

A Nation of Dreamers – Kol Nidre 5777

Rabbi Michael Safra

At our core, we are a nation of dreamers.

I know we are fasting, but I look to Birkat Hamazon, the blessing after meals, which on Shabbat and holidays begins with Psalm 126. It is fair to describe these words as a Jewish mission statement, which guided our people for 2000 years. “שיר המעלות בשוב ה' את שיבת ציון היינו כחולמים” A song of ascents. When the Lord will return the fortunes of Zion, we shall be as dreamers.” Modern Zionism didn't invent the dream. Theodor Herzl merely had to teach the world that it was possible. We were, we are, we shall be as dreamers, but “if you will it, it is no dream.”

I have been thinking about the dream in light of the recent passing of Shimon Peres. At 93 years old, he was essentially the last of Israel's greatest generation of dreamers. He and his family left his birthplace in Vishnia, today Belarus, in 1934, to meet his father in Palestine. In 1948, at age 25, he was sent to France to procure arms – the United States and Soviet Union were enforcing a strict embargo – and Peres's actions helped to turn the War of Independence from a nightmare into a dream. Later, Peres became the architect of Israel's nuclear project and the visionary for what became Israel's hi-tech “start-up nation.” He shared a Nobel Peace Prize with Yitzhak Rabin and Yassir Arafat in 1993, and he spent his later years as Israel's most respected elder statesman.

For a visual representation of the dream, I look to a series of photographs that hang in the waiting area in our Lessans Religious and Administrative suite. The pictures were taken by Rudi Weissenstein, one of Israel's most prominent photographers. I want to describe three of them, which stand out for me as representative of the dream.

One is a night scene from Ben Yehuda Street in Tel Aviv in 1936. It was only about 30 years since 66 families had stood on a sand dune to draw lots for land parcels in the city they wanted to build, but, amazingly, the picture features tall buildings, a movie theater, and cars with their lights streaking in the night as they pass by. I imagine the young Szymon Persky – Shimon Peres's given name – encountering this first modern Jewish city, fresh off the boat. You can sense the feelings of normalcy, hope, the dream for a brighter future.

A second picture from the same year shows a woman teaching Hebrew to a group of young students. I am sure that Shimon Peres sat in a similar classroom at some point. The dream is there in big block letters on the chalkboard: “יום שני, Monday. אתמול נסענו לקרית מאיר. Yesterday we traveled to Kiryat Meir. ושם ראינו הרבה פרחים. And we saw lots of flowers there.” The contrast to Europe is striking. The gloom of ghetto life is gone. There is no political or religious oppression. economic distress, or East European winter. Just flowers.

And even moreso in a third picture, taken on September 1, 1939, the day the Germans invaded Poland. A group of people is standing at the entrance to Phillips Radio shop. I have no doubt what they are listening to. To use the Shimon Peres example, half the residents of his native Vishnia immigrated to Palestine, while the other half – including Peres's grandparents – were murdered by the Nazis. In that picture you can see the fear, but also the contrast. Europe is going up in smoke and we are here in Tel Aviv, on a bright sunny day, listening to the radio. היינו כחולמים, We were as dreamers.

Shimon Peres was the last of Israel's leaders to be a part of the entire dream of statehood. As he was laid to rest on Mt. Herzl in Jerusalem, it was clear that the country was mourning not just the loss of a person, but the passing of a generation. Israel in 2016 is a far different, far better, far more advanced country than what was depicted in those pictures from 1936. Its population is more than 10 times what it was then, and its people are more diverse, more successful, and more sophisticated than even the dreamers could have imagined. And yet there are parts of the dream that remain unrealized. Israel is a country divided: hawk and dove, right and left, religious and secular.

Earlier this year, we celebrated a historic agreement between the Israeli government; Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, the Rabbi of the Kotel; Women of the Wall; and the Conservative and Reform movements to change the plaza in front of the Kotel to include three prayer spaces – one for men, one for women, and one for mixed prayer. The three spaces are to be created equal, such that each can be approached from a single entrance. The Women of the Wall agreed that they would no longer conduct public prayer in the women's section, and the government agreed to recognize and fund the religious streams. It was a compromise, but also a dream come true ... except it was never implemented.

The Kotel is only symbolic. The larger issue is that non-Orthodox Judaism still is not recognized in Israel. Conservative and Reform rabbis cannot perform weddings or even use community *mikvahs* for conversion. There are thousands of non-Jews who emigrated from the Soviet Union decades ago who are still unable to convert, which means they can't marry Jews, unless they convert through the Rabbinate, which requires them to adapt an Orthodox lifestyle. And there are thousands upon thousands of others who have decided that Judaism simply doesn't matter to them. Not having many options beyond government-sponsored Orthodoxy, they simply choose nothing.

There is a divide between Israeli and American Jewry as well. Studies demonstrate that the next generation of Americans is largely apathetic about Israel. And we have many Israelis living in our community who can't or won't or don't feel comfortable or don't feel invited to join our synagogues and participate in our communal institutions. We are beginning to open some avenues for dialogue through the Israeli American Council but, on the whole, we are still dreamers.

In the aftermath of last year's Iran deal and in the midst of an election season, we can feel the political divide as well. The "with-us or against-us" polarization of American politics threatens to turn Israel into a wedge issue. And what if the personality conflicts between political leaders were to expand into a substantive rift in the American-Israeli relationship?

I haven't even mentioned the threats from Hezbollah, Hamas, uncertainty in Syria, and the stalled peace process with our Palestinian neighbors. היינו כחולמים, We can celebrate a dream, but there are nightmares on the horizon that we dare not ignore. To paraphrase an old joke, when it comes to Israel in one word, things are "good"; and in two words, they are "not good."

A few years ago, Shimon Peres was interviewed by Charlie Rose, who asked him what he wanted his legacy to be. Peres – I believe he was 91 at the time – answered, "I think it is too early for me to think about it. I am more concerned about tomorrow than about yesterday." Even at the end, this last great witness to the miracle of Israel refused to stop dreaming about the greatest days, which are yet to come. Which means that it is up to us, the next generation, to press.

My message tonight is simple: Israel needs you. Israel needs you to get involved – not as a mouthpiece for the government, not as an outsider who sends checks or heaps praise – but you, as you are.

There is a statement in the Talmud: "תלמידי חכמים מרבים שלום בעולם, Torah scholars increase peace in the world." At face value, it is a surprising statement because we know that Torah scholars argue; they disagree, and sometimes vociferously. How do people who always disagree with each other bring peace to the world? Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine, explains it this way. You see, the Hebrew word *shalom* comes from the root שלם, which means complete. שלמות, completeness comes from hearing all voices, all sides of any issue. In his words:

Some err in thinking that world peace will only be built through a single character of attitudes and attributes. And, therefore, when they see people arguing and producing multiple opinions and approaches, they think they are witnessing the opposite of peace. But this is not so. True peace can only come through the increase of ideas, the multiplication of opinions, so that all sides and positions can be seen and complicated matters can be weighed carefully.

Peace comes when both sides are valued, when all voices are heard, and even the ideas with which I disagree are recognized as legitimate.

My corollary to Rabbi Kook's comment is that Israel needs you because if your voice is absent, something is missing. If we only hear from the Orthodox, or only the hawks, or only the doves, then something is missing. So if you are a Democrat, support Israel as a Democrat. If you are a Republican, support Israel as a Republican. If you care about religious pluralism, then support the fight for religious pluralism. Lend your voice, and do it with respect, because if we who disagree can treat one another with respect, then our political leaders will have the freedom to do the same.

There are so many things that we can do to support Israel, but tonight I only want to mention three – besides visiting, praying, and keeping up with the news.

The first is to support the Masorti movement and to urge our local community leaders to support projects that promote religious pluralism in Israel. Sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking that the only thing that matters for Israel's future are issues of war and peace. But defining the Jewish state matters too – after all, what are we defending? – and it should matter to the entire community, not just the Conservative and Reform movements. There are flyers outside that tout our movement's successes and offer ways to contribute. We don't want to bash or defeat the Orthodox. We want only to provide opportunities for Jewish expression to that large group of Israelis who claim to be looking for something more.

Second, we have to support AIPAC and, if you can, to attend the Policy Conference in the spring. AIPAC's purpose is to strengthen the US-Israel relationship and to keep it bi-partisan. American politicians need to hear from Israel supporters on the left and the right. There is room for disagreement, but the relationship is sacrosanct and it depends on each of us.

And the third is to purchase an Israel Bond. I make the case every year at Kol Nidre, and it is pretty simple – four points:

1. Israel Bonds are apolitical. They support infrastructure projects and help boost Israeli innovation.
2. Israel Bonds are not *tzedakkah*, but rather are a good, safe, highly rated investment.
3. Israel Bonds connects us to the dream in a tangible way.
4. The Israeli government is more interested in increasing the number of *purchasers* of Bonds, as opposed to the total dollar amount, which means that any amount that you pledge makes a difference. If you have never purchased a Bond before, consider making this the year.

I ask you to take a moment to look at the pledge card at your seat. Choose a tab that works for you, and fold it over to be a part of the dream.

For more than 67 years, we have been as dreamers, היינו כחולמים. And yet, we know all too well as we turn the page on a founding generation, that parts of the dream are as yet unfulfilled. As we honor the memory of Shimon Peres and mark this holiest night of the year, I invite you to heed the call from our homeland that needs you. Let us rise up. Let us celebrate a life and a miracle. And let us do our part as the dreamers of tomorrow to shape a glorious future for the only Jewish state, which belongs to all the Jewish people. G'mar Hatimah Tovah, may we each be inscribed for good in the Book of Life.