Engaging with Israel: Taking Responsibility
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The day before Rosh Hashanah, Reb Moshe and I had the privilege of participating in a conference call of North American rabbis with President Obama. The president shared his blessing for the new Jewish year and among other things urged us to be hopeful and to support the efforts to bring peace to the Middle East.

As the direct talks between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Mahmoud Abbas continue, there may actually be a small glimmer of hope to sustain our praying for some advancement towards quiet and peace in Israel and the Middle East.

Today however, as I speak about Israel, I will not address the immediate political and security challenges that are involved in reaching any agreement. I want to talk about our role as Jews living in the United States, in the shaping of the State of Israel. Today I would like to invite us to engage in a conversation about Israel and about why we should care and be involved.

The essence of Yom Kippur is to deal with that which is difficult and challenging. Our tradition teaches us that while Yom Kippur atones for transgressions against God, it does not automatically erase wrongs we have committed against other people. To get forgiveness for those sins we must face those whom we have hurt. We must seek forgiveness from any friend, relative, or acquaintance that we may have harmed or insulted over the past year. You
might say that the essence of Yom Kippur is to face what challenges us. Not to sidestep difficulties, not to deal just with what feels comfortable or only with questions we know the answer to.

Israel is perhaps one of the most challenging issues to talk about. It is important to acknowledge that Israel is a delicate subject in our community—people have strong beliefs about the Jewish state and our role in relation to it. Discussions about Israel easily become very emotional and at times lead to harsh exchanges. Sometimes we even avoid talking about Israel because we are afraid of disagreement and of the polarizing effect of the politics. The State of Israel has become a major source of conflict and disagreement within the Jewish world, posing real threats to the sense of Jewish peoplehood and community.

Precisely because of this it is important for us to have these conversations, and for us to discuss these issues in ways that promote tolerance and care for each other. It is relatively simple for us here to espouse pluralism when we talk about Jewish practice, but when we talk about Israel, we are somehow often less open to different points of view.

I want to speak about OUR relationship to Israel. How is Israel an inherent part of our Jewish Identity? Why should we care? And what does it mean to support Israel even if you disagree or are disappointed with what goes on there.

I would like start by sharing something of my journey and my personal relationship with Israel:
I grew up knowing that Israel was a special place for me, as a Jew, but also personally since my grandparents, uncles and aunts lived there. We visited often as a family, and once I even spent a whole summer in Israel learning Hebrew.

I moved to Israel in 1996. At the time I planned to be in Israel for just one year to study in Haifa University. I remember my first weeks in Israel. The excitement I felt hearing Hebrew everywhere, and the bus-driver saying Shabbat shalom on Friday. Judaism was a private experience for me, the culture of a minority in Chile and Argentina. Yet in Israel it became an experience that I could have on the streets without fear. I had come to Israel after losing my mother in an anti-Semitic attack in Argentina, and Israel felt like home.

By the time I decided to make aliya, some years later I was much more aware of the complexities of the country, politically, religiously and socially. In many ways, being a liberal Jew was harder for me in Israel than outside of Israel, but the more I was there, the more at home I felt. Through the Masorti-Conservative movement I became involved in the struggle for religious pluralism in Israel, one of the most complicated and fundamental internal issues in Israel today. As a rabbi engaged in this struggle I felt the work I was doing was as meaningful as the work the first halutzim, the first pioneers that arrived to Palestine to help with the creation of the State.

I lived in Jerusalem, a place that did not always feel safe. But when asked why I did not leave, I could respond only with metaphors of family. When a family-member or close friend is sick or in danger, you do not go to a different
place to feel safer. You stick around to help the person get better; you do what you can to alleviate the danger.

Using the same metaphor, when someone from your family does things you dislike, or disagree with, you still try to preserve the love and the connection.

The Torah teaches us: “Hocheach Tochiach et Amitecha” - Rebuke each other (Leviticus 19:17). Offering constructive criticism is an expression of our commitment to be in relationship with another human being. To criticize or disagree should not mean in any way to stop supporting or loving. This is true, in every aspect of our life, every relationship we have, every society we belong to. To be loyal is not to say yes to everything, but rather to participate in making society better.

But in order to go beyond my personal experience, I have to justify using the family relationship as a metaphor for Israel. While many here have family and friends in Israel, or have lived there for some time, many of us do not, and the relationship with Israel is something that we would have to consciously cultivate. Is this really important? Is it not possible to live a Jewish life without a connection to Israel? Do we not often say at TBZ that the mentions of Israel in our liturgy are best read metaphorically as a yearning for a place of inner wholeness?

I think we should be in a relationship with Israel and there are perhaps two main ways to think about this:
One is to remember that Israel is part of our history and that it is the homeland of the Jewish people. All the stories that create our cultural narrative tell of an actual place not just a metaphorical place or a spiritual idea. It is true that it is important to us that the Zion, Jerusalem or Israel of our prayers are not only the geographical place, but we still need to ask ourselves about the meaning of the place and land to us.

The second way to look at this is to engage in a conversation about people-hood: What does it mean to belong to a larger group of people? Being Jewish – it is not just about a spiritual, religious or personal journey. And it is not only about being part of my shul or my local community, it is at least partially about being part of the Jewish People and having responsibility towards Jewish people. To quote my bevrutah, Rabbi Sharon Cohen-Anisfeld, dean of the Rabbinical School at Hebrew College: “The notion of Jewish peoplehood has both a “vertical” dimension and a “horizontal” dimension. To say that I embrace the idea of peoplehood is to say that I feel a special connection to and responsibility for other Jews across the distances of both time and space – Jews of past and future generations, as well as Jews all over the world. The vertical dimension of peoplehood is what enables me to read myself into Torah and to read Torah into my own life with a sense of intimacy and immediacy (…)… the horizontal dimension of Jewish peoplehood is more complicated and challenging for many of us. This is the aspect of peoplehood that binds me to other Jews around the world and makes me feel a sense of responsibility both for and toward them (even, I would add, when I feel radically alienated from their actions or beliefs). End quote. (From a letter sent by Rabbi Cohen-Anisfeld to Rabbinical Students).
The concept of people-hood is challenging, and all the more so in relation to the State of Israel which is the place where the largest collection of Jews in the world live together creating a Jewish State. People-hood means that we are part of a larger group, which includes all sorts of people, people we like and people we don’t like as much. But it also means that we have a responsibility to change what seems wrong and to express our hopes and yearnings for a better Israel. It means that we are responsible for each other, as the rabbis phrased it - Kol Israel Arevim Ze La Ze and it means that we have an obligation to help the country to become the place that it ought to be. This includes helping Israel find its way to becoming a place of peace and security, a place where Jews and Palestinians can live peacefully together. By supporting processes that help bring about peace we are supporting the survival and flourishing of the Jewish people.

Jay Michelson, a writer, who spoke not long ago here at TBZ, wrote an interesting article in the Forward named: “How I’m Losing My Love For Israel” (September 16, 2009). In this article Michelson describes how the complexities of Israel, politically, religiously, and socially are exhausting him, and how the deep love he felt for Israel is waning as a result. I read him and I cry, because I know the feeling he is describing. Because I don’t want to feel disengaged from Israel even when I struggle and I am challenged by so many things that are going on there. Because I want to be hopeful that things can be different.

We need to remember that as North-American Jews we have an important role to play in helping Israel become a better place.
Honestly, I struggle deeply with my relationship to Israel. For the most part, it feels safe here, where we are and it is easy to forget about Israel. Being Jewish is relatively easy for us, at least for those living in Brookline, Newton, JP and the surroundings. But Israel is part of the core of who we are as Jews, and we can not let our comfort cause us to forget our responsibility to the people we are part of.

So, now, the question is how do we engage with Israel? What does it mean for us, Jews in the Diaspora to get involved and care about Israel? The argument is still often made that Diaspora Jews owe support to Israel and have no right to engage in criticism of a country they do not live in.

Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, who is the assistant dean of the Schechter Rabbinical School in Israel where I studied, wrote an article in which she describes her understanding of the role Jews in North America can play in relation to Israel: “You don’t need permission to be involved regarding Israel; it is your duty as Jews to take part in this venture and bring your voices into this discourse (…) Accepting this role seriously will mean changing some of the paradigm: Not only speaking klal Israel but speaking for the future of Zionism. Not only leading in donating to charity but donating to religious freedom and justice. Not only talking political concerns but talking the religious one” (“Zionism: a State of Renewal”- June 5, 2010).

Rabbi Sharon Brous from Ikar in Los Angeles wrote: “The most powerful way for us to show our love of Israel is to push beyond the talking points and re-engage the dream that has animated our people for centuries — the dream of a democratic, pluralistic and diverse nation, one in which the
Jewish past is honored and its future built, a country in which Jewish culture and language flourish and the spirit receives sustenance, and one that honors the dignity and equality of all its inhabitants” (“A Narrowing of Heart and Mind: The American Jewish Response to the Flotilla”- Jewish Journal, June 8, 2010).

Once Zionism was about either making Aliyah or sending money. These rabbis are telling us that today Israel needs the Jews of the Diaspora also in different ways. They are calling upon us to bring our spiritual and religious perspectives to help Israel fulfill its potential.

I want to urge all of us to grapple with questions about Israel, about your relationship to the State of Israel, your relationship to its political, religious, economic and social challenges. We enter the conversation with humility born of the recognition that people’s lives and freedom are at stake as we discuss these issues. I want to encourage you to think about Israel as part of your core Jewish identity (If you haven’t visited, I want to encourage you to think about visiting it, if you are interested in helping us organize a TBZ group to visit Israel, let us know, If you are interested in getting involved in our newly formed Israel committee, also let us know). I want to encourage you to relate to Israel as a place you care about, a place you belong to, but mostly as a place that you as a Jew living in the United States can help become what it could be.

Yom Kippur is about facing reality and taking responsibility. I pray that taking on this sense of responsibility towards Israel will help us all be more whole and become better people.