

“לא תודה” “No, thank you.” – Kol Nidrei
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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I stood on top of Masada. Usually I stood there with groups of 20 or 30. We'd dissect the mountaintop's meaning, its place in our history. We'd have a debate. On one side, the ancient Zealots who had lived there and chose their principles and death. On the other, their rabbinic contemporaries who settled in the village of Yavneh on the Mediterranean who chose instead to innovate and survive. But this was a different kind of Masada visit. Jen and I stood there with our very jet-lagged 4- and 6-year-old children. We checked out the view, took some pictures and then, just as the meltdowns began, we went straight to the cable car for a ride down to the air conditioned McDonalds at the base. Before boarding that cable car I took another look around at the desolate, desert mountaintop. If only the Zealots had channeled their passion toward the constructive path taught by rabbis of Yavneh, the path of learning and prayer and doing good deeds.

The next day, we met the new fundamentalists, not suicidal, but zealots nonetheless. We took our children to The Kotel, the Western Wall, the holiest site for the Jewish people. The ancient rabbis taught that all the prayers of all the Jews of the world – secular, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, everyone – flow to that spot on their way to heaven. Before approaching the Wall itself, we stopped for a picture of the four of us with the Wall and an Israeli flag in the background. And then. And then we had to separate, Jen and Talia to the right, Lev and me to the left. So much for “the four of us”.

As Lev and I entered the men's side, an earnest man with a black velvet yarmulke came up to us, “Let me say a prayer for you!” “לא תודה” “No, thank you,” I replied. We kept walking toward the wall itself, Lev had drawn a picture and written a few words of prayer to place in the cracks of the Kotel. Now another man blocked our way, his pants tucked neatly into knee high white socks, “I will help you wrap tefillin. Give me your arm. It is a mitzvah and you are a Jew, no? Come, it is good. It will help to bring mashiach, the messiah.” “לא תודה” “No, thank you.” “Daddy, what's he talking about?” “Don't worry Lev, our prayers are as good as his.”

We finally made it to the wall. Lev and I placed our notes snugly in the cracks which hold so many prayers and hopes. We sang Shema and I blessed him as I do each Shabbat: “**יברכך יי** .**וישמרך**.” “May God bless you and keep you,” ancient words flowing in this ancient spot. I shed a tear and hugged my son. Another man appeared, his hat brim bigger than the one who came before. “I can say a prayer for your family.” Having done it perfectly well myself, I replied: “לא תודה” “No, thank you.” And we went to find Jen and Talia and some pizza and ice cream for lunch.

Why did they try to be my surrogate, to say my prayers for me? Why does a right-wing rabbinical authority forbid my family to pray together? I could bless my son with one hand on those ancient stones but I could not bless my daughter. That rabbinical authority took away my right to do that. How dare they?

In that holy spot, instead of coexistence, there is segregation and division. In that spot, instead of pluralism, there is a fundamentalist interpretation of our sacred tradition that has no respect whatsoever for the right of each of us to practice Judaism as we see fit. There is plenty of room at that wall for a men's section, a women's section and an egalitarian section. Instead of bringing together a diverse array of Jews to celebrate what we have in common, the Wall functions as a power play by one group to assert its dominance over the rights of others, over our rights! Something is gravely wrong. To the arrogance and coercion of the ultra-Orthodox rabbinate I say, "לא תודה" "No, thank you."

We traveled to Israel this summer for two reasons. First, because we wanted to share a place we love with Lev and Talia. Jen and I lived in Jerusalem for a year of rabbinical school. We've traveled there extensively with congregants and colleagues. The intensity of the society, its deeply Jewish character, its beauty, its role as home to half the Jews of the world, and its profound history all make us care deeply about the land, state and people of Israel.

Our excuse to finally make the trip with our four- and six- year old kids was the wedding of dear friends, Hadar Orshlamy and Sheldon Low. Hadar has done song leading for us at several young families events. Sheldon has been here as our special musical guest. They work regularly in synagogues, bringing Judaism to people through the gift of their music. They do their part for the Jewish people. Yet they could not get married by a rabbi of their choosing in Israel. Only Orthodox rabbis may perform legal weddings. Indeed, my Israeli Reform colleagues risk arrest every time they perform a wedding ceremony. And so Hadar and Sheldon said, "לא תודה" "No, thank you."

Instead, here in New York, about a month before the wedding, Hadar and Sheldon got together with a few witnesses and my wife, Rabbi Jennifer Goldsmith, who married them according to the laws of New York. They then had Hadar's sister perform a liberal Jewish ceremony in Israel. All these machinations simply to work around the fundamentalist ultra-Orthodox establishment.

And not just weddings, they're meddling in b'nei mitzvah, too. This past spring the mayor of Rehovot, just south of Tel Aviv, canceled the b'nei mitzvah service scheduled for several families of the Lotem School for Disabled Children. The children, who had a range of disabilities, had looked forward to celebrating their coming of age with aliyot and Torah readings. The ultra-Orthodox mayor canceled the ceremony to avoid having it take place in a Conservative synagogue. Why? Because he objected to an interpretation of Judaism different than his own. Well, the parents said, "לא תודה" "No, thank you." They moved the time of the ceremony to after school hours, which took it out of the jurisdiction of the school-municipality partnership. They could then hold it at the Conservative synagogue over the objections of the mayor and the ultra-Orthodox establishment.

This ultra-Orthodox over-reach goes beyond life-cycle. On July 7th, Israel's Religious Services Minister, David Azoulay, a member of Netanyahu's new cabinet, said, "Let's just say there's a problem as soon as a Reform Jew stops following the religion of Israel. I can't allow myself to say that such a person is a Jew."

What is he talking about?! This man ostensibly runs religious affairs for the Jewish State, a state which proudly proclaims itself as a homeland for all Jews. Not “following the religion of Israel”?! Well guess what, millions and millions of Jews from around the world, millions who call Israel their homeland, practice non-Orthodox Judaism. If millions of us are practicing it, I’d say that, on any objective level, it is the “religion of Israel,” of the Jewish people. But David Azoulay is arrogant enough to declare over half the Jewish people to be wrong. Not only wrong, but not “Jews”. Does he really think that he knows what God wants from us? Apparently there is a new age of prophecy in the land of Israel. Well if he’s the prophet, I have to say, “לא תודה” “No, thank you.”

The Judaism that I know, the Judaism that I love and practice calls on each of us to look into the deep well of Jewish tradition and to use its many rituals and stories and values to create meaning for ourselves and our communities. The Judaism that I teach from this pulpit and in our classrooms calls us to accept the many differences within our community, to recognize that we are all on our own, unique Jewish Journeys, seeking our own sense of meaning and connection. We do that best in community, supporting one another along our personal journeys. That is liberal Judaism at its best.

Unfortunately, the ultra-Orthodox do whatever they can to impede the growth of liberal Jewish movements in Israel. Their politicians block building permits for Reform and Conservative synagogues. The government refuses to pay all but a handful of liberal rabbis while they pay all Orthodox rabbis. The so-called secular Jews of Israel suffer because of this ultra-Orthodox monopoly. They feel utterly alienated from Judaism, from our religion, our birthright, because the establishment presents it only as a fundamentalist faith. While many secular Israelis have now had exposure to Reform and Conservative Judaism they cannot explore it further because of the impediments put up by the ultra-Orthodox. And what a shame. We have so much to teach one another. Israelis can learn from us how to incorporate Jewish ritual into their very modern lives as we Reform Jews do it. We can learn from Israelis to allow our Jewish identity to infuse our entire lives. We need each other. But the road blocks put up by the ultra-Orthodox make it all the more difficult for the nascent, progressive, modern, Israeli Judaism to fully take root.

Lest you think that all is lost, the liberal Jewish movements in Israel have made incredible strides. In a recent survey, 34% of Israeli Jews said that the Progressive movement is the Jewish movement they most identify with while only 23% stated that they identify most with Orthodox Judaism. Today, there are over forty Reform congregations in Israel and a similar number of Conservative congregations. This represents a huge growth over a short period of time. People also actively protest the Orthodox rabbinate’s control over marriage with nearly 20% of Israelis getting married abroad. And recently, in an act of real courage, a court of relatively liberal modern Orthodox rabbis conducted their own conversions to Judaism in direct defiance of the Ultra-Orthodox establishment. The cracks in ultra-Orthodox domination are beginning to form. Israelis and liberal diaspora Zionists are joining together, looking the arrogant establishment in the face and saying “לא תודה” “No, thank you.”

Your voice and your dollars matter in this effort. To those of you who answered the call to vote in the World Zionist Congress elections, thank you very much. The Reform movement won nearly 40% of the vote, the largest share of any group. Our seats, combined with those of other

liberal Jewish movements around the world, give progressive, pluralistic Jews a clear majority of the seats. These “results... help determine our influence in Israel’s national institutions, the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency for Israel and the Jewish National Fund.” Your ongoing support of groups like ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America, and individual Reform Congregations in Israel is critical in ensuring a “Jewish, pluralistic, just and democratic society in the State of Israel.” You can get information on supporting these important organizations on our temple website under the Seek and Discover menu or by calling the temple office.

Please, keep yourself informed about this issue. All Jews everywhere are truly tied together through our common history and our common destiny. Ultra-Orthodox control in Israel is not only about the present it is about the future. Knowing what is going on with the half of our people who live in Israel is the first step toward addressing the future of our entire people, of giving us what we need to teach the next generation.

When the ancient Zealots retreated to the top of Masada with their radicalism and arrogance, they could only stew in their fundamentalist, messianic approach to Judaism, an approach that led to death by their own hands. Meanwhile, in Yavneh on the shores of the Mediterranean, the rabbis embraced Judaism as an innovative religion of learning and prayer and good deeds. It is that flexible, forward-looking tradition that we have followed for 2,000 years. Let us work together to ensure that Israel’s society does not follow the ultra-Orthodox on a coercive climb to the lonely heights of an ideological Masada. Instead, may God help us bring all of our people to the forward looking shores of Yavneh and the wide sea of possibility that is our greatest tradition and our most sacred heritage.

כן יהי רצון

May This Be God’s Will