

Rosh Hashanah 2014/5775 – Rabbi Edward Elkin

Kiddush Hashem and the Israel-Gaza Conflict of 2014

I begin with a story not about Rosh Hashanah, but about Pesach. It happened once on Shabbat HaGadol, the one that precedes Passover, in the shtetl of Ropshitz east of Krakow. Because of all the special dietary requirements, Passover requires money, a great deal of money, to celebrate it the way it should be celebrated. Yet the people of Ropshitz had none, or almost none. There were but a few rich merchants; all the others lived from day to day, worrying about each penny, each mouthful that they brought back home. The men and women were constantly over-worked; even the children were pale with fatigue and hunger. That was the picture all year round – which was bad enough. But the week before Passover it became even worse. For at Passover every Jew must consider himself free and sovereign – free of worries and bonds – like a king.

So on this particular Shabbat, Shabbat HaGadol, the rabbi of the community, Rabbi Naphtali – devotes his speech to the theme of tzedakah. He quotes parables, invokes the authority of Talmudic sages, adds argument to argument, asking those who are well-off to share with the have-nots, the victims of heaven, the deprived ones, so as not to embarrass them at the Seder, when through the open door the prophet Elijah will enter and be their guest of honor.

Rebbe Naphtali explains, argues, pleads, orders. Never before has he spoken with such ardor; never before has he put his entire soul into every one of his words. For this was the time of year when the poor felt even poorer. He had to bring them *some* joy for the holiday. He had to succeed in convincing his congregation – he had to, at any price.

Back home, after services, he falls into a chair, exhausted. His wife asks him how it went. Were there many people? Yes, many; the place was packed. Did so-and-so attend? Yes. And such-and-such? Also. Did you speak? Yes. Were you good? Yes, I believe so. Did you succeed in convincing them? With a smile, Rebbe Naphtali answers: "I only half succeeded, and that isn't too bad." And as the woman seems not to understand, he explains: "I convinced the poor to receive, but not the rich to give."¹

I stand before you this Rosh Hashanah delighted by your presence in such extraordinary numbers as we gather together to celebrate our new year once again. This is Narayever's Centennial year, making this the 100th time

¹ Elie Weisel, Four Hasidic Masters and their Struggle Against Melancholy, U of Notre Dame Press, 1978, pp.97-98.

our congregation has celebrated the High Holy Days as a community – what an extraordinary milestone! As the rabbi of the Narayever, I feel proud of the vitality and energy reflected by the participation of so many people in our High Holy Day services, one hundred years after the founders first gathered to form their little immigrant landsmanschaft just a couple of kilometers south of where we are right now. I am honoured that you are prepared to give me a few minutes of your attention to allow me to share what’s on my mind at this turning point on the Jewish calendar. Yet I am also humbled by the story of Rebbe Naphtali, and by my own past experience – this year being a personal milestone in my career as I mark twenty-five years since my ordination as a rabbi. After all these years, I know that no matter how eloquent the sermon, the power I have to persuade you to believe something you don’t already believe, or do something you don’t already intend to do, is actually quite limited.

Now I’m not saying that people can’t and don’t change. They do. I myself was once not engaged in Jewish life, Jewish community, Jewish learning -- and then I became so. But my evolution wasn’t in response to an eloquent speech. It followed a whole series of encounters over the span of years, encounters with other people whom I admired, with inspiring and challenging Jewish texts, and with God, that together led me to the path I chose. With some rare exceptions, that’s how it goes in my experience. We really enjoy hearing people give speeches and write articles in which they articulate and affirm values and beliefs that we already instinctively believe. And we mightily resist allowing words that we don’t *already* believe to touch us in any meaningful way. That’s why, in our day, people generally choose to subscribe to the periodicals they do and choose to visit the websites they do. That’s what Rebbe Naphtali in his day found out just before Pesach, and that’s what many rabbis across the generations have experienced on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. But, amazingly for us rabbis, you come each year anyway, and you listen politely, and perhaps our words do have an impact in ways that even we don’t fully understand.

Rebbe Naphtali had to talk about tzedakah, because of a need that he perceived in his community. This year I have to talk about Israel, because of a need I perceive in our community. I have to talk about Israel, because I suspect you’re all expecting me to, and because I was there for the month of July with my family during the first part of the Gaza war. I have to talk about it because I’m sure that’s what all my colleagues are doing today. And most importantly I have to talk about it because it’s so much on my own mind, and like so many of you I have been experiencing so much turmoil about the *matzav*, that my neshama just needs to articulate some of what I’ve been thinking about and feeling. And while talking about it in the current climate can feel a bit like walking through a minefield, not talking

about, after what happened this summer, feels avoidant – so I’m going to jump in.

But here’s the thing: I’m not a pundit, and I’m not a diplomat, and I’m not a military strategist, and I don’t have an advanced degree in international relations. So I’m not here to convince you of a particular position regarding what happened this past summer -- whose fault it was, what Israel should have done, what Israel should do now. You all have read tons of stuff addressing those questions from every angle, I don’t know that I have much to add. I do have positions on these questions, but bearing Rebbe Naphtali’s experience in mind, I think that sharing my politics would only affirm those who already agree with me, not after all *such* a great accomplishment, in addition to maddening those who don’t, definitely not an accomplishment. What I am is a rabbi, and this is Rosh Hashanah, and my area of expertise is Jewish ideas and values. Still complex of course, still potentially divisive I know, because ideas have political implications. But a category where I feel on firmer ground.

Now there are many Jewish values that one could talk about in reflecting on the events of this past summer. Justice. Fairness. Peace. Self-preservation. Compromise. All play a role in determining how we feel about what happened. But I only have time to talk about one, and the Jewish value that I want to discuss with you this morning is martyrdom. See, there was a time in Jewish history when martyrdom, *kiddush hashem*, was considered a Jewish ideal. It is a theme which appears repeatedly in rabbinic literature, and will receive prominent play next week in the Martyrology section of the Musaf service of Yom Kippur, in which we will recount the deaths of ten rabbis who were killed by the Romans following the Bar Kochba revolt. Partially because of circumstance, partially because of faith, *kiddush hashem* became valorized in Judaism. We decided that our job was to sit, to pray, to study Torah, and when necessary to get killed, until God decides to send the Mashiach and bring גאולה -- redemption. One of the texts that is most often cited as support for the value of martyrdom is Akedat Yitzchak, the Torah reading chosen by the rabbis for the second day of Rosh Hashanah. In that reading, God asks Abraham to sacrifice what is most precious to him, in this case his son’s life, to demonstrate his loyalty to God. That’s martyrdom, giving up your life, or what is most precious to you, for a belief or value you profess. Much later in Jewish history, there is an extraordinary story about martyrdom told in the Jerusalem Talmud, also involving children. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel lived at the time of the Bar Kochba revolt against the Romans in the 2nd century CE. He once related the following story about his youth: There were 500 schools in Beitar and the smallest of them had no fewer than 500 children. The children used to say, אם באו השונאים עלינו במכתובים הללו אנו יוצאין עליהן ומנקרים את עיניהם “If the enemy comes upon us, we will go out

against them with our quills and poke out their eyes." And as a result ...the Romans wrapped each one in his book and burned them. From all these," Shimon ben Gamliel said, "none remained but me."²

It's an extraordinary image, and it goes to the depth of the Jewish psyche. Rather than give up their Torah studies in the face of Roman persecution, those children went out on a hopeless campaign which resulted in their horrible deaths. We're called "the people of the book", and there's something attractive about that appellation – it makes us sound smart, and holy. But what happens when, as in this case, the sword proves mightier than the pen? It's hard to know from this text what Rabbi Shimon's attitude toward the deaths of all these children, armed with pens against the Roman legion, was from this text. Many centuries later, in the wake of the Kishinev pogrom in 1903, Haim Nahman Bialik was much clearer in his harsh assessment of Jewish martyrdom in his poem בעיר ההרגה "In the City of Slaughter": ועתה לך והבאתיך אל כל המחבואים Come now and I will bring thee to their lairs, the privies, jakes, and pigpens where the heirs of Hasmoneans lay, with trembling knees, concealed and cowering – the sons of the Maccabees! The seed of saints, the scions of the lions! Who, crammed by scores in the sanctuaries of their shame so sanctified My name. It was the flight of mice they fled, the scurrying of roaches was their flight; they died like dogs, and they were dead!" The Jews in Bialik's poem did not even have the tragic nobility of the children of Beitar – as their towns were pillaged and their wives and daughters were being raped, they simply cowered.

And after the Holocaust, there was no doubt -- martyrdom as a Jewish ideal was finished. In the words of the Yiddish poet Kadya Molodowsky, אל חנון קלייב "O God of Mercy, choose another people. We are tired of death, tired of corpses, we have no more prayers." If martyrdom is defined as dying in the name of some higher ideal, then Kadya Molodowsky is saying, essentially -- been there, done that. Dayenu. No more. That was a decision that the vast majority of the Jewish people collectively made in the last century, it's the decision that led to the development of the Zionist movement and the establishment of the State of Israel, and it's a decision that continues to have very real consequences in the context of a Jewish state with power in our own time. We cannot underestimate the extraordinarily radical nature of that theological move away from the value of martyrdom, including but going way beyond Israel. It affects the way we relate to the other people in our lives, the way we relate to God, for the way we relate to Jewish tradition, the way we think of ourselves.

² JT Taanit 4:5-6, 68d-69a.

Textually, a result of this theological move was that Akedat Yitzhak became for many Jews less an inspiration to great religious commitment, than a hurdle or an embarrassment to be overcome through all kinds of creative interpretive strategies. Politically, at home in the Diaspora, it led to the Soviet Jewry movement, and to the establishment of all kinds of organizations like the ADL and Wiesenthal Center, dedicated to fighting anti-Semitism around the world. And on the ground, in the context of a Jewish state, when an enemy fires rockets at us and digs attack tunnels into our territory, having made that decision about martyrdom we respond not with quills, as those children did at the time of the Bar Kochba revolt. Nor do we respond with prayer, or with Torah study, or by hiding and cowering as Bialik saw us doing at Kishinev. Rather, we respond with the military means at our disposal. And if the result is a lopsided body count, for many of us -- so be it. We will be victims no more. The classic Jewish self-image -- the innocent, sinned-against sufferer whose moral superiority sustained his self-respect, is finished.³ We're simply not prepared to pay the steep price necessary for moral superiority any more.

Many of us may still claim that ethical superiority for Israel over against her neighbours, and there are good grounds to do so. But there is just no way that people with power can be as ethically pure as those without. Advance warnings and leaflets dropped are good, but they don't make the ethical issues surrounding the use of force go away. For centuries, many Jews felt the shame that goes along with victimhood when that's what we were. Today, many in our community feel the shame that goes along with the exercise of power now that we've got it. Yes, Hamas launched rockets from schools and mosques and hospitals. Yes, other countries are much worse and their hypocrisy is seemingly boundless and yes, there's a lot of anti-Semitism in the world. Yes, it is doubtful whether the Palestinian populace as a whole accepts the existence of Israel. Yes, Israel withdrew settlements from Gaza and the Palestinians didn't turn it into the "Singapore of the Middle East" but built rockets and tunnels instead. And yes, there's no evidence that the people on the other side are having parallel agonizing ethical debates about their own tactics, which specifically target civilians. Yes, yes, yes. I've heard them all, and in other contexts, I've made many of those same arguments -- because I believe they're true. But at the end of the day, lots of cute little babies and frail old ladies and pregnant women and people in wheelchairs who had nothing to do with firing rockets were killed this summer by Israeli bombs. Jewish bombs. Dropped as a result of a profound decision made by our people to reject a centuries-long tradition of martyrdom, of sanctified victimhood, a decision not to cower any more, a decision to raise the price of taking a Jewish life. Those deaths are

³ Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, The Jewish Way, p.384.

heartbreaking, a human tragedy. We can say that, and stay with that feeling, without rushing to decide one way or the other what the policy should be as a result. It doesn't weaken Israel to name the tragedy that happened to the other side this summer, even as we mourn the loss of those beautiful young Israeli soldiers.

Whatever you think of Israel's conduct before and during the war, whether you think it was justified or not, handled wisely or not, whether it made you feel angry or sad, or proud or ashamed, those dead Palestinians are making us once again confront that earlier decision, and its consequences. In an ideal world we can be both strong and pure, our victories noble and unclouded, even our defeats glorious. In an ideal world, a storybook world, we can always maintain our virtue. But we live in the real world, not a fantasy. And in the real world, the decision to reject martyrdom comes with a heavy price. One can say "Israel should defend itself without hurting anyone", but in the real world, the one where the enemy is embedded in the midst of civilian populations, I just don't think it's possible. Whether *some* of the casualties could have been avoided I do not have the expertise to judge. I'm not talking military rules of engagement now; I'm talking about our souls, our *yiddishe neshamas*. And it's just *us* here this Rosh Hashanah, us and God. The focus of these holy days is not on our virtues. Our justifications mean little or nothing here. Out there, on TV talk shows or on Facebook or in the blogosphere, they mean something, and it's important that Israel have articulate voices speaking out on its behalf when there is so much hostility directed against it. But that's out there. In here, right now – our justifications don't mean much at all.

For in here, this day, the subject is our Jewish quest to figure out what and who God wants us to be, as individuals and as a people. The fundamental question is, in this far from perfect world, how do we reconcile to the fact that sometimes we inflict pain on others? On the Palestinians, in the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict. But also more generally, bringing the question closer to home, how do we understand our propensity to hurt members of our family, our friends, our colleagues, our neighbours, the earth?

How do we reconcile the fact that we sometimes hurt others, with the virtuous image we have worked so hard at constructing concerning ourselves? That is our spiritual challenge during this season of repentance. Even if we tell ourselves we "had no choice" but to do what we did, whether thinking of Israel or in any of these other areas closer to home, still our tradition considers a sin done under compulsion to be a sin. Look at the *Al Het* confessional prayer next week on Yom Kippur, and you'll see a category for sins done *b'ones*, under compulsion. The prayerbook of the Vilna Gaon explains that even in an ostensibly coerced case we are indicted if we do the

act eagerly, unblinkingly, or if perhaps we could have avoided the whole situation to begin with utilizing forethought, or if through *rov tachbolot* (much shrewdness) we could have extracted ourselves from the situation without doing the act we felt compelled to do. As Rabbi Danny Landes writes, *Ones* or “a difficult situation” is not a complete free pass.⁴ Clearly, this is very complex moral territory, which is why I think many in our community felt so much turmoil this summer.

I don't have the answer, but psychologists tell us that shame is among our most powerful emotions. It feels so bad, we do almost anything we can to keep it at bay, including telling ourselves stories, and filling ourselves up with so much self-righteousness, whether of the lefty variety in which Israel can do no right, or the righty variety in which Israel can do no wrong, that we start to choke on it. But whether it's the shame of being a victim, or the shame of being a victimizer, shame keeps finding us, keeps making its presence felt. And we can't stand that. That's what this time of year is about on the Jewish calendar, and why it's so challenging and why it's so amazing that you're all here. The wisdom of the rabbis was, let's at least name our shame. Since it's unavoidable, let's at least bring it to the surface and confront it. We may be able to do something about it. We may not. We may still conclude, after all our reflections, לא היתה לנו ברירה. But let's not avoid it. At least here, now, let's drop the mask, the pretense, the justifications that are our defenses against a hurtful world. Let's be honest, with ourselves and with God. We collectively decided that we don't want to be martyrs any more. Fine. That decision means that sometimes we inflict suffering on others. That's not something to be proud of. That's something we have to minimize wherever possible, and atone for when not.

Martyrdom is a powerful and ancient and complex idea from Jewish tradition, carrying with it many divergent voices. It's actually too simple to say, once we believed in martyrdom and now we don't. Resistance comes in many forms, and even people with power can be or see themselves as victims. If I've sought to persuade you of anything today, it is to think about the theme of martyrdom and victimhood as a deep spiritual challenge to each of us on these days of awe – whether in the context of Israel and its enemies, or in the context of our own personal lives in the midst of our families and our communities. Let's challenge ourselves, by reflecting on the values that underlie our politics and our behaviours. Let's question our verities in a way that we wouldn't do if we were being interviewed on Meet the Press or posting on Twitter – where the imperative to defend ourselves is paramount. Such questioning won't weaken us. Our reflections may, or may not, yield a change in our political stance or our decisions about how we conduct

⁴ Haaretz online, Sept.22, 2014

ourselves. What I hope is that our reflections will allow us to be more honest with ourselves and with God about why we believe what we believe, and why we choose what we choose in the face of the excruciating moral dilemmas we face, as we try to figure out how to do right by others, how to do right by ourselves, and how to do right by God.

There are no simple, obvious answers for how to do all those things in the context of our very complex reality, how to keep them in proper balance. Acknowledging that complexity, and engaging in true *heshbon hanefesh*, is what God expects of us at this season of the Jewish year. What *do* we think about martyrdom? How do we understand the evolution of Jewish thinking on this topic? Is there anything we can learn from our ancestors' approach? Are there principles that we do feel are worth dying for, and if so what are they? Are there principles that we feel are worth sacrificing for but *not* dying for, and if so what are *they*? How do we decide what risks we're prepared to incur for the sake of the things we believe in? In what scenarios do we stick by our principles, and in what scenarios do we compromise? How do we understand, spiritually, the fact that we have enemies in this world...and what are we supposed to do about that fact? How do we understand the stereotype in Jewish humour of the Jewish mother as guilt-giving martyr, and what can we learn from it about the power that people who are martyrs hold over those around them? These are fundamental issues that affect not only how we think about a conflict in the far off Middle East, but affect how we conduct our lives here as well.

A good place to think about our values, and the gap between our values and our actions, is shul. Encountering the ancient words of the Torah and the liturgy, practicing rituals that come from another time and place, taking part in communal life and decision making with others whose religious and ethical beliefs may differ from our own – these are all things that happen in shul that can help us grow as individuals. I know I'll probably meet with as much success as Rebbe Naphtali did when he spoke to his community on that long ago Shabbat HaGadol when I say that if you are someone who has been in the habit of coming out to shul only on the big holidays and when invited to bar/bat mitzvahs, I invite you to consider making shul a more regular part of your life in 5775 and challenge yourself to see what you have to gain from, and what you have to give to, your community in doing so.

I'd like to wish us all התחלות טובות – good beginnings at the turn of the new year. I don't anticipate that our moral and spiritual challenges will be any less complex in the new year than they were in 5774. Israel's dilemmas are not going to get simpler in the new year. Nor the dilemmas facing Canadian society or the globe. Nor our own personal dilemmas. Engaging with these challenges without putting up our usual defenses in this safe space and at

this time can grant us insight as to why we do what we do and what the consequences are. Engaging with these challenges honestly and openly elevates us as individuals and as a community, whatever our ultimate decision or stance may be. That's what this time of year can do for us, if we truly internalize its message.

Shanah Tovah.