

The Kotel and the Soul of the Jewish People

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Rabbi Neil Cooper

I took a circuitous route through the winding streets of Jerusalem's Jewish Quarter to the Kotel, the Western Wall. I have always preferred this route, even though it is the less-than-direct path. The more direct route takes one through the Arab Shuk. I have never had any problems in the Shuk, but chose my route because of the dramatic view of the Kotel which greets you as you arrive from this direction.

No matter how many times one has visited the Kotel, arriving from this direction inspires a degree of awe and excitement which, I believe, is unique to that place. The open and expansive plaza and, of course, the Western Wall itself, are breath-taking. The impact of seeing this place from this vantage is further enhanced for one who is aware of the long and storied history preserved within this parcel of land.

The Wall we see is actually what remains of the outer, retaining wall upon which the Second Temple was built more than 2500 years ago. The Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 CE and, since then, this one remaining wall has been the place toward which Jews have prayed for over two thousand years.

When the Old City of Jerusalem was retaken from the Jordanians during the 1967 War, this ancient remnant became a national and religious symbol of Jewish hopes which were never abandoned, of Jewish history which was never forgotten, of Jewish yearnings and the belief that, in Messianic times, we would return to Zion and Jerusalem. It is from the distance of one's first glimpse of the Wall, the distance of Jewish History, that the Wall is most impressive. But for some, myself included, that impressive patina begins to fade as one approaches the Wall.

On that morning I had come to the Wall, not specifically to pray but to add my voice to those of a hundred other North American non-Orthodox rabbis. We had converged on the plaza of the Kotel to protest the reneging by the Prime Minister and the Government of an agreement we, by way of a consortium of non-Orthodox organizations, had completed regarding gaining unfettered access to the Kotel for non-Orthodox, mixed prayer services.

As I walked across the plaza in front of the Kotel, however, it was clear that tension was already building, generated not from the rabbis who had come to join together in a peaceful demonstration, but from somewhere else, from the women's side of the Wall.

In the middle of the women's section, a section delineated by a barrier, a *mechitza*, separating the men's side from the women's side, a large group of women, perhaps 100, were huddled together, singing and celebrating a bat mitzvah. As they raised their voices in song, a number of men, part of the ultra-Orthodox contingent which perpetually occupies the area near the Kotel, stood on chairs and, from their side of the *mechitza*, screamed obscenities at the women, using words and images inappropriate for use at the Kotel, unfit for use by a rabbi from this pulpit, unacceptable, frankly, for anyone at any time. It shall suffice to approximate the message they were delivering: "How dare you brazen women

conduct your own service?! Raising your voices so that we can hear you?! You do not belong here. You are not Jews.

All of this was, for me, hard to listen to and hard to watch. How could it be that such vicious barbs were being hurled at women sing verses from the Psalms as they celebrated a young girl coming to the age of mitzvot?!

I approached the shouters on the men's side. I wanted to photograph what was occurring thinking that, were I to tell this story, no one would believe me. I wanted to speak with some of those who screamed those obscenities to understand their perspective, motivation and reasoning. As I approached, however, a group of kids (12 or 13 years old) approached me with hands raised in order to block me from photographing and from approaching. As I moved forward, they pushed me back. At that point, an older fellow (probably in his early twenties) ran at me and pushed me to the ground.

Had you asked me before this incident what my response would have been to being blindsided, I would have assured you that I would have jumped up and confronted my attacker. (In my mind, you see, I am very fast, very strong and invincible.) I was not hurt. But I stayed on the ground for a few moments. My assailant had disappeared in the crowd (go try to find a person in that crowd with a black yarmulke, white shirt and black pants). But in that moment "frustration and prostration", a great sadness came over me. I was not angry. Mostly, I felt sad as I said to myself, "Has it really come to this?"

I have spent a fair amount of time reflecting on this incident. Some of my thinking has led me to the realization that we really don't need enemies from the outside to attack us. Given the enmity within the Jewish Community created by such violent intolerance, we might well simply destroy ourselves, imploding and going down in the flames of self-righteous glory. We need very little help from non-Jews who hate us. We can choreograph our own demise, no problem at all.

As I sat on the ground in front of the Kotel, however, I could think only of how we must find a way to mend that which has so damaged our collective soul to the point of creating such discord between us. We must find a way to heal the brokenness of our People.

On this, the holiest night of the year, I wanted to share three lessons, the first two relate to what it means to be a Jew, the third relates to our connections and our responsibilities to Israel, along with Israel's responsibilities to us.

Neither you nor I can save the world nor can we save the entirety of the Jewish People. But we can try to move things from bad toward better. And so, here are my three suggestions for us, for a better Jewish People and for a better world.

- 1. We must find a way to heal the rift of intolerance between one Jew and another.**

How does one move beyond this sort of intolerance?

Those who stood on chairs were able to absolve themselves of their responsibility to *Klal Yisrael*, the larger Jewish Community, by claiming to love all Jews. But, they maintain, the "renegade" women at whom they screamed, were "not Jews". Here is what they would say:

We tolerate all Jews. But, if you don't agree with our definition of Judaism, we will declare you as "not Jewish", at which point, we no longer need to tolerate you. Therefore, women dancing

together at the Kotel cannot possibly be Jewish because Jewish women, real Jewish women, don't do that.

Since the women were not Jews in their eyes, they could be verbally attacked with impunity and without restraint. I must add, as well, that had they known that I was a Conservative Rabbi, they would have made a double proclamation on me: I am neither a rabbi **nor** a Jew. But there is a deeper level to this discord which is even more distressing.

For the men screaming over the *mechitzah*, their definition of Judaism is quite narrow and, for that matter, quite simple:

If we are right, you must be wrong. We are part of the legitimate core of faithful Jews who will uproot the imposters and destroy those who lie about what Judaism may or may not permit. It is our job and our individual responsibilities, to disrupt, disavow and denounce those who want to bring these illegitimate and alien ideas to our Kotel.

Here is my response:

It has never been the case that Jews have agreed on one form of Judaism. Within the Jewish Community we have Ashkenazic and Sefardic Jews, Chasidim and Misnagdim, in Israel, Secular Jews, in this country Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist Jews. What would Judaism be without differences between Jews and without, Heaven forbid, the disagreements spawned by those differences? It has never been the case that Jews have agreed on anything important! (It was a horse! It was a mule!) And yet, today's emboldened Haredi/ultra-Orthodox, have become empowered politically in Israel to the point that they prevent any compromise and encourage their "flocks" to stand up on chairs, screaming aggressively, cursing and pushing away that which they consider a threat.

I hasten to state here that this is not the case within the ranks of the vast majority of American Orthodoxy, not within the ranks of Israeli Modern or Centrist Orthodoxy. My comments are not intended as an indictment of Orthodoxy. My desire here is to shine a light on a trend against which we all, including the Orthodox community, must resist. And those in the Orthodox Community, many of whom I know and work with closely, are very much offended by this sort of trend as am I.

Please don't misunderstand. The Orthodox in this country vigorously disagree with our brand of Judaism. But disagreeing need not pull us apart the Jewish People. In fact, they and we know that agreeing to disagree is a cherished Jewish value. And we learn that lesson from two Sages known for their ongoing disagreements based on their different understandings of the law and known for their ability to transcend their differences for the sake of the unity of the Jewish people.

In *Pirke Avot*, the Ethics of the Father, we are reminded that Hillel and Shammai, the great Sages of the Mishneh differed on nearly every ever point of Jewish Law. But what is amazing is that when they had reached an impasse, when there was nowhere else to go to convince the other that they are wrong and you are right, Hillel and Shammai were able to say: ***Elu V'Elu divrei Elohim chayyim / both opinions are the words of the living God:***

Even if I believe that I am correct from my perspective, I can accept that, from your perspective, you believe that you are correct. Perhaps we are both right. Perhaps we are both wrong. But what is certain is that **I don't need to be wrong for you to be right.**

Or maybe there is something even deeper in this statement:

Maybe we are not able to hold simultaneously ideas which seem to contradict each other. Maybe we can't, but maybe God can. Maybe it is God's desire that there not be only one answer. Maybe that is what: "**elu v'elu**" means: we need **both** views.

It may very well be that this statement from *Pirke Avot* is suggesting that discussion, argumentation and opinions are employed **not** in order to find a single, "right" answer but to be part of a process which brings depth, diversity and richness to important matters of life.

It is not necessary to determine who is right or wrong, if there even is a correct answer. Perhaps the resolution of the issue is inherent in a **dialogue in which different opinions are generated**.

Maybe God does **not** want people to adhere to only one way of thinking, to only one set of beliefs.

Maybe God is honored when people interpret our ancient tradition in new ways.

Maybe God finds delight in innovations and new possibilities.

Maybe God is praised in different ways by different people.

As I looked at the Kotel, from my ground's-eye view, before I stood up, I realized that my assailant was not angry at me. He was frightened by the notion that he might not be right and he needed to be right. He was at war against my challenge, as he saw it, to his monopoly on truth.

The first lesson which I take from this altercation is that our education for our youngest students must begin by teaching our children that neither they nor we are not threatened by new ideas. On the contrary, new ideas are sources of renewal and new opportunities for Jews, especially for Jews who have not found a way to connect to Judaism or the Jewish people. We cannot afford to shun our fellow Jews. They are part of us. We are part of them and the intolerance manifested when one Jew pushes another, tears at soul of the Jewish People and must be fixed.

2. **Something else tears at the soul of the Jewish People which this incident brings to mind: Indifference.**

After being pushed to the ground, I waited for a few moments before standing up, waiting to see if anyone would extend a hand to help. I could have gotten up on my own but I waited and noticed that several of the people standing around actually turned their backs on me.

What does it mean to turn your back on a fellow Jew? I believe that the answer to this question touches the very core of who we are and what we are as Jews.

There are many ways one might choose to explain the essence of Jewish Life standing on one foot, as did the great Sage, Hillel. But tonight I would like to suggest a different formula for Jewish Life. My suggestion: **Thou shalt not remain indifferent**. Again, I turn to our sources.

A few weeks ago, we read in our weekly Torah reading the following verse (Deut. 22:1):

If you see the animal of your neighbor gone astray, "lo hital/lamta me'hem"/you must not ignore it.

A few interesting features of this verse:

First, it is interesting to note that no one would ever know if you ignored the straying animal. You could simply say, "I never saw it". But **you** would know. This law is not concerned about enforcement. This law is about what it means to be an ethical and caring human being. This is about personal accountability. It is about standing up when needed and not shirking our responsibilities. If a person learns not to be indifferent to a straying animal, how much more so can one not turn away from a person who needs their help?!

Indifference means not caring when someone is pushed to the ground. Indifference is felt when someone is attacked, when someone is unfairly denied or ignored. It is manifested when we don't want to get involved. That indifference, the attitude which says, let someone else do it, is also a reflection of a damaged Jewish soul in need of repair.

In our synagogue, over the past several years, we have been placing greater emphasis on, what we call, "inclusion". Our Inclusion Committee oversees our programs of outreach to those who have certain disabilities or deficits. We reach out, as well, through our *Chesed* Committee to those who, for instance, need help with setting up a house for shiva. We visit those who are recovering from surgery or from illness by way of our *Bikkur Cholim* Committee. And we reach out individually. Many do this well. The rest of us need to learn.

Today, we cannot remain indifferent to the plight of the people of Haiti in the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew. I don't know anyone in Haiti. I do not believe that there are many Jews living there. But knowing that these people are suffering so terribly, we cannot ignore their pain. We must respond. You will find in the lobby information regarding how you can help to provide assistance to the Haitian people.

There is a verse in the Torah that instructs us,

"When a stranger resides among you...you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Lev. 19:33 – 34).

And so when there are refugees in our country, fleeing persecution and death in the countries where they have lived, they, in relatively small numbers, are given refuge in the US. These are the strangers in our midst of whom the Torah speaks. It is easier to disregard them, to be indifferent to their plight. But we cannot be indifferent because we are Jews.

The antidote for indifference is engagement and a welcoming embrace. If indifference is a sign of a damaged Jewish soul engagement is reflection of Judaism at its best.

3. And finally, we must reclaim our stake at the Kotel and in Israel in general.

The Kotel confrontation (the Body-slam in Jerusalem) can be easily explained in two words used by the shouting Haredim: "**our Kotel**"

"Our Kotel" means mine and not yours. In their minds, the Kotel belongs to them. And for all effects and purposes, therefore, they are correct. When they say "our Wall" they mean just that.

The governance of the Wall, you see, including all rules and regulations and matters of etiquette have been taken over by ultra-Orthodox factions. This governance, the final say on all rules and regulations at

the Kotel have been given by the Knesset to the Ministry of Religion and the Chief Rabbinate. The fact that control of the Kotel has been given, by the Chief Rabbinate to a Haredi Rabbi and his followers, lies at the root of the problem. We non-Orthodox Jews are, therefore, perceived by those in charge as visitors.

But the Kotel you see belongs to the entire Jewish People not simply to one small faction of Jews.

When I face Jerusalem to pray, I am not praying towards an Orthodox synagogue, I am praying toward that place where our Temple once stood, the place where Jews throughout history have focused their prayers, their hopes and their dreams. When I pray, I am facing the place which every Jew, to this day, faces as they pray. The Kotel is as much mine and yours as it is theirs. And here there is some things we can do.

We can support the Masorti Movement, the Conservative Movement in Israel, which fights daily for recognition.

We can remind our Israeli brothers and sisters that our request for access to our religious sites is more than valid. It is a right which is enshrined in the values of the State of Israel, stated explicitly in its Declaration of Independence. Discrimination against Jewish worship is something we must confront in other places in the world. We should not be required to confront it in Israel.

We can remind Prime Minister Netanyahu that he made a deal with us, a deal affirmed by a vote of the Knesset earlier this year on January 31. That deal confirmed, and had put money aside to fund the renovation of an area, away from the current wall, in a place which one cannot even see when standing at the Kotel, an area which would permit non-Orthodox Jews to pray together, a place where women can raise their voices in prayer, where boys and girls can hold hands and dance together. The Kotel is ours too.

And something else. The control of that religious and national site is not a trivial issue. This is not a turf war. This is a struggle that cuts to the core of our relationship with Israel. We American Jews love Israel. We support Israel. We visit Israel and we think about Israel all of the time. But American Jews want to know that their concern for Israel, their love for Israel and their commitment to Israel is, on some levels, reciprocal. We want to know that our feelings count. That our religious affiliations count. That the way we connect to Israel, through prayer, synagogues and the Jewish community here counts. We want to know that our rabbis count.

My scuffle at the Wall is symbolic of a mindset which is harbored by a small percentage of Israeli Jews. They are not representative, by any means, of the mindset of most Israelis. And yet, the government allows this to occur. The Prime Minister and other leaders know that this is wrong and yet refuse to take the actions necessary to right this wrong. They refuse because, if the government enforces the promises they have made to us, the Haredi parties will leave the coalition and bring down the government. What should the Prime Minister do?

I have my hands so full here with politics in this country, I am simple unable to personally take on Israel's political dysfunction. I would not wade into the political waters of Israel any more than I will wade into those waters here tomorrow morning. I will not presume to tell the Prime Minister how to change this equation, how to maintain his coalition and placate American Jews, and the majority of Israelis, at the same time. But what I would say is that this situation hurts. It hurts when we are pushed to the ground.

It hurts when we are told that we do not belong. It hurts that a hand is not being extended in our direction.

There is much that needs healing world. There is intolerance every place in the world. There is indifference and intolerance in so many other places? Because Israel is not every place. Israel is our place, our only place, in this world. And the Jewish People are not just people. They are our people. And, as Jews, we have a mandate to embrace and assume responsibility for one another: *kol Yisrael 'areivim zeh la-zeh* / Jews are responsible for one another. We are responsible for each other not only because it is right, but because there are not enough Jews in this world to have the luxury of turning our backs, alienating or shunning any Jew. We have much work to do:

We need to eradicate intolerance from the Jewish Community

We need to heal the indifference within the Jewish Community. We must redouble our efforts, in our community and beyond to teach that we are responsible for each other.

And we must convey, in any and every way possible, that Israel is ours too. We love Israel. We support Israel. We are proud of Israel. But we have the right to be seen, heard and considered.

One of the cardinal lessons of Judaism is that of *Pikuach Nefesh*. We do anything and everything to save the life of another person. When life hangs in the balance, Jewish Law is suspended and all efforts are made in order to save a life. Today, however, there is another urgent and pressing matter. Today we need to invoke a new principle of *Pikuach Neshama*: we need to resuscitate the soul of the Jewish People. And that resuscitation is urgent, it is necessary and it is vital for the future of our people.

On this, the holiest night of the year, we can begin to repair our Jewish souls, personally and communally, by extending a hand to those around you. Whether or not you know them, they need that hand as much as you need theirs. Wish them a Sweet New Year. By extending a hand, you let them know that they matter, that we care and that none of us is here alone.

And when we grasp the hand of another person, we give strength to each other. And we need that strength to stand and fight for the soul of the Jewish People. At the Kotel the battle was literal and real. But whether or not fists are flying. This fight is a real fight, this is a battle worth engaging. This is a confrontation from which we cannot back down.

The soul of the Jewish People was and is being threatened, knocked down and trampled at the Wall. Together we and our friends in Israel must be there to pick it up, dust it off and defend it wherever we are. This is a fight for the Jewish Soul from which we cannot, we should not, we must not run. It is time to take our stand, to make our case. It is time now to push back.