

The Religious Meaning of Israel

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As many of you know, I went to Israel this summer for a very brief visit. At the core of it, I wanted to be there in solidarity with friends and the whole country during a difficult period. I found the article I sent out to the membership written by my friend Bonna Haberman very compelling. In this article she encouraged people who cared about Israel to express their concerns in person. She wrote that she understood it was inconvenient, but *she* hadn't planned to spend the summer in a bomb shelter worrying about her three sons in active duty in the army. I am so grateful that I was able to go. Another reason for the trip was to visit a friend who is battling a very serious illness. So I was also fulfilling the mitzvah of *Bikor Holim*, "visiting the sick." In discussing this *mitzvah*, the *Talmud* says

One who visits the sick must not sit upon the bed, or on a stool or a chair, but must be respectfully dressed and sit upon the ground, because the Divine Presence rests above an invalid's bed. (Bavli Nedarim 40a)

מפני שהשכינה שרויה למעלה ממטתו של חולה

So those images raise the interesting question of God's location. The liturgy is inconsistent on this point, most specifically it identifies God as *Shochain Yerushalyim* "The One who dwells in Jerusalem," but also, in the very same passage as "the One whose presence fills all of creation."

I'd like to talk about Israel today. Not so much about the current political situation although I will touch on that briefly to recommend some reading. I am more interested, in this setting, to explore what the modern State of Israel might mean to us religiously - how does it interact with our understanding of God and Judaism?

I spoke about Israel last year on the first day of Rosh Hashanah to introduce the learning we were planning with the Israel Study Group and iEngage program. I am incredibly grateful to those who participated in those groups for their curiosity and openness which made that learning so rich.

What came out of those readings and discussion for me personally, was a clear sense that secular Zionism of the kind that created the State of Israel is withering, and Religious Zionism is flourishing. I think this is a very important transition that will have profound implications for the direction of the State and relations with diaspora communities. I also think understanding this shift is difficult for us to internalize because we don't have corresponding cultural or political division in our own country. How do we relate to these two kinds of Zionism and what are the implications of this shift for our connection to Israel?

Before I get into that, I do have some recommended reading for those who are interested. In the summer we invite the returning Youth to Israel students to join us on a Shabbat morning to share their experiences. This year, our students, Aliza Ottenheimer and Brooks Richon were in Israel during the war so spent their time in the North. Debbie Coltin, who is now leading the children's service and will come momentarily to blow shofar, was amazing in her ability to manage that trip under incredibly difficult circumstances. On one of those Shabbat mornings I expressed frustration with media coverage of what was happening in Israel and suggested that those who were curious and/or opinionated about the current situation would benefit from a close reading of both the Israeli Declaration of Independence and the 1988 Hamas Charter. I still think it's a good idea.

As those who participated in the Israel Study Group, or the Torah Study, or the groups that read Art Green's Radical Judaism or Yehuda Amichai's poetry; I am a huge advocate of having a text which we can relate to in order to understand the ideas of others and refine our own ideas and sensitivities. One of the most gratifying comments I heard from a participant in the Israel Study Group was from someone who said he had been a committed Zionist his whole life, but never before had actually read the foundational documents of Zionism.

We have a strong tendency to think we know more than we know. Our brains naturally fill in gaps in our understanding and knowledge with something familiar. But if there's nothing familiar than that can leave us a very distorted view. For example, I think for most of us, our general assumptions about a Declaration of Independence for a modern Jewish State, or a charter for a Jihadist Liberation movement are very unlikely to be accurate. So if you aren't familiar with the Israeli Declaration of Independence or the Hamas Charter I bet they'll surprise you. I'll talk about the Declaration of Independence in more depth in a moment.

On reading the Hamas Charter, two words of advice: First, the insane anti-Judaism is jarring, but that's not why I'm recommending you read it. What is more interesting and important I believe is understanding the theology, goals and vision of success. You could actually clean up the crazy stuff and not change the underlying theology so don't let the offensiveness short circuit your ability to read carefully. Second, it's upsetting so don't read it before bed. Back to Israel.

I want to ask a question about how we how we individually understand the religious nature of the Jewish State. I also want to make a suggestion and plea for how we talk about Israel.

The Israeli Declaration of Independence, like our Declaration of Independence, is a secular aspirational document based on enlightenment values. It makes no reference to *mitzvot* (commandments), *halacha*, (Jewish law), God's promise to give the Land of Canaan to Jacob's descendants, or the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people. Instead, much like the early Reform Movement, it links the Jewish ethical prophetic tradition with enlightenment values and modern politics. The Declaration states:

The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

That is secular Zionism. Jewish culture and history are the context, but the values and laws are modern democratic. Religious authorities in Israel have a small sphere of authority around marriage, burial and Jewish status but otherwise *halacha*, (Jewish law) is not the law of the land. For many, in the significant and increasing percentage of the Israeli population who see Jewish Law as binding, this absence of *halacha* from public life doesn't make a lot of sense. This is one of the major reasons Israel does not have a constitution.

The Declaration of Independence, signed May 14, 1948, promises a constitution will be written by October of that year. First they couldn't make the deadline because of the War of Independence. Then, within the Jewish community in Israel, they quickly discovered that they could not agree on how to balance the religious and secular visions for the state. As an example of the problem; in order to write a constitution you need to define judicial authority. So, in Israel, should final decisions be made by some kind of supreme court composed of secular legal experts who might be men and women, Jewish and non-Jewish? Or must final decisions of law be made by a traditional *beit din* - religiously observant male experts of Jewish law?

There are many ways that this secular/religious tension plays out in Israeli politics and culture. The place where it comes up for us, is in the Blessing for the State of Israel that is in our Shabbat Siddur and the books we are using today. As noted in our book, this prayer was probably composed by the Chief Rabbis of Israel in 1948 maybe with the help of great Israeli author Shai Agnon. Also a major intellectual contributor to that prayer, although he died thirteen years before it was written, was the major early figure of Religious Zionism: Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the British Mandatory Palestine.

To put the text of the prayer in context, I want to share just a bit about Rav Kook and his writings. He was traditionally observant, a mystic and a great lover of the People of Israel. What was remarkable about Rav Kook is that he saw secular Zionism as serving a sacred purpose. He believed that the founding of the State of Israel was part of the messianic process. In his view, traditional Judaism in exile had lost connection to both the vitality of the physical body and the vitality of the land. Secular Zionism was bringing back these essential elements into the Jewish people and this reconstitution of a healthy embodied Jewish people, no longer in physical and spiritual exile, was the beginning of messianic redemption.

Here are the words of Rav Kook. Note that he is speaking to his fellow traditional Jews who are overwhelmingly opposed to Zionism because of its complete rejection of Judaism as they know it. Rav Kook writes:

How should men of faith respond to an age of ideological ferment which affirms all of these values in the name of nationalism and denies their source, ... in God? To oppose Jewish Nationalism, even in speech, and to denigrate its values is not permissible, for the spirit of God and the spirit of Israel are identical. What they [men of faith] must do is to work ... at the task of uncovering the light and holiness implicit in our national spirit, the divine element which is its core. The secularists will thus be constrained to realize that they are immersed and rooted in the life of God and bathed in the radiant sanctity that comes from above.... We are called to a new world suffused with the highest light, to an epoch the glory of which will surpass that of all the great ages which have come before. All of our people believe we are in the first stage of the Final Redemption.

So the Secular Zionist project for Rav Kook is actually God's project of redemption but the main actors don't realize the role they are playing in the divine drama.

This link between the modern State of Israel and Redemption is the opening of our Prayer for the State of Israel which opens:

Avinu sheh'b'shamayim [Our Father in heaven]
Tzor Yisrael v'Goalo [Rock of Israel and its Redemer]
Barech et Midinat Yisrael [Bless the State of Israel]
Raysheet [the beginning]
Tzmichat [of the flowering]
Ge'lu'yo'taynu [of our redemption]

Our *old* Machzor, edited by R. Jules Harlow translated this opening:

“Bless the State of Israel, the dawn of our redemption” (p. 197). Straight up! If dawn comes high noon is only a matter of time.

Our Shabbat siddur, Sim Shalom, fudges the translation a bit with **“Bless the State of Israel with its promise of redemption...”** (p. 149). So "promise" is interesting because it can be either assurance as in "you have my promise" or a possibility as in "Kid, you've got promise" - so maybe yes maybe no.

Our new *mahzor* makes this ambiguity explicit by inserting a word in brackets. *Barech et Midiniat Yisrael [she'tehiye] Raysheet Tzmichat Gelu'yotaynu*. "Bless the State if Israel, **[that it may be]** the flowering of redemption." With that insertion, we don't start from the premise that the founding of the Jewish state *is* evidence of the Final Redemption, but rather that this is a possibility.

In addition, there is a third option. At the bottom of the page is an alternative version which, similar to the Prayer for Our Country, doesn't mention redemption at all.

Our book leaves each individual and community to make a decision about how we understand the religious significance of the modern State of Israel. So much political emotion and feeling about Israel gets externalized and put on display. In contrast, I expect the way you relate to this prayer will be very private, based on your background and intuition. Despite the fact there are very dramatic theological differences embodied in the three options in our *mahzor*, I don't expect that where you sit in terms of this question of the relationship of the State of Israel to the Final Redemption will be controversial. It is your own business. It is the realm of personal belief, and in this realm we give each other a lot of space.

There's a story in the Book of Judges about conflict between the tribes and clans of Israel. In fact, there are lots of stories in the Book of Judges about conflicts between the tribes. This is the book that comes after Joshua, after the conquest of the land. Much of the Book of Judges is devoted to wars between Israelites and the inability of the community to get along peacefully. (This is also one you probably shouldn't read before bed.) In this particular story (chapter 12), the tribe of Ephraim is aggrieved because they were not invited to fight in a successful war wages by the Gileadites. So they go to war against the Gileadites, their fellow Israelites, and are defeated. The Gileadites take control of the river crossing that is the route back home for the soldiers of Ephraim. When a possible fleeing soldier shows up to cross the river, the Gileadite soldiers ask if he's from the Tribe of Ephraim. Of course he answers "no." So then they ask him to say *Shibboleth*, which an Ephraimite pronounces as *Sibboleth*. If he mispronounces the word, they kill him. That's how we get the English word Shibboleth meaning a word, symbol, or credo that identifies someone's identification in a group. Those are necessary for understanding our place in society. I have no problem with it. What's a problem is the part where they kill him.

We have gotten very restrictive in American Jewish life in our political discussions about Israel which I find both sad and foolish. If we continue to let our political discussion on Israel degrade to the same level as the worst of our national politics, we will pay a very high price in weakening us as a community. Very simply, regardless of how we feel on the political issues, I think we are in the same boat. As Jews and non-Jews connected to Jewish community we are in the same boat - fractious and stiff-necked and opinionated as we are. Being in the same boat means that we talk and debate and disagree without abandoning compassion and respect. Look at the example I just read from Rav Kook. It's astonishing for someone with a traditional world view that sees serving God as expressed in mitzvot to look at the socialist, sexually-liberated, convention-rejecting, religion-bashing early Zionist movement and see a manifestation of the Divine will. That was possible because of his love of and faith in Jewish people - even those who dramatically disagreed with him.

Here's a more modern example about one of the most contentious issues in the question of negotiations with Palestinians - God's address: Jerusalem. Listen to what former Likud Prime Minister and Mayor of Jerusalem, Ehud Olmert said about 2012. [Of course, Omert, like almost any political figure is somewhat controversial. I will admit however to having a soft spot for Omert (even with his bribery conviction). This is because when he was mayor and I was living in Jerusalem we were walking to the Jerusalem film festival and I saw him respond to snarled traffic by getting into the middle of an intersection to direct traffic, which is exactly what I think a mayor should do] . This is what he said addressing a liberal supportive crowd regarding his offer to the Palestinians that *neither* side would have sovereignty over the Temple Mount and *Al Aksha* Mosque. Here's what Omert said:

Don't take it lightly and do me a favor, don't applaud. Cry with me, but understand that for a Jew to offer this is possible only if you reach the conclusion that if you want to live in peace, and secure the future of the Jewish people in the State of Israel as an independent democratic Jewish state, giving this concession is an inevitable conclusion.

The political content is not what is important here, it could have been someone saying the opposite politically, what is important to me is: "Don't take it lightly and do me a favor, don't applaud. Cry with me."

Even if decisions are obvious does not make them easy. In fact, it is often the privilege of detachment and distance that makes obvious decisions seem easy. A limb needs to be amputated to save a life, or someone who is not able to drive safely needs to have their keys and car taken away. For those of you who have been involved in those kind of "obvious" decisions you know they are not easy. There is certainly no triumph or celebration in it. If that's your brother, if that's your sister, there is no satisfaction in being right about what needs to happen.

I wish we could speak about Israel with more sensitivity to the fact that any direction forward, is going to be hard for some of us and that over the long run our strength comes from unity. There are a lot of big ideas out there. Big scary ideas: Annex the West Bank, Pull out of the West Bank, Give up on the state being Jewish, Give up on the state being democratic.

Especially for those who have made up your mind about what Israel should or should not do, and are confident that you are right, I encourage you to not stop there but explore what are the implications of that decision for others. Can we understand what we are asking them to give up? Do we have enough love for the People Israel to turn to them and say "cry with me?"

I want to finish with the image from the Talmud of the Divine Presence hovering over the bed

of one who is ill. The Gemara says that the person visiting someone who is sick, must not sit on a chair or a stool, but rather on the floor because the Divine Presence is above the bed of one who is ill. This is a stunning image leading to a very beautiful principle which will make a lot of sense to those of you who have participated in this *mitzvah*. The person who is ill is always at a disadvantage: they are incapacitated, the one who visits is not. The person who is sick is in bed, low to the ground, not easily able to move, perhaps in discomfort and not bathed nor dressed in the way they would like to receive a guest. This is enough reason for the visitor to keep oneself low, out of respect for the dignity of the person who is sick. Our tradition goes much further. The reason for sitting on the floor is not for the honor of the one who is sick, but humility before God. It does not depend on the particular relationship of the one visiting and the one who is sick. The *mitzvah* is not about that individual relationship but about respecting our unique and proper place in the universe. Our tradition offers us such amazing insights into how to live in community and be respectful of each other. And of course this wisdom and sensitivity is not for the easy moments but for the most difficult.

I hope that we can draw from this part of our tradition in our discussions about Israel. This is an area where so many of us feel hurt, angry and vulnerable. As we continue our conversations please know that our unity as a people is of vital importance, that the long-range project of the Jewish State does not make sense if we start to isolate and demonize parts of the Jewish community because they have a different opinion and perspective at this particular moment. May we continue to cultivate caring and curiosity and always aspire to a consciousness of the Divine Presence is hovering between us.