

My last day in Israel this summer, wasn't supposed to happen. But when the US suspended flights to and from Ben Gurion in Tel Aviv, and my carrier followed suit, my stay was involuntarily extended. At first this was no big deal. I was rescheduled the next day for almost the same flight. But when that flight was cancelled, my carrier told it would be 5 days before I could leave Israel.

Those 5 days included my son Akiva's birthday party. Me being in Israel during a war with Hamas left my wife Sarah unfazed. Still I knew that leaving her alone for a birthday party of hyperactive 12 years old boys was not an option.

So I found the cheapest available flight on El Al to Europe, that, plus overnight layover and three transfers got me to New Jersey before Shabbat and before Akiva's party.

On my final day in Tel Aviv, a few rabbinic colleagues in the same boat and I, borrowed the hotel bikes and rode from the Tel Aviv port south along the Mediterranean Sea. We spent the morning exploring the alleys of the Old City of Yaffo and the shuk at its base. We bought guilt offerings for our families at home and drank fresh squeezed juice.

As happened almost everyday I was in Tel Aviv there was an *azakah* – the sirens went off, warning us to seek shelter. There was no obvious bomb shelter, so we did what we had by that point become pretty good at and followed the local Israelis. We landed in a two room bike shop with bikes hanging at crazy angles from the domed middle-eastern ceiling. As we entered, one of the tattooed bike shop employees directed a young pregnant woman to the corner of the room, behind a counter, that he claimed was the safest spot.

I felt more nervous during this *azaka* than the previous half dozen. Perhaps because I was supposed to be gone. Perhaps because for the first time I doubted the strength of this shelter that clearly predated the Israeli construction codes for safe rooms. Or maybe I was just projecting fear and worry for the young pregnant woman.

I was especially grateful when I heard the reassuring booms of an Iron Dome interception and soon after the quieting of the sirens.

Hitlamdut

Before I go on – I would like to ask you to take a moment and notice where your attention is right now? What is going through your mind? How do your muscles feel? Your breath rate?

I have hardly begun to share insights from my summer in Israel, but perhaps you already notice your heart reacting compassionately to this story. Maybe you are sympathizing with the pregnant woman I mentioned or with your rabbi or with the rabbi's wife?

Maybe your mind was focused on our relative safety in that bike shop protected by Iron Dome and you are thinking of Israel's southern residents closer to the Gaza border, who often have only seconds to respond to missile attacks.

Or maybe you are thinking about residents of Gaza who had no shelters?

Hitlamdut

Over the next year we will be exploring the value of practice in relation to strengthening our *middot* our ethical and spiritual characteristics. Simple virtues like patience, kindness and trust. The very foundation of this kind of practice is *hitlamdut*. I would describe *hitlamdut* as mindful introspection. To practice *hitlamdut* is to approach whatever you are doing with curiosity and an assumption that in this moment there is something to learn.

With mindful curiosity, we notice how even minor comments or irritations can trigger our emotions and lead to responses of anger or impatience or envy: reactions that are out of line with our best and most wholesome intentions.

When talking about Israel *hitlamdut* is very useful to practice. Israel is tightly bound to our feelings about the survival of Judaism, our memory of the Holocaust, our fears of anti-Semitism, our pride as Jews and how we want to be perceived as Jews in the world.

I have been trying to practice *hitlamdut*. Listening and speaking with over 85 individuals during my trip was a great opportunity, to observe my own thoughts and emotions. I often forgot my intention to practice *hitlamdut*. When, I remembered, I was often embarrassed by my internal reactions of impatience, irritation, sometimes boredom.

Writing this talk I again tried to practice *hitlamdut*. Unsurprisingly, I noticed my mind engaged with many of you in imaginary conversation. I noticed, regret as certain ideas were put on the page or abandoned or cut. I noticed my convictions careening toward self-righteousness. I noticed concern that I could say something that might harm my relationship with you as your rabbi.

Knowing that I can't say it all, we have planned many more opportunities to discuss Israel this year. I have invited many more speakers. I trust we will get to practice mindful curiosity. Why not start practicing now?

RESPONSIBILITY---*Teshuva* means taking responsibility for our actions. It means taking responsibility for our responses to things we don't control. It means acknowledging our responsibility for determining the meaning of our experience.

My talk today is centered on several people I met in Israel who embody this kind of responsibility.

One was Yossi Klein Halevi, a prominent journalist and author. He describes himself as a perpetually frustrated centrist.

When we met with Halevi he shared his view that two commandments drive two competing and dominant Zionist narratives. Both of these narratives describe things that are true. But both can also distort.

One narrative is rooted in the commandment to remember to blot out Amalek.

“Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt... How he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and he cut down all the stragglers.”

Haman the villain of Purim is taught to have been a descendent of Amalek. This commandment teaches that we have real enemies and if we fail to address them we will pay the price in future conflicts.

Suicide bombings, missiles, tunnels all make it easy to see Palestinians as a dangerous and frightening enemy. The frightening expressions of anti-Semitism we witnessed this summer reinforce our experience of danger. At it's best this commandment encourages us to take seriously our responsibility to protect Jews against real danger.

But the discourse of “remember to blot out Amalek” often leads to blaming the entire conflict on Palestinians, Arabs and anti-Semites. The violence it justifies tends to relinquish rather than take responsibility.

The problem with this narrative is that it too easily cast Israelis only as powerless victims.

The second dominant narrative is driven by the commandment “You shall not wrong or oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

This commandment reminds us of the many ways *we* have been abused as a minority. At its best it encourages us to resist discrimination and oppression of others.

But Yossi Klein Halevi taught that this narrative while useful in protecting the rights of minorities had its downside as well.

His critique of this commandment created a big opportunity for me to try and practice *hitlamdut*. I love this commandment and I noticed myself defending it while he was still in mid-critique. Even, now I worry about damaging the power of this important commandment.

But Halevi pointed out that the discourse driven by “remember you were strangers,” tends to blame the *entire* conflict on Israel.

What at first appears like taking responsibility becomes martyrdom, and the more we look on through this lens the easier it is to imagine that everything is Israel’s fault and that they alone can solve this conflict. This discourse minimizes the responsibilities of Palestinians to be part of the solution. It casts Palestinians only as disempowered victims and is used to excuse violence directed at Israelis.

Both narratives get used to displace blame and relinquish responsibility. Israelis and American Jews use these narratives to lay blame entirely at the feet of their ideological foes.

Halevi spoke of trying to find a center path. A path of responsibility without victimhood or martyrdom.

What does this look like?

Halevi doubts Israel will find a useful negotiating partner in the next several years but still believes Israel must prepare to end its role as occupier. As examples of what Israel can take responsibility for without a partner he suggests freezing settlement growth and addressing issues of institutionalized discrimination against Arab-Isrealis.

We are used to hearing Jewish leaders in America talk about our responsibility to Israel but Halevi didn’t flinch from speaking about Israel’s responsibility to worldwide Jewry.

He said that this responsibility meant supporting multiple forms of Jewish expression and practice, not just Orthodoxy.

It meant actively engaging, debating and listening to Jews outside of Israel because Zionism is an ideology of the Jewish people not only of Israelis. He said that Israel has the obligation not to make other Jews ashamed.

Hitlamdut

Perhaps this is a good time to notice if you are still practicing *hitlamdut*?

To notice your reaction to Yossi Klein Halevi.

If you agree with him does it make you feel good or validated?

If you disagree, what arises?

Are you arguing with him?

Are you arguing with me?

Our reactions are mostly hardwired. They arise involuntarily.

A colleague of mine described her tendency to reflexively defend Israel saying:

“Of course I love all children, but I love mine the most.”
Something similar could be said of our critical tendencies,
“Of course, I’m annoyed about the mistakes of others, but I hate my mistakes.”

The Jewish value that I think most useful for encouraging us to take responsibility is, *kol yisrael aravim zeh bezeh* – that all the Jewish people are responsible for one another, our fate is woven together like the woof and warp of fabric.

Kol yisrael aravim ze bzev – We Jews are bound together and responsible to each other. We need each other and have the power to impact one another.

I believe that when it comes to issues like anti-Semitism, freedom of religion, and Israel – our experience confirms how tightly we are bound together. It is part of why we react with such emotion when other Jews disagree with us on these issues.

Our lashing out at one another hurts because it is a violent attempt to rip those we disagree with out of this shared fabric of mutual responsibility.

Hitlamdut

Again consider the things you heard from other Jews that most angered you this summer. In what way was your response a desire to distance yourself from them? What might it have been like to instead assume you are dependent on them and bound together by fate with them? To ask yourself, what am I pushing away and what would it mean to instead accept it as something I need to hear?

Two people this summer pushed me to think more expansively about this idea of mutual responsibility.

One was Bob Lang head of the Efrat Religious Council. Efrat is a village in an area historically referred to as Judea. It is one of the oldest and most established settlements in the West Bank. I use the term settlement because unlike Jerusalem or the Golan Heights this land though controlled by Israel since 67 was never annexed. Thus, though the Israelis who live there maintain the rights of citizenship they are governed by a set of laws and regulations that are quite different from the rest of Israel.

Bob Lang believes that living in Judea is a matter of spiritual significance and religious obligation. He believes that returning the West Bank to Palestinian sovereignty would be a disaster.

Still, he speaks about his Palestinian neighbors with respect. He argued that Israel could more meaningfully meet the humanitarian needs of these neighbors if the West Bank was annexed and made subject to the same laws and regulations as the rest of Israel.

I have to admit that when listening to Bob Lang I noticed skepticism arising like a lightning storm.

But while I disagree with him on many issues, I came to trust his respect for his Palestinian neighbors as genuine because he was willing to take responsibility for the implications of this vision. He believed that the Palestinian residents of the West Bank, and even of Gaza should be given full citizenship and voting rights.

Many who support a two state solution – are afraid of precisely this outcome: afraid that were all Palestinians in Israel controlled territories to be given a vote that it would mean the end of the Jewish state and that the typically higher birthrates of Palestinians could lead Jews to become a minority in Israel.

Bob Lang was willing to face this fear as part of his vision for Israel. He thinks the fate of the Jews in Efrat is inextricably tied the fate of his Palestinian neighbors. That whether there is one state or two, Israelis and Palestinians will be required to work together on so many levels: economic, environmental and criminal that separation is a harmful fantasy.

He has faith that if Jews do lose the demographic battle in 50 years, that during those 50 years of working together Jews and Palestinians could forge an alliance of mutual self-interest.

I heard something surprisingly similar from Sheerin Alaraj, who lives in the village of Al-Walaje. The land of this village just outside Jerusalem was annexed after 67, but the people were not, meaning that they were not offered citizenship. The security wall in Israel is being built to completely surround this village and when completed is planned to have one checkpoint, that those who live in the village will have to cross to leave whether going to the West Bank or to Jerusalem.

Sheerin is an observant Muslim who wears *hijab* - a headscarf. She has worked in Sudan to help respond to violence against women there. She is an exuberant and energetic woman, who managed to say things I hated to hear with such honesty and forthrightness that though difficult, remained with me for days.

One such comment that she made was that she had to admit she often did not know who to fight first or more vigorously, men or Zionists. Don't get me wrong as a man and as a Zionist I wouldn't want to fight with Sheerin on either account.

For Sheerin the continued existence of Israel wasn't a priority, but she said that if it was important to Jews then they needed to find a way to live side by side with the Palestinians.

She said, and that we should realize that groups like the Islamic State are our common enemy. That Jews needed the Palestinians as allies if they meant to stay in the region. She, like Bob Lang, thought that moving to a one state solution with equal

rights for all residents or Holy Landians as she liked to call them was the most just solution.

But, she said that even if we believe in a two-state solution we have to start treating each other like we would if we were moving towards a single state.

That only with this kind of mutual respect would the Israelis and Palestinians be able to effectively unite against fundamentalist groups that threatened them both.

Hitlamdut

Again I invite you to notice your reactions to the ideas of Bob Lang and Sheerin Alaraj. How does one being a male Orthodox Jewish settler and the other a female Palestinian Muslim impact you? What feeling of trust or distrust arise when hearing their perspectives?

Another common, but distorting framework about this conflict is that of an existential battle between two enemies in which only one can win. There are only two-sides in this model and you are either with Israel or against it.

Bob and Sheerin offer what I believe is a more useful narrative of shared fate.

I believe that our thinking about Israel must not only include our interconnection and responsibility to other Jews - but also to every inhabitant of the land.

Over the last year many in the synagogue have read Ari Shavit's book *My Promised Land*. He manages to critique while still reminding us of what a miracle Israel is. Reading this book together is on the BK calendar. Though Shavit leans to the Left, he is a pragmatic realist seeking wisdom equally from the center and the right. When he speaks of ending occupation, he doesn't offer a clear prescription for action, only a challenging diagnosis of the problem:

Shavit says,

“There are only four paths from this junction:

1) Israel as a criminal state that carries out ethnic cleansing in the occupied territories;

By which he means an Israel that in one way or another preserves Jewish majority rule by displacing Palestinians from its territory.

2) Israel as an apartheid state;

Here he describes what it would mean to indefinitely maintain a status quo in which 4 million Palestinians of the West Bank & Gaza have no citizenship or representation in Israeli government, which so significantly governs their lives.

3) Israel as a binational state;

This one person, one vote scenario is the one that both Bob Lang and Sheerin Alaraj seem to embrace.

Shavit fears this would erase the Jewish majority and threaten the very meaning of a Jewish homeland.

Or 4) Israel as a Jewish democratic state retreating with much anguish to a border dividing the land.”

Shavit believes as do I that the majority Israelis still prefer the 4th path. (p.399)

But preferring it is not enough to make it happen.

And many are afraid that the longer the status quo of increased settlement and increased Palestinian birthrate continue the less likely a two solution becomes.

The perspective that most resonated with me, I heard from Ali Abu Awwad. Ali is just a few years younger than me. He spent four years in Israeli prisons for throwing stones at soldiers during the first Intifada. In prison he came to embrace the practices of nonviolence as taught by Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King. He has remained true to those principles after being shot in the leg and after the death of his own brother during the second intifada.

Ali argued that you cannot be Pro-Israel or Pro-Palestine unless you are first and foremost Pro-Solution. For him this means repudiating violence and pursuing engagement with the hopes of reconciliation.

Ali said, if you are Jewish and support peace you must come with him to stand by the checkpoints and witness the crimes he witnesses. And he said that he and other Palestinians must go with Jews to Sederot to witness and condemn the damage done by Kassam rockets fired from Gaza.

So what are we to do? What does it mean for us as Jews living in America to be Pro-Solution? To take responsibility?

I believe that the opportunity for a two-state solution is narrowing. I feel we should act with urgency. But what will it take for us to play our part as pioneers as *chalutzim* for a solution? All the more so when the shape of that solution is less and less clear.

It is not an easy question to answer.

I believe that whatever path we pursue must embody the ends we seek. That violence though on rare occasions, justifiable, is never moral, never righteous. It closes the hearts of both its victims and its perpetrators.

I would like to see Israelis elect leaders who are willing to keep taking risks towards a solution. Just as earlier generations of Israeli leaders acted with incredible bravery and creativeness to found a democratic Jewish state, I would like to see Israeli leaders courageously thinking beyond the status quo to preserve a Jewish state.

I have similar wishes for the Palestinians that they might embrace leaders like Ali Abu Awwad.

But my wishes are not easily translated into action. It isn't clear how to be a responsible pioneer for a solution especially, here in the United States.

That is part of reason I try to visit Israel often. It is why I am thinking about ways that I can heed Ali's call to go back to Israel and visit S'derot and visit checkpoints.

Being in Israel during the war was stressful. But I am glad that I had the opportunity to be there. Being there even as a tourist helps us to understand the experience on the ground in ways that are utterly obscured from the US. Being in Israel even when there isn't a war is not always easy, but it is the one thing that always helps me recommit to engagement.

So if we want to deepen our synagogue's connection to Israel the question is not whether we should go to Israel but when.

Another option that we have as American Jews is to support groups in Israel who are doing the work we believe in. For the most part this means giving money. Maybe we should give money every time we get worried about Israel or after every challenging conversation. Giving money can help keep us accountable. We can notice, is our giving proportionate to our passion?

I give my money to groups that seem to most effectively fight for human rights, religious pluralism and democracy for all the inhabitants of Israel. I believe that these are the groups who are tilling the earth and planting the seeds that are most likely to blossom into a secure and peaceful Israel.

But perhaps the most important thing we can do is get better at speaking to each other about Israel with humility. When we listen to each other about Israel we should practice *hitlamdut* and assume we can learn from everyone.

We should recognize that even our most heartfelt beliefs and hopes may be wrong. Humility demands that we treat statements of certainty or absolute truth about the future security of Israel with skepticism.

What would it mean, if when listening to people with whom you disagree or when reading those Facebook posts that push your buttons, to instead of constructing rebuttals, to ask: How is this person right? What are they saying that I need to hear?

Too often, when debating about the situation in Israel we talk as though every word we say matters. I think we would be better off to assume that nothing we say matters.

Yes, debating and sharing analysis, can help set the direction for action, but too often our heated debate replaces action all together.

There is good reason to be skeptical that our debates will impact the facts on the ground. But we can be certain that when members in our community feel attacked or silenced for sharing their beliefs, that real damage has been done to the Jewish people. Being able to listen to each other with kindness and respect matters far more than the content of anything we say.

hitlamdut

So notice again, one last time how you feel now. What thoughts are going through your mind?

I hope that my own comments have modeled mindful speech. I have tried to speak with honesty and purpose, with clarity about my own responsibility as a rabbi to you.

I have ended, as I knew from the beginning was inevitable, with much more that needs to be said, but I am **looking forward** to this New Year with **confidence knowing that our community will continue the discussion.**

Shanah Tovah