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Hope is Aspirational: Israel in 1968 and Today

Shanah Tovah. I wish you all, each of you, and all of us together, a healthy, happy, successful, and peaceful New Year. May the year to come bring us together for joyful celebrations, deep learning, emotional support, and spiritual growth in this, our communal, home, and on line.

To these Holy Days, we bring our most intimate hopes and prayers, as well as our loftiest dreams for our community, our nation, and for the Land of Israel in a more peaceful world. May the personal work that we do on these Holy Days help us to realize our worthiest aspirations, and may our prayers be answered for good.

In today's Torah portion. We read about Hagar and Ishmael. Hagar, Sarah's concubine, and Ishmael, her son by Abraham, are banished so as not to share in the inheritance promised to Abraham and Sarah's descendants. God reassures Abraham that Ishmael, too, will become father to a great nation.

But Hagar and Ishmael are soon overcome by thirst. In a detail that raises the level of emotion in an already painful human story, Hagar moves away from her son so as not to have to endure his suffering. God hears the boy's distress, and an angel cries out to Hagar and directs her to a nearby well of water.

It seems that this story and the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac, which we read tomorrow, are duplicated, paired stories about life's fragility. They are especially appropriate to a holiday when we are asked to take seriously our mortality, to assess what matters to us. with full recognition that really, at any time, anything can happen. By having us read these stories on Rosh Hashanah, we are also being asked to notice the stark difference between premature tragic endings (the near

death of both sons of Abraham) and the alternative, children who will not die, but will instead grow up to have children of their own, and found nations that extend into the far future, with infinite promise.

But there is another story that fits snugly between these two tales about Abraham's sons and their brushes with death. After Ishmael is saved by the discovery of a well, and before the Akedah, the story of the binding of Isaac, is a brief story about Abraham's encounter with another tribal leader, Abimelech. In this story, Abraham confronts Abimelech about a well that Abraham dug and which Abimelech's servants apparently stole.

Unwilling to apologize for usurping Abraham's well, Abimelech indicates that Abraham's complaint is the first he hears of it. Abraham then gives Abimelech a substantial gift, effectively purchasing back what he already owned – and the leaders take a mutual oath of friendship and peace. The place, which I am sure many of you know, is then named Be'ersheva, Be'er means "well" and Sheva means "oath,"

the place name thereby preserving the story of the negotiations over the well and the oath of peace.

This story has been appreciated as a model of peacemaking and is important to the characterization of Abraham as the ultimate peacemaker. But the story is not completely sensible by our contemporary rules of diplomacy. Most notably, Abraham purchases land and a well that he dug on that land; land and a well that he believes he already owns. Perhaps Abimelech has another point of view. Interpreters have explained that we are meant to learn from this extravagance just how far one should go in the interest of peace, that the goal is not to be right, not even to ensure justice, but rather to swallows one's pride in the interest of living peacefully with one's neighbors. Peace requires a willingness to compromise, and sometimes to set aside our strict sense of justice in the interest of peace. During this holiday, we actually prefer not to be treated with justice, but we repeatedly ask God to judge us from a place of mercy and forgiveness.

What strikes me in reading the story is its placement between the story of Ishmael's and Isaac's near-death experiences. Rabbi Debra Kolodny has written that the well over which Abraham negotiated may be understood to be the very same well that materialized to save the lives of Hagar and Ishmael. Perhaps, Kolodny supposes, Abraham purposely sent Hagar and Ishmael in the direction of his well and had them followed by a servant to keep watch. Perhaps Abimelech's servants, having concealed the well, unwittingly put Ishmael at mortal risk, but Abraham's servant, whom Hagar understandably imagines to be an angel, stepped forward to reveal what he knew to be the location of Abraham's hidden well. The servant would have reported back to Abraham, that his well had been concealed, which then motivated Abraham to confront Abimelech.

I like this interpretation, including Kolodny's suggestion that people are sometimes mistaken for angels and vice versa. On either side of the negotiation between Abraham and Abimelech is a miracle story about God saving an endangered child so that he may live into his

great destiny as founder of a nation. But linking these miracle stories together is a political story, the outcome of which is entirely in human hands, a story that includes a confrontation, diplomacy, an exchange of commodities and a treaty. If the stories of the sons make us feel the power of fate and our reliance on fortune, the Abraham-Abimelech story, the intervening story, points to what is equally true -- that much of life **is** in our control. How our lives turn out depends on fate, God's will, as well as on our own skills and choices.

Just as these stories are both about Divine interventions and human action in determining our fates, so too the Rosh Hashanah experience emphasizes the message that our fate is in God's hands (we pray to be written in the Book of Life and prosperity) and that our fate is in our own hands (we pray to be able to break destructive habits; we promise to better ourselves, to turn inward, and to repent).

Judaism continuously balances these complementary forces: Faith and Action. The message of <u>faith</u> reminds us how little we control and asks us to believe, as much as possible, in the ultimate goodness of

God. In this way, Judaism demands that we resist despair, acknowledge that life is full of mystery, and pray for the best. The message of action demands that we always do self-assessment, think about where we may have fallen short, make plans to improve ourselves, and be more forgiving and generous in our relationships with other people. We affirm that we are at once powerless and powerful.

Today Israel stands yet again, thousands of years after these ancient stories, navigating relationships with Arab neighbors and still discussing sharing water. We are still trying to balance the claims of justice and peace. I want now to turn our attention to the model of Abraham and Abimelech as we consider our personal and communal attachments to Israel. And while my own my attachment to Israel is longstanding and strong, I am aware that discussions about Israel have become increasingly complicated, especially when we talk to the rising generation.

My generation came of age in the era of the Six Day War, of Moshe Dayan, Abba Eban and Golda Meir, a time when we had clarity

about who was on defense and who aggressor. Israel was the land of sweet oranges and blooming deserts, a safe haven for oppressed Jews worldwide. We fought for the release of Soviet and later Ethiopian Jewries, and we felt triumphant in these successes. On July 4, 1976, as America celebrated its bicentennial, Jews world-wide held their breath. Jews had been separated from non-Jews during a hijacking that ended up in Uganda's Entebbe airport. As the world stood by, tiny Israel sent a rescue mission and brought the hostages to safety. Our conviction that Israel was looking out for world Jewry, only a generation after the Holocaust, consoled us.

Those who have come of age in more recent decades may struggle with knowing a fuller history than the one we had been taught. Mayor Teddy Kollek's vision of a reunited and integrated Jerusalem now seems unrealistic. The Palestinians, once seen as part of a unified Arab nation of 22 states, now have a national identity of their own. And the progress that followed the signing of the Oslo peace accords has given way to a stalemate in which terror and occupation, Hamas

control in Gaza, and hopelessness regarding change in the West Bank, has made us more weary than hopeful.

The best that I can offer is that it is still important – politically and spiritually – to have hope. Rabbi Hanan Schlessinger is a diminutive Orthodox rabbi who lives in a settlement on the West Bank. He refers to himself as a settler-rabbi. He is also the founder of ROOTS, an organization that brings together Jews living in the West Bank with local Palestinians, two groups that have grown to see each other as enemies. Rabbi Schlessinger begins his talks by speaking about how the West Bank is the land of the Patriarchs. Judea and Samaria are where our ancestors lived, it's where today's torah reading took place, not Tel Aviv and Haifa. For him, the West Bank is an indivisible part of any Jewish homeland. And then, he goes on, usually surprising his audience, to say that the same is true for the Palestinians; they also are rooted in that same land and have a just claim to live there with autonomy. Two peoples, two claims, one land. Rabbi Schlessinger builds human bridges.

For me, and I suspect for some of you, we do not evaluate our connection to Israel year by year or government by government. As in our families, sometimes we need to admit to serious problems without breaking the relationship. And, in the mode of Abraham, sometimes we do well to react to personal slights with bemusement rather than anger. As a Conservative Rabbi, there is only one country in the world where my rabbinic ordination does not count, and where I cannot officiate at life cycle ceremonies, and that is Israel. A few years ago, while I was in Israel, I found my name in a newspaper article about a list, kept in Israel's interior ministry, of American rabbis whose testimony on someone's Jewish status would not be accepted. The list comes with no explanations. Rather than succumbing to anger, I circulated the article to my friends with the ironic subject line: "I made the list."

My connection to Israel, like many of yours, is intimate and personal. In 1968, when I was turning 13 and the state of Israel was also a teenager, my mother, a Holocaust survivor, and I shared a

transformative experience. Our family had spent a special summer travelling throughout Israel for the first time, and my mother reconnected with a cousin, Sam Hamburg, who lived at the Dan Hotel on the beach in Tel Aviv. Sam had helped support my mother and her family when they arrived in America as refugees at the end of a journey that had begun after the War in Warsaw and took them to Paris, Havana, Cuba, and ultimately, to America. Sam had built the cotton industry in California, and in the 1950s he brought his skills to the infant State of Israel, beginning Israel's cotton industry. The Minister of Agriculture at that time was the young Moshe Dayan, later to become the iconic figure of Israel's lightening victory in the Six Day War, and Sam introduced us to Dayan and other labor party leaders.

A few months later my mother was surprised by a phone call from the publicist for Israel's Ministry of Tourism asking if my parents would accept a free trip to Israel. In 1968 Israel expected that, for the first time in a single year, 1,000,000 passengers would arrive by plane at Lod, now called Ben Gurion, Airport.

My father, a rabbi who loved leading High Holiday services (I am wearing his kittel and tallit) but otherwise shied away from public attention, was reluctant to be my beautiful mother's escort as the cameras flashed when she became "Israel's Millionth Passenger." He suggested that she take me, the bar-mitzvah boy. And so I had my bar mitzvah at the Kotel, a year after the 6 Day War, courtesy of Israel's Ministry of Tourism.

Among the trip's highlights, I was welcomed to the office of the Prime Minister of Israel, Levi Eshkol. I sat across from the man who had just shepherded the State of Israel through a great military victory, and he asked me, of all things!, how many hours I dedicated to Hebrew School each week. At the time, I went to a four-day a week supplemental Hebrew school program, then the norm for Conservative synagogue schools. The Prime Minister did not hide his disappointment. All these years later, I still marvel that the Prime Minister of Israel's priority was that the next generation should be studying Hebrew and Judaism. At this critical stage in my life, ***I*** had

upset the Prime Minister of Israel. As I think about my path since then, I cannot help but suspect that Levi Eshkol's expectations that day influenced my choosing a career in the rabbinate, studying Judaism.

I grew up with Israel, and we are both evolving. Since studying in Jerusalem with my girlfriend Lori after our first year in college, Lori and I have lived there on and off for years; two years of post-graduate study at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and two sabbatical on Mt. Scopus. I have led congregational and interfaith missions including a memorable 24-hour sleepless trip with members of the Philadelphia Jewish community to attend the festivities as Israel turned 50. And most recently, our trip in May from B'nai Tikvah to Israel put us among the first congregations to visit Israel after the Covid lockdown.

Honoring Israel and diversity, and acknowledging complexity, on this trip we met representatives of many of Israel's multiple communities – a woman who travelled across Ethiopia to make the journey to Jerusalem, a young Palestinian man who turned from violence to peace making, a Christian-Arab beauty contest winner in

Jaffa who spoke of her identity as an Israeli. And we visited a Bedouin tent where a traditionally dressed woman spoke to us of her work on behalf of women's equality in the Bedouin community. Sitting in her tent, sipping sweet tea with the flaps up, I was put in mind of Abraham and the characters of today's stories.

Of course, we also visited the Kotel and Masada, the two looming ancient symbolic sites of modern Israel. Our relatively recent access to these sites reminds us that for millennia the Jewish people had been exiled. I still feel the weight of knowing that, after a 2,000 year exile, today eating street food on the Ben Yehuda pedestrian mall, or davening in a liberal synagogue in Jerusalem on Friday night, or going to the beach in Tel Aviv is a relatively short, nondramatic, plane trip away.

If the Kotel, a remnant of God's Temple, represents the spiritual side of Jewish survival, Masada represents Israel's political will. Masada, the fortress and palace built by King Herod, fell to the Romans three full years after the burning of the Jerusalem Temple, in 73 of the Common Era. Masada represents the last holdout, the place where a

small community of Jews maintained their political resistance for three additional years.

According to the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, Elazar told the people not to destroy their food stores, so the Romans would know that they could have held on considerably longer. He also proposed, according to the legend, that the last defenders commit suicide rather than submit to Rome, a martydom designed to make their heroism inspirational for all time. In the synagogue at Masada, archaeologists found excerpts from the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones, the prophet's promise that even after destruction new life would emerge.

In the 1940s and 1950s Jewish youth would climb Masada, long before the cable cars and even before the paths were cleared. To mark the end of basic training, soldiers would receive both a rifle and a Bible on Masada. A few years ago, I witnessed a ceremony on the mountain top when teenage soldiers from all over the world, from Brazil and Russia, Ethiopia and France, who had come to Israel without family, lone soldiers, had their induction ceremony at the remains of King

Herod's fortress. Their commander spoke passionately: "Remember, you are here to protect the Jewish people wherever they live, anywhere in the world."

Today, both the Kotel and Masada convey mixed messages. The Kotel once a symbol of Jewish unity, is now also a symbol of gender and denominational separation. Masada once inspired pride, but for many people today it recalls the messianic fervor of the zealots who are remembered for choosing death before accommodation to Rome. Sensitive to changed attitudes towards this tale of martyrdom, soldiers are no longer routinely sworn in there.

Truth is not a fixed stable north star to guide our judgements. We are mindful that Israel is a nation-state navigating a complex world, but that it nevertheless has an obligation to live into Jewish values. In Israel we are still seeking to build something unique and difficult – a state that is a homeland and haven for one people, and a just society for <u>all</u> its inhabitants.

I want to conclude with the words of Israel's late President, Shimon Peres, with whom I share a common great-grandfather from Volozhin in Poland. I quote:

"Our legacy—morality, knowledge, and peace—should be our agenda for today. And so, with an eye on the horizon, let us join forces to tackle today's demands—building a just society, ensuring the safety of our citizens, encouraging scientific research and development. We have overcome obstacles many a time. With courage and determination, we shall not lose hope and will face these challenges head on. Dissatisfaction has led us thus far and I am fully confident that it will carry us to new heights in the never-ending quest for Tikkun Olam, the repair of our world." End quote.

In 1968 when my family first flew to Lod Airport, the board in the arrivals hall showed flights from NY, London, Paris, Rome and a handful of other cities. Today, you can fly from Israel to most countries in the world, and fly over countries that do not have relations with Israel. It is

change we could not have imagined when I became the million and first passenger.

Our world may feel more divided than ever; the threats Israel faces are more terrifying and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more seemingly intractable. But areas of growth and progress, from scientific innovations for the environment and medicine to diplomatic breakthroughs, will also persist. All these years later, my nostalgia has yielded to a recognition of greater complexity and my experience has also left me open to happy surprises when people of good will stay engaged, and stay in the struggle. Love must survive the loss of innocence.

The example of Abraham teaches us to be flexible and generous for the sake of peace. Solutions are possible. If we dig wells and point people in the right direction to find the resources they need for survival, we lay the groundwork for the appearance of angels and miracles.

There is a tradition to give charity, tzedakah, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as a way to sweeten the world around us before the day of judgment. As you come into the building on Kol Nidre night, in the entrance way, there will be two boxes in which to put cash or checks to one of two charities. The first is HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society which assists refugees and displaced people around the world. The second is Healing Across the Divides, a group based in Northampton, MA that give micro-grants to Israeli and Palestinian health care organizations. The founder of Healing, Dr. Norbert Goldfein, spoke to us at shabbat services a few months ago. Norbert is an angel. The work he does builds for a more hopeful future.

To everyone, Shanah Tovah, may the year ahead be filled with moments of positive surprises and an emerging peace in Israel. Through travel, respectful conversation and our volunteer energy may we find ways to bring that about.

May we each, individually and collectively, be inscribed in the book of hope and may our dreams for goodness and happiness be realized. Shanah Tovah.