

Rosh Hashana II - 5778

As the wheels of the plane touched down at Ben Gurion airport, the sky was crystal blue. 60 teenagers spontaneously burst into Hatikvah. *Hatikvah bat shnot alpayim* – the hope of 2000 years. A few hours later, we arrived at the Kotel, the Western Wall. I placed my hand on those hard rocks and I prayed. That was the first time I cried tears of joy. In my childhood growing up in Pensacola, FL, a part of me always felt like an outsider. My Judaism was unique among my peers. I think the reason I cried for joy is because a part of me that I didn't even know existed was unlocked. For the first time, that part of me wasn't an outsider. For the first time, that part of me was *home*.

This was the Summer of 2000, and hope was in the air. Each night in Jerusalem throngs of fellow teenagers mobbed Ben Yehuda street without much need for supervision. Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Yasser Arafat, and President Clinton were working out an agreement for peace at Camp David. I was excited to see the plans for the future of my homeland emerge alongside a newly forming independent Palestinian State.

Only my cousins, Ariella and Elhanan, *Chalutzim*, pioneers who were some of the first residents of Tel Aviv and fought in the War of Independence were skeptical of the progress I felt Israel was making. I'll never forget arguing with them in their modest apartment in which they've resided for 50+ years. We sing *Hatikvah* I said– where is your hope? I left disturbed, but still believing that I was right and they were wrong. Of course Israel will work hard for peace and our home will prosper and thrive.

Sometimes I wish I could go back to the naiveté of the summer of 2000. I miss the carefree days of loving Israel without complications. But seventeen years have passed, and my love has deepened beyond the new romantic love of year. True love is complicated, true love requires obligations, sacrifice and commitments. True love is a whole lot of work.

I've returned to Israel many times since that summer. Since then, I studied Hebrew in Beer Sheva, delved into the rich history of the modern State in Haifa, and immersed myself in Torah and Rabbinics in Jerusalem. I've celebrated the weddings of my friends, and accompanied the Rabbi of my Rabbi to his final resting place. I'd like to share three brief stories about how my simple love for Israel became complicated over the years.

During my semester abroad in college. The Jewish Agency offered to bring me to Jerusalem to have lunch with veteran shlichim from American Jewish summer camps. The State of Israel pays for young Israelis to spend their summer at our Camps like Ramah and Barney to share Israeli culture and create lasting connections. Some of the Israelis at my table were from *dati*, "Orthodox" families. Others at the table were *hiloni*, "Secular." I asked them what they thought about the religious experience at their summer camps. The *Dati* Israelis were impressed at how non-religious Jews could be so passionate about Judaism. The *chiloni* Israelis were impressed by a vibrant non-

Orthodox Judaism as compelling as is at our summer camps. Every one of the Israelis I spoke to felt moved by the beauty of American Judaism. They felt that this kind of Judaism would be good for Israeli society. And yet, every one of those Israelis felt that this Judaism would never exist in Israel. It was in this moment when my love for Judaism, for Jewish life in Israel became more complicated.

The next story takes place in 2005. I was on my way to Ben Yehudah street to get shawarma for dinner. As I walked down King George about 10 ambulances in a row drove past. The tension on the street was palpable. None of us knew what was going on, but all of us knew something had happened. I arrived to the shawarma shop, and a crowd had gathered around the television waiting for the news. Sure enough, there had been an explosion, there were several injured. It happened in East Jerusalem. As soon as the words East Jerusalem were uttered, the tension was relieved, life on the street went back to normal. The feeling was, it was not “our people”, so we could move on. Since that night, whenever I’m asked about whether or not I believe in a united Jerusalem, I’ve wondered quietly to myself, is Jerusalem really united?

Several years later, in 2009, Emily and I were living and studying in Jerusalem when a war broke out between Israel and Gaza. This was known as operation Cast Lead. The objective of the operation was to stop or greatly reduce the indiscriminate rocket fire that plagued the south of Israel in cities like Sderot. As Israel moved offensively against Gaza, the casualties began to rise. Rockets streamed from Gaza constantly. Some of my friends who fall on the left side of the political spectrum began posting on social media the count of Palestinian casualties. Other friends on the right side of the political spectrum began posting the count of rockets that were falling in Israel. One of my friends, Josh Ladon, captured my frustration with the false equivalence by writing, “Peace Count, zero.” For the first time since my love of Israel began, I felt true cynicism, hopelessness for a peaceful future. Ariella and Elchanan were right all along. I still loved Israel, I still sang *Hatikvah*, “The Hope,” but in truth I had lost hope. Because I lost hope, I neglected the work of loving Israel.

I have many loves in my life. I love my family. I love my work. I love Torah. I love the United States of America. All of those loves require commitment. In addition, while I don’t know any Rabbis who have lost their jobs for talking about Torah, or family, or most issues that involve the United States of America. A few years ago, a Rabbi in Chicago lost his job for his views on Israel. Just this past year, two of my colleagues came under intense criticism and loud calls for their removal from outside their congregations for talking about Israel from the perspective of multiple narratives. When my cousin was in rabbinical school, he was called out by the prominent Rabbi and author Danny Gordis because he celebrated his birthday with friends in Ramallah. Prospective members have interrogated me on the phone about where I stand on settlements and a unified Jerusalem. It’s far safer for me to simply not engage. I was an optimist in every area of my life except Israel. When it came to Israel, I had lost hope, cynicism had firmly taken hold.

This past summer a number of experiences helped me realize the cost of silence, and restored my hope that our voices can make a difference. In one swift move, the Government of Israel made two decisions that struck to the core of my desire to recognize my Judaism in our Jewish National Home. The first was a symbolic move to renege on an agreement to open a new and equal section of the Kotel that would be for egalitarian prayer. As it currently stands, the Western Wall is run like an Orthodox synagogue, with an unequal *mechitza* separating men and women. The agreement would expand a section that allows for men and women to pray together, would have formally recognized non-Orthodox movements to have authority over the site, and would have had one entrance for all three sections. For most Israelis, the Kotel is not an important part of life. Yet, symbolically, it is a proxy conflict for the question of who defines Judaism in the Jewish State. Even worse, a bill was placed forward to extend the power of the Orthodox Rabbanut in Israel to have the sole authority of conversions for the sake of right of return. As it stands, when I am honored to guide someone on the path to conversion, and they study and work for a long time to sit before a Beit Din and immerse in a mikvah and accept Judaism as their own, they are able to make aliyah to Israel as a Jew. If this bill were to go forward, we would be closer to a reality where there would fully be two Judaisms, that of the State of Israel, joined with bureaucracy, codified in a way that excludes most of the active practice of Judaism, and the Judaism of Diaspora, plural, inclusive, and diverse, as Judaism has always been.

These decisions angered me enough to get out of my cynicism fueled apathy and engage with Israel. I was invited to be a part of a delegation of politically progressive Rabbis to travel with AIPAC to Israel over the summer. On this trip, we had the opportunity to meet with politicians, thought leaders and policy experts. I came to them with a persistent question. With all that is going wrong with Israel, where is your hope for our future? I wanted to believe that hope was alive, that it was worth the challenge of engagement.

What I discovered was that hope was alive, that we are valued and heard more than we realized, that there were multiple hopeful visions that were possible to achieve. Some I was inspired by to engage in agreement, others I was repelled by, but all were versions of the many forms of Zionism that have always existed.

I also sat next to Rabbi Daniel Gordis at Shabbat dinner. The same Rabbi Gordis who once criticized my cousin for celebrating his birthday with friends in Ramallah. I asked him my optimism question. He didn't hesitate in saying, "My optimism is that we'll be ok." I pushed back, is we'll be ok enough? What about Palestinians? What about religious pluralism? Is the status quo enough? Where's the optimism?" His response, "The optimism is, we'll be ok." A few weeks later, he wrote an article about our interaction and titled it, "Optimism Takes Many Forms." He paraphrased my disappointment with the scope of his optimism. Toward the end of the article he wrote.

"Would life here be better if the conflict could be resolved? Of course it would. But since that is not likely to happen in our lifetimes, it's worth noting – particularly that now, after

Tisha Be'av, we have entered the "Seven Weeks of Consolation" – that the Jewish state is a success far greater than anything its founders imagined."

I agree that the Jewish state might be a greater success than the founders imagined, but I want to dream bigger. "We'll be ok" too small for me. I disagree with the scope of his optimism. Maybe because I'm a few years younger than Rabbi Gordis, but phrases like "not likely to happen in our lifetimes," draw out a cynicism within me and dissuade me from engagement in the Zionist project of creating a Jewish State that is a light unto all the nations of the world and is at peace with its neighbors.

I'm grateful to AIPAC for creating the trip that challenged and inspired me with a truth that ironically was the title of Rabbi Gordis's article. "Optimism Takes Many Forms." Rabbi Gordis's optimism is not my optimism, and it might or might not be your optimism. But if we believe that a Jewish National Homeland is still a project worth pursuing, believe that our interpretation of Jewish values, our priorities have a role in the conversation of the future of *Medinat Yisrael*, then we must engage, we must not lose hope.

If we are going to engage in the messy optimisms of the future of the Jewish state, we will find ourselves disagreeing. But we are stronger than those disagreements. We must not allow them to blind us to the reality that we are all Zionists in the sense that we want the Jewish State to reflect Jewish values. The hope of 2000 years is too important to let those we disagree with win the day by removing ourselves from the conversation because it's too difficult or risky to engage.

Here's how we at Shearith Israel will engage. I'll continue to be involved in Pro-Israel activities, speaking and educating, and sometimes we might disagree. As long as we're engaging in the fundamental work of building the future of the State of Israel, we can disagree on how we best get there. I'll take stands on important issues of religious pluralism. I believe the Rabbanut should be disbanded and issues of personal status should be referred to more denominations and also civil courts. The Kotel agreement should be implemented in full. I refuse to abandon my hope for a Jewish state at peace with its' neighbors. We'll learn and grow in our knowledge of Israel together. Sometimes, we may invite speakers that challenge you, because I fundamentally believe we are stronger when we engage with ideas that are not our own. In 2019, we'll travel to Israel together on what will be, as far as I know, the first Shearith Israel mission to Israel. For this, we're going to need some help to get it together, so consider this your call to action.

The hope of 2000 years, Zionism, is too important to allow those who define it in extreme ways to be the only definition. I pray that we never lose hope, that we are able to turn our hope into productive action, and that our dreams are fulfilled.

Sing Hatikvah.