

Rosh Hashana 2018 – Rabbi Andrea L. Merow – *Havaya Metakenet*

On Saturday nights we mark the transition between the holiness of Shabbat and the ordinary days of the week. We use a braided candle, spices and wine. One Havdalah service sticks out in my mind and I want to tell you why, and then, I invite you to consider the dichotomy of holy vs. ordinary when it comes to the State of Israel.

I spent the year after high school learning and working in Israel. On my last Shabbat in the country, it struck me that this was not a typical Havdalah, this was a period of transition of leaving Israel also. When we recite Havdalah, we affirm the importance of the weekdays; we remember God's creative process, and therefore honor our own; we also sanctify Shabbat for its holiness and ability to restore us. Both are important. That night on kibbutz, I chanted the traditional blessing that ends, "*Hamavdil bein kodesh l'chol*- Blessed are You, who distinguishes between kodesh (the holiness of Shabbat) and hol the (ordinary rest of the week)." Most of my fellow year course friends were leaving Israel that night and so I was moved to create a new 5th blessing, "*Hamavdil bein kodesh (holy) L'Chu*". In my new blessing *Chu*"I is an acronym for, "chutz l'aretz, meaning outside of the land of Israel." "Blessed are You who distinguishes between Israel and everywhere else."

Living in Israel was a sacred experience and I wanted a ritual to separate myself from the inherent holiness that IS the land of Israel as I returned to the US. I have now said that blessing at Ben Gurion airport over 25 times, often with tears in my eyes. It is an acknowledgement that there is a difference between living there and choosing to remain a resident of the Diaspora. Often, that choice is painful, hence the tears.

I am not polyannish about how life may be better lived in, or out, of Israel; I am recognizing that there is a difference in *living one's life* in Israel, or out of Israel. I remind myself of our long, historical connection to the Land, and of the destiny of the Jewish People that is finally able to be played out in our own homeland. In reciting this blessing I confirm that I continually choose to live outside of Israel. I am OK living with this cognitive dissonance. I even appreciate the slight guilt that it produces in me - to love and honor our great country, and to love and yearn for Israel with equal depth.

Visiting or studying in Israel, and having a wonderful time, and saying this blessing might lead one to believe that everything in Israel is "*kodesh*," holy. It could leave one to think that there is a dichotomy: that Israel = holy and the Diaspora = ordinary and not holy. We know this is not true. We know that both the sacred and the mundane are blessed and needed for creation. We know that there is often sacred in the mundane acts of daily living that occur on weekdays; conversely, sometimes aspects of Shabbat may feel mundane.

So too with Israel there is holy: deserts in bloom, "the Start Up Nation," a democracy, the potential to create a moral Jewish society, and there IS a place for each one of us should we choose, or need, to live there. There is also *hol* – ordinary: people work, shop, cook, and do laundry.

There is sadly, even profane, because Israel is not Disney World. It is not a "make believe" place without problems. To love Israel is to know that we have security concerns and the obligation

to advocate for Israel's security. To love Israel is to embrace Israel's complexity and diversity, its holiness and what is mundane. And to love Israel is to also confront what is profane, and to dream and work to make it better. To love Israel means to be concerned about the character of the State. Just as we, during this high-holiday period, examine our actions and endeavor to do better, Israel as a state needs to do the same.

A few weeks back Ronald Lauder, respected president of World Jewish Congress, published a provocative Op-Ed article entitled "Israel, This Is Not Who We Are." The next line reads "Orthodoxy should be respected, but we cannot allow the politics of a radical minority to alienate millions of Jews worldwide." Right now in Israel, a very small radical, fundamentalist minority dictates many policies. It is ugly; and I would go farther and say, it is even profane.

Lauder writes: "For many Israelis, Jews and supporters of Israel, the last year has been a challenging one. Israel's government withdrew from an agreement that would have created an egalitarian prayer area at the Western Wall and proposed a strict conversion law that impinges on the rights of non-Orthodox Jews. ... (it) passed a law that denies equal rights to same-sex couples. The very next day came the nation-state law, which correctly reaffirms that Israel is a Jewish state, but also damages the sense of equality and belonging of Israel's Druze, Christian and Muslim citizens."

Last month, a Conservative rabbi was detained by the police for the alleged crime of performing a non-Orthodox wedding ceremony for two Jews in Israel. In several municipalities, attempts were made to disrupt secular life by closing stores on the Sabbath."

"Israel's founders from Jabotinsky to Herzl, Golda Meir and Weizmann" all envisioned a Jewish state that reflects its Declaration of Independence: "with complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants regardless of religion, race or sex."

Our beloved Israel has become one of the only democracies in the world where there is less freedom of religion for Jews. Think about that. If you live in Israel, you will have less freedom of religion than you have here. In Israel the State sets policy for conversions, weddings, funerals, kashrut, funding for schools, based on Orthodox, and increasingly fundamentalist religious law.

How do we fix this? How can we help Israelis fix this? How do we, on these High Holidays and beyond, do soul-searching, not only for ourselves, but also for Israel? We need to help Israel to return to its roots of being an open, Jewish democracy where equality, science and pluralism in Jewish practice are values. We need to help those in Israel who are working for these values, while we remain in love with Israel.

This summer, I spent 3 weeks in Israel studying and reconnecting with the land and the people. I had many wonderful experiences. For two of these weeks I studied at the Shalom Hartman Institute was with 175 rabbis from all denominations. There, pluralism, acceptance and *ahava* – love for each other, through deep, respectful discussion reigned. And I soaked up the holiness. There were also negatives.

The new month of Av fell on my last Friday in Israel. I had planned to join Women of the Wall for services that morning. As many of you know, Women of the Wall has worked for the last 30 years to teach that the sacred space of the Kotel is for every Jew, regardless of one's religious denomination. A Jew is a Jew is a Jew. I was not sure if I wanted to go, as I did not want to lose a spiritual high that I was on by going to contested space. But I awoke early thinking, "how can I be a 10-minute drive from the Old City and not go?"

The Israeli cab driver knew where I was going. He was an elderly man from Yemen. I was sure there would be a lecture from him. Instead, he said, "I am proud to be driving you to Women of The Wall. The Kotel is holy to all Jews. You go and pray, and you stay safe. No charge for this ride; this is how I support you. And pray for me." So far, so good.

We were at the back of the women's section. The davvening was beautiful, the sun was shining brightly, the morning summer air was fresh, the singing was uplifting, and the Israeli Bat Mitzvah girl chanted proudly. (PAUSE) Only we had to shield the girl from the hard objects that our Haredi co-religionists were throwing at us. That Jews were throwing at us. I was the first one to be hit in the back with a hard object. Then there were more hard eggs and stones. Haredi, Jewish women and girls infiltrated our space and spit on us. They whistled, yelled, and pushed older women. There was terror on their faces. We sang our praise to God even louder. A loudspeaker from the Men's section was pointed at us to interrupt our prayer. We turned inward and kept praying. Then they did the unthinkable – they burned one of our Siddurim. Stop and think about that: Jews burned a prayer book. Jews, people who call themselves pious, burned a siddur, with God's name in it.

I understand Jews and senseless hatred, it's happened before; but this behavior is not acceptable. We do not do this to fellow humans; we cannot allow this behavior in our Jewish family.

Most distressing is that the police just watched. The government of the Jewish State allows these fundamentalist Jews to harass and endanger other Jews. It was Rosh Hodesh Av, 9 Days before the second most powerful fast day: Tisha B'Av, the day that marks the destruction of our Temples. In the literal shadow of the Temple mount, Jews turned their hatred for other Jews into violence. The rabbis of the Talmud blame the destruction of our Temples on "*sinat hinam*" senseless hatred. There are still those today who perpetuate this sin. Jews have the right to pray to God in the way we see fit, especially at this spot of religious and national importance. People asked me why we did not fight back. Because we were on holy ground and we will not spit, throw or push. As we tell our children, you can disagree but you are not allowed to endanger others physically. We do not throw hard objects at others or burn sacred books. The government of the Jewish people, the police, should not allow this either.

I believe God wants us to treat others well, to embrace a diversity of Jewish expression, to treat women, people in the LGBTQ community, and all humans with respect, dignity and equality. I believe that we want Israel to be a place that values open-minded inquiry in all areas: in science, social science and religion. I think that you do as well.

Later that day, my close Israeli friends and I spent a beautiful afternoon in Tel Aviv. We raced to be at the port for a 6:30 Shabbat service overlooking the Sea. We weren't even sure if we would find the service. And then, we saw 900 other people who also came to welcome Shabbat. There was music and dancing in a festive, and totally egalitarian service. The rabbi spoke with sadness about what had occurred at the Kotel that day. As the Psalmist says, "we turned our sackcloth into dancing." The service was warm, inviting, inclusive – just beautiful. It was pure joy. The awful feelings of sadness for our people that I had found in the morning began to fade. We sang, we danced. We felt hope.

I learned that THIS is also Israel, as was the cab driver from the morning, and that the disruptive people in the morning ARE a minority that is clearly profane. It is also profane that the government of Israel supports these fundamentalists in their cause to support only one fundamentalist expression of Judaism. On the 2-mile walk back for dinner, I contrasted the morning with the evening. In the words of one of my friends, I just had a *havaya metakenet*, an experience that repairs the soul. After troubling incidents, we need to create experiences that fix and heal us.

I am reminded of Maimonides' process of repentance/return. We want to help Israel return to a time when the laws of the state value and support the diversity that is Jewish identity. We want as a people to have our behavior be a light unto the Nations. Maimonides teaches that to do *t'shuvah*, to return to our best selves, we recognize and regret our wrongs and resolve to not do wrong again. Then, when we are in a similar situation where we are tempted, we refrain from the bad behavior. Expanding on Maimonides, we need to not only be back in situations and not be tempted; we also need to create new, positive situations, a new narrative, and new memories. We need to create restorative experiences. A *havaya metakenet*.

We care about Israel continuing to be a place that respects all, as outlined in its Declaration of Independence. That is the place that Herzl dreamed of; and we need to make that dream a reality on a consistent basis. We can love Israel enough to delight in its holiness, to marvel at what is ordinary and work to eradicate what is profane, so that the sacred can permeate Israeli life.

How can we help Israel to return to its best version of itself? We can actively support and honor institutions in the State of Israel that work for open Judaism, like our own Masorti/Conservative movement, and many others, that advocate for inclusive, egalitarian democracy. We can financially support these institutions so that they can help Israelis have many, many more positive, restorative, healing experiences. We can support Israelis that work to create shalom between Jews, and with their non-Jewish neighbors. We should support Israelis who are working for a separation of State and religious law, so that all Jews have freedom of, or from, religion. We can support those who work for equality and against hatred of others. We can ask the leaders of national Jewish institutions here to do the same. We can support our Federation in their work to support an inclusive Israeli society. You can also study with us and learn about the complexity of these issues. In late fall the rabbis will teach a course called "Israel's Milestones and their Meaning" from The Hartman Institute's iengage series.

We are now in the ten days of repentance, a period of introspection and an opportunity for change. Let's take the concept of a *havaya metakenet*, a restorative experience that can repair us, and apply it not only to our national endeavors, but also to the personal. From this week until Yom Kippur we take the time to apologize to family and friends whom we have wronged. When you ask forgiveness, also consider creating a *havaya metakenet* – a new, shared good experience, upon which to re-build your relationships.

After the Jewish People leave the terrible experience of slavery in Egypt we wander in the desert for 40 years. People make jokes about how Moses needed a GPS, or how the 40 years in the desert was some kind of punishment for complaining. Later in our service we are reminded that the time in the desert was when God and the Jewish people fell in love with each other. It was a giddy time of young love. This was God creating a *havaya metakenet* – a restorative experience, for us after slavery, a new reality and new, good memories for the Jewish people. May we endeavor to create new experiences of healing in our personal lives, and for The State of Israel.