

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 2014 -- 1 Tishrei 5775

Cantor Kim Harris

During the summer of 1996, I attended my first North American Jewish Choral Festival in the Catskill Mountains of New York. I was thinking about maybe applying to cantorial school, and I knew this event would be a good learning experience for me. During the choral festival, one is assigned to a choir according to one's musical ability. Each day I would rehearse with the other members of my choir, go to various workshops about choral singing, spirituality, and Jewish music, attend concerts of various choral groups, and come together with all the other participants for community sing. During community sing, we would sightread through all kinds of choral repertoire, new and old. One evening we sang a new piece by Cantor Charles Osborne entitled "Samachti B'omrim Li," the text of which comes from Psalm 122. You can translate the first line like this:

I rejoiced with those who said to me,

"Let us go to the house of Adonai."

Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

The piece is so beautiful and so uplifting to sing... At the time, I knew very little Hebrew. I guess Cantor Osborne translated the piece before we sang it...

I don't really remember. I just recall thinking that this composition was one of the most beautiful I had ever heard.

Two summers later in June of 1998, I was in Jerusalem, beginning my first year as a cantorial student at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. During that summer our teachers took us on all kinds of learning expeditions to explore Jerusalem. We wandered through its ancient, winding streets and trekked over its rocky hills in search of history, in search of ancestry, and in search of God. On one trip we traveled to the southern wall where the actual steps leading up to the Temple of old still stand. As we ascended, our teacher explained that this is why so many of the psalms open with the line “*shir ha-ma'a-lot*” – A Song of Ascents – a song of going up. The Israelites would sing as they ascended the steps to the temple. The piece I had sung back at the Choral Festival filled my ears:

*“Samachti b’omrim li, beit Adonai neilech...
Omdot hayu ragleinu... bish’arayich Yerushalayim.”*

I rejoiced when they said to me, “Let us go to the House of Adonai.” Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

Tears welled up in my eyes. I was standing where my ancestors had stood. Here I felt at home. Now I knew the meaning of that beautiful setting of Psalm 122, and the words fit the text so beautifully.

*Yerushalayim ha-b'nuyah... k'ir shechubra-la yachdav...
sheh sham a-lu shivtei Yah eidut l'Yisrael l'hodot l'sheim Adonai.*

Jerusalem, built as a city that is compacted together.
That is where the tribes go up—
the tribes of Adonai—
to give thanks to the name of Adonai...

As our ancestors before, I gave thanks... for that moment, for ascending those ancient steps, for the opportunity to learn, and for being in Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel.

The year I lived in Jerusalem was one of quiet and calm. No intifada... no missiles... no Hamas. We were told not to ride the number 18 bus, though, and we were warned about the “chefetz chashud” – a suspicious package. There were a couple of bombings, and there was a threat from Iraq of a gas attack, but overall, things were peaceful. I fell in love with the land and its people. There is that *sabra* exterior that one has to break through, and certain cultural differences, like not smiling. That was hard for me.

But once you break through the exterior and get to know the person on the inside of that tough cactus, you have a friend forever. I met people on the street from all

walks of life and from all places of the globe. So many traditions, backgrounds, foods, colors... And there was a lot I didn't understand – the politics, the heavy Orthodox hand that controlled so much of daily life, the lack of understanding of Reform Judaism, having to bag my own groceries, cats everywhere... East Jerusalem, West Jerusalem... There were certain places where I discovered it was just not OK to go and where I could feel the underlying bubblings of mistrust, but I felt safer walking dark streets late at night there than I ever did here in the States. We cantorial students would sing on the streets and folks would gather and sing along. We camped in Eilat and took bus trips to the Golan. We splashed in the Mediterranean and hiked in the Negev. There were no sirens wailing, no watching the skies, no booms, no rushing to shelters.

This year another set of future rabbis, cantors, and educators arrived in Israel. My cantorial colleagues returned to Israel this past summer for our American Conference of Cantors convention. Rabbinic colleagues studied for weeks at the Hartman Institute. Clergy friends led congregational tours throughout Israel. Teenagers went on birthright and NFTY trips. Friends and congregants took vacations, and children became b'nai mitzvah at Masada.

I watched it all unfold on facebook and twitter. Rafting on the Jordan River, floating on the Dead Sea. I saw my friends covered in salty mud, praying at the Kotel with Women of the Wall, visiting the Biblical Zoo with their kids... shopping for a new tallit... strolling through the market at Machane Yehuda...drinking hot chocolate at Aroma... munching on the delicious rugelach at Marzipan Bakery. But this summer there was more to the iconic photos of being ba-aretz – in the Land. There were accounts of rushing to bomb shelters, of parents having 30 seconds or less to gather their children and get to safety, of the airport being closed, of flights being cancelled. Now things are different. Friends have posted pictures of missiles being stopped by the Iron Dome – little circles of white on a field of deep blue, almost like a wisp of cloud. Children are dying from missiles. Hatred is spreading like a cancer. The world seems to hate Israel and us. Supporters of Israel, of the only democratic nation in the Middle East, are turning their backs, withdrawing their support philosophically and monetarily. Now things are different.

Psalm 122 continues:

- ⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May those who love you be secure.
⁷ May there be peace within your walls
and security within your citadels.”
⁸ For the sake of my family and friends,
I will say, “Peace be within you.”
⁹ For the sake of the house of Adonai our God,
I will seek your good.

These are the things we must do, yes. We must pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

For the sake of our brothers and sisters in the Land of Israel we must seek her prosperity, seek goodness for her. But what can we do? How can we do it?

I would like to offer some ways in which we can embrace the Land of Israel and its people regardless of our political leanings:

The first, and simplest way to help Israel is by purchasing her products. Look for merchandise made in Israel, by Israelis. In the grocery store look for Osem. They make soups, pastas, crackers, and sauces. Look for Elite, makers of candies and chocolate; Telma...They make soup mixes...And Ahava makes all kinds of beauty products. There's also Malka Beer, a new microbrewery whose beers are now available here in the States. Search the internet for products that your family would enjoy.

Unfortunately, you must be prepared for the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) websites that outnumber those that are advocating for buying Israeli goods. Though I hate to click on them and bring them closer to the top of the Google search, these websites do list numerous Israeli companies and products to help us in our search.

Even more important than purchasing products is the support of Israel's people and their livelihood. Israel is more than a holy place that we love. It is a nation made of people from all walks of life... OUR people. israelgives.org is the most comprehensive website I've found for giving tzedakah to Israel. Here, you can give a tax-deductible donation online to any of Israel's 30,000 nonprofit organizations. There are agencies for serving the hungry, advocating for children and women, at-risk youth, housing, education, health and welfare, animals, and the environment. While there isn't a comprehensive list, it's possible to search by category, by population served, by region or city, or by activities that the organization does. I think that as a congregation we could make a difference by coming together to support one or several of these organizations.

A third way to help Israel? Go! Go there. Visit our holy land, her places of beauty and wonder, the houses of worship, dine in the cafes, stroll the ancient streets, pray with her people. Ascend the steps where the Levites sang. Walk where the rabbis of old taught and wrote and compiled our law. Israel needs us. I think the time is right to plan a trip together. Maybe not this summer, but next summer. We can go together, travel together, study and learn and pray together. We can visit the organization that we've chosen to support, spend a day volunteering and interacting with the people who need our help. We can study Torah within the walls of an ancient synagogue and stand on Mount Nebo where Moses stood to view the Promised Land. We can unite with our people in Israel while drawing closer as a B'nai Chaim community.

Two thousand years ago, Rabbi Hillel wrote: *Al tifrosh min ha-tzibbur*. Do not separate yourself from the community. The commentators added that "we should share in the community's woes and never undermine its solidarity." Through our support of the land and people of Israel, we not only share in her woes, but we labor to strengthen her and rejoice as we enter the gates.

For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will seek your good.

L'ma'an achai v'rei-ai, avaksha tov lach. **[Sing "Samachti B'Omrin Li]**