

Life Is Messy. Choose Life.

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Rabbi Michael Safra, B'nai Israel Congregation, Rockville, Maryland

Life is messy. That's the essential message of these chapters we just read from Leviticus. When a woman gives birth, she becomes impure. The baby is circumcised. There is blood. "When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration ... the priest shall examine the affection on the skin of his body. ... If it is white discoloration on the skin of his body ... the priest shall isolate the affected person for seven days. ..."

I can't explain all the details of purity and impurity and leprosy (and if I could explain them, you wouldn't want me to), but it has to do with life and death. The white skin disease represents the absence of blood, which is likened to death. Childbirth is all about blood; it is dirty and gross; it makes a woman impure; but it creates life. And it is the only way to create life. Life is messy ... but you wouldn't want to trade it for something else.

On the Hebrew calendar, today is the 5th of Iyar, the 73rd anniversary of the independence of the State of Israel. We celebrated the holiday on Thursday because of Shabbat, but today is the actual date. I don't think I'm giving away any state secrets when I say that for some, there is a bit of ambivalence about Independence Day. It shouldn't be that way; but I understand it. It is hard for some to separate Israel the Value, Israel the Homeland, Israel the Miracle, Israel the Dream ... from Israel the Political Mess.

Weeks after the fourth Israeli election in two years, we really have no idea what the next government will look like or how stable it will be. In the foreign policy arena, there have been many important successes this year; but also controversy, disagreement, debate, and disillusionment. It's all there because Israel *is real*, a real state. And statehood, like life, is messy. But – and this is the important message – you wouldn't want it any other way.

In a piece he called "The State of Our Dreams," Leonard Fein, the provocative 20th-century intellectual and activist, described two Jerusalems. "The one is the heavenly Jerusalem, where, when it rains, flowers bloom; when mouths open, choirs of angels sing. The other is the earthly Jerusalem, where, when it rains, the streets turn to mud, where when mouths open it is as often for curses as it is for blessings. In that Jerusalem, people push in line and write wonderful poems; they cheat on their taxes and grow miracle crops."

Fein wondered how we might merge the two Jerusalems to become one. I just want us to love the earthly Jerusalem. We all want the heavenly Jerusalem; but it isn't real. You can't have that – Israel without the mess – anymore than you can have life without blood and gore and even impurity. Israel is messy because statehood is messy; life is messy. And the absence of life is death.

Which is why we can't shy away from the controversy. We can't pretend the imperfections don't exist. We live in the world *as it is*, not the world *as it should be* or the world we believe someday *will be*. Our job is to become partners in the ongoing, gradual, sacred work of making things better, bringing the earthly Israel ever closer to the heavenly realm.

I say all that as a preamble. Our movement has designated this Shabbat adjacent to Israel Independence Day as Masorti Shabbat. As we celebrate Israel's independence, we also celebrate the successes of our movement in Israel, which combines reverence for traditional Jewish norms with respect for modern values like egalitarianism, scholarship, and an understanding that the law necessarily evolves over time. Today we celebrate 87 vibrant Masorti communities. We celebrate the Adraba Center for People with Disabilities, which serves children in the years leading to *b'nai mitzvah* and seniors coping with dementia and other challenges. We celebrate our movement's Hebrew language *siddur*, which became a bestseller in Israel, and data points that suggest increased recognition of and identification with our brand by average Israelis.

Recently, the Israeli Supreme Court recognized the legitimacy of Conservative and Reform conversions performed within the State of Israel. Not everyone understands how big this is. Under Israeli law, any Jew is entitled to citizenship in the Jewish state. But who is a Jew? A person whose mother is Jewish? Israel follows the standard of the Nuremberg Laws – a person with at least one Jewish grandparent is considered Jewish for the purpose of citizenship. But what about conversion? Until very recently, only Orthodox conversions were recognized in Israel. If a person converted with a Conservative or Reform rabbi outside of Israel, that person is entitled to Israeli citizenship. But not if the conversion was performed inside Israel. Until now.

This matters because the Orthodox don't perform conversions for people who are not religiously observant. Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union who have a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother and want to formally convert can't do it unless they are willing to drastically change their lifestyle. If a non-observant couple wants to adopt a baby – in America, we bring the child to the *mikveh*; but in Israel, if the parents are not observant, they can't bring the child to the *mikveh*, and so they can't adopt. They have to leave the country to do it. Until now.

It was a hard-fought, messy struggle. And there are others that are not yet resolved. In Israel there is no civil marriage, so anyone who wants to be married has to go to an Orthodox rabbi or else travel abroad. We know about the ongoing-fight over mixed prayer services in front of the Kotel, the Jewish people's holiest site, which some want to make an Orthodox synagogue to serve a narrow fringe.

It isn't fun to fight Israel's religious bureaucracy – not just because we lose a lot, but because it would be nice if expressing ourselves Jewishly in the Jewish state wasn't so messy. It would be nice if our expressions of love of Israel, *ahavat Tziyyon*, didn't seem to come with caveats. But that's impossible because Israel is real. Real states have politics, and politics are messy. But politics breed life; and life is sacred.

The Masorti movement does not seek to destroy. I have no qualms about Orthodox Judaism. I love our Jewish tradition and I admire Orthodoxy. I just recognize that not all Jews are going to be

Orthodox. And the 80% of Israelis who are not Orthodox, the 50% of Jews who live outside of Israel deserve recognition. There is only one Jewish people, only one Jewish state; but there is more than one way to be Jewish. Judaism should not be coercive; it must be pluralist. And that is a worthwhile struggle.

Masorti. Remember the word. It means “traditional”, and it stands for the kind of Judaism we practice – not just at B’nai Israel, but at Beth Shalom or Beth Ami or Adat Shalom or B’nai Tzedek or anyplace else. Every Jew deserves recognition in our spiritual homeland.

There is a tendency among some to talk about Masorti as an import. Some claim the mantle of authenticity for Orthodoxy while marking everyone else as outsiders. But this is changing and it needs to change more. Not just for “us”, so that our rabbis can perform weddings and receive recognition, but for Israel. If Orthodox Judaism is the only Judaism and most Jews are not Orthodox ... then what happens to Judaism? Much of the non-Orthodox spirit is generated outside Israel, but our voices make a difference on the inside.

We saw it in today’s Haftarah, which began with *arba-ah anashim*, four men who had been sent outside the city of Samaria, because of their leprosy. The city was besieged and they were completely disconnected from what was happening inside. They were ready to defect; but a miracle happened. When they arrived at the Assyrian camp, they found it deserted. They thought about pillaging the camp and taking the spoils for themselves, but they realized that even though they were outside the city, they were not outsiders. They sent word that the Assyrians had abandoned their posts. The siege was broken. The Israelites were saved. Salvation came from the outside.

We also live on the outside. There are times when we may see the messiness inside Israel and think about walking away. But we can’t. Sometimes it feels like our brand of Judaism is being pushed away. But we dare not cede the ground. Politics is messy. Statehood is messy. But it breeds life. On Yom HaAtzmaut, on Masorti Shabbat, on Shabbat Tazria-Metzora, we must affirm our responsibility to support, to build, to challenge, to improve, to assist, to sustain life in Israel – our spiritual homeland, the living, breathing sovereign state of the entire Jewish people. Shabbat shalom.