

TO ISRAEL WITH LOVE

Kol Nidre 5763

Six months ago I spent a week in Jerusalem with the Central Conference of American Rabbis. We meet there *every* seven years. I confess, I had never attended our Israel convention before. The price and the effort always seemed to be too high. But this year was different. The price was higher. Or at least the stakes were. This year Israel was at war. Not as in 1967 or 1973. Those were wars of military confrontation. With front lines and battles. With tanks and fighter jets. This war was different. It was being waged not on battlefields but in restaurants. Not with armies but civilians. And Israel seemed more isolated. More than usual. Sympathy for Israeli victims was in short supply. Criticism of Israeli policies and behavior felt unfair, filled with double standards and moral equivalencies. Yet for all the words I spoke and wrote, for all my efforts to argue Israel's cause, the opportunity to put my body in the place of my mouth was simply too great. Indeed, it was more than an opportunity. It was a challenge.

Of course, I went with strict orders. Stay away from public places. Don't take any buses. Don't leave the hotel. Yet the moment our plane landed and I walked on the tarmac of Israel's Ben Gurion airport, the moment I smelled the date palms and felt the warm Mediterranean breeze, whatever fears and anxieties I might have brought with me were instantly replaced by a feeling unique to this ancient land. I felt at home. As if part of me was already there. A missing part. Like someone had reached out and taken hold of my heart.

Your head, however, tells you that something is wrong. The airport is empty. Just a couple of tourist buses waiting outside. There are no cab drivers or *sherutim* calling out the names of Israel's most frequented cities. You even have to put your suitcase on the bus by yourself. (The luggage handlers have been laid-off.) As you settle into your seat on the bus, you notice sitting up front is a stranger. A young man. In his early twenties. Long hair. In dreadlocks. Blue jeans and a tie-dye tee-shirt. He looks like someone I used go to camp with thirty years ago. Only thirty years ago my friends didn't carry M-16 rifles over their shoulders. At least not wearing tie-dye shirts and long hair.

Still, that something special inside fights against this new reality. There's a cognitive dissonance. You *know* there's danger. You *know* there are risks. Everything logical says so. But common sense is no match for the allure of your senses. Or your heart. The clear blue sky, the warm breeze, the smell of springtime flowers and the memories of Jerusalem's sacred enchantments touch a place within that—like mythic sirens—beckon to you. It's like being in love.

Thursday morning. *Emek Refaim*—a Biblical reference to the Valley of the Giants—is a tree-lined street. A touch of Europe in the Middle East. Wine stores, sidewalk cafes, it looks more like Paris or Manhattan's Upper West Side. Marc Berkson, an old friend from school now serving the congregation in Milwaukee I left to come here 22 years ago, joins me as we risk our lives for a chance to catch up with each other over a sandwich and a beer. Little do we know just how risky our decision will prove to be.

Emek Refaim seems immune, an isolated enclave from Israel's reality of terror. It's not one of those places that you read about in the newspapers. It's not *Machaneh Yehudah*—the market, or *Mea Shearim*—the ultra-orthodox community; it's not an archeological site or a West Bank settlement. It is the heart of Israel's liberal establishment. If ever there is a place where the Palestinian cause finds sympathy, it is along *Emek Refaim*.

We change some money, think for a moment of eating at *Norman's* (an American-style hamburger and steak restaurant) but decide—it's too much like home. We walk another block and come to an inviting café. *Cafit*, the area's most popular restaurant, is just another block ahead. Maybe 50 yards further. Marc says, "Let's go to *Cafit*," but I'm hungry. There's probably a waiting line at *Cafit*; there's an empty table here, and the menu looks good. Besides, this is where *Cafit* used to be (before they got popular and had to move to larger quarters). We go inside.

Maybe a half-hour into our lunch we hear a siren. Marc immediately tenses up. "Relax," I say. "This is

Israel. You know the way Israeli's drive. It's probably just an accident." We return to our conversation. A minute later there's another siren. And then another. Police cars, driving right past our window. Soon we begin to notice that the people outside have stopped. Everyone is looking up the street. Something is clearly going on. There's a kind of nervous laughter among our Israeli lunchmates. Then a police woman walks inside. "*Chutza. Chutza,*" she says impatiently. "Outside. Everyone outside." "But I haven't finished my beer." Marc grabs me by the arm and pulls me up. The waiter just stands there, frozen. The police point us away, in the direction from which we've come. We walk one block only to find another policeman. He tells us to keep on going. Finally we reach the barricades. A large group of people have gathered, including three of our colleagues. "Do you have any idea what's going on?" we ask. Heschy Wiener, an old friend, the retired rabbi from Aberdeen says, "They caught a suicide bomber. They jumped on him, pulled the wires right out of the bomb in his backpack. It all happened so fast." "Where?" I ask. "Right in front of us. Right next to us. At lunch. In the restaurant. At *Cafit.*"

In all likelihood, we were never in any real danger. *Cafit* was too far away. Or better put, not close enough. But the reality had begun to sink in. We were not immune. The enemy was real. And he was everywhere. Two days later, a half-mile from our hotel, at *Café Moment*—Jerusalem's most popular Saturday night hangout, twenty-two young Israelis died. And yet, when our plane took off the next day, my sadness at leaving was palpable. I was not ready to go. It seemed as if I were leaving part of myself behind. Such is the nature of love.

That day, the day I left Israel, I knew what I would talk about tonight. Not about terrorism. Or Israel's enemies. Not about the prospects for peace. Not even Israel's survival. I want to share with you this evening why it is we need to take more seriously the *mitzvah* of *Ahavat Tziyon*. The love for the land and the State and the people of Israel.

I cannot ask nor can I expect you to feel about Israel the way I feel about Israel. Very few of you have lived there as did I. Many of you have yet to visit Israel. As we so often say, "I guess you have to be there." Nor can I expect you to love Israel, at least not in the way most of us understand that idea of love. And to be sure, it is impossible to legislate emotions. I have often noted to would-be Jews-By-Choice that the hardest part of becoming a Jew is *feeling* Jewish, *feeling* emotions for other Jews, *feeling* for Israel. But, I believe, there is more than one way to understand *love*.

If there is one text in our tradition which embodies the Jewish notion of *love* it is, of course, *V'ahavta l'rei-akha kamokha*—Love your neighbor as yourself. As Hillel has taught, it is the very essence of Judaism. All the rest is commentary. But, I contend, it is also a text most of us fail to understand in its fullness. Contrary to popular belief, even contrary to Hillel's ambiguous contention, *loving your neighbor* was never intended to be understood in the context of universalism. Torah had absolutely no intention of implying that *your neighbor* meant the guy next door let alone the non-Jew of your acquaintance. A closer look at the specified *mitzvot* in Leviticus 19—from which we will read tomorrow afternoon—reveals a series of dictates shaping our relationship to other Jews.

"Do not be a talebearer among your **people**...Do not stand by the blood of your **neighbor**...Do not hate your **brother**...Reprove your **kinsman**...Do not bear a grudge against your **people**...Love your **neighbor**."

Four different nouns are used to describe the objects in these four consecutive verses, yet every one implies the same idea—a fellow Israelite, a fellow Jew. Loving other Jews is not an option, according to Torah. Mind you, it never says anything about *liking* them. Indeed, we are commanded to "reprove them", but we are equally directed not to "bear a grudge against them." Yet the defining text, the *chatimah* or "seal" of these *mitzvot* is to "Love your neighbor—as yourself." And the key word is *kamokha* which means "like you." "Love you neighbor as yourself" means "Love him *because* he is—*kamokha*—like you." *Because* he is a Jew.

God knows there are lots of Jews I just don't like. Both individually and in groups. But Torah's command to *love* them is not about *feelings*. It's about responsibility. The Western concept of love is rooted in affection and compassion and feeling. But for Judaism, love is understood within the

context of covenant. *Ahavah*/Love is at the core of a belief that we have ties that bind. As Jews, we are not only in a covenant with God but with other Jews as well. We are a covenant people. The definitive text expressing the idea comes from the Jerusalem Talmud: *Kol Yisraeil aravin zeh b'zeh*—"All Jews are responsible for each other," but literally it means, "All Jews are 'aravin' or bound to each other" (or as my brother has taught me, "All Jews are *stuck* with each other"). Whether we want to or not, we are commanded to stand by our fellow Jews, regardless of what we think of them.

But the truth is, I *want* you to think of them. Because I believe that Israel not merely has the right to expect our love, I believe Israel deserves it.

I know that we bring a wide variety of feelings and attitudes about Israel to this space. We are not of one mind. And that, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. It's proves we are Jews. Judaism has always welcomed and even encouraged differences of opinion, provided, of course, they are for the sake of heaven. What is more, I believe that not one of us takes Israel lightly. We all care. By the same token, it strikes me that sometimes our passion blurs our perspective.

You know how it is when your kids go to somebody else's house and have dinner, maybe a sleepover? And when you go to pick them up the hosts say how wonderful they are? And you're standing there wondering, "Is this the right house?" Sometimes we get so close that we see only the cracks. We lose sight of the proverbial forest for the trees. That's the way it often is with us American Jews and Israel. Is Israel without flaw? Should it be above our criticisms? Do I really need to answer these questions?

I have intentionally chosen not to speak about specific issues this evening. This is not to diminish their importance; rather it is to keep us focused on what, ultimately, I feel to be of importance. I have also chosen not to speak about Israel's enemies. Somehow it becomes too easy to point fingers, or make one look better through contrast. This is not necessary. Israel stands on its own. Rather, I want you to understand why it is that I love Israel. Why it is that I admire Israelis. Not simply because of who I am, but because of who they are, of what they've done, and the promise of what they can become.

I am a Zionist. Not in the way Theodor Herzl envisioned the term. I do not believe that a Jewish state is the only answer to the problems and challenges which face our people. I do not believe that the only hope for the Jewish people is to live in a state of our own. What I do believe is that the State of Israel has breathed life into our people and our faith like no other experience in over two millennia. What I do believe is that the presence of a Jewish homeland as a place of refuge has been the greatest source of redemption for oppressed Jews since the exodus from Egypt. What I do believe is that Jews should have the right to protect themselves and be held accountable by the same standards applied to any other nation. I believe our people's claims to that ancient land are as valid—indeed, moreso—than any other people. And above all, I believe that *Yisraeil* / Israel is not the name of a nation or a state or a land but a people. It is our name. Yours and mine. A name we share with Jews the world over. Including Israel. To be a Zionist means to affirm our people's historic ties to the land of our ancestors. To be a Zionist means to believe that we have the right to have a future in that land. And to be a Jew means to stand with other Jews in times of trouble.

But the merits of *Medinat Yisraeil*, the State of Israel go far beyond the highlight reels of the Ministry of Tourism. Israel is more than a land steeped in history. It is more than a place of refuge for oppressed Jews the world over. It is more than an extraordinary chapter in Jewish history, a deeply moving testimony to Jewish courage and resilience. The reason Israel deserves our support—and our respect—is that it embodies all the values we hold dear. Simply put, Israelis are like us. *Kamokha*. Not only as Jews but as Americans.

I want to show you something. This is another installment of Rabbi Kushner's High Holy Day *Show and Tell* (which, I confess, owing to the constraints of shipping and storage is more *Tell* than *Show*). It's a piece of paper. By most accounts, it's not all that distinctive. Indeed, were it not for the keen eyes of a friend's uncle, it would have been swept up in one of World War II's infamous paper drives. But it is a piece of history. American history. This is a letter to John Avery of Boston. From the people of Wilmington, Massachusetts. It is dated April 6, 1789. It is a voting record. Inside are the names of

the people running for office and the official record of votes they received. *John Hancock* was the leading vote-getter for the office of Governor. *Samuel Adams* was the favorite for Lieutenant Governor. And then it lists those running for Senator. Dr. Timothy Winn was the most popular among the ten candidates listed. He got 51 votes. Samuel Thompson got 1. No doubt this is not owed the reverence of documents like our *Declaration* or *Constitution*. But at least in one way it is no less important. It is a symbol of democracy. So is Israel.

We are often quick to point out that Israel is a democracy. Maybe we do it too much. Maybe we've forgotten just how important that fact is. What is more, Israel is a nation of law. And justice. And compassion. For all its failures, I am persistently amazed by the extent to which Israel retains its passion for fairness and decency. Examples abound. It serves no purpose to begin listing them because I wouldn't know how to end. And the truth is, you probably know as many if not more than do I. But there is one story I do want to share. This from the Israeli newspaper *HaAretz* website this past week:

"The Jerusalem District Court handed down a 22-year prison sentence to Nidal Mishal, the would-be suicide bomber whose attempted attack on the *Cafit* restaurant in Jerusalem in March was foiled by a faulty detonator, as well as alert patrons and staff...Mishal's attorney, Leah Zimmel, argued that the court should not impose such a heavy punishment on her client, since the attack did not succeed. The judges rejected her argument, however, saying that Mishal planned the attack meticulously and in cold blood, with the aim of injuring as many people as possible."

All things considered, it's hardly the most poignant illustration of Israeli justice and democracy. There are many other accounts that could paint a more evocative picture. But for me, it's kind of personal. And like that Massachusetts voting record, it's symbolic.

Israel is good. It's that simple. Immersed in a sea of hate, constantly in fear for its very existence, besieged by enemies without and within, Israel holds dear to the values for which generations of Americans have also given their lives. The cause of freedom. And human rights. The pursuit of peace. And perhaps more than anything else, the inextinguishable belief in the power of hope. *Tikvah*. That, and that alone, necessitates our respect and support. As Jews, it demands our love.

The day after they caught the would-be suicide bomber, Marc Berkson and I went back to the restaurant where we almost had lunch. You see, in all the excitement and tumult, we never had a chance to pay for our food. As we walked in and went to the manager, he was incredulous that someone would actually pay for a free lunch. We had to tell him what we ate, then look at the menu to determine how much we owed. For him it was a pleasant surprise. For us it was *mitzvah*. Not merely because we got something for which we didn't pay but, particularly now, Israelis simply can't afford to give anything away.

These are grave times in which we live. And nowhere is their weight felt more than in the streets of Jerusalem. We, as American Jews, would do well to ease their burden. We are in a unique position. Our affluence and influence are unprecedented in Jewish history. No community in the history of our people has been more capable of such support. The only question is whether or not we are willing. I am more than hopeful—I am confident that we will be equal to the task.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.