

Feeling “Off”

Acharei Mot 5776

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The atmosphere in the room was somewhat tense. There were nine of us local Rabbis and five members of Knesset present past Wednesday, on a whirlwind tour of North American Jewish Communities and we were the only group of Rabbis they would be encountering on this trip. One after the other, each of my colleagues spoke, respectfully but passionately, about the challenges they faced as American Rabbis and what they would like to see in a relationship between the American Rabbis and Israel, especially denominational acceptance and pluralism in Israel. Some even ventured into much more controversial political territory. I was the only Rabbi of an Orthodox synagogue in attendance, and I had not yet spoken my turn. As I was called upon, I could feel all eyes on me as people wanted to know what I was thinking. What does a religious Zionist Orthodox Rabbi have to say about the diaspora/Israel relationship? What did I think about their concerns? The answer is that I had plenty, and today. I'd like to share with you what I told Michal Rozin of Meretz, Deputy speaker of the Knesset Dr. Nachman Shai of the Labor Party, Majority Leader of the Knesset Tzachi Hanegbi of the Likud, Meir Cohen of Yesh Atid and Revital Swid of the Zionist Union about what I think are the *real* challenges in the relationship between American and Israeli Jewish communities, why I disagreed with all my colleagues and why this time of year makes me feel somewhat uneasy.

Over Yom Tov, we were privileged to have with us many guests from Israel visiting their Dallas families. This year, it was especially easy to do travel to and from Israel for Pesach, because the eighth day was Shabbos anyway and so the way the day was observed, both for Israelis and people from abroad, was mostly identical, with some major differences. Most notably, while we read the Torah reading for the eighth day of Yom Tov here, in Israel, they read the Parsha of the week- Acharei Mot. Absent a special Torah reading, an Israeli spending Yom Tov in America would have missed the Torah reading for this week, because this week's Parsha in Israel is Kedoshim. The simple question I have is this: Why? Why couldn't we also read the Torah reading for next week on the last day of Pesach, so we would all be on the same literal page? This is what happens most years- why not all the time?

To answer this, a brief halachic/historical lesson is in order. Our system of weekly *parshiyos* was instituted in Babylonia, where the practice was for the entire Torah was completed within a year, to be completed each year at the end of the Tishrei holidays. The parallel custom in the land of Israel was to read the Torah in order on a triennial cycle, a practice that fell into desuetude; one of the reasons suggested for the abandonment of this practice was that holidays were mentioned only once every three years, rather than annually. Part of the Babylonian custom was to read special readings for the holidays describing the themes of the Yom Tov or mentioning it by name. Reading a regular Torah reading when one was supposed to read about the *chag* was never an option. With this in mind, though, our question still stands. Each day of Yom Tov we read a section of the Torah that described some aspect of Pesach in detail. One day of Chol

Hamoed, we even read about Pesach Sheini! So why do we have to read yet again about Pesach on the final, additional day? Perhaps we can suggest an answer that provides the conceptual underpinning behind this calendrical anomaly. The Talmud Yerushalmi in Eruvin and Nedarim describes the second day of the *chag* (and the eighth)- what is known as *Yom Tov Sheni Shel Galuyos*- as a fine for living in the diaspora. We have all made our choice, for any number of valid and less valid reasons, so now we have to live with the consequences- in this case, additional days of Yom Tov- thus leading to the times when we are off from Israel on the Torah reading. Chazal *wanted* there to be two customs so that diaspora Jews can be reminded, on occasion- in case we have forgotten- that we are “off” from Israel, at least for a few months.

I think this is a critical lesson for us to think about on the Shabbos before Yom Haatzmaut. Modern Orthodox Jews in the diaspora have plenty that distinguishes them from their more chareidi counterparts, but at this time of year, we tend to focus on liturgical distinctions. Does a particular shul we say the prayer for the government of Israel or not? If it does, does it *sing* it to the tune of Hatikvah- a practice which, if it is the barometer of Zionism, makes us the most Zionist shul on the planet? Hallel or no Hallel, full or half, beracha or no beracha? These liturgical issues often will define where a person chooses to affiliate, even for people who rarely or never attend shul during the week to know what the custom might be regarding Hallel recitation. . These liturgical distinctions may be important, but thinking about them obscures what I believe to be a more serious, foundational issue- the ways in which we are “off” and unaligned with our Israeli counterparts. This is what I shared with the members of Knesset; Beyond the political and religious issues (and in Israel, those are often the same) that my

colleagues were so passionate about, the more serious reality is that American Jews (even Orthodox Jews) and our Israeli counterparts are misaligned in several important ways.

The first major way in which we are unaligned is that American Orthodox Jews are often unaware of the cultural and religious lives of our Israeli brethren. We inhabit a different cultural milieu with disparate influences, such that we read different books, listen to different music and have different public intellectuals, authors and poets. Moreover and more importantly, American Jews often don't know who the religious thinkers and leaders are in Israeli life (though, in fairness, many Israelis don't either). We hear about the big controversies- ascending the Temple Mount, women's services at the Kotel, the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and its role in conversions and religious courts, and on and on. But some of the most exciting developments in Jewish thought, Jewish Law and Jewish scholarship are taking place in Israel, and we have no idea what they are and who is driving them. I've mentioned Rav Yoel Bin Nun from this pulpit, who is the father of an exciting stream of Tanach teaching that is being developed in Israel, but Rav Bin Nun is just one of the many innovative teachers of Tanach emerging from the Israeli religious Zionist community. Other fascinating thinkers include the late Rav Shagar, who attempted to integrate postmodern thought into a Jewish framework, and even Rav Kook zt"l, whose work is barely studied at all outside of Israel. In the realm of Jewish law and religious scholarship, Rav Eliezer Melamed, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva in Har Bracha, is revolutionizing the religious Zionist halachic world with his eminently reasonable and balanced Halachic approach, and the wildly innovative and brilliant Rav Asher Weiss, though not actually a religious Zionist- has gained currency across all denominational lines with his incredibly original and confidently

reasoned halachic rulings and his shiurim, which draw a remarkably diverse crowd each week spanning the religious spectrum. Rabbanit Michal Tikochinsky has created a revolution with her dedication to Torah Study for women on the very highest level and the creation of institutes for advanced Torah study for women, and Rav Benny Lau has created a new paradigm of communal leadership and engagement through his work at the Ramban shul in Jerusalem. Yet many of us have no idea who any of these people are. While we may disagree with our chareidi brethren on many foundational issues, especially relating to Israel, this is one area where they surpass us. American chareidim often turn to Rabbis in Israel for guidance, for better or worse. As such, they know exactly who the leading lights are of their community and may be more aware the religious and social trends are among their Israeli counterparts.

The truth is, though, that even if we did know who the exciting thought leaders were in Israel, too many American Jews would be at a serious disadvantage should they want to read their writings. The most exciting Jewish scholarship in all realms has yet to be translated into English, and American Jews are woefully deficient in Hebrew. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos tells us (2:1)

והוי זהיר במצוה קלה כבחמורה, שאין אתה יודע מתן שכרן של מצוות.

Be scrupulous in the performance of a light mitzvah as you would in the performance of a severe one. What is a “light mitzvah”? The Rambam explains that this refers to mitzvos like ascending to Yerushalaim for the festivals *or teaching Hebrew*. The Rambam was equating a mitzvah whose seriousness was not at all considered to one whose seriousness was beyond question. The great American intellectual Leon Wieseltier published a magisterial working paper several months ago entitled “Language, Identity and the Scandal of American Jewry,” in which he

bemoaned this lack of Hebrew proficiency of American Jewry. I will let his words speak for themselves, for to paraphrase them would do them a grave injustice.

The American Jewish community is the first great community in the history of our people that believes that it can receive, develop, and perpetuate the Jewish tradition not in a Jewish language. By an overwhelming majority, American Jews cannot read or speak or write Hebrew, or Yiddish. This is genuinely shocking. American Jewry is quite literally unlettered.

The assumption of American Jewry that it can do without a Jewish language is an arrogance without precedent in Jewish history. And this illiteracy, I suggest, will leave American Judaism and American Jewishness forever crippled and scandalously thin.”

What this means is that American Jews- even those who have benefitted from extensive Jewish educations, are often at a loss when encountering foundational Jewish texts, such that, as Wieseltier put it, *“We are a community whose books and whose treasures—our books are our treasures—are accessible almost entirely in translation.”* And we know that something is lost in every translation (if you don’t believe me, try reading Harry Potter in Hebrew). This is not only in the religious realm. Regardless of one’s political affiliations, Americans who are limited in their Hebrew knowledge aren’t exposed to the nuanced political writing that appears in Israeli papers, or to the extremes of same, so that American Jews may not really know what’s being said in the “shuk.”

This is what I told the members of Knesset, and this is, I believe, our great challenge before Yom Haatzmaut 5776. To be sure, Israel is far from perfect and, in many ways, is trying to learn from

us as well. That's why some of the highest ranking members of Knesset foregathered at Shearith on Wednesday- to see what they could learn from us. However, an American Jew living in the diaspora who is celebrating Yom Haatzmaut should feel degree of cognitive dissonance, celebrating the religious significance of a country we don't live in- and that dissonance is not a bad thing. It can be solved with the most obvious solution of aliyah, which is not for everyone and may not be for everyone *right now*. Until then, though, our misalignment should not diminish our celebration. Instead, it should spur some introspection and evaluation amidst a joyous day. To what degree do we, in our lives, truly manifest a connection with Israel? The question might be better than the answer, but we should still ask it, because we don't fulfill our religious Zionist quota by singing the *tefillah leshlom hamedinah*, and we can't buy our way out of it through donating to Israeli charities or political action groups, though that is important. Is there any area in which we could be doing more to connect with Israel on an emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical level? Let us use this day to take stock and reconnect. In just a few months, the Torah readings will be aligned once again; let us make sure our connection is, too.