

## Rosh Hashanah 5779

This past July, I spent most of my free time removing an absolutely enormous hedge from our yard. It was nine or ten feet high, at least 30 feet in length, and its primary function seemed to be blocking our view of anyone or anything in sight. This overgrown hedge - a barrier between our property and the street - felt downright un-neighborly to me, and so, using electric hedge clippers, chain saws, and other power tools my mother had warned me about, I took that green monster down. It felt wonderful.

But as the hedge gradually disappeared, I noticed that more of my neighbors were stopping by to chat - asking about the hedge of course - but staying on, just to shoot the breeze on a hot summer day. And the more neighbors I chatted with, the more I started to think about Robert Frost's famous poem, "Mending Wall." In the poem, published in 1914, a New England farmer works with his neighbor to repair the stone wall that divides their property. The farmer wonders, "There where it is, we do not need the wall: He is all pine and I am apple orchard. My apple trees will never get across and eat the cones under his pines, I tell him. He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'" (The poet isn't sure at all, and neither am I.)

So while I was spending my July weekends with unruly shrubbery, another New Englander, Ms. Ariel Gold, a long-time member of a Reform synagogue, dropped off her two teenagers at the Reform Movement's Camp Eisner in the

Berkshires, and departed for Israel, where she was registered for the summer as a student at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Although Gold possessed a visa permitting her to study in Israel, when she arrived at Ben Gurion Airport, she was stopped, interrogated, and then informed that her visa was being revoked. She was put on the next flight back to New York.

Gold was not a terrorist. She had no criminal history, either in Israel or the United States. Indeed, Gold's relationship with Israel was evident from her family's travel history: she has close family ties in Israel, she had visited Israel with her son for several weeks in 2016, sent him on the summer NFTY trip to Israel in 2017, and was looking forward to her daughter going on the same trip next summer. In Reform Judaism, it's sort of what we hope for.

So you may ask, "why did Israel ban this dangerous woman?" Ariel Gold is a pro-Palestinian activist. She is a leader in the BDS movement - a movement promoting boycott, divestment, and economic sanctions against Israel. She has filmed conditions in the West Bank and shared them on her Facebook page that included a scene of Israeli soldiers asking her why she would support the Palestinians. She responded "as a Jew I felt compelled to work for freedom and dignity for all."

Let me be perfectly clear. I vehemently and unequivocally **disagree** with Ms. Gold's support for the BDS movement. Not only does it unfairly portray Israel

in the harshest possible light, it also takes a nation's entire character and history and boils it down to a single issue. But even worse, the movement attracts a scary multitude of anti-Semitic people and groups; people who find common cause and genuinely wish Israel harm. Many of these groups have flourished on college campuses, and their voices are growing louder and more strident. Indeed, Jewish college students - many of whom have visited Israel and witnessed a very different reality than the one they hear about on campus - feel intimidated and have begun to withdraw from the conversation entirely.

And yet, despite all of the misgivings I just mentioned, I also believe that Ariel Gold's activism - her desire for fairness and justice in the West Bank - is borne out of a fierce commitment to Jewish ethics and her belief that Israel should be an embodiment of those ideals. After all, who boycotts Israel by repeatedly traveling there, studying at Hebrew University, and sending two children there for weeks at a time? And while most of you would surely disagree with her politics, the idea of **banning** her from Israel for her beliefs sends an unsettling, heavy-handed message to Israel's supporters and opponents alike.

The decision to ban Ms. Gold from Israel is not only deeply disturbing, but also flies in the face of Israel's - and Judaism's - cherished history of rigorous debate and intellectual freedom. Tens of thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews live and work and pray in Israel who believe the state is **illegitimate - they don't think**

**it should exist** - because it pre-empted God's messianic plan. And we don't seek to ban them or their ideas. And tens – perhaps hundreds - of thousands of Israelis fervently believe in the so-called one-state solution, a scenario that would surely imperil Israel's democratic future. And yet, such extreme opinions are considered part and parcel of the ongoing Zionist debate. No one would seek to suppress their views – let alone ban the people from the conversation.

From the Labor Party to Likud, from radical settlers to Israeli Arabs, from the ultra-Orthodox to the secular humanists - and everything in between - Israel's Zionist narrative is as messy and diverse as the nation itself. As journalist David Suissa recently observed in *The Jewish Journal*, Israel's "miracle" is about so much more than survival. The miracle "is that Israelis - Jews and non-Jews alike - are not a passive bunch who quietly accept their fate. They're not intimidated by authority. They protest, they argue, they fight." The miracle is that we have gathered from the four corners of the earth – with vastly different cultures, vastly different politics, vastly different religious identities – and have made a vibrant, intense, energetic homeland. The "miracle" is the diversity within the unity.

And here, in North America, the debate on Israel's future - until very recently - was also ongoing, passionate, and covered the waterfront - from the ultra-dovish to the ultra-militarist and every perspective in between. Yes, there was disagreement and conflict, but the parameters of the argument were

constrained by the recognition of a common goal: a democratic Israel, living in relative stability and peace with its neighbors. We may have differed on how to get there, but the destination remained the same.

But we have changed. We are no longer engaged in that debate. The narratives of Zionism - in Israel, in North America, and in the Diaspora – have been drastically transformed. This era of Zionism, defined by power, military strength, unfettered capitalism, and religious orthodoxy - has enjoyed the support of a majority of Israelis for most of the last two decades. And that's fine. After all, a secular, socialist Zionism prevailed for most of the 20th century. Things change. The problem is **not** the emergence of a conservative Zionist narrative over another Zionist narrative.

No, the problem that has emerged is that the multiplicity of Zionist narratives – Political Zionism, Labor Zionism, Religious Zionism, Cultural Zionism - narratives that used to compete in the marketplace of Jewish ideas – are rapidly disappearing. We have moved from an **inclusive** Zionism based on one's commitment to, and engagement with, all of the many facets of the State of Israel, to an **exclusive** Zionism based solely on one's support for how it is defined today. Those who support this one view are now called Zionists. But those who advocate for other Zionist views, and those who dissent - in whole or in part from the

dominant narrative - are now subjected to accusations of being anti-Zionist, and even anti-Israel.

Why has this happened? Well, the sad truth is that some people - politicians, communal leaders, Jewish ideologues - have figured out that **division works**. Division pits groups of people against each other, division inflames passion, division shores up group identity. It appears that hatred of "the other" is a great motivator, even if the "other" is a member of your own family.

And once this division takes hold, once we have constructed this symbolic wall, once we are playing the game of "you're either with us or against us," once the debate has been reduced to its simplest, crudest, black and white extremes, it no longer matters how engaged or informed you are, whether you've been studying Israel's history for fifty years or fifty days, we've been divided into two camps - camps that no longer have to debate each other, or argue with each other, or really even recognize anymore that we are indeed connected, that we are *am echad* - **one** Jewish people.

It's not that I want us to sit around the campfire eating smores and singing Kumbaya. We never did get along all that well, and that's fine. Indeed, all of the growth, all of the vibrancy, all of the *chutzpah-dik* candor that gives Jewish life its zest, depends on our taste and enthusiasm for disagreement. Indeed, a passionate argument has always been a tonic for the Jewish soul. But today, the rhetoric has

become so crude and insulting, so beyond the pale of civility and decency, that both camps have packed up their marshmallows and headed home.

Many years ago, Ethan Bronner, then the New York Times bureau chief in Jerusalem, wrote an article about some of the consequences of Israel's separation fence. He noted - correctly - that the fence had virtually eliminated terrorist attacks inside the Green Line and had made Israel a much safer and more secure nation. But he also observed that the enhanced security had cut off nearly all of the daily interactions between Israelis and Palestinians; employers and employees, fruit sellers and cab drivers, plumbers and shop keepers, all sharing their experiences. Today, the "other" - on both sides of the fence - no longer has parents, or children, or fears, or dreams. They are a faceless mass, glimpsed on the news, but never really seen; a people invisible, lacking in humanity, let alone three dimensions. Like Frost's "Mending Wall", good fences didn't make good neighbors; they made no neighbors at all.

The poem continues, and Frost's farmer wonders out loud about the wall they share; he wants to ask his neighbor a very different question, and thinks to himself,

"If I could put a notion in his head.

*Why* do they make good neighbours?

Isn't it Where there are cows?

But here there are no cows.

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offence.

Our walls - the ones that physically separate us, and the ones that keep our opinions safe from challenge - are growing higher every day. They're not just keeping the enemy at bay; they are keeping us imprisoned. When the Knesset passed the Nation-State law this summer and more than a million Israeli Arabs were officially declared a lesser status, we put another stone on the wall. When the Prime Minister promised an egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall and then reneged, we put another stone on the wall. When journalists and progressive organizations - working within Israel - are declared "enemies of the people," we put another stone on the wall. When Reform and Conservative Jews - and their rabbis - still struggle for even the slightest acceptance and recognition, we put another stone on the wall. And when Israel banned Ariel Gold for her political beliefs - her unpopular opinions - we put another stone on the wall.

These walls - both literal and metaphoric - are intended to divide us; to divide Israelis against each other and to drive a wedge between Israel and American Jewry. These walls not only limit our horizons, they compel us to see Israel only through the narrowest of windows - through its borders, its security, its

relative strength, and its survival. And while such values are **essential** to any national project, they will certainly never be **sufficient**.

We must remember that our Zionist dreams – the ones that united our scattered masses for millennia - were based on the highest ideals we could imagine – ideals of justice, our covenant with God, kindness to the stranger, and compassion for the poor. Ideals that would inspire our people to revere their heritage, ideals that would affirm the holiness of our language, our culture, and our tradition. To paraphrase the prophet Zechariah, we are united not by might, nor by power. Rather, we will be united because every Jew – regardless of their opinions or beliefs – has a place at the table.

For nearly ten years, all three of our children have been attending or working at Habonim Dror camps in North America. These camps embody socialist, Zionist principles; the kibbutz as a way of life, equality and justice for all, and rebuilding the land - and our people - through cooperative labor. All of them - each in their own way - have drunk the Kool-Aid of a progressive, egalitarian Israel, the Israel both Annie and I wanted them to know and love. Our daughter, Adi, is named for A.D. Gordon, a hero of the early labor Zionists, and our son, Judah, will be leaving for Israel in just two days, to spend a gap year learning Hebrew, living on a kibbutz, and doing community service. What are my hopes and dreams for him?

I hope and pray that he will experience the miracle of Israel - a nation and a people that pulses with energy and passion. In the words of the Israeli journalist, Ari Shavit, "The Jewish State does not resemble any other nation. What this nation has to offer is not security or well-being or peace of mind. What it has to offer is the intensity of life on the edge. The adrenaline rush of living dangerously, living lustfully, living to the extreme." Does this describe the people who must be protected from ideas? The people who can no longer bear to hear the voices of dissent?

I hope that he will love Israel in so many different ways: that he will bear witness to the ingathering of Jews, not just from England or Poland, but also from Ethiopia, Morocco, and Yemen; that he will worship not only in Reform synagogues, but in Conservative and Orthodox ones as well; that he will appreciate the intensity and maturity of Israeli youth; that he will be awestruck that we made the desert bloom; that he will savor the hummus and the olives, the fruits and the chocolate milk, and the freshest, most delicious strawberry juice he's ever tasted; that he will snorkel in Eilat, float in the Dead Sea, swim in the Galilee, and hike in the Golan.

But most of all, I pray that he will come to understand that even though our leaders cynically build stone walls - both here and in Israel - such walls can also be dismantled, one stone at a time. For Judah, and for all of us, when we stay

engaged and ensure that our voices are heard, we can tear down these walls. When we encourage debate and dissent, when we affirm that those with whom we disagree are still members of our family, we can tear down these walls. And when we stop walling ourselves off from our neighbors, stop shutting people out, stop closing ourselves off from nuance and complexity, we can tear down these walls. And one day, when these walls tumble and fall, we will - once again - truly **see** our neighbors, and Israel will indeed be a light unto the nations. **Am yisrael chai.** The people of Israel shall live.