

A D'var Torah from Rabba Sara in Israel

The Flawed Dream Shabbat Devarim, 5773

This week, while in Israel studying at the Hartman Institute in Yerushalayim, I experienced moments of *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred, and moments of optimism, illuminating the dream of unity and pluralism.

At 6:20am on Rosh Chodesh Av, I boarded a bus with other men and women to go pray *shacharit* at the Kotel. The police escorted us to Sha'ar Ha'ashpot, and as we drove to the old city, Anat Hoffman, an organizer of Women Of the Wall, led us in song, using one of my favorite melodies. "*Ozi, v'zimrat ka... God is my might and praise.*" This was the first time I was going to participate in a Rosh Chodesh service at the Kotel, and I felt strength, and joy. However, when we arrived, the police did not permit our group of 300 people to enter the Kotel plaza, claiming that there was not enough space for us. To my own eyes, the plaza and the area closer to the Kotel were not visibly crowded. We were barricaded into a small area and surrounded by young Haredi men and women.

We started *davening*, and the Haredim began singing louder in an attempt to drown out our *tefillot*. We called out "*shema yisrael Hashem elokaynu Hashem echad*, Listen oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One," and they called us Nazis. We said the words of *hallel* and they told us to go home, and threw eggs at us.

I cried, but it wasn't because of the taunting words or the egg that I had to wipe off my face. I cried because I couldn't sing the words from *hallel*, "*Pitchu li sha'are zedek*," "Open for me the gates of righteousness," because I was stuck at the entrance of a gate that would not open for me, surrounded by injustice, rather than righteousness. There was a total lack of tolerance and understanding of our differences. For the Haredim at the Kotel, it appeared, there is only one way to express Jewish values; only one acceptable way to pray to the Divine.

And then I heard MK Rabbi Dov Lipman speak to us at the Hartman Institute. Rabbi Lipman made *aliyah* eight years ago, attended Haredi *yeshivot* in Baltimore, and adheres strictly to halakha. A few years ago, in Beit Shemesh, he watched as the Haredim spat at girls for their alleged immodest dress, and he was inspired to get involved in politics. In his talk, he offered us a dream of what Israeli society could be, a society of moderate Haredim and Hilonim (secular Jews), and all those in between, in dialogue with one another. He told us that we are marching towards respecting one another's differences, while maintaining our own individual beliefs. His optimism was magnetic, and difficult to reconcile with the baseless hatred that I experienced at the Kotel just days before Tisha B'av.

I started to ask myself if it was possible to create a neutral space where we could meet in the middle. My thoughts initially brought me to Bereishit, where we read in the Torah that on the second day of creation, God declared: "*Yehi rakiah b'toch hamayim*," "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water." (Bereishit 1:6). Between the Heaven and Earth, God created a vast space, a middle ground. It is in that middle ground where humans eventually populate the world, beginning the journey of humanity. And, in the book of Exodus, God splits the Sea creating space, in the middle of the water for the Jewish people to move forward. It was in that space that we found our way to freedom.

In a country that usually polemicizes most of the big issues, political or social, there does not seem to be much middle ground. That being said, carving out a space to serve as a middle ground is the only way to move forward. It is in that space that we will find compromise.

In the Talmudic Amoraic period (230-500 CE) there were two main Yeshivot, two centers of rabbinic study. Rav was the Founder and Dean of the Yeshiva at Sura, and Shmuel was the Dean of the Yeshiva in Nehardea. Rabbi Yehuda was a disciple of both rabbis. In the Talmud, Rabbi Yehuda often quotes rabbinic teachings in the name of Rav, and other times, in the name of Shmuel. I imagine Rabbi Yehuda as a seeker, traveling back and forth, between the Yeshivot of Sura and Nehardea, searching for truth. But rather than follow directly in either of his rabbis' footsteps, Rabbi Yehuda created his own Yeshiva, Pumbedita, which emerged in the middle, in the space between Rav and Shmuel.

Rabbi Yehuda offers a model for creating a new entity in the space, in the middle. We don't have to fully reject or fully embrace the philosophies of those at either end of the spectrum of beliefs. Rather, we can build a bridge that at least inspires divergent groups to find a way to meet in the space. And then within that space, we must explore growth and respect.

Perhaps, this idea is an unattainable dream. It certainly felt that way to me this past week at the Kotel. But, as we prepare for Tisha' B'Av, the day of mourning loss and destruction, inspired by *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred, it is also a day to make space to dream about Jewish redemption and unity.

The famous Israeli poet and writer, Amos Oz writes, "[Israel] is a dream come true. As such, it is bound to be flawed and imperfect. The only way to keep a dream intact is never to try to fulfill it...Israel is flawed and imperfect precisely because it is a dream come true" (In the Land of Israel, 259).

Israel may have its flaws. But if we get stuck and lost in her imperfections, we will never have the fortitude to dream of unity and have the courage to transform the space in the middle.