

Kol Nidre 5771 – The Language Gap

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In his book *The Case for Jewish Peoplehood*, Misha Galperin – who recently stepped down as the CEO of our Jewish Federation – describes his experiences traveling across Eastern Europe with a group of college students to show them examples of our *tzedakkah* at work. At one stop, a young woman challenged him: “Is this what the federation spends its money on?” She asked. “I don’t want to spend my money on poor people somewhere else. I want to spend it on the people who suffer in our own city.” Misha understood where she was coming from, but he was unapologetic. Efforts to alleviate Jewish poverty worldwide are a major pillar of the work federation does. “This is our family,” he explained. She quickly retorted, “These people are not my family.”

This story underscores a truth we have been seeing for some years now. The next generation doesn’t share the same sense of solidarity or peoplehood that our parents and grandparents felt. And this often translates into a weakening support for Israel. In his new job at the Jewish Agency, Misha is working to address this issue head on – and I hope he succeeds. But I think the challenge of strengthening the sense of belonging and connection between Israelis and world Jewry is more difficult than many people believe.

Many say that the problem is simply one of marketing. Too many people view Israel through the prism of war and conflict; they may be disillusioned by certain policies; they are affected by the negative portrayals of Israel in the media and so they abandon support. So we need to market the positive side of Israel. We need to focus on Israel’s economic success – Israel was recently invited to join the OECD, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; and Israel was the first country to emerge from the global recession. We need to highlight Israel’s achievements in the areas of science and technology, and the many innovative things that we use every day that were developed in Israel.

There is some truth to the notion that we need more positive messaging. But I believe the waning connection of Diaspora Jews to Israel is much bigger than that. The problem is language –

Diaspora Jews and Israeli Jews speak different languages; and I'm not talking about Hebrew and English.

American Jews, by and large, think of their Judaism in religious terms. Judaism is a religion like Christianity or Islam. Israeli Jews, on the other hand, tend to think of their Judaism as a nationality, much like British or French or Syrian.

Let me give an example that Gilad Golani, who recently completed his term as Israeli *shaliach* to our community, shared this summer. When he came here, he enrolled his daughter at the JCC Preschool. On the first Friday, the children celebrated Shabbat and recited the blessings like the *hamotzi*. Gilad's daughter was born into a secular home and she had never heard of the *hamotzi*. Here she was, the only child who could translate the Hebrew words of the blessing, but she had no idea what it was. You may hear this story and say, "How can that be?" It is something so basic." But that's what I mean by different languages. She spoke Hebrew, the language of Judaism as a nationality; but she was not at all familiar with the language of Judaism as a religion.

The Torah presents both languages together. God forges a covenant with Abraham couched in national terms. There is nothing religious about the promise that Abraham's descendants will become a great nation. You don't see Abraham observing Shabbat or eating kosher food.

Contrast that with God's covenant with Moses, initiated on Mount Sinai. Moses's covenant is based on commandments and rituals and worship.

From our very beginning, Judaism was both a nation and a religion; the languages of nationalism and religion were spoken simultaneously. Jews in Babylonia and Spain and Poland faced Jerusalem and prayed for a return to the land of Abraham; but living Jewishly meant observing the religious precepts of Shabbat and Kashrut and prayer from Moses's Torah.

Two modern historical trends set these expressions of Judaism on divergent paths. And I believe that we – sitting here tonight – are the ones to bring them back together.

The first is emancipation. In France in 1804, Napoleon offered Jews something they hadn't received in any other country of their dispersion, citizenship rights on par with other Frenchmen; but only on the condition that they relinquish their identity as a people. French Jewish leaders

began to refer to themselves as “Frenchmen of the Mosaic Persuasion”; one was a nationality and the other a religion. In America, the Reform movement of the 19th century declared that Reform Jews would no longer pray for a return to Zion. They had found a home in America and the religious language of Moses had trumped the nationalism of Abraham.

The second trend followed the opposite path, beginning around 1896, when Theodor Herzl came to the conclusion that emancipation was impossible and Jews needed their own land and a revived national identity. Herzl worked to create a “new Jew” – not hampered by the commandments of Moses, but ready to fight and plant and build a new national homeland.

You can see how the two expressions of Judaism – once inseparable partners – came to lead down separate paths.

To the extent that there was a bridge, it was the religious Zionist movement, which saw the national dream as a religious imperative. The Reform rejected the national language of Abraham. And the ultra-Orthodox rejected the Zionists’ secular interpretation of Abraham’s promise. The religious center of the Conservative and Modern Orthodox attempted to hold the languages of religion and peoplehood together. But that religious center is splitting apart.

Today in Israel, close to 80% of the population identifies as secular. It is not uncommon for a secular Israeli to posit that because she lives in the Land of Israel and experiences Jewish identity every day, she has no need for religion. And yet nobody in Israel can avoid religion entirely because matters of personal status are controlled by religious authorities. And unfortunately those religious authorities are moving further to the right religiously and becoming less Zionist. They are pushing the secular further away from religion, even as they are delegitimizing the rest of the religious world.

This year, Rabbinat policy at the Kotel led to the arrests of two Israeli women – one for wearing a *tallit* and one for carrying a Torah. These arrests demonstrate the extent to which the religious establishment is working to delegimize non-Orthodox Judaism.

Parenthetically Women of the Wall has begun a campaign to collect pictures of women holding Torahs, which they will send to the Israeli Minister of Justice to underscore that what is

being prosecuted as a crime is actually commonplace in the rest of the world. And if you'd like your picture taken, please contact me after the holiday.

But these cases were largely ignored by secular Israelis who are not particularly moved by what they see as religious squabbles.

The conflict hits home, though, when a secular Israeli wants to get married. I have close friends in Israel, Zvika and Lois Kaufman. Zvika is originally Israeli and Lois grew up in Fairfield Connecticut. They met in America while Zvika was working at Camp Ramah and they were married in Lois's Conservative synagogue before making *aliyah* about 30 years ago. Recently their daughter went to get married. Because they were married by a Conservative Rabbi and Lois has blonde hair, the Rabbinate questioned her status as a Jew and refused to marry their daughter. This is not completely surprising for a bureaucracy that is becoming more and more insular. By a stroke of luck, Lois was able to produce her mother's Ketubah, which was stored away in an attic somewhere, which had been issued by an Orthodox Rabbi and the story had a happy ending.

There have been other cases when secular Israelis have adopted children from abroad, but the Rabbinate refused to bring them to the *mikvah* because the parents were not Orthodox. In a country where citizenship is pegged to Jewish identity, these cases are indeed tragic.

You may have heard about the Rotem bill, which is currently stalled in the Knesset. The intent of the bill is to resolve the status of 300,000 Russian Israelis who have Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers. Although they consider themselves Jewish, they have been unable to officially convert and be recognized as citizens because the Rabbinate does not approve of their non-Orthodox lifestyles. The Rotem bill aims to force the Rabbinate to grant conversions; but in the process, it also grants explicit legal status to the notion that only the Orthodox can grant conversions. Conversions done abroad would no longer be recognized. The bill caused a major uproar, which has united American Jews against Israeli politicians and, for the time being at least, has derailed the legislation.

Mr. Rotem – who is a secular Jew – was completely taken aback by our response to his bill. He does not understand why we would stand in the way of these Russian Jews stuck in limbo. But Mr. Rotem doesn't get it because he does not speak our language. Religious expressions of Judaism

are just not that important to him. We have a crisis of unity, which pits an Orthodox establishment against a wide swath of Israelis, and against the vast majority of Jews in the Diaspora. And I believe that we are the ones who are ultimately responsible for bridging that gap.

We need to do more to strengthen the Masorti movement of Conservative Judaism in Israel. Our movement builds synagogues and community centers, which are dedicated to connecting secular Israelis to their religious heritage in a non-coercive manner. Your donations help to hire rabbis, purchase books and *sifrei Torah*, build nursery schools, sustain a summer camp and so much more. You can become an overseas member of our sister congregation, Yaar Ramot in Jerusalem, or you can donate to the movement directly.

The other critical organization is Mercaz. The name literally means “Center” and Mercaz is dedicated to strengthening the vital center. Mercaz is our party in the World Zionist Organization, which allocates monies raised by Jewish Federations throughout the world. This year Mercaz secured \$2 million in funding for Masorti programs. It’s an allocation based proportionally on the 10,000 membership units in Mercaz, which is roughly 5% of American Conservative Jews; so imagine what our allocation might look like if every Conservative Jew became a member of Mercaz. This is really important – and it’s easy and inexpensive. Flyers describing both organizations are available on the tables throughout the building. These are things we can do to make the language of Moses more meaningful for Israelis, and ultimately to transform Israeli society in positive ways.

But at the same time that we work to transform the religious landscape of Israel, we must do more teach our children to speak the language of Abraham, the language of peoplehood. It is with that goal in mind that I make an appeal tonight on behalf of Israel Bonds.

Israel Bonds was founded by the first prime minister of Israel, David Ben Gurion. His vision was to secure crucial funding for the new state by engaging Diaspora Jews. Since then, Israel Bonds have proven to be a valuable, safe investment, as the State of Israel has never been a day late or a dollar short in making its payments. But I don’t really need to focus on that.

The government of Israel sets a goal each year for the amount of bonds that need to be sold. The goal for the United States this year is about a billion dollars; and we're doing pretty well. To those who have purchased Israel Bonds in the past, I want to say thank you for your support of the Jewish State and I hope you will purchase again this year.

But I want to make a special plea to the people who have never purchased an Israel Bond before. While we are doing well in terms of the total dollars raised by bonds, we desperately need to raise the number of bonds purchasers. If nothing else, the purchase of an Israel Bond is an opportunity to demonstrate that we speak Abraham's language of peoplehood. We need to send a clear message to those who think our connection to Israel is eroding. I want to encourage new purchasers to look especially at the Mazal Tov Bond, which sells for only \$100. These bonds make great gifts for lifecycle events. Imagine the message you send to your children or grandchildren or nieces and nephews when, instead of writing a check, you send a bond, along with a certificate from the State of Israel. Their parents would make them save the money anyway and it matures in 5 years or less, but here you have an opportunity to demonstrate tangibly that we are part of the Jewish people with its center in Israel and that we speak the language of belonging.

Last year B'nai Israel led the Washington community in total number of Bonds purchasers, and I hope we can retain that position again with your support.

As we gather on this Kol Nidre eve, we are mindful of the fact that other Jews are gathering for the same purpose in Israel and throughout the world. And yet, in spite of all that we share in common, our unity as a people is threatened, as we continue to navigate separate paths. In the coming year, I pray that our efforts may lead to a new dialogue in two languages, the language of peoplehood and the language of religion. Though some of us may be more fluent in one of these languages than the other, I pray that with tolerance and love, we may we all come to develop a sincere appreciation for both, that we can pass on to the generations to come.

I want to ask you to look at the Israel Bonds cards and, as an expression of our connection to Israel, to join with me in a prayer for Peace and Security for Israel.