

Israel: Healing A Fractured People

When Moses brought the Israelites across the Red Sea to freedom, they wanted to sing a song to God. But so long had they been slaves to Pharaoh that they had forgotten how to sing. They opened their mouths, but no sound came out.

At that moment, God felt their frustration. According to an old midrash, God sent birds from all the corners of the world to teach the Israelites how to sing. And so, it was a custom among the Jews of Eastern Europe that each year on Shabbat Shirah, the Sabbath when the story of the crossing of the Red Sea is read in the Torah, the children of the synagogue would go outside and spread about crumbs for the birds in gratitude for the gift of song that the birds of the world had shared with the people Israel.

One day in 1948, an old man carrying many huge packages arrived at the port of Haifa. He stood in a long line of people who had come from Europe. They all looked tired and worn from their long journey and from the terrible events that brought them to the new State of Israel. But they all looked forward to becoming citizens of the new Jewish state.

When the old man approached the immigration officer, he set down his heavy bags and presented his passport.

"Name?" demanded the officer, curtly holding his clipboard and pen ready.

"Elimelech son of Shlomo."

"Occupation?" The officer continued the interrogation without looking up.

"I am a rabbi."

"Name of the city where you last lived?"

"Chelm."

"What was that you said?" The officer looked up from his clipboard. "Where did you say you come from?"

"Chelm. I come from the town of Chelm."

"You come from the town of Chelm, as in the famous Wise Men of Chelm? The ones from the stories we learned as children?" The officer appreciated this bit of humor after his long, dull day.

But the rabbi did not get the joke. He answered quite seriously. "Yes, that's right. I come from Chelm. I am the rabbi of Chelm. Or, rather, I was the rabbi of Chelm, before..." A look of sadness crossed the rabbi's face as he remembered what had brought him to Haifa.

The officer did not react to the rabbi's sadness. Instead, he laughed out loud and called out to the other officers in the station. "Hey, everybody, listen to this: We have a celebrity here! He says he's the rabbi of Chelm. You know all the stories of the Wise Men of Chelm? Here is their famous rabbi. The rabbi of Chelm!"

Loud laughter filled the station as all the other officers and many of the passengers crowded around. People gawked and mocked. "The Wise Men of Chelm? Their rabbi is here? Can you believe this?" Finally the officer returned to

his business. "OK, old fellow. Enough jokes," he said. "What is your name, and where have you come from?"

The rabbi explained in all sincerity: "My name is Rabbi Elimelech son of Shlomo, and I really am the rabbi of Chelm. You may laugh at the stories, but they are true. Chelm is-or rather was-a real place. The Wise Men of Chelm were very real. And I was their rabbi!"

The officer looked into the man's eyes and realized that he wasn't going to change his mind. So he wrote down what he was told. "OK, fine," he said. "Have it your way. Elimelech son of Shlomo, rabbi of Chelm. So, Rabbi, what's in all these packages?"

The rabbi looked right back into the face of the officer. "They are cages, filled with birds," he stated.

"Birds?" The officer was even more surprised. "You brought birds all the way from Europe?"

"Yes," replied the rabbi, opening one of his bags. "I brought birds."

"Why birds? Were you afraid there were no birds here in Israel? I can assure you we have plenty of birds-"

"No, you don't understand. When the Nazis came, they took everyone. Everyone. The men, the women, the children-everyone was taken away. By some miracle I survived. I was liberated from the concentration camp. And after I was liberated, I went back to my village. I went back to Chelm to see if anyone else had survived. But there was no one. Not one other person from Chelm had

survived. I found myself alone. I stood in the burned-out shell of our synagogue, and I was alone.

"And suddenly I realized what day it was-it was Shabbat Shirah, the Sabbath when we read the story of the crossing of the Red Sea. And the birds came, all the birds, as they had come every year to eat the children's crumbs and to sing with us! But there were no children, and there were no crumbs for the birds. The birds were starving in the cold of the winter. So I decided I must save them. I couldn't save the children, and I couldn't save the song, but perhaps I could save the birds. I picked up the birds and put them in these cages. I picked up as many as I could carry. And I have brought them here. Here there are Jewish children. Here there is Jewish song. Here there is Jewish life. Here there is a future for the birds and for Jewish children. So here the birds will live again."

The astonished officer stamped the rabbi's passport and said: "Welcome to Israel Rabbi Elimelech son of Shlomo of Chelm. Here you will find Jewish children. Here you will find Jewish people who sing. Here you and your birds will find life again. Welcome to Israel, Rabbi."¹

Even if this story, from Rabbi Ed Feinstein, didn't exactly happen as written, I have always been moved by its message. It has always filled me with such pride – pride at the return to, and establishment of, a Jewish state that was only dreamed about for thousands of years. Proud of how much this small state has accomplished in such a short period of time.

¹ Feinstein, *Capturing The Moon, The Last Story of the Wise Men of Chelm*

Despite the challenges she has always faced, Israel has always felt like a miracle. A safe haven for Jews to return to, connecting us back to the land where our ancestors walked; returning us, quite literally, to our roots. I have always believed that Israel was a model, albeit not a perfect one, of what Judaism had to offer the world. A land that promised, in her Declaration of Independence to :

... promote the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; [Israel] will be based on precepts of liberty, justice and peace taught by the Hebrew prophets; will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens without distinction of race, creed or sex; will guarantee full freedom of conscience, worship, education and culture; will safeguard the sanctity and inviolability of shrines and holy places of all religions...

[PAUSE]

How many of you remember what happened, on this exact date in the Hebrew calendar, fifty years ago today?

Yes, you are correct, today marks fifty years since the Yom Kippur War. Fifty years ago today, the young Jewish state and the entire Jewish people were taken off guard, attacked from the south by the Egyptians, the north from the Syrians, and the whole of the Jewish people feared for the destruction of the State that had, at that point, existed for only a quarter of a century.

Fifty years ago, we faced incredible external danger- but against all odds, thanks to the incredible heroism of the IDF and Israeli resolve - we survived.

Today, the State of Israel faces yet another existential threat to all it has built and accomplished in the past 75 years. The dream of our ancestors that we have all been blessed to watch come true in our lifetime is, perhaps more than any other point in its history, at risk of becoming a nightmare. But this time, the danger comes from within.

I hope you have all paid some level of attention to the news and challenges Israel has faced this year. Without getting into the granular details (though I encourage everyone to make sure you're up-to-speed on the bigger picture), I'll give you an "on one foot" overview.

Prime Minister Netanyahu and his coalition government have asserted that the judicial system in Israel is flawed and gives too much power to the courts. In order to address this issue, his government has pushed for wide-ranging reform aimed at curbing the powers of the judiciary.

Although polls have shown that the majority of Israelis support some level of judicial reform, for nearly nine months, tens of thousands of Israelis have taken to

the streets on a weekly basis to protest Netanyahu's proposed reforms, asserting that they go much too far, and tip the balance in favor of the extremely right-wing coalition government that does not represent the interests of many Israelis.

At heart of the issue lies a critical conversation about what it means to call Israel a “Jewish” and “Democratic” state. Remember, Israel is relatively “young” at 75 years old. Unfortunately, she has been busy dealing with external threats from neighbors for decades, and these conversations have not always been made a priority.

Dr. Micah Goodman, one of Israel's most influential public intellectuals in Israel, explains:

“The majority of Israelis are against this reform ...(but) right now, the majority of Israelis have a minority of the power, regarding these issues. Two constitutional instincts have been unleashed and clashing with each other. The Israelis who want to be empowered through government versus the Israelis who want to be protected from government..

That said, Dr. Goodman points out that:

“...when you look at the polls, you see something very surprising. You see that most Israelis agree with each other. How shocking is that? That, while we hate each other more than we've ever hated each other before, just because of politics, at this high moment of hate, there's still a critical mass

of agreement. So this is the paradox of this moment, that Israelis hate each other, emotionally speaking, and agree with each other, policy-speaking..."

Over the summer, our oldest daughter spent six weeks in Israel. She heard from many speakers about the current political situation, attended a protest or two, and watched as Israelis marched through the streets yelling about de-mo-cratiyah (democracy) as she was out shopping with friends. One message that stuck out to her was when Yizhar Hess, the vice chairman of the World Zionist Organization, told her group that he believes that Jews can live anywhere that is a democracy, except in a Jewish state that is not.

As I was speaking to her regularly throughout her trip from this side of the ocean, I was spending a few weeks up at Camp Yavneh, a pluralistic Jewish overnight camp in New Hampshire. Yavneh is a Zionist camp with many Israeli campers and staff, and this summer you could feel the stress and tension they carried with them.

One afternoon, I was sitting with a young Israeli staff member who was helping me set up a printer in our camp house, and I asked him how he was doing and how it felt to be outside of Israel in this particular summer. Was it hard? "No," he replied, with pain in his eyes, "I am just relieved. Relieved to be away. It is just too stressful. It is just too much."

The great relief of being able to escape the political and social turmoil of Israel, the relief of being in New Hampshire instead of Tel Aviv, was so sad to hear. But this young Israeli was not alone. A poll this summer found that nearly 28 percent of Israelis were considering leaving the country – not because of the threats from others, but because of the divisions within.

Dr. Goodman issued a warning about the dangers of power quoting the speech that Moses gave to the people of Israel when they first entered into the land.

Take care lest you forget Adonai your God... and you say to yourselves: My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me...²

Be careful, warns Moses, because when you have power, you think you are in ultimate control; you forget the Torah values that should be your guide. You may forget the imperatives to care for the stranger, the orphan, to take care of all of Israelite society and all of God's creatures...

² Deuteronomy 8:16

*"Behold," says Moses towards the end of his magnum opus, "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life- so that you and your offspring will live."*³ The choice is in the hands of the people.

That remains true today. While the issues are complicated, exacerbated by emotions that are running deep on all sides, Israeli citizens have the ability to "choose life."

Israel's President Isaac Herzog has been an important voice all year insisting that Israelis from all sides of society, left, right, religious, secular, pro and anti-judicial reform must talk. They must work to find common ground. And we, as their diaspora family, must encourage them to do so.

My prayer is that the majority in Israel who do not want this reform done in this manner remember all of this. That they remember that they can choose unity over division, love and mutual understanding over hatred and disdain; "reasonableness" and compromise over fanaticism and zealotry. When we are united, we are strong, but when we are divided- we are our own worst enemy.

³ Deuteronomy 30:19

We should all remember what Golda Meir said to young Senator Joe Biden, as tensions were heating up before the Yom Kippur war. Israel's secret weapon was, and remains, that *"we have nowhere else to go."*

Echoing this sentiment last month, author Yossi Klein Halevi reminded his readers:

*"This country is too small, too intimate, too embattled, to turn our deep debates into irreconcilable schism – like the kind of fantasies circulating among some liberal Israelis of a new 'two-state solution,' the theocratic state of Judea and the liberal state of Israel. If we have returned home only to recreate the dysfunctional conditions that led to our ruin the last time we were here, then Jewish history will be the story of failure."*⁴

I refuse to believe that our story will end in failure. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote: *"the greatest heresy is despair."* Indeed Israel's national anthem, Hatikvah, means "hope." It is that hope that we need now, more than ever. Not a blind hope, but hope rooted in history, a hope rooted in understanding what it means to be an *or la-goyim*, a light unto the nations, and the responsibility that goes along with that aspiration from the prophet Isaiah.

I have always been, and remain even in complicated and contentious times, a proud Zionist. At the same time, these days, my relationship with Israel is in many

⁴ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-wounded-jewish-psyche-and-the-divided-israeli-soul/>

ways a painful struggle. I am so incredibly sad, worried, and frustrated at the political and social division.

As someone who has felt this strong connection to Israel my whole life, I am one of the 45% of U.S. Jews who, in the most recent Pew Research Center study, say that caring about Israel is “essential” to what being Jewish means to them. But this percentage drops significantly among younger Jews and within the non-Orthodox community. Making the case for why Israel should be an essential part of the American Jewish experience has never been easy. It has always been hard to explain or defend the challenges faced by liberal Judaism in Israel. The incredibly complicated and intractable conflict with the Palestinians has always been a target for deep critique and challenge, particularly from young adults. But the crisis of this past year has brought us to a new level of challenge, a new reason that it is difficult for many American Jews to establish, let alone deepen, their connection to Israel.

This is part of the reason why this spring we will be taking a congregational trip to Israel during the first week of April. This is a critical time for us as American Jews to support Israel, to support our Israeli brothers and sisters, and to spend time learning about Israel's strengths and challenges up close. I hope that you will join us as we take in the majesty of Israel, and take time to learn about how we can support the pro-democracy work taking place. Sermons and articles can

only explain so much. To “get it,” you have to feel, and to feel you have to experience- our history, our people, our homeland.

As we begin this new year, blessed to still exist as a people, blessed to have a thriving state in our ancient homeland, may we remember that there is always hope. As American Jews, we must support those voices in Israel calling for dialogue and unity, and making sincere efforts to ensure that all of Israel's citizens – Jewish, Muslim, Christian, secular, religious, left wing, right wing, Mizrahi, Yemenite, Ethiopian, Ashkenazi, Sefardi – are God's creatures, deserving of equal rights and freedoms.

Since 2020, on Yom Kippur, around 2000 Jews of all types, from Orthodox to secular and everything in between, have gathered together on Yom Kippur for prayers in Dizengoff Square in Tel Aviv. Dizengoff Square is an iconic traffic circle that's part of one of the city's main shopping areas, thanks to the many surrounding designer shops and cafes. It is also, incidentally, a spot where protesters have been gathering for nine months.

Although this large public outdoor space in the middle of the city may seem like an odd setting for a religious service, this event has become a new holiday tradition cherished by a wide spectrum of Jews, including both the most

religious and the very secular, in part because it connects their two groups at a time of growing polarization.

The organizers have included a mechtza at this event to separate the men and women in order to enable Orthodox Jews to join. They have described the event as “a touching symbol of love and unity,” and an event that is about inclusion, something more and more important in today's fractured social and political environment.

Last month, the Tel Aviv municipality told the organizers that this year they would not be permitted to erect any sort of mechtza because it violated the city's ban on physical gender segregation in public spaces. The ban was initially implemented to prevent discrimination against women and the violation of equality in public settings.

While the ban on this mechtza was welcomed by those who oppose religious coercion, critics have expressed concern that this just reinforces Tel Aviv's image as a city that does not value religious pluralism and that does not make space for religious activities and people.

The organizers appealed the municipality's decision, explaining that this was the only way they could maintain the halachic requirements, the Jewish laws, that

would enable Orthodox men and women to join the service. On Friday the Supreme Court upheld the original ruling that prohibited the group from erecting a mechitza for this public service.

Ultimately, the group leaders have decided to go ahead and hold the service anyhow, ostensibly planning to figure out a workaround that would both uphold the religious requirements and comply with the city's ruling.

While the issue of who controls religion has become a central piece of the protests against the judicial reform, I am hopeful that this service and the organizer's decision to "make it work" serves as a powerful symbol of the potential for a united Israeli people that we can and should all hold on to.

It is this spirit of unity that we pray for on this Yom Kippur. It is this spirit of unity, as *am echad im lev echad*, one people, with one heart, that reminds us that *Am Yisrael Chai*, the people of Israel, the nation of Israel lives. Even, and especially in difficult times, may we never forget this ancient and sacred challenge: to live as one people, moving forward together with a commitment to one another, to our people, and to our land. That is our prayer. That is our hope. (Hatikvah)

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