

“The Tenth Trial”
Second Day of Rosh Hashanah - October 5, 2005
Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Temple Aliyah, Needham

It is hard to imagine any experience as challenging as the *Akeidah*, that incredibly disturbing tale we read this morning. Yet, according to Jewish tradition, Abraham wasn't challenged only once; he was challenged many, many times. According to *Pirkei Avot*, “*Asarah nisyonot nitnasah Avraham avinu v'amad b'khulam*”—“Abraham was tested with ten trials and he withstood them all.” Unfortunately, *Pirkei Avot* doesn't tell us what they are. For that we have to turn to the commentators.

Maimonides, the great medieval scholar, gives us one list, and Rabbeinu Yonah (Jonah ben Abraham Gerondi, c. 1200—1263), another great medieval thinker, gives us another. (I want to thank my teacher and colleague, Rabbi J. J. Schachter, for drawing my attention to these contrasting perspectives and inspiring my remarks this morning.) For the most part, the lists match up, but there is one profound difference. Whereas for Maimonides, the *Akeidah* is the **tenth** and **last trial** of Abraham's life, for Rabbeinu Yonah, as difficult as it was, it was only the ninth. According to him, there was one more trial in Abraham's life, one more test of his faith and his confidence.

And what was that challenge?

It was the following: After being promised by God repeatedly that the Land of Canaan would one day be his, after in fact leaving his homeland for Canaan and settling there, after living there for decades, after all that, when push came to shove, none of that mattered: none of Abraham's neighbors recognized him as really belonging there. Right after the *Akeidah*, Abraham's wife Sarah dies and he suddenly realizes that he doesn't have anywhere to bury her. He's forced to beg, to engage in insincere Middle Eastern style “*hondling*” in order eventually to gain the right to pay an exorbitant sum for a cave in which to bury her. It's humiliating! It's outrageous! Most of all, it must certainly have challenged his faith in God. “When,” he must have been wondering, as he negotiated for that cave, “When in God's name will I finally be accepted here?”



Living in the 21st century, we are in a unique position to understand that, aren't we?

After all, in 1948, against all odds, after we might have thought we, as a people, had been through the last of our trials, the Jewish People succeeded in establishing a haven and a home, the State of Israel. It would have been totally reasonable to say, with the creation of the State, "We're through the worst of it; the rest must be smooth sailing."

But it hasn't been smooth sailing. It's been very, very challenging. As we all know, Israel has faced numerous challenges. The day it declared its independence, five of its neighbors invaded. It's been forced to defend itself in several wars—an average of one per decade, and it's had to contend with terrorism. It's had to meld a nation out of Sephardim and Ashkenazim, secular as well as religious Jews, and it's had to absorb millions of refugees, from places as diverse as the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia.

Out of all its challenges, there is one particular challenge that has continued to bedevil Israel and that we, even though we live here in America, far from the action, can have a dramatic role in addressing.

It's the same one that Abraham faced: **the challenge of legitimacy.**

Let me explain. As you all know, I had the wonderful opportunity to live in Israel for several months. So, nu, what was it like? The short answer is, it was wonderful. It is thoroughly stimulating to be in the one place in the world where Judaism, Jewishness and Jewish culture is the default. Where your identification as a Jew is not just a religious label but a national identity. Where Hebrew is the language of common speech as well as of the great classics of literature. Where Jewish values matter in all spheres of life, from the personal to the national. To study in such wonderful schools as the Schechter Institute, the Conservative Yeshiva, Pardes Institute, and the Hartman Institute is, for a rabbi, like *mayim karim al nefesh ayefa*—cool water on a tired soul.

"Nu, but did it feel safe?" Yes, it did feel safe. Very safe. Bear in mind that when it comes to security, there are no guarantees. I happened to be there during a lull in the violence. There was, of course, a lot of tension in the country in anticipation of the disengagement (which took place just after I left), and I was certainly conscious of a growing divide between the so-called national religious camp and the secular Israeli majority. But Israel has long withstood tensions and polarities in its society: nothing new there.

All in all, it felt wonderful to be there, and while I was there, it occurred to me that the message I would want to share with all of you would be similar to what I've said in the past: namely, that **we are blessed to be living in a time when the sovereign state of Israel exists, and we should therefore do all we can to bridge the divide between us and our Israeli cousins.** We should study Hebrew, we should go to Israel, we should strengthen the ties between us.

That was *going* to be the message. It didn't occur to me to say anything else until some time in the spring, when news about something happening, not in Israel, but in England, reached me in Israel. It was in April that I learned that the AUT, the Association of University Teachers in England, voted to boycott Haifa University, Bar Ilan University and Hebrew University. (They later backtracked on Hebrew U.). Why? Because these schools were charged with supporting the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. A boycott would mean that professors at those schools could be dismissed from positions as editors of learned journals and might be forbidden to take part in international conferences under AUT's auspices.

Now, academic boycotts are not new. About two years ago, there was an intense effort to get several prominent American colleges and universities to divest from Israel. But this vote by the AUT seems to represent a new surge of interest in such tactics. Fortunately, after intense activity by British Jews—in particular, British Jewish academics—a special vote was taken in May to roll back the resolution.

Several other local initiatives, not all that different, ensued. On June 5th, the Green-Rainbow Party of Massachusetts (which I had always thought was an environmental party) called on American academics to boycott Israeli academics and academic institutions, and called for divestment and a boycott of Israel. On June 11th, the New England Methodist Conference passed a resolution urging churches and conference investment managers to divest from companies that, in the words of the resolution “support in a significant way the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.” Finally, over the summer, there was an effort to put a petition on the ballot in the town of Somerville to get the Somerville Retirement Board to divest its holdings in Israel bonds and in stock of companies doing business with Israel. (That petition was just defeated.)

These resolutions and petitions are part of a broad effort to get universities, municipalities, and Protestant denominations united around a common goal: to isolate and ostracize Israel, ostensibly in the interest of promoting human rights. (I would like to thank Rabbi Alan Iser for inspiring me to address this topic.)

When I heard about these and similar initiatives, and I did a little research into them, I must admit, I was more alarmed than I had been the entire time I was in Israel. And for good reason. Reading about them online is an unreal—occasionally appalling—experience. The statements are sometimes reasonably worded—but sometimes not. Some of them seem motivated by lofty values. But others clearly are not. Almost all of them describe an Israel very different from the one I know and love. And I don't believe that I am naïve or live in any sort of an ivory tower. I'm well aware of the moral challenges that Israel has faced throughout its existence as a result, in particular, of the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. I learned about that as part of my program at the Hartman Institute. But the depiction of Israel in this literature to which I have now unfortunately been exposed is harsh, distorted—sometimes grotesquely so—and, needless to say, unfair. Israel is singled out in the most brutal way for criticism not leveled against any other nation in the world.

And if you think that the local petitions I've cited are just isolated examples, all you need to do is to google “Divestment Israel” and you'll get a host of websites committed to this effort. Reading these sites is likely to spoil your day. But nonetheless, that's exactly what I'm going to urge you to do.

For the challenge of legitimization is one that we can have a unique role in addressing. Israelis certainly have a role to play, but so does every one of us, wherever we happen to live.

As you know, on the High Holidays, I usually encourage people to increase their level of Jewish observance, to strengthen Jewish continuity within their homes. Today, I'm going to tell you to do something that might seem very different, yet it could have an equally significant impact on Jewish continuity: I want you to get out there and talk with your Christian friends and neighbors. And not just about the weather, and not just about the Red Sox or the Patriots—may they live and be well! I want you to talk with them about Israel. I want you to share with them why we care about Israel, why Israel matters to us, why we love Israel. Israel can't just be something we talk about amongst ourselves. There is too much at stake. There is a great deal of grass-roots support for Israel, particularly in mainline Protestant denominations. It's important to strengthen that support and its influence.

In order to do that, though, we need to know what we're talking about. As it says in Pirke Avot, “*Dah mah l'hashiv la-apikoros*”—“Know what to say to somewhat seeking to undermine your faith.” We need to have a good grounding in the historical and geopolitical context, which takes time and effort. So my next piece

of advice is for everyone to read, to learn, to gain a solid understanding of the issues. There are excellent books you can and should acquire—Alan Dershowitz’s *A Case for Israel* is a good place to start—and the JCRC and the David Project periodically sponsor programs to provide this critical education. Let’s pursue it.

Knowledge of the Middle East conflict alone is insufficient. We must try to understand the psychology of divestment. Yes, there is anti-Semitism behind these divestment petitions. Rabid, repulsive anti-semitism. That is important to recognize, and that must be addressed.

But not all those who have been led to support divestment are anti-Semitic. I can’t stress that enough. Many good, well-meaning people are caught up in this, and it’s important to understand why.

First of all, when they hear that Israel is occupying Palestinian territory, that Israel has settled its own people in that territory, that the lives of Palestinians are disrupted—or worse—it’s very easy to identify Israel as the aggressor and the Palestinians as innocent victims. It’s very easy and it is natural, particularly for an empathic person, especially one who is aggressively fed misinformation and distortion, to want to do something about that, something non-violent, something that seems constructive.

One must point out that “the occupation” which seems to be the narrow target of so many of these divestment campaigns is not the primary cause of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It has exacerbated it, but it did not create it. Many people don’t know, for example, that there was Palestinian terror against Israel long before ’67—in fact, long before ’48. Many people don’t know that there are many Palestinian terrorist groups—such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and PFLP—which are quite explicit about their rejection of Israel and their desire and willingness to continue to fight Israel until, God forbid, it is destroyed. For these groups, the “occupation” means the occupation of any part of what they call Palestine. Thus, even pre-1967 Israel is illegitimate.

Defeating the occupation of the West Bank may seem to some like a noble goal, but there are constructive ways to address that, such as encouraging Palestinian-Israeli peace and coexistence. Divestment, boycotts and ostracism are not among them. Outside pressure helps in a nation in which freedom of expression is muted. That’s hardly the case in Israel. And what about the timing: is it appropriate to pursue divestment efforts during a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip?

The reach of divestment extends far beyond the occupation. Denying legitimization paves the way for the destruction of Israel, its ultimate goal.

Many church-going supporters of divestment are concerned about human rights. It would be helpful for them to know that many Jews are, too. Many Israelis are, too. It would help them to know that unlike every other Middle Eastern country, Israel operates under the Rule of Law; that it is a free country with a strong, independent judiciary that has authority over all aspects of government, including the military.

I was very impressed and very proud to learn about the role that legal oversight and ethics plays in the Israeli army. One of our instructors at the Hartman Institute this past summer was Dr. Moshe Halbertal, who helped draft the IDF's ethical code.

Listen to this one excerpt from the code, which every soldier carries around with him while on duty:

The soldier shall make use of his weaponry and power only for the fulfillment of the mission and solely to the extent required. He will maintain his humanity even in combat. The soldier shall not employ his weaponry and power in order to harm non-combatants or prisoners of war, and shall do all he can to avoid harming their lives, bodies, honor and property.

While in Jerusalem, I visited the Jewish Agency which conducts classes for soldiers on the morality of warfare. I saw a DVD showing such a class. There was a group of soldiers talking about the ethical dilemmas they'd faced and the acute challenges of applying ethics out in the field. They spoke about how difficult it was to balance three concerns while on a mission: protecting yourself, subduing the enemy, and avoiding civilian casualties. Not easy! One young man stood out: a sergeant named Dan Talesnikov. A cheerful, gregarious, guitar-playing, strong, healthy-looking young man.

My sense is that most supporters of divestment don't have a clue about the Israeli army's commitment to ethics, nor about young men like Dan Talesnikov. If you look at some of these divestment websites, you will get the sense that the Israeli army is filled with blood-thirsty, trigger-happy killers.

We have a role to play in educating them.

It is our job to point out distortions and to clarify the facts, to explain Israel's point of view, and elicit some of that empathy which is now going in virtually only one direction.

The strongest objection to all of these divestment efforts is that they single out Israel. I have yet to see a divestment petition calling for divestment in China, Korea, Iran, Sudan or other countries whose human rights records are considerably worse than Israel's. To single Israel out for human rights abuses when it is sitting in a sea of repressive regimes is absurd, yet since it is so common, it has become unexceptional.

As Tom Friedman has said, "Criticizing Israel is not anti-Semitic, and saying so is vile. But singling out Israel for opprobrium and international sanction—out of all proportion to any other party in the Middle East—is anti-Semitic, and not saying so is dishonest." (quoted in Dershowitz, p. 2) It is not easy for people to realize that through their well-meaning efforts they are contributing to an anti-Semitic agenda, and yet it is important for us to point that out.

Let me repeat: Israel is a wonderful country. I think it is clear though, that however wonderful it may be to be in Israel, the Jewish People is still enduring the Tenth Trial. The promise of *Yishuv Ha-Aretz Ba-vetach*, of dwelling safe and secure in the land, that promise given to Abraham so long ago, has yet to be fulfilled.

Rabbeinu Yonah tells us that Abraham passed that tenth trial. He passed with flying colors. Notwithstanding how demeaning it was for him to have to grovel before the common people at the village gate and practically beg to purchase Ephron the Hittite's cave, nonetheless, he didn't complain: "*Lo hirher b'davar he-zeh.*" He didn't doubt God's word. He remained loyal, he remained committed, he remained *shalem b'chol ha-midot*—wholehearted.

We have to do the same. We have to live up to the *nisayon*, the trial of our generation. Israelis are certainly living up to their trials. As I said earlier, there was a lull in the violence during the months I was in Israel, but only a lull. At the end of February, there was a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv. Two months later, in a pre-dawn raid, a paratroop reconnaissance unit attempted to arrest two members of the Islamic Jihad cell that had orchestrated the attack. Following IDF rules of engagement, they refraining from opening fire until they had confirmed their identities. In the meantime, the two suspects opened fire. One member of the reconnaissance unit was killed. It was Dan Talesnikov. *Yehi zichro barukh.*

Those of us who live here in America—we have it relatively easy. We don't *personally* have to face the challenge of living in a hostile, unaccepting neighborhood.

But we have another challenge: to be advocates. To defend Israel from libel, slander, calumny, distortion, and “special treatment”. There is much we can and must do, if it will be said of us, as it was said of Abraham, that we have remained loyal to our values, our people, and our land.

May we live up to the promise inherent in our identity as the Children of Abraham, and may we be given the *z'chut*, the privilege to see Israel granted the security, the peace, and the legitimacy it has for so long yearned for. *Amen.*