

THE ONE HUNDRED GATEWAYS TO GOD

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July 7, 1972. It was my very first full day in Israel. I had arrived the day before with my friend from Detroit, Chicky Marks, taken a *sherut* from Lod Airport to Jerusalem, then the Number 6 bus up King David Street. We spent the night sleeping on the floor of the office of Rabbi Hank Skirball, the only person I knew in Israel, whom we just happened to bump into on the street. (Of course, there are no coincidences.) Looking through his narrow window, I saw the walls of the Old City lit up. This was the Jerusalem I had seen in travel guides, in text books. It was like a dream.

The next morning Chicky and I grabbed a quick breakfast and made our way to the only place that mattered: The *Kotel*. The Western Wall. In those days it was known simply as The Wailing Wall. It didn't look so much like it does today. There was no security. There was no touristy plaza. Just an old, archeological remnant of Judaism's most holy site. It wasn't too crowded. A few "religious" Jews, a few soldiers, a few tourists like Chicky and me. Once there, we kind of split up, each of us knowing intuitively that whatever we were about to do, we were going to do alone. I walked up to the wall, leaned forward allowing my head to rest against the ancient stones, closed my eyes, and prayed. It was a *Shehecheyanu* moment for me. I remember being aware of who I was and where I was for the first time in my life. I remember taking a deep breath and saying the *Shema*. (It was the only prayer I knew by heart.) After a couple of minutes, I stepped back and rejoined Chicky. We kind of looked at each other and silently said to each other, "Now what?"

Standing there, a couple of hippie-looking Americans with long hair and big beards, it was if we had signs around our necks, "We have no idea what we're doing here." Right about that time we get approached by a "religious" Jew. A *Hasid*. He was a young guy, not much older than we. "You Jewish?" We were wearing *kippot*. "What are you doing here?" Like idiots, we told him. "We're studying to be rabbis." He smiled. "You want to meet a real *rebbe*?" Chicky and I looked at each other. "Sure," we said. To be honest, it's a bit hazy as to what exactly transpired next, except before we knew it we were on a bus to Tel Aviv. The *Hasid* paid our fare.

It was mid afternoon by the time we got to the *Yeshiva*. The *Hasid* escorted us upstairs into a large room filled with a bunch of guys studying. I had never been in a *Yeshiva* before. At the very back of the room was a door, the *Rebbe's* study. I went in first. I didn't stay very long. He asked me a few questions about my parentage. Once I told him my mother's mother was a Reform convert to Judaism, he politely asked me to wait outside. To him I was non-negotiable. I was ineligible. The son of a woman born to an illegitimate convert, I wasn't even Jewish. I was a *goy*.

Then Chicky went in. All I remember is that I could hear raised voices coming from the *Rebbe's* study. Chicky could be confrontational. He joined me back in the main room and then the *Rebbe* asked the *Hasid*, the one who picked us up at The Wall, to come into his office. Now there was real yelling. Then the *Hasid* comes out and says to us, "You'd better go." We look at him and say, "Where are we?" Pointing to a door, he says, "Just go," and walks back into the *Rebbe's* study. So we go to the door which leads to a staircase, we walk down a flight, open

another door, and find ourselves standing on the sidewalk of Dizengoff Street, Tel Aviv's major thoroughfare. About a minute later, the door on the sidewalk opens up. It's another *Hasid*. He points down the street and says, "The Central Bus Station is that way. You can get a bus for Jerusalem from there," and then goes back inside.

Welcome to Israel, I thought to myself.

Chicky and I made our way back to Jerusalem that day. Our first day in Israel. We went back to Jerusalem, got ourselves settled, and began our studies as first-year students in the Rabbinic Program of the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion. We immersed ourselves in the language of our people, we studied the texts of our tradition, we began the process of learning what it means to be a Jew.

Near the end of that year in Israel, about ten months later in May of 1973, I was walking down one of the main streets of *Mea Shearim*, the heart of the Hasidic community in Jerusalem, on my way to my favorite bookstore, the place where most of the HUC rabbinic students would buy their sacred texts. Nearing the bookstore I saw a *Hasid* coming towards me. At once he seemed familiar. I felt like I knew him, yet I couldn't quite place him. And as we approached each other, he acted as if he knew me as well. Our eyes met. He smiled. So did I. But then, just as we were right upon each other, his smile went flat. His face lost its softness of friendship. And for as long as I shall live, I will never forget what he then said to me. "I remember you. You're the goy." And without missing a stride, he walked right past me as if I didn't exist.

I've shared this story before. It is, for me, one of the most influential and formative experiences of my life. But more than just a rude awakening to Israel, more than a shattering of illusions about the land of my dreams, that day taught me a lesson that still speaks to me as a rabbi and my life as a Jew. And it is a lesson, I believe, that applies to all of us.

I need to say, I have an exceptionally hard time with *Charedim*. Ultra-Orthodox Jews. I appreciate that for many of you I am talking about your *mishpocha*, members of your families. Your parents. Your children. Your brothers and sisters. Your aunts and uncles and cousins. Please know that I believe we are of the same people. I feel very strongly about the unity of the Jewish people. It's just that there are times when I'm not so sure we're of the same religion.

Let me be clear: I am not talking about Orthodox Jews. The truth be told, many if not most of Orthodoxy or what many call "Modern" Orthodox are equally troubled by the growing chasm between "Ultra" Orthodoxy and the rest of the Jewish world. The word *Charedim*, a title of their choosing, means to tremble. As in Trembling before God. Literally, "Quakers". Implying, or so it would seem, that their lifestyle, that their life choices, places them directly under the shade of God, that somehow they are closer to God than we. And while I have always affirmed a pluralistic Judaism, while I have always believed that there is no one right way from Sinai, that there is no one right way to God, more and more I wonder if they and I worship the same God?

I have decided not to enumerate the things that bother me about the *Charedim*. For one, it's too long a list. But even more important, it's not in the spirit of these sacred days. But by the same token, I would be remiss if I did not address the events of the *Kotel* this past July.

This summer witnessed what I believe to be the nadir, the lowest point I have observed in the brief history of Israel. *Medinat Yisrael*, the State of Israel, the nation forged as a sanctuary for Jews the world over, a place to which all Jews could aspire, a place where we could finally, after generations of being denied the right, be free to live as Jews. And for so many the *Kotel*, that western retaining wall of David's and then Solomon's and then Herod's Temple, was the symbol of that freedom. That was why we called it the "Wailing" Wall. It was the place for

which we cried. It was the place at which we cried. Tears of hope. Tears of dreams realized. But this summer brought with it a different tear. This summer saw tears of pain and anguish and dismay.

For a quarter century *Nashot Ha-Kotel*, Women of the Wall, have gathered on the new moon to pray at that Wall. But more than doing this as an act of acknowledging the holiness of that space -- which more and more I believe has morphed into a place bordering on the idolatrous -- these women meet to affirm their right of equal access within Israeli society. Simply put, they should have an absolute right to pray at that place as anyone else. The *Kotel* does not belong to any one particular group of Jews.

So on *Rosh Chodesh Av*, the new moon of the month of *Av*, scores of women and supportive men gathered to *daven Rosh Chodesh*. But in anticipating their presence, the *Charedi* community mustered its forces bringing bus load upon bus load of yeshiva students to block their way, to curse at them, to blow whistles -- all designed to interrupt and foil their prayers. Eggs were thrown at them. Even a folding chair.

Could this possibly be what God wants from us? Is this the "justice and mercy and humility" that the prophet Micah said God "demands" of us? Of course, the great irony, the *tragic* irony is that it occurred on the new moon of *Av*, the month wherein we commemorate the destruction of the Temple, a destruction -- according to the Talmud (*Yoma 9b*) -- that occurred because of *Sinat Chinam*, baseless hatred between Jews. The only thing remaining of that destruction is the *Kotel*. But contrary to what so many of us think, the *Kotel* is not the symbol of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, God's holy Temple; on the contrary, it is the symbol of our inability to see each other as worthy of love and respect.

The text we read on the 9th of *Av*, the day the Temple was destroyed, is the book of Lamentations. Its Hebrew name, also its very first word, is *Eicha*. It is an emotional exclamation of the word "How". *Eicha yoshva badad ha-ir...* "How lonely sits the city." Of course the "city" is the destroyed Jerusalem. And for the rabbis, the use of that word has great import, because it is the same exact spelling of the word addressed to Adam in the Garden: *Ayekah*. "Where are you?" But, the rabbis teach, the word is not a geographic question. Of course God knows where Adam is. The question is an existential one for Adam. "Where are you?" I have no doubt those two words spelled with the same letters -- *eicha* and *ayekah* -- are on God's lips once again.

It's not the internecine struggles, even the contempt between us Jews that bothers me so much. It's not even the deeply troubling acts and attitudes of the *Charedim*. Rather, my concern is why it is we think that they, the *Charedim*, are the "real" Jews and we are not?

You know I'm right. You know that somewhere, deep down inside, we all think that they are more authentic than we. Maybe it's because they look more Jewish, as if dressing in the garb of our ancestors somehow brings with it a greater legitimacy. Maybe it's because they keep on telling us they're the real Jews and we're not. It is a strategy that works very well for them, because out of our own insecurities we then give them lots of money. It is very troubling to me how much ultra-Orthodox Judaism is supported by liberal Jews (who alas then fail to support liberal Judaism, especially in Israel). Maybe it's when we think or say out loud that we're not very "good" Jews because we don't do this or that. So know this: There's no such thing as good Jews and bad Jews. There's just Jews. And contrary to all our words about getting our names inscribed in the Book of Life, there is no scorecard.

On the other hand, I do believe there is such a thing as an authentic Jewish way of life. And I can assure you of this: The Women of the Wall are behaving in authentically Jewish ways. And those who were trying to drown out their prayers are not. You, by your very presence here tonight, are acting in an authentically Jewish way. And so are those who bring food to feed the homeless. When you light candles on Shabbat. When you adjust your dietary practices on the basis of our tradition. When you build a sukkah. Or visit someone else's sukkah. When you recite Kaddish for your loved ones. When you circumcise your son. When you teach your daughter Hebrew. When you pursue justice and care for the stranger. When you choose to join with your community on Shabbat. You are Jews. No more and no less than any other Jew.

And yet somehow we abdicate our right to our own authenticity. This is especially true when it comes to Israel. For all the angst we invariably carry over the well-being and security of Israel, there is no doubt in my mind that the greatest danger facing Israel comes from within.

In the days following the liberation of the death camps, David ben Gurion knew that for Israel to have legitimacy as a Jewish state he would need the support of the religious community. So he went to what were then the remnants of the European Hasidic seminaries. Keep in mind, most ultra-Orthodox Jews at that time were, at best, deeply conflicted about a Jewish state in the Holy Land. Only the Messiah could bring us there. So ben Gurion made a deal. If they would agree to support the establishment of the state, he would cede all matters pertaining to religion to them. And thus was created the *Rabbanut*. The Rabbinate. And in the sixty-plus years that Israel has existed, the *Rabbanut* has become increasingly right-wing, ultra-Orthodox, and even more disturbing, power hungry.

For many years, the *Charedi* seemed content to live within their own enclaves, apart and distinct from the rest of Israeli society. But today, as their numbers have grown so has their influence and power. More and more Israelis choose to get married in Cyprus than allow *Charedi* rabbis to dictate the terms of their weddings. Billboards showing images of women are being removed. Public buses that travel through *Charedi* neighborhoods have become segregated, men in the front and women in the back. They refuse to serve in the military. And then there's the conflict at the *Kotel*.

But hear me. This is not about the *Charedim*. It's about how the rest of us, mainstream Jews, simply have allowed them to seize control of the State of Israel. More and more Israel reflects the fanatical religious demagogueries of the Middle East. And it is becoming less and less a Jewish state, at least the way *we* understand Judaism.

Let me be clear. We are mainstream Judaism. To quote my professor Jakob Petuchowski, we are the "heirs of the Pharisees". Which is to say, Judaism has always been an organic tradition, never locked into a singular expression, always able (and willing) to confront the challenges of contemporaneous "modernity" with a reverence for the past but a creative instinct for relevancy. Just as the Pharisees revolutionized the Biblical Yahwism of Moses, so the medieval rabbis recognized the need to adapt to their environment. And perhaps most of all, it was the *Chasidim* of late 17th century Eastern Europe who understood the needs of the people and offered radical insights and unconventional practices to the notions of what it takes to find God (much to the chagrin of the orthodox establishment of their day). We Reform and Conservative and Reconstructionist Jews are merely continuing on in a centuries-old tradition of adaptation and innovation. This is what has kept Judaism and the Jewish people alive. But in Israel just the opposite is occurring.

You know that of all the nations in the world where Jews reside, Israel is the only place where freedom of worship is denied us. And the reason most non-*Charedi* Israelis are *chiloni* or "secular" is because they do not understand that there is more than one way to be authentically Jewish. And no one suffers more than the Israeli woman. I believe that "organic" Judaism, the Judaism we practice, is the only hope Israel has of truly becoming a "Jewish" state. And there is reason for hope. More and more Israelis are coming to recognize this. (I commend to you the article I wrote last spring on Ruth Calderon, one of Israel's new breed of leaders who seek to be Jewish in ways that are familiar to you and me.) But they will never succeed until there is change. Radical change.

I believe Israel must find a way to end the *Rabbanut*. It must remove the stranglehold of a few and restore Judaism to the Jewish people. It must allow the beauty of Judaism to flower in the same way Israeli pioneers transformed the arid land into gardens and orange groves. None of this is to deny *Charedi* Jews the right to live and worship as they see fit. They should live and be well. Nevertheless, I celebrate the Women of the Wall. The cause of organic Judaism has been championed by the Israeli woman. Yet the real work must be done by all Jews, regardless of where we live. We must stop supporting Jews who disregard us as ephemeral, and direct our resources to those who are passionately and courageously struggling in the cause of religious freedom. Whether we realize it or not, they are fighting for us. And we should be doing the same for them.

When I think of those women who continued to sing despite the eggs being thrown at them and the jeering whistlers attempting to drown out their prayers, I thought back to another woman, my grandmother, Emogene Vinton Edwards, who, of her own free-will, embraced the Jewish tradition and made it her own, and raised her daughter -- my mother -- to raise her sons as Jews. Grandma Gene couldn't make a *lochshen kugel* if her life depended on it. Her masterpiece was bread pudding. But she blessed the *Shabbos* candles every Friday night. She went to Temple every Friday night. Her choices were Jewish choices. And she deserved the same right as any other Jew to stand at that wall and pray to the God of her adopted ancestors. Above all, it is because of her that I am a Jew -- a real, honest-to-God Jew -- no matter what that *Chasid* said to me forty years ago on that street in *Mea Shearim* in the spring of 1973.

For what it's worth, the words *Mea Shearim* mean "100 Gates". Perhaps to suggest that there are 100 different entry points to reach God. The path of the *Charedim* goes through just one gate. That leaves 99 other portals for the rest of us. All we need do is choose one.