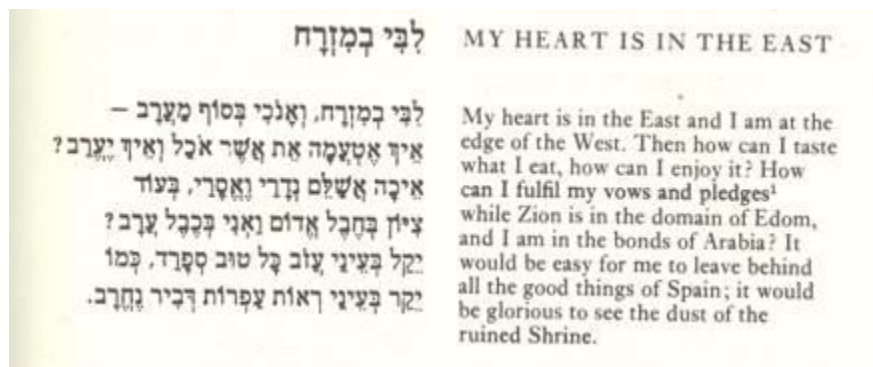


My Heart is in the East but I, I am at the Edge of the West

Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman

This famous medieval poem was written by Judah Halevi, the renowned rabbi, poet and philosopher who lived most of his life in Muslim Spain. “My heart is in the East and I am at the edge of the West” expresses the ageless longing of the Jewish people for Tzion, for Zion, for the land of Israel.



Halevi penned these words some time in the early 12th century. Years later he actually left behind all the good things of Spain, and attempted to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He made it as far as the port of Alexandria in Egypt, where he died 6 months after he arrived. He died, but his poetry lives on as a symbol of the yearning of the Jewish soul to connect with its spiritual center — eretz yisrael, the land of Israel.

Israel—This morning, on the holiest day of the year, I'm going to speak about Israel. You think I would know better. No subject these days is more polarizing in the Jewish community than Israel. I know rabbis who have lost their pulpits over Israel. I know at least one community that recently declared a moratorium on discussing the current conflict for fear of their own implosion! Of course, Shomrei Torah is a much more civilized place. In fact, we are all over the map with people on the right, and left, and lots in between.

You think I'd know better than to touch this “hot potato”, but the truth is, like Halevi, “My heart is in the East,” at least part of it, as is the collective heart of the Jewish people; Israel is just too important not to talk about. Besides, I am now a rabbinic Fellow of a Jewish think-tank in Jerusalem called “The Shalom Hartman Institute.” I was there for 3 weeks this summer and will be going back and forth to Jerusalem on and off for the next 3 years. It would be a waste for me not to share part of what I am learning and seeing there. In fact, that is my primary goal this morning, simply to describe part of my experience in the hopes that it will inspire you to want to learn and do more.

Jerusalem: About a week into my studies there I had a few hours off between lectures and I went to the Old City to buy the tallit I am wearing now. I walked through the Jaffa Gate and made my

way quickly to the Jewish Quarter. I was headed for the “Cardo”, a Roman ruin that is now a center for shops that sell mostly Judaica, Jewish art and ritual objects like this tallit.

Before you go into the shopping area there is a corridor, left in its half-excavated state. There are pieces of Roman pillars, large stones, the remnants of the ancient structures that were once there, and an inscription that describes what this was — a Roman market which they built after they destroyed the Jewish Temple that once stood not far from here.

I stopped to look at the ruins and read the sign when a large group of Israeli children poured into the room, sat on the floor amongst the ruins and began to eat their sack lunches. It is difficult to express what I felt as I watched these kids simply eat their lunch. First, you have to picture a very diverse group of children — white, black and every shade of brown, representing the Jewish families from all over the world who have immigrated to Israel in the last 50+ years.

Watching them innocently sitting there, I could not help but reflect on how different their situation is from ours. We take our security for granted, but for the majority of the 6 million Jews that live in Israel, Israel is their refuge, their not-so-safe haven from a very hostile world. Their parents or grandparents didn't just decide to come to Israel — they fled for their lives to the only place that would take them.

And now here they are, a dream come true, at least from the point of view of Halevi's poem — “My heart is in the East and I am at the edge of the West.” However, it is not quite how Halevi pictured it.

Then again, he never even made it to “the ruined shrine,” which is now all built up, and the truth is, even from our mythic beginning in the Garden of Eden, we've had to deal with disappointment.

Another thing that crossed my mind as I watched them eat their lunch is, they're having a field trip just like any other group of kids, and they are oblivious to the history, pain and danger of the place. They're just kids having fun with other kids, on a hot day in Jerusalem.

On the way back from the Old City I took a taxi. I hopped in the back seat and asked the driver the question I asked the driver the question I asked everyone I could: “Ekh ha matzav? “How is the “situation?” “K'tzat yoter tov. A little better,” he responded. “Lama?” I asked. “hageder,” “The barrier,” He responded. He went on to say that since the wall had been under construction there had been many less terror attacks, life was more normal; there were more tourists – the bread and butter of the Israeli economy – and he had more work. Meanwhile, he pulled over to pick up another customer. She gets in the front seat, catches the drift of our conversation and a heated argument ensues between her and the driver, only the gist of which I could understand. Something like:

“How can you say such a thing! The Barrier is a disaster for everyone! Now 40% of the Palestinians are unemployed, they have no life and nothing to look forward to... except to kill us! What can the barrier bring but more hatred and bloodshed?!? We must find another way. The way we are headed is a dead end.”

Her stop is before mine and as soon as she gets out of the cab, the driver turns to me and says, “at tzodeket, “You know, she is right.” Only in Israel do you get “Point and Counter Point” in the back of a taxi.

Hageder, the barrier, is a big issue in Israel today. It's only partially completed, and its future is on everyone's mind. There does seem to be a consensus (a rare thing in Israel) that at least for now, there needs to be some kind of defensible border between Israel and Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. What's at issue is not the concept of the barrier, but how it is built, and where it is located. In fact, not too long ago, the Israeli Supreme court ruled that the barrier was permissible, and even necessary for now, but in places where it caused undue hardship to the Palestinians, or where it resulted in the unnecessary confiscation of Palestinian land, it must be moved. This is what they wrote:

“We are aware that this decision (to move the barrier) does not make it easier to deal with reality of Palestinian terror. This is the destiny of a democracy: She does not see all means acceptable, and the ways of her enemies are not always open before her. A democracy must fight with one arm behind her back.”

It is hard to imagine the current American administration making such a statement, but that's another sermon altogether.

I went to the geder. I saw first hand its size and its impact on both sides of the dividing line. We received 2 tours of the barrier. The first trip was with a grass roots Israeli organization, neither rightish nor leftish, just, as they put it, “tired of going to funerals.”

As they took us around the geder, they showed little concern for the Palestinians. It was almost as if they did not exist. Their concern was for their children riding the bus to school, their family sharing a meal out, or their son, a soldier in Gaza or Jenine.

The other tour was with Rabbis for Human Rights. They offered another view of the same reality...

We actually spoke to Palestinians affected by the barrier.

They took us through check points and road blocks so we could experience its affect on daily life.

They showed us how villages were cut-off from their olive groves; families cut-off from each other.

However, in the end, even the Rabbis for Human Rights believe there needs to be a barrier, they are just more concerned that it be built in as humane a way as possible.

I am sorry if I am frustrating you with unresolved tension, no clear answer, no simple solution to the problems that torment Israel and the Palestinians.

Hamatzav, “the situation” is complex, at least if you are not an extremist on either side.

Another example, a lecture by Moshe Habertol, a renowned scholar, Professor of Philosophy at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and one of the authors of the Israeli's military rules of engagement. He is also, by the way, a man about my age, a father and a soldier in the reserves.

The essence of his talk was this: In the ideal, Israel has the highest moral standard of any army in the world:

Citizen army. everyone serves....

Takes education seriously....

Tries to operate from a moral frame work – it is, in that sense, a Jewish army....

Does that mean the Israeli army does not do horrible things? No!...

The problem is that the situation itself is corrupting. A few examples:

It is illegal for Israeli soldiers to target non-combatants. Sounds great in theory, but what if you can't tell a combatant from a non-combatant?

Palestinians do not identify themselves as soldiers.

For the Palestinian fighters, there is no front to the war, no separation between combatants and non-combatants.

Suicide bomber or a mother trying to get formula for her baby? Killer or a father looking for help to get through the check point...?

It is illegal for an Israeli soldier to unnecessarily damage personal property. Sounds good. Work this one out for yourself:

You are a tank commander ordered to drive your tank to the top of a hill in a hostile residential neighborhood. There is only one problem . a car is in the way. What do you do? Get out of your tank and go looking for its owner? Try to push the car out of the way without destroying it? Or, run it over, destroying the car – a devastating loss to the Palestinian owner – and completing your mission. You decide.

One of the principles of the Israeli army is “proportionality.” In other words, only use whatever force is necessary, while weighing what damage might be caused by whatever action is taken. Makes sense in principle, but almost impossible to follow in practice.

How would you like to choose between killing a known terrorist along with his family, or letting him go to later blow himself up on a commuter bus or a crowded restaurant that you or your family may be in! How would you like to be the soldier that must decide whether to knock at the door of a suspected gunman, or knock the door down?

In the end, Moshe Habertol said (and I believe him) “The Israeli standards of engagement are the highest in the world, and regardless of what the press reports, the army tries to adhere to them.” The problem is hamatzav. “The situation” is corrupting.

He does offer a partial answer: Withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, the sooner the better. It's not that he believes it will end the war. If only it was so simple, it would however, allow Israel to regain some of the moral high ground it has lost as an occupier.

So far, I've shared mostly the challenges Israel faces. You should know, that in the midst of all the struggle, Israel is very much alive. Jerusalem was full of tourists of all kinds from all over the world. Also, thanks to the Birth Rite program, which sends college-age students to Israel for free, thousands of young people poured in and out of the country all summer long.

In addition, our seminary, HUC-JIR, still holds the first year of rabbinical school in Jerusalem and they had a record number of students this summer. I went to the opening night celebration and was so moved to meet so many young men and woman, excited to be starting rabbinical school and really excited to be in Jerusalem.

The matzav is the matzav, but life goes on. In fact, I rarely, if ever, felt at risk in Jerusalem while I was there and I saw things I would never experience anywhere else:

A teenager interrupting her dinner out to daven maariv

A Palestinian woman, covered from head to toe, rollerblading in Liberty Bell Park.

A Jewish Reggae street band, playing Bob Marley's "One love, One heart, Lets get Together and feel all right," with a crowd of people, secular, religious, Israeli, tourists, all crowded around to sing and enjoy.

The color of Jerusalem stone as the sun sets on Shabbat.

Toward the end of our study, we and the 20 or so other rabbinic fellows from the institute spent a day at The Tokhnit, The Jewish Agency. The Jewish Agency is focused, more than any other, on what they call "Diaspora Education." Frankly, most of us didn't want to go for fear of being subjected to a day of diatribes about how we weren't doing more to support Israel. In fact, the opposite was the case. We had three presenters that day, and all 3 were trying to define with us, what the role, what the connection, really, what the relationship was between Israel and the rest of the Jewish world. This was unbelievable to us – even the Toknit, the center for "Diaspora Education" is searching for a new, workable framework for connections between us and them. Of the 3 speakers, Dr. Racheal Korazin was the most interesting. A professor of Hebrew Literature and a brilliant speaker, this was the framework she offered: Up until now the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora had been defined by "Solidarity and Censorship." The expectation of Jews living outside Israel was that we would support Israel unconditionally and if we did not, we would be censored.

Now she says, we need a new paradigm, what she called "Commitment and Critique."

Commitment is essential. She, like the overwhelming majority of Jews for the past 2 millennium, sees a connection to the land and the people of Israel as essential. However, she recognizes there can be no real connection, no real relationship without dialogue, without give and take, without any real shared vision of what is and what can be.

I agree with Dr. Korazin. Israel needs us, and we need Israel and there are plenty of avenues for involvement that don't require unquestioning loyalty to every move the Israeli government makes. So what do we do? Where do we go from here?

What I'd like to see are 3 things:

1. Jewish communities engaged in Israel where all sides can be heard and where no one is afraid to speak. What I am calling for is an end to the model of "Solidarity or Censorship" and the beginning of a relationship that allows for dialogue and critique with the goal of creating a new generation of Jews committed to a New Israel, one we can all be proud to be a part. Our own movement has shown great courage in this area. Rabbi Eric Yoffe, the President of the URJ, has been a strong supporter and when necessary, a serious critique of Israel in recent years, while at the same time working tirelessly to build bridges between Israel and the Diaspora. The same can be said for Rabbi David Saperstein (a Scholar-in-Residence here a few years ago), the director of RAC, not to mention ARZA, our movement's Zionist wing. Just reading their publications, like the magazine, "Reform Judaism", and utilizing the many resources on their websites will create a foundation where true dialogue and connection with Israel can happen.

As you leave this morning, please pick up one of the Israel resource pages we've put together for you. On it are websites, publications and a short bibliography of books on Israel and the Middle East.

2. Focus our energy on the progressive institutions already working in Israel.

There are literally hundreds of progressive Israeli organizations already in the trenches of Israeli life to choose from. I've listed a few of my favorites on the resource sheets you'll find on the information table in the entrance way.

Right now I want to spotlight an opportunity to support Progressive Judaism in Israel that Shomrei Torah is already taking a leading role in – Hineini.

Hineini in Hebrew means "here I am". Hineini is all about helping build Reform congregations in Israel. You may not know this but our movement has been struggling in Israel on every level – for recognition, funding, and to get its message out to the Israeli public who knows very little about Progressive Judaism.

What's amazing is that in spite of all the obstacles, Progressive Judaism is actually making headway in Israel. New communities are being established every year, and more and more Israeli-born rabbis are being ordained through our movement. More important than that, where communities are built, people come! They come, for b'nai mitzvah, for weddings, for the Holy Days, and when they come they are exposed to a whole other way to view, not just Judaism, but the world. You see, Israel needs progressive religion for the same reasons we do – to model pluralism, inclusively, and the liberal democratic values that are a part of a progressive religious world view.

There are now over 30 Reform congregations in Israel today. So many lack the most basic of congregational needs and few can afford their own place to meet and worship (we can relate to that!). This is where Hineini comes in. Through Hineini, Reform Congregations in the states can support struggling Progressive congregations in Israel. In fact, earlier this year our congregation responded to the Hineini call by agreeing to adopt a new struggling congregation in Israel called,

Kehilat Yozma, whose name in Hebrew means “initiative” and is also an acronym for Yahadut Z’maneinu, Moreshet Ha’Am– Judaism of Our Time, Heritage of Our People.

This blossoming Reform community is in Modi’in, a new and growing city in the hills between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv where the Maccabees battled the Syrians for religious freedom more than 2,000 years ago. Kehilat Yozma is one of Israel’s fastest-growing Progressive communities. Yozma has about 150 member families, but its diverse programming serves hundreds more.

As part of our participation in Heneini a number of months ago, we asked every congregational member to think about donating \$18.00 in support of Kehilat Yozma. If you have already done so, great! If not, here’s your chance to make a connection and make a difference in Israel. You will find more information about Heneini, along with the Israeli resource page I hope you will take with you when you leave today.

The 3rd thing we need to do is go visit. They say that every tour to Israel creates 15 jobs in Israel. Besides, there is no better way to learn about the country and its people than to visit. We don’t have a congregational trip on the calendar yet, but we will in the coming months. I put my e-mail address on the resource sheet so that anyone interested in going to Israel with the congregation could let me know.

“My heart is in the East and I am at the edge of the West.” Judah Halevi longed his whole life to be in eretz yisrael. He prayed facing east, toward Jerusalem, uttering many of the same prayers we say today. He died incomplete, a pilgrim on the way.

The 21st century is a far cry from the 12th century.

Our hearts are more divided; our prayers less focused in one direction. We’ve also learned that being in a sacred space is not as easy as we thought it would be, coming home, not as much a real homecoming as we had dreamed about for all those centuries.

So much for the mythic past or the messianic future – it is today’s Israeli reality that we must face through increased knowledge and dialogue, commitment to progressive grass roots Israeli organizations and travel to Israel as well.

Libi v’ mizrakh, v’ anokhi v’ sof maarav...

“My heart is in the East and I am at the edge of the West....”