

Rabbi Edward Elkin
Yom Kippur 2011/5772

Talking About Israel

Thirty five years ago, in the summer of 1976, and I was 13 years old, attending summer camp in the Catskills, completely cut off from the world in the way that only summer camp can cut you off. But I knew, before getting on the camp bus in Manhattan that there were two dramatic events unfolding in the world that touched me very deeply. One was the American bicentennial. All spring, the hoopla had been building in the country I now know as "south of the border", and I knew that the tall ships were going to be sailing into New York harbor and there was going to be the most amazing fireworks show ever and I was going to be missing it. The other drama that had been unfolding as I left for camp was the hijacking of an Air France plane en route from Tel Aviv to Paris by terrorists who had eventually landed with their Jewish and Israeli hostages (the others having already been freed) at a place in Uganda I'd never heard of called Entebbe, welcomed by a dictator I *had* heard of -- named Idi Amin.

I arrived at Camp Cejwin, and life assumed its usual Jewish camp routine of baseball, soccer, wood-shop, swimming in the lake, canoe trips, Israeli dancing, night-time raids on the girls' cabins, etc. Living in that summer-camp bubble, I almost forgot about what was going on in the world outside.

But on the 4th of July, two wonderful things happened to pierce the bubble. One was that our counsellors planned an especially festive and patriotic Independence Day celebration in honour of the Bicentennial, with hot dogs and flags and fireworks on the lake. The other was the announcement, conveyed to us by the staff, that an Israeli rescue mission had flown to Entebbe and successfully freed the hostages and returned with them to Israel. I remember that day so vividly, and the extraordinary feeling of pride that I felt at the confluence of these two events, which seemed to affirm the virtue of both halves of my identity as an American Jew in a particularly vivid way. Of the two, the Entebbe rescue was of course the more dramatic because it came as an utter shock. How did the Israelis dare travel all that distance, land in the heart of what was at the time an enemy state, and with minimal casualties rescue all those innocent people? The success of the Entebbe mission demonstrated to me both the Israelis' valour and their cleverness – as they outwitted both the Ugandan security forces and the terrorists with their disguises and their stratagems. What a thrill it was for me to be associated with such brave, smart, good people who battled the forces of evil, and won. A year later, Sadat went to Jerusalem, confirming

the narrative that had taken shape in my mind -- strength, victory, peace. The summer after Entebbe, I didn't go back to camp. I begged my parents to let me go to Israel on a teen tour, for what would be the first of the many trips I have taken there in my life, culminating in my six month sabbatical this past year. So that summer was a real turning point for me.

Well, friends, it's not 1976 anymore. We all know that. Israel may in fact always have been more complicated than I felt it was that long ago Fourth of July, but regardless, by now we all certainly know how much more complicated it is. Good-vs.-evil doesn't sum up the story any more. We're not always brave, and we're not always smart, and we don't always win. We're not always David and our enemies are not always Goliath. Thirty-five years later, there's not a whole planeload of hostages being heroically rescued 4,000 kilometers away, but one hostage, named Gilad Shalit, sitting 70 kilometers from Tel Aviv, rotting there more than five years after having been kidnapped by Hamas, with Israel seemingly impotent to get him out. Instead of the simple pride in Israel I felt at the time of Entebbe, most of us, no matter what our politics, feel a whole range of conflicting emotions when we think about *medinat Yisrael* – including pride but also including disappointment, sadness, anger, defensiveness, despair, hope, yearning, frustration, fear, shame, and probably many more.

Today is Yom Kippur – a day that, if we take it seriously, is also filled with many conflicting emotions. Certainly joy -- that we're here, and have been granted another year of life, and the ability to come out and participate in this solemn observance together with our community. Also sadness -- on a day in which Yizkor is recited, about those with whom we once celebrated Jewish holidays who are no longer around to accompany us along life's path. Regret and shame -- over the times during the past year when we could have done better than we did. Hope and faith, that we will be forgiven, and will merit another year in which we'll have a chance to do better. Fear -- that we might not have the strength to pull ourselves out of the some of the ruts we've fallen into and that we might not experience the forgiveness we crave. Anger – at the people who have let us down, or at God – who doesn't always organize the world in the way we might think is right or proper or fair. Defensiveness -- in the context of all the reasons that can account for or justify why we did what we did or didn't do in the last year. And pride -- that we we did in fact achieve what we did in the last year, despite all our challenges and limitations. All these emotions, and more, are in the room this Yom Kippur. It's such a complicated mix, that it becomes quite hard to articulate what this day is really about and what we really aspire to get out of it.

Complicated things are hard to talk about. Especially after my sabbatical, I wanted to talk about Israel today, but it doesn't feel as simple to do so as it did in the summer of 1976. Donniel Hartman of the Hartman Institute this summer described Israel in 2011 as being unsafe for Diaspora Jews – not unsafe to visit, but unsafe to talk about. We have gotten to the point where we are either so confused by the situation that we simply don't know what to say about it anymore, so hopeless about it that we're afraid that talking about it will only lead us to despair, or so dug into our positions that there is no room for conversations about Israel that are more subtle than "Don't you get it???!!! Don't you see what I see???!!!" This inability to converse coherently about a topic so central to Jewish life in our time, is perhaps one of the factors playing into the alienation of younger non-Orthodox Diaspora Jews from Israel discussed by Peter Beinart in his famous article in the New York Review of Books last year. For the moment we stop talking about something -- whether to express support for it, criticism of it, concern about it, whatever – we have retreated from it, and the next generation picks up on that lack of engagement pretty quickly. So my purpose today, this Yom Kippur, is to talk about it, and encourage you to do the same.

On one level, the period of my sabbatical was a blessedly quiet time to be there. In fact, until the incident near Eilat last month, we can safely say that the last two years have actually been the most peaceful in the whole history of the state of Israel – both on the borders and within. But Israel certainly doesn't exist in a vacuum. And while we were there, the Arab spring started, with implications yet unknown for the tiny Jewish state embedded in the midst of the Arab world. And the Palestinians prepared their UN statehood application – who knows where that's going? One speaker I heard wondered what we're supposed to think when a Palestinian state is simultaneously an existential necessity for Israel, and an existential threat to her survival? In this utterly confusing context, no wonder Israel is so hard to talk about!

I am not here this Yom Kippur to tell you that my experience on sabbatical for six months means I've figured out all the answers. I honestly don't know any more than you do what will happen. I have my political views, and we can talk about them and debate them sometime, but not today. What I want to do this Yom Kippur is to urge us all, whatever our views, not to be afraid to talk about Israel. Because we as Diaspora Jews have an enormous stake in what happens there, even if we don't live there. Israel is, I believe, the center of the Jewish world. More than half the world's Jews live there now, and the experiment our Israeli brothers and sisters have embarked on, creating a Jewish democracy in the 21st century, and a laboratory for the development of Hebrew culture in the modern world, is both enormously exciting and filled with wonderful ripple effects for the development of Jewish life and culture outside its borders. So we have to figure out a way to

talk about it, even when everything about Israel seems controversial, everything subject to dispute. Even when every word that comes out of our mouths is a potential minefield because there are no agreed upon definitions – “peace”, “security”, “right of return”, “homeland”, “democracy,” “Jewish state”, “occupation”, “settlements” “legitimate criticism”, “Zionism” – to cite but a few terms about which there is no consensus regarding what they mean. The easiest thing to do in such a context is simply to avoid talking about it.

In thinking about the tendency to avoid difficult tasks, I called to mind another Jew who, like the Entebbe commandos, was sent on a rescue mission to an enemy state. We will actually read his story this afternoon, as we do every Yom Kippur. I’m thinking about the prophet Yonah ben Amitai, Jonah. God sent Jonah on a rescue mission to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. But unlike Entebbe, the purpose of Jonah’s mission was not to rescue Jews, but rather to rescue the enemy himself. Jonah’s mission was to warn the Ninevites that because of their wickedness, God was preparing to destroy them. Initially, as we know, he decided not to go. In defiance of God’s will, he headed in the exact opposite direction from Nineveh. But when he did finally get to Nineveh, after a rather unusual sojourn in the belly of a fish, Jonah went through the streets of Nineveh and simply called out five words alerting the locals that their city would be destroyed in 40 days. Remarkably, and unlike anything that had ever happened to prophets who preached *teshuvah* to the Israelites themselves, the entire city, from the king on down, fasted and repented. As expected when people repent, God the Compassionate One forgave and Nineveh was spared.

Why had Jonah been so reluctant to obey God’s word and go to Nineveh? Was he afraid he’d be killed? We could understand such a fear about his physical security as he contemplated a trip all alone to the capital of the Assyrian empire bearing a message of doom. But the book itself, and later commentators, want to go deeper than that. There are many different explanations that have been offered, but one in particular stands out for me this Yom Kippur. In the midrash Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael¹, Rabbi Elazar ben Tzadok suggests that Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh precisely because he knew his mission *would* be successful.

אמר יונה אלך לי בחוצה לארץ מקום שאין השכינה נגלית שהגוים קרובי תשובה הן שלא לחייב את ישראל
Jonah said, I will leave Eretz Yisrael and go to a place where God is not present. Why? Because the Gentiles are more inclined to repent, and I don’t want to cause Israel to be condemned.” This midrash is a fascinating reflection on the rabbis’ view of the character of the Jewish people versus that of the Gentiles. The Jews are stubborn; no matter how much you

¹ Tractate Pischa, Parasha Alef

preach to them, they don't repent. The Gentiles, however, are קרובי תשובה. Their nature is such that they're actually more inclined to repent than Jews are. And because God is compassionate, people who repent are saved.

Now these Assyrians who Jonah would be leading to repentance and therefore saving were not just some random foreign kingdom. They were the superpower of the ancient Near East. If God destroyed them as punishment for their wickedness, the most powerful single threat to Israel's independence would be removed. The destruction of the Ninevites would be a *good* thing as far as Jonah was concerned. He didn't want to have any part in stopping it. As the midrash goes on to say, there are different kinds of prophets. Jonah was the kind who cared more about the fate of his people than he did about obeying God's word. Hence his initial, futile attempt, to flee to Tarshish. Let the Assyrians be destroyed, was Jonah's feeling. Nothing would make him happier. They were Israel's oppressors and potential conquerors, and the last thing Jonah wanted to do was save them. Never mind what God wanted, he wasn't going to have any part of it. But Ribono shel Olam had other ideas, so ultimately, save them Jonah did, despite himself. And indeed his fears were realized. The Assyrians only got stronger, and in the year 722 BCE they destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel.

Jonah's dream was for a quick, clean, all-encompassing solution. Nineveh destroyed. Assyrian threat removed. The land and people of Israel safe. Most of us dream of this type of solution for the Arab-Israeli conflict in our own day as well. Hopefully without any peoples being destroyed, but still a full solution. End of conflict. Borders internationally recognized. No more refugee problem. Jerusalem's status resolved. No more boycotts, divestment campaigns, sanctions, or flotillas. Whether our bent is to dream of this solution as having come about through military victory, or through negotiations and signing ceremonies on the White House lawn – most of us are holding out for that vision of total peace. *Lo yisa goy el goy herev*. And while we're turning our swords into plowshares, we'll put away the ones we've reserved for each other too, because Israel will have solved all its own internal contradictions at the same time. The place of religion in the Jewish state will be all worked out, and the status of non-Jewish minorities resolved, and all those nasty internal conflicts will simply dissolve. The feeling will be something like what I felt on July 4, 1976, when I heard about the Entebbe operation, or what some slightly older folks tell me they felt in the wake of the Six Day War or when the state was first declared. The feeling that Jonah dreamt of when he contemplated the destruction of Nineveh. It won't be complicated any more, it won't be hard any more, we won't have enemies any more, it'll just be good.

I don't think it's going to happen that way. I share the craving for it, but it may be that there just are no simple solutions out there, no all-encompassing answers. And it may be that our insistence on holding out for perfect, end-of-conflict solutions is actually getting in the way of making things better.

On my sabbatical, I had a chance to study with Tal Becker, lead negotiator for Israel during the Annapolis peace talks with the Palestinians. He maintains that in our time victory does not come in the form of a flag planted on a hill. Rather, victory is found in the ability to "choose well between sub-optimal alternatives and to act upon them."

Choosing well between sub-optimal alternatives. As a goal, it doesn't exactly stir the soul. No one ever wrote a song or a poem about choosing well between sub-optimal alternatives. About military triumphs they write songs and poems. About peace they write songs and poems. "Choosing well between sub-optimal alternatives" sounds so bureaucratic, so wonkish, so defeatist, so dull, when we think of our dreams, our lofty aspirations. It doesn't exactly inspire.

Yet that may be what we need to shoot for, and knowing how to make those good choices and dealing with the bad consequences that inevitably go along with the good when options are sub-optimal, is hard enough. There likely won't be more pure Entebbe moments in this generation. There won't be a complete elimination of the enemy that Jonah dreamed about, when he even defied God Godself in the hopes of achieving it. Salvation is not within our reach, no matter what policy direction we pursue. Giving back all the territories tomorrow won't bring that messianic peace many on the left imagine. Annexing the territories, filling them with more settlers, and demonstrating unwavering resolve won't lead the Arabs to finally accept Israel the way many on the right have long supposed. "Solutions" are for the Mashiach, not for us. We will still have enemies, no matter what we do. But maybe, just maybe, decisions Israel makes can make its situation a bit better. Again, no politician runs on such a platform -- "Vote for me, and I'll make your situation a bit better." No preacher ever stirred his flock by urging them to dream small. But maybe that's all we can hope for at this time. Maybe we can limit our enemies' ability to dictate the agenda. Maybe we can help create a space for more moderate forces to gain traction on the other side. As Becker says, a country is not a math problem – it's not solved. Israel will for the foreseeable future be either more or less at peace, more or less secure. Never totally one or the other.

The realization that end-of-conflict is not actually our immediate goal can be liberating in many ways, both for Israelis and for Diaspora Jews. If we let go

of the idea that our positions on Israel and the Mideast conflict must bear the burden of solving the problem once and for all, maybe we can talk about Israel a bit more easily. Maybe we can speak to each other with more humility, more modesty, more honesty, more openness, and less defensiveness, recognizing that the dilemmas are excruciating and any steps Israel might take will be fraught with risk. Which is not to say that we shouldn't have positions; we should challenge ourselves to articulate positions, both to ourselves and to others, and where appropriate to take action on behalf of those positions – whether that involves for us Diaspora Jews writing letters to the editor or to our parliamentarians, attending demonstrations or rallies, contributing money and time, learning more/reading more, going there more. But as we articulate our positions, and take actions on the basis of those positions, let's do so with modesty and with the realization that whatever direction we're advocating will involve risk for Israel, and will likely not provide an ultimate solution to the Mideast conflict. And of course, as a small Diaspora Jewish community very far away we need to remember that at the end of the day whatever we do here will have significance primarily for ourselves, because the real decisions will be made by those who will live with the consequences – the Israeli people themselves.

As a man of faith, I confess that I find it very difficult to let go of the big dream. I want it so bad. I crave that Entebbe-followed-by-Sadat feeling I had thirty five years ago, when everything was so clear and clean, when our virtue was so apparent, when right was so clearly distinct from wrong, when problems seemed so obviously to have solutions if only you're brave and clever. But I'm coming to the conclusion that such clarity is not real, is not of this world anyway. Not so long as this world includes extremist Jews who burn down mosques and uproot Palestinian olive trees as a "price tag" for any government concessions. Not so long as this world includes extremist Arabs who would postpone achieving their own state indefinitely rather than accepting the reality of the Jewish state and living in peace with it. The continued existence of these kinds of people on both sides makes a neat, perfect solution to the Mideast conflict inconceivable at this time. But the fact that they're not going away doesn't preclude the possibility of making things better. Not perfect, but better.

And as this is Yom Kippur, I have to say that the same thing goes for our own more personal problems. We've all got 'em, and it's hard to accept that the perfect solutions we dream of might just not be out there at this time. We can fantasize about those solutions – whether it's a new boss, or a different job altogether, a spouse or partner who is a perfect match, a therapist who has the cure for all that ails us inside and will make us feel good about ourselves at last, a community where all decisions go our way,

politicians who never compromise on the issues that are most important to us, kids who are smart, wholesome, athletic, good-looking, and never-ever surly, parents who don't bug us or make us feel guilty, the atonement that will lift the burden of our guilt from us once and for all and make us feel virtuous and pure again. Solutions -- to all our personal existential dilemmas. Tikkun Ha-Olam. Emunah shlemah. These fantasies are not what Yom Kippur holds out for us. We enter Yom Kippur as sinners, and we leave it, after a long arduous day, as sinners as well. Nothing gets "solved" here. If we work really really hard, some things might get addressed. That is all. Just as the dollars you pledged last night to our annual Yom Kippur appeal will not *so/ve* any of the problems being worked on by the worthy organizations to which they are being donated, so too will the efforts of teshuvah that you make this day not solve any of the problems that concern you this year. Yom Kippur 5773 is already on the calendar, ladies and gentlemen, and if Ribono shel Olam grants us another year of life, we'll be sure to need it. Maybe, just maybe, our communal dollars can help these important causes we support, a little bit. Maybe, just maybe, our spiritual work, our fasting, our prayers, our willingness to ask or offer forgiveness, maybe all that will help us "choose well between sub-optimal alternatives" as we carry on after this day in our still messy and complicated lives and relationships. If so, then I believe this day will have been a success.

Jonah couldn't save his people by running away. Sitting here in Canada, we can't save Israel either. But that doesn't mean we should run away or avoid the topic, which as Jonah found out is futile anyway. Our test is -- can we stay engaged with Israel without the emotional feed of Entebbe-like triumphs and the conviction that Israel is always virtuous? Is our relationship mature enough to carry on *without* that feed? Psalm 63 begins like this: *Mizmor l'David bih'yoto b'midbar Yehuda* -- "a song of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah." Rabbi Abba asks in the Zohar: Why does it tell us that David was in the wilderness, when there are so many other psalms that don't say where David was? The answer: in order to show David's praise, that even though he was in the desert, in a barren place, pursued by enemies, he did his best to sing [*Zohar, Parshat Terumah*, p.140].

Judaism is about being in the wilderness and doing your best to sing. It is about finding cause for gratitude and praise even in the presence of your enemies and even when dreamt-of solutions are not in the offing. In the wilderness, we're still allowed to cry or be angry -- that's real, and the psalms are full of those emotions, too. But Judaism wants to train the soul to pass through those emotions and to rest somewhere else -- in thanks and celebration. Though we live in the midst of worry and fear and anger, we can search out moments of goodness and comfort and love and hope. It is in

those moments that ideas emerge that may help us make good choices that will make our situations better. Not perfect, but better. That's not nothing. And if we find a way to sing in the wilderness, it will lift us up.² This is true about our lives in general, but it is also true about the way we think about Israel. This is our test -- can we still sing about Israel, even if we feel like we're lost in the wilderness because it's all so confusing and seems so hopeless? Can we resist the too-easy route of cynicism and despair?

Can we still embrace our task as people who love Israel, and talk about it, and ask questions about it, and argue about it -- even though it's really confusing and we don't have perfect answers and it might be uncomfortable because other people have a different perspective on it than we do? Let's talk about it a lot -- sharing our concerns, fears, hopes, ideas about Israel -- its identity as a Jewish state, the peace process, its relationship with Diaspora Jewry, its democracy, its history, its culture, settlements, occupation, its status as the Land promised to our people in the Bible -- whatever moves us. And if we're moved to criticize, let us criticize -- that's honest, and that's okay, and if any day is one on which to remember that self-criticism does not necessarily constitute self-hatred, Yom Kippur is it. Are there boundaries to this criticism? Very hard to define. But I like what the writer Yossi Klein Halevi says when he implores us³ to criticize out of a place of love, not contempt; to avoid simplifying complex issues; and to maintain a concern for the physical security of our Israeli brothers and sisters' bodies even as we express concern for the effect that certain policies and actions they take may have on their souls. Let's defend what we feel is defensible even as we criticize what we feel must be criticized. And let's always do it from a place of humility, not arrogance or superiority.

If you want to have this conversation through the auspices of the Narayever, sign up for our *Engaging Israel* series that I'm going to be teaching at the shul beginning at the very end of October. If our course doesn't work for you, talk about your feelings about Israel with friends, family members, and colleagues; with Jews and non-Jews. Don't be worried that it's an unsafe topic. In the spirit of Yom Kippur, let's challenge ourselves to talk about the hard stuff. Let's talk about it with honesty, humility, and openness. Jonah cared so much about *am Yisrael* that he even defied God in order to try to save it. I'm a rabbi, so I'm not exactly recommending that -- but what a great conversation about competing Jewish values his impulse could provoke! I am inspired by Jonah's love for our people in their land. Having lived there for six months, I am even more inspired by Israel and Israelis than I was before. It's a more complicated feeling of inspiration than the one

² Rabbi Janet Marder sermon, September 8, 2010.

³ Lecture at Hartman Institute, Summer 2011.

that I had on July 4, 1976 in the afterglow of Entebbe, but I think in a way that complexity makes it a deeper kind of inspiration, and certainly one more appropriate for 2011. I hope you'll be inspired too, in the year ahead.

Staying engaged with Israel when you're here so far away, and there's so much negative stuff going on, isn't easy. Observing Yom Kippur properly isn't easy either, as we engage in *histapchut ha nefesh*, pouring out our souls this day and telling ourselves the painful truths we keep so carefully hidden the rest of the year. No one ever promised that it's easy to be a Jew. As in all areas of our lives, we do our best, and put our trust in a loving and compassionate God.

Gmar hatimah tovah.