

Rabbi David Wolkenfeld
ASBI Congregation
Shimini 5778

Seventy Years is Ripe Old Age: Zionism in a Post-Ideological Age

How many times have you heard somebody say, with pride, “you can walk into any synagogue in the world and they will be reading the very same words out of the Torah scroll?” I know I’ve heard people say that. But it is not true. At least not this week.

Because the eighth day of Pesach was a Shabbat this year, Jews in Israel, where Pesach is only observed for seven days, experienced last Shabbat as a regular non-holiday Shabbat and read *Parashat Shimini*. We read a special reading for the eighth day of Pesach last Saturday and only got around reading *Shimini* this morning. We are one week behind Israel and our calendars will be out of sync in this way for five weeks until an extra double-portion lets the diaspora catch up.

It feels uncomfortable to be reading a different Torah portion than is being read in Israel because we think of the weekly Torah portion as something universal that all Jews share in common no matter where we live. It also feels uncomfortable because of anxiety that our being out of sync with Israel in our Torah reading might be a metaphor for other ways where we may be drifting apart. Polls show alienation and distance from Israel among many young Jews and we don’t need polling to see that younger generations relate to Israel in a different way than our parents do. Israel is the beating heart of the Jewish people. It is the focal point of *kedushah* in the world and so it bothers us when our liturgy and our lives drift apart.

The Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* teaches **בן שבעים לשיבה**. At Seventy years one attains ripe old age. This may be true for an individual, but it is not true for a state. Just recall that when the United States was seventy years old we were a full generation before Lincoln’s “four score and seven years” landmark. Even if a seventy year old nation remains young, it is still a time of transition. The generation of Israel’s founders are no longer leading the state or serving in government and fewer and fewer of us have direct memory Israel’s founding.

How can we express that Israel is the beating heart of the Jewish people and the focal point of *kedushah*?

We can start by coming to shul.

Wednesday evening and Thursday is *Yom Ha’Atzma’ut*. It is a day when we can come together for *tefilot* in large numbers so we can express our gratitude for the blessings that the State of Israel has provided to the Jewish people. By attending *tefilot* in your own shul and expressing gratitude and joy through a festive *tefilah* on the anniversary of Israel’s independence, we can reinforce a foundation of love and identification, gratitude and joy, that keeps our connection strong when other factors pull us apart. My teacher Rav Amital taught, “one does not need a mitzvah to rejoice.” We have returned home after two thousand years of exile. The joy that causes should be expressed in the same place - right here - where we express so many other emotions that arise in the course of the calendar and in the course of our lives.

By virtue of the fact that you are here right now, you all have declared yourselves to be religious individuals who use prayer as a medium to express significant occasions in your personal lives and in our community’s history. *Yom Ha’Atzma’ut* can be a day when this congregation comes together in prayer, dozens and dozens at a time.

Several years ago the shul purchased special *machzorim* for Yom Ha’Atzma’ut, *siddurim* with special prayers and readings for the day. We own fifty copies. We’ve never used more than 15 or 20.

After seventy years, we should gather here in shul to celebrate Israel. We don't need ceremonies built on ideology. We should acknowledge Israel's place in Jewish life in the same way and the same place as the rest of the year.

If Israel is going to remain a central orienting point of Jewish life, then everyone needs a seat at the table to talk about it. Anyone who wants good things for Israel gets to be a part of the "pro Israel" movement and deserves a space in a big-tent community. It continually frustrates me when the Jewish discourse in America about Israel is so much more tame and constrained than debate in Israel itself. Debate and disagreement is a sign of caring. Any opinion that someone advocates for in sincere belief that it will be good for Israel is a pro-Israel position. That includes anti-Zionists in the Haredi community, and post-Zionists on the left and on the right. Let's have a conversation, even a fierce argument, about what policy will be good for Israel in the short term and in the long term. But let's not engage in ideological litmus tests. After seventy years Israel isn't an abstract topic of debate, (like the legendary cafeteria debates at City College in the 1930s between the Trotskyites and Mensheviks). Israel is a real place with real challenges and real opportunities. We need everyone in the room to figure out the best path forward. And the stakes are too high for any ideas to be excluded from the debate.

If Israel is the beating heart of Jewish life, then we cannot exclude someone from the discussion about Israel without excluding them from the Jewish community.

Finally, we can acknowledge the risks and the potential that follow Israel's central role in Jewish life.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter was asked why the learning schedule was so intense at the great Lithuanian yeshivot. Why devote twelve hours every day to intense Talmud study without interruption. It wasn't a reasonable schedule. It wasn't a fair expectation of the students. He responded, "if we learn for twelve hours each day in the great yeshivot, then they will learn eight hours each day in the second-tier yeshivot, and if they learn a full eight hours every day in the second-tier yeshivot, then the *baalabatim*, the tradesmen, of Vilna, will learn one hour each day after work. And if the tradesmen Vilna learn one hour each day after work, the shopkeepers in Warsaw will attend a shiur on Shabbat afternoon. And if shopkeepers in Warsaw attend a shiur on Shabbat afternoon, then a Jew in Prague won't learn Torah at all but will observe Shabbat. And if a Jew in Prague observes Shabbat then a non-observant Jew in Paris will make sure to marry someone Jewish and pass on a Jewish identity to the next generation. But if we were to stop learning a full twelve hours in the great yeshivot of Lithuania, then the Jew of Paris would be lost."

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter recognized that the yeshivot were the beating heart of the Jewish people and Jewish life radiated out from the *beis medrash* to Jews and Jewish communities that were far removed. The State of Israel is that center of Jewish life today. To paraphrase Rabbi Salanter, if an Israeli is reported as having done something wrong then a day school graduate at the University of Chicago who loves Israel won't want to wear an IDF t-shirt on campus. It doesn't matter if it is fair. It doesn't matter if it is right or wrong. It's a fact about how the world works.

If a day school graduate won't wear an IDF t-shirt at the University of Chicago, then a student with little Jewish education at the University of Illinois in Champagne won't want to participate on a Birthright trip. And if he won't go on a birthright trip, then a student at Washington University in St. Louis won't step foot into the campus Hillel. And if she won't step foot into the Hillel at Washington University in St. Louis then a student with a Jewish mother at University of Michigan will say "no" when the Chabad rabbi asks him if he's Jewish.

For every African migrant deported from Israel, a Jew in San Francisco or Dallas, or Atlanta, or here in Lakeview, who has never studied Torah, never celebrated Shabbat, never sat in a sukkah, never read a newspaper in Hebrew, never eaten fresh pita from the shuk, never hiked in the Negev, and never learned the chorus to *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav* will walk away from her Jewish identity. It isn't fair. It isn't rational. But that is what it means to be tied to Israel. That is the sensitivity we live with because the beating heart of Jewish life is Israel.

When Nadav and Avihu, overcome by their desire to enter the Kodesh HaKodashim, the beating heart of Jewish life in their day, they are struck dead. Moshe responds to their death with a curious statement:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אֱהֲרֹן הֲוֹאֵ אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר ה' ׀ לֹא־מַל בְּקִרְבֵי אֶקְדֹּשׁ וְעַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָעָם אֶכָּבֵד וַיִּדַּם אֱהֲרֹן:

“This is what the LORD meant when He said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people.” And Aaron was silent.

This is an obscure verse and very challenging to understand. Aharon’s silence is perhaps the aspect that makes the most sense.

I would suggest that this verse is telling us that there is a great danger when one approaches the beating heart of the Jewish people. There is tremendous risk as one nears the center of *kedushah*, the focal point of holiness, the place from where it emanates throughout the world. And there is also great power to demonstrate a positive example as well. The tragedy of Nadav and Avihu is that they died in order to demonstrate the power of God’s sacred space. That too was not fair. They meant no harm. Their motivations were entirely pure. Their deaths were tragic because they was not necessary. They could have lived, they should have lived, and demonstrated the *kedushah* of the *mikdash* through the example of their lives. But when one approaches kedushah, when one lives proximate to the beating heart of the Jewish people, then we aren’t judged fairly. And for all that we sometimes complain that the State of Israel isn’t judged fairly by the rest of the world, we have to admit that we wouldn’t want the State of Israel to be compared to any other place, or judged by the standard used to evaluate any other place. It isn’t a normal state, it’s the beating heart of the Jewish people.

I want to conclude with a more positive story that illustrates this same point.

Two weeks ago I sat down in the *beit midrash* to sell our community’s *hametz* to Carol-Ann, the local real-estate broker who has been purchasing (and selling back to us) our community’s *hametz* for the past five years. As a broker she understands complex sales, sophisticated contracts, and that more elaborate methods of transfer of ownership are necessary when something of great importance changes hands.

Selling *hametz* to her and buying it back again is one of the most rewarding professional responsibilities that I have each year. Carol-Ann makes the experience rewarding because she is so open about the ways in which cooperating with our congregation is meaningful to her. Her father liberated Europe with the Allied armies in World War II and he taught his daughter to respect religion in general and Judaism in particular.

This year, I learned something new. When we gathered to negotiate the sale, Carol Ann told those of us who had gathered that she wished to present something to the shul. Her husband, Steven Nasser, had been a veteran of the Chicago Police Department. One of his most cherished assignments was his stint guarding the residence of the Israeli consul-general to the Midwest. To commemorate that assignment, and his willingness to risk his life on behalf of his mission to protect the Israeli diplomats, he had a commemorate badge created that says “Chicago Police Department” with a map of Israel. Steven Nasser died this year and Carol Ann wanted the congregation to have his badge. Here it is. We will find a suitable location to display it.

Those who would have harmed an Israeli diplomat in Chicago would have harmed us as well if given the opportunity. Those who love and defend Israel, love and defend our community. We are bound together.

On its seventieth birthday, our destiny is linked with that of the State of Israel with ties that cannot be severed. May our brothers and sisters in Israel have the fortune and wisdom to continue to teach us through the positive examples of their lives.