surveillance, in order to get from their homes in Ramallah and its surrounding villages to school and work in Jerusalem and other parts of Israel. I saw Israeli soldiers – the age of college students at Duke and UNC just like the kids I saw with their guns in synagogue – sit behind a foot of bullet proof glass; they fear a suicide bomb as has happened many times at these checkpoints. That day there was a problem; we waited for ½ an hour to try and walk back through but finally gave up and called our driver who, because of his permit, could drive us through, pick us up in his car, and take us to our next destination another way. I have no idea how long it took the people at the checkpoint to get through, if they got through at all that day. Traveling to the West Bank, talking with Palestinian educators and sharing with them our parallel and divergent struggles to educate the next generation, and experiencing just a bit of the struggles that are part of their daily lives – it did not weaken my support of Israel – but in allowing me to see more of what was invisible – it deepened my understanding of my life.

As Jews, we walk through the world differently, more confident, less anxious about persecution because we have a State – As a pawnshop owner in downstate Virginia reported in [The Provincials](#),

“Israel has brought Jews up off their knees onto two feet. For the first time, I feel more like a tank commander than a suffering old Jew.” One need only ask Jews old enough to remember life here before Israel to realize how deeply Israel has affected American Jewish self-esteem. Israel is part of all our collective story, but Israel is not free. Seeing its costs – paid by Israelis who live in a rough neighborhood, and by Palestinians who live a difficult daily existence – is harder than reading newspapers or watching CNN, it is harder than riding on a tour bus, but the work of the High Holidays is not just for God to do an accounting of us, but for us to do an accounting of ourselves, to ask, what are the unseen costs of the life I enjoy? To do t’shuva, to reorient our lives means going beyond the visible to see as much as possible of the things that make up the stories of our lives.

I have criticisms of Israel. At Mandel, a number of Israelis told me they wished I could be their rabbi. I reminded them that Israel is the only place in the world where I can’t be, the only country in the Western world where the government will not authorize me as a non-Orthodox rabbi to perform a Jewish wedding. Israel’s record on human trafficking is a source of unmitigated pain and, whatever one’s political opinions, if one cannot mourn for a moment the suffering of Palestinian children before leaping to an explanation of why it is the fault of their leaders then, to borrow a phrase from the poet Yeats, “Too long a sacrifice has made of your heart a stone.” My criticisms, and those of others, don’t make me or anyone else an enemy, or unsupportive, of Israel. The Talmud teaches – אין אהבה בלי תוכחה there is no true love without holy criticism, and I love Israel.

But sometimes, I’m reminded of an episode of The Simpsons in which Marge Simpson is making Thanksgiving Dinner when her mother walks into the kitchen. She has terrible laryngitis and every word out of her mouth is an effort. She watches her daughter for a few moments, stops her and says, “I only want to say one thing: You never do anything right.” We can, we should, criticize but the Talmud also teaches – אין תוכחה אים אין אהבה – criticism only works when grounded in love; it works in the context of a committed loving relationship with our brothers and sisters.

You are all inundated, as I am, with many ways to support Israel. I have some that speak to me but as a rabbi, I don’t aim to convince you of the rightness of mine; I only hope to model that it is good to be involved, to pay attention to, and to find a way to connect with Israel, for what happens there is part of our story. If you have not gone, I urge you to go, visit. Involve yourself. Not only can it be a wonderful vacation, but many organizations can provide wonderful ways to give of ourselves; Israel, amongst many other needy places in the world, needs us too. I will offer one example that our President, Sandy Kessler, brought to my attention: Atzum. Atzum was founded by a teacher of mine, Rabbi Levi Lauer, based on Herzl’s belief that Israel should be an example for the world in how a society addresses its social problems and crises. Atzum works to remedy injustices in Israel by supporting victims of terror, righteous gentiles who saved Jews in the Shoah, by fighting against human trafficking in Israel and by creating a project for elders in the Ethiopian Jewish community that records video testimony of their tortuous journey to Israel for future generations of Ethiopian youth. If Atzum is for you, great. If it’s not, our local Israel Center, the Federation and virtually any Jewish organization can help you find a way to connect and work with those who want to make Israel better.

Rosh Hashanah is a day of beginnings: of the year, of the world. Yet all beginnings begin somewhere. We might think the Torah is different – that God created something from nothing, but that’s not what it says – the Hebrew *B’reishit* doesn’t mean “In the beginning” – it means, In the beginning OF God’s creating the heavens and the earth - we’re picking up in the middle; some things already exist. The Torah doesn’t tell us where the waters came from, where the darkness came from...they were there before. Every beginning means using what’s already there, reorganizing it, seeing it anew. The work of t’shuvah requires a fresh start – yet starting anew does not mean ignoring or trying to get rid of the life you’ve lived up until this moment. Just the opposite – it means struggling to see truly how we have lived and, having taken stock of our lives, we can begin the work of reorganizing them and beginning anew.

After 13 years in Los Angeles, and a year in Jerusalem, our family is finally here and, as much as any place outside Israel can feel like home for a Jew, we are home, and grateful to be here, to be beginning anew. Israel – both ancient and new – was part of our journey, it is part of the collective history of all our lives. It shapes, in part, our experience of Jewish life in America. Israel is not the only thing we should talk about – as I said, I hope you come back on Simchat Torah to sing and dance and celebrate Torah – but Israel is part of us, part of our beginning – we move from Yisrael to Bereshit - it is part of what shapes us as last year comes to a close and a new one is poised to begin. The hope of the High Holidays is the chance to start anew. To do so, we must take stock of what is here; look more deeply and honestly at the whole picture of who we have been, must make visible what is invisible, either because it was hard to see, or because we chose not to look.

This Rosh Hashanah, may God give us the courage to look back upon the year passed, and forward to the year ahead, to ask uncomfortable questions and, in bringing what was in darkness to light, may we be blessed to begin anew, to reshape ourselves, Israel & the Jewish people, and a world much in need of our loving hands. Shana Tova.