**Israel, We Need to Talk …**

**Rabbi Rachel Safman – Talk delivered Second Day of RH – 5782 (Temple Beth-El, Ithaca, NY)**

Is it really possible to maintain a friendship when you do not meet each other or speak? Is it possible to maintain familial intimacy when you cannot hug? Can community survive when our only ties are built on remote, impersonal exchanges? These are questions that I touched upon in a different way in my address yesterday morning, and that I take up again today in a different context.

The pandemic has forced all of us to wrestle with what it means to be in relationship from a distance. It is perhaps not such a new experience for those whose professional careers or personal circumstances have seen them making one, two, multiple moves – sometimes over great distances, even across time zones – to accommodate their own and their family's changing needs.

It is also not a novel question for us as Jews. Since at least first centuries of the Common Era when the Romans first laid waste to Jerusalem and then scattered the survivors, the global Jewish community has been spread across the extremes of the known world. For centuries before it was possible to ping someone on the internet or call them on the phone, Jews maintained a sense of connection to one another by remaining in constant communication: writing letters, sending envoys (and brides!), and reading one another's scholarly treaties – over which they engaged in passionate debates.

It was not that most Jews were *without* a proximate Jewish community in that time. The vast majority of the world's Jews then – and now – lived in locations with at least a nucleus of fellow Jews, and there were global centers of Jewish life and learning (in the plural): First in Israel and in Babylonia, then in the Iberian Peninsula and the Rhineland, later in Eastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean and finally, in the modern era, in the United States (or, more broadly, North America) and Israel.

Unsurprisingly, the existence of multiple Jewish centers, each with their own authorities, their own relationship to their neighbors and perceptions based on prevailing conditions made for somewhat uneasy relations at times. Try telling a Jew living in Maines, Germany in the 13th century that rice is kosher for Passover! But they clung to one another because … well, they were Jews and beholden to the same Torah, beholden to one another as expressed in the Talmudic precept: *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba'zeh* (Roughly: "All Jews are responsible for one another's well-being").

The principle of *kol Yisrael arevim* has been invoked in a very concrete way at various points in modern times. In the 1970s and 1980s North American Jews made a full-court press to get their co-religionists in the Soviet Union out from under the Iron Curtain. Many taking part in this service today may have been part of the letter-writing campaigns, solidarity missions and as sponsors of those who were successful in emigrating to the West. Some of you may yourselves be among those brought to America in this way.

Similarly in the 1990s when Argentina's Jewish community faced crippling inflation, coupled with waves of anti-Semitic violence, American Jews opened their hearts and their wallets, providing financial support for those who chose to ride things out in place and supporting countless others in their decision to make Aliyah to Israel or to seek resettlement elsewhere (including in the U.S.).

But this vision of ourselves as a global Jewish community, inescapably bound up in each other's lives is a paradigm that has been fraying in recent years, at least in as far as the American Jewish community with Israel is concerned – and arguably, the reverse is true, as well. Our two communities – the Yochin and

Boaz, two great pillars – of the global Jewish world have, in recent decades, come to diverge at more than a linguistic or cultural level. Nor is it only in the realm of the political that we have been divided. We have begun to think of ourselves as disassociated entities that can – perhaps even should – each "go it alone" in isolation of the other. It is this notion of which I hope to disabuse you on this Second morning of Rosh Hashanah, this day on which our tradition asks us to take on openly and honestly some of the most difficult relationships in which we are engaged.

Now I am no fool. I recognize that for much of the English-speaking Jewish world, Israel is now the "third rail," the subject that one invokes at one's own peril, but this is one of the problems that I think we need to explicitly take up. I am also aware that there are in this congregation – and in this community – a diversity of positions on Israel. As TBE's rabbi, I have no interest in telling anyone that the opinions that they have formed on Israel or her government or her relationship with her neighbors, etc. are "wrong". What I am addressing today is the need to be in relationship with Israel and her people and, related to this, our need as a local Jewish community, to be able to discuss Israel civilly.

I came to the decision that I would talk about Israel during this High Holiday season several weeks ago, amidst the most recent round of conflict between Israel and Hamas. It was a brutally painful period for many of us, both because of the events transpiring in Israel – among them, an unprecedented surge in violence between Jewish and Arab Israelis – and because of the way it was affecting the Jewish community locally. Our teens and college students, in particular, were the targets of truly ugly expressions of antisemitic and anti-Zionist messaging over social media and in local protest gatherings in which they as Jews were positioned as proxies for the "Jewish state" and its actions – regardless of their own views on or relationship to events there.

As poignant for me as the pain that I heard my high school students was an essay that I read as the conflict was winding down. I came across it in a newsletter by Mitch [name?] a political analyst born and educated in America, who since making *aliyah* has published a weekly newsletter about Middle East affairs.

The column that caught my eye was not looking at the dynamics within the region. Rather it examined how the conflict had played out in terms of the relationship between Israel and the American Jewish community. The author wrote in a nuanced way about the treatment of the conflict in the American media, about a controversial letter penned by some American rabbinical students voicing sympathy for the Palestinians, and about the growing rift between the Orthodox and American Jews who identified with more liberal denominations.

As he concluded his column, the author made a statement, which I am paraphrasing here because it has since been taken down from the site:

> However optimistic I am about the ability of the two communities [Israel and the American Jewish community] to work things out and come to an understanding, what troubles me most is that the next time the American Jewish community engages in such a full-throated exchange on Israel is likely to be when Israel is next in a conflict.

This forecast floored me, in part because I could not easily push it aside. The author is correct in asserting that in recent years, as it has become increasingly uncomfortable to discuss Israel in a North

American Jewish space, we have largely slipped into the habit of avoiding it. We might tote out our Israeli fruits at Tu b'Shevat or our Israeli flags at Yom HaAtzma'ut, but many of us (not all) would just as soon not speak about – or to – Israel at other times.

"And is that a problem?" You might ask. "Maybe it's a good thing that we don't bring up topics that are likely to put us at odds with one another, to expose rifts in our community or between our community and others?"

That is not the message communicated by this morning's Torah portion. The story of the Akedah, the near sacrifice of Isaac, is the epitome of difficult relationships and the attempt to resolve them by not talking.

Our rabbis fleshed out the intense but sparse narrative by creating a plethora of midrashim describing the interactions among the protagonists as the events of the Akedah were unfolding. In one Avraham slips out of the house in the predawn hours to avoid having to explain to his wife what he is doing. In another, the father instructs his son to walk in silence to the mountain "to enhance the sanctity of the experience". In several of the midrashim and in the rabbinic commentaries on the text itself attention is drawn to the fact that following Isaac's unbinding (as the ram is sacrificed) the father and son do not speak to one another – not a word! – for the rest of their lives.

Their silence is deafening! It is deafening and utterly destructive of their relationship.

What might the father and son have said to one another as they were walking away from their makeshift altar? Might they have spoken of their shock and pain that such an event could ever have transpired? Might they have emphasized their love for one another and discussed what a horrible breach of that love this incident represented? Perhaps the younger man could have expressed his sense of betrayal or confusion, the father his own fears and desperate desire to be "right" with a God whom he felt he could never quite satisfy? Maybe they could have walked in silence for that moment but later, when the emotions were less intense, come together to cry and to mourn what had been lost but also to dream together about Isaac's future, about the home his father hoped he would build with Rebecca?

There are lots of things that we have to say to and about Israel. For some of us these messages come easily: Expressions of pride in the existence of a sovereign Jewish state, a reality that our ancestors could only have dreamed about; a sense of connection to a place, a culture that is in its essence a realization of Jewish ideals, beliefs, language, culture (or cultures) – a place where the very calendar reflects Jewish sensibilities; for some the message that they have to express about Israel is a feeling of safety or of belonging – a place from which we can't be budged and to which we can look for sanctuary or a champion; and for some a deep appreciation for Israel's numerous achievements in fields like medicine, technology, culture, the arts, environmentalism, etc. These are, as I said, the easy messages and the messages most likely to be voiced by Jews both within Jewish spaces and in other spaces.

But there are other messages that some within the Jewish community carry within themselves. There are feelings of rejection rooted in Israel's treatment of non-Orthodox streams of Judaism and at some of the messages that have been addressed to the American Jewish community, in particular. There are feelings of resentment based on partisan intrusions on the American political scene and on the ways in which Middle Eastern politics can intrude on American Jews' relationships with their non-Jewish friends

and neighbors. There is deep frustration, pain and anger surrounding the intractable conflict with the Palestinians and with the way that both this conflict and the Arab minority in Israel gets spoken about and treated, including in official government doctrines. Finally, there is a sense of "disconnect" between a Jewish minority who "performs" their Judaism through participation in Jewish institutions and communal activities, cultivation of recognized cultural practices and embrace of certain rituals and values – this contrasted with a people who would argue (if the question ever occurred to them) that they are "doing Jewish" by strolling on a beach in Tel Aviv on Yom Kippur.

These sentiments equally need to be given space for expression – and space to be heard – as do the matching sentiments originating among Israeli Jews about their feelings of alienation and betrayal when Diasporic Jews align with BDS or fail to express support for Israel and Israelis in times of crisis or when we, along with our non-Jewish neighbors, appear to be holding Israel to an impossibly high standard in its conduct of internal and external affairs, even as they wrestle with the complexities of life in an exceptionally volatile region.

There is what to talk about! And we must talk about them as family. We must talk about them as Jews have spoken to one another throughout the centuries, as people deeply vested in one another's welfare. And to achieve that vestedness, we have to begin by having ongoing dialogues with one another, including at times when there is no proximate threat or injury requiring repair.

We need to open in our own communities opportunities to speak about Israel – and to bring to the table people whose views depart from our own. In this I applaud the IAUJC for the excellent program they sponsored last June(?) with Uriel Abuloff and express support for follow-up programs in a similarly open-minded vein.

I would also like to create in the TBE community opportunities to discuss the complexities of the relationship between the American Jewish community and Israel. I had the distinct pleasure last spring of beginning a series of such conversations with our Midrashah Bet students, based around the Hartman Institute's iEngage curriculum, and I would like to expand this to a larger multi-generational audience.

We also need to be creating opportunities for dialogue with Israel and with Israelis. I know that for some of us that is as simple as picking up the phone or sitting down at the dinner table. But for many of us, getting these conversations going is more involved. I have begun working with Rabbi Brody on expanding our largely quiescent partnership with the Dimona region, with whom we have been twinned, into a more vibrant multi-faceted dialogue at both an individual and community level. I see our congregation – perhaps our community, more broadly – hosting salons in which people from the two communities come together (virtually for now, though maybe later in person) to discuss issues of shared interest, be these intellectual, cultural, social, political. These might range from an art "open house" featuring the work of one or two local artists to a more heated(w?) discussion of how individuals in each community experienced the latest round of conflict.

And I would hope that when the pandemic lifts, we can be discussing as a community, opportunities for us to travel as a group to meet with counterparts in Israel representing a wide range of political, social, cultural and ethnic dimensions of Israeli society (and to host such delegations here). For as you know, I am a big believer that meaningful relationships are based on real person-to-person contact.

For those who are saying under their breaths (or maybe out loud, given the Zoom mute function) “Been there. Done that.” Let me emphasize that we stand now in a particularly liminal moment with respect to American-Israeli relations. It is a moment of particular significance for various reasons:

First, as has been reported in numerous fora, there has been a sea-change in the American Jewish community’s attitudes towards Israel. The shift of opinions among younger Americans, in particular, away from inchoate (w?) support for Israel to a more suspicious, generally hostile stance means that the next few years are critical if we are going to salvage a meaningful, mutually supportive relationship between the communities – and by this I don’t mean a relationship based on uncritical endorsement of everything Israel does, but rather one in which the goal is, in all instances, the long-term welfare of all parties.

There has also been a tectonic shift within Israel herself in recent months, with the election of the new coalition government. Whether you lean left, right or center; identify with hawks or doves, environmentalists, Islamists or settlers, you have your counterpart in the current administration and what is craziest of all is that they are making it work!

For the first time in years the Knesset has passed a budget and has made significant changes in policies relating to finance, transportation, investment in the Arab sector, [more], and there is room for considerable movement on a number of other fronts – though, truthfully, the status of relations with the Palestinians is unlikely to be among them in the near term.

But if you believe, as I do, that Jewish culture is based in dialogue and that we are strongest when we bring our diverse ideas to the table; if you believe that the global Jewish community, which collectively amounts to just 001% of the world’s population is strongest when its two pillars serve to strengthen one another; if you believe the creative gifts, economic, intellectual and political contributions of more than 40% of world Jewry is too great a resource to squander, in either direction, then we need to make this commitment to get the conversation going – and to keep it going through bad times and good.