

At the Entrance of Hope

Yom Kippur 5779 Alternative Morning Service

When it previewed on Broadway, “The Band’s Visit” was described as an offbeat, understated show, a “slow burn.” Yet this sleeper swept the 2018 Tony Awards. It received eleven nominations and won ten Tony Awards, including Best Musical. The Broadway production was adapted from a film of the same name that was released a decade ago. The plot is simple: members of the Egyptian Alexandria Ceremonial Police Orchestra arrive in Israel to play at the inaugural ceremony of an Arab arts center in Petach Tikvah. After a mix-up at the Egypt-Israel border, the band ends up in Beit Hatikvah, a fictional, one-horse town in the middle of --- nowhere. Stuck in Beit Hatikvah until the next morning when the daily bus is scheduled to arrive, the musicians make the best of the situation. The plot develops under the spell of a starlit desert sky. With haunting music perfuming the air, the band brings the town to life and relationships to fruition in unexpected ways.

“The Band’s Visit” is a narrative about three essential needs: food, shelter, and human interaction. “The Band’s Visit” also imparts a moral lesson about the virtues of compassion and kindness. In addition, “The Band’s Visit” paints a vision of an ideal world in which ethnic, religious,

national, and partisan differences transcend political, cultural, and geographic boundaries. Nowhere in this 90-minute snapshot of the Middle East is there a hint about the complex relations between Israel and its neighbors. On the contrary: audiences who expect some sort of clash or conflict are met with everyday people extending a hand to strangers in a tough spot. If only “The Band’s Visit” wasn’t a work of fiction. If only life in the real Middle East was as idyllic as in the fictional town of Beit Hatikvah. Unfortunately, the harsh facts on the ground don’t mimic the amicable relations on the stage.

Israel is the bullseye in a neighborhood that is a hotbed of terrorism and instability. It’s no secret that Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula is overrun with militant Islamists and ISIS affiliates; or that jihadist extremists in Jordan threaten the pro-Western monarchy; or that Syria is a cauldron of terrorists; or that in Lebanon, Hezbollah is growing militarily and politically; or that Iran is the world’s leading sponsor of terrorism in the Middle East. The situation is alarming. Israel’s security and survival are at stake. As terrorist groups and aggressive governments across the region continue to proliferate and strengthen, Israel has no choice but to remain vigilant and proactive against those who seek its destruction.

At nearly every service, we sing “*Oseh shalom bimromav, Hu ya’aseh shalom aleinu, v’al kol Yisrael, v’al kol yoshvei teiveil*; may the One who makes peace in the high heavens make peace for us, for all Israel and all who inhabit the earth.” Unfortunately, peace remains an elusive dream.

Last week marked the 25th anniversary of the Oslo Accords. On September 13, 1993, Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Shimon Peres *z”l* and PLO Negotiator Mahmoud Abbas signed the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements. Israel accepted the PLO as the representative of the Palestinians, and the PLO promised to renounce terrorism and recognize Israel’s right to exist. Both sides agreed that Israeli forces would withdraw from parts of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and that a Palestinian Authority would be established to assume governing responsibilities during an interim five-year period. The Oslo Accords also stipulated that an Israeli-Palestinian Committee would be established to promote and support economic cooperation and that “permanent status negotiations” would take place to reach a final agreement on issues including “Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security arrangements, borders, relations and cooperation with other neighbors....” From the perspective of 25 years, we know that the Oslo Accords didn’t end the conflict. On the contrary: direct negotiations between the Israelis and the

Palestinians sputtered and stalled numerous times. Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other pro-Palestinian groups continue to oppose Israel's right to exist. Extremists from Gaza and from the disputed territories continue to threaten Israeli civilians by digging terror tunnels, by launching incendiary devices, and by perpetrating acts of terror against Israeli civilians.

One would think that the government of Israel had enough to worry about from aggressive neighbors without stirring up domestic turmoil. That's why we were taken aback in July when the Knesset passed the Nation-State Law. The reaction both in Israel and in Jewish communities worldwide was swift and impassioned. The Nation-State Law reaffirms basic Zionist ideals and concepts: the Jews' historic connection to the Land of Israel; the symbols of the State; the capital of the State; the national languages; the ingathering of exiles; Israel's connection to the Jewish people worldwide; Jewish settlement (natural growth and expansion); the official calendar; Independence Day and memorial days; holy days and Shabbat. The heated controversy over the legislation isn't about what's included in the Law. Rather, the controversy is over what's not stated explicitly, such as Israel's commitment to "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex." Also absent is any mention about the rights of Israel's ethnic minorities:

1.8 million Arabs, as well as hundreds of thousands of Zionist Christians and the Druse who fight alongside Jewish Israelis in the Israel Defense Forces. The Reform and Conservatives Movements were quick to object to the Law's absence of guarantees that protect and enhance the rights of non-Orthodox Jews in Israel. Obviously, the Nation-State Law needs some work. Appeals will be heard by the High Court of Justice. Hopefully, the Court will require the Knesset to reassess what it means for Israel to be a Jewish, democratic State. Hopefully, the Knesset will take into account the opinions of representative constituents. Hopefully, the Israeli government will give serious consideration to these different points of view and draft amendments recognizing the religious liberties and basic human rights of all its citizens.

“All the world's a stage,” wrote Shakespeare. Sometimes that stage is in the political arena, and sometimes that stage is on the Great White Way. It's on the stage of the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in New York City that the Egyptian Alexandria Ceremonial Police Orchestra ends up in the fictional Beit Hatikvah rather than in Petach Tikvah due to a simple miscommunication: there's no P sound in Arabic. Try saying Petach Tikvah and Beit Hatikvah. They sound alike. In “The Band's Visit,” the ticket agent at the fictional bus station misunderstood. She assumed that the band's

destination was Beit Hatikvah. On the stage, the mix-up was funny; in real life, such miscommunication can have profound consequences.

In a few minutes, we'll recite the traditional confessional liturgy for Yom Kippur. *Al cheit shechatanu lifanekha*, for the sin we committed before You, God. One of the sins for which we ask forgiveness is the sin of not listening carefully enough. As the old saying goes, there's a good reason why we have two ears and one mouth: so that we can listen twice as much as we speak. That is what the Israeli government should do as it reformulates the Nation-State Law: listen more carefully to all those who are affected by the legislation. Hopefully, the revised legislation will satisfy the country's constituent populations. Hopefully, Israel's attentiveness to its citizens' concerns will attract the attention of the Palestinian Authority and of neighboring Arab countries and motivate all to sit down together, to listen to one another, and to forge a secure and lasting peace.

I'm hopeful that such a day will come. I think most Israelis are eager for such a day. In his recently published book, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, Israeli scholar Yossi Klein Halevi extends an invitation to the Palestinian neighbors who share his homeland to engage in a deep conversation, a conversation about their own personal narratives, as well as their conflicting narratives. His book is published in English, but it's

available on-line, free of charge, in Arabic. To me, that says a lot about his determination to help change the status quo. Fortunately, Yossi Klein Halevi is one of many like-minded individuals eager to engage in such conversation.

In her recently published memoir *Jerusalem, Drawn and Quartered*, blogger Sarah Tuttle-Singer provides an insider's perspective of her encounters with Israelis and Palestinians as a resident of Jerusalem's Old City. Sarah refers to the area in which she lives as the seam between the Christian and Armenian Quarters. In the book, she recounts many of her candid and intimate conversations with residents of all four quarters. She describes both the challenges and the rewards of these open and honest exchanges. A few weeks ago, I met Sarah here in Denver at a gathering for Rabbis hosted by AIPAC. Sarah shared with us a story that's not in her book. Friday, July 22, 2017. Sarah was enjoying a quiet Erev Shabbat with some friends in the Old City. About 36 miles north of Jerusalem in a small town called Halamish, three generations of Yosef and Tovah Salomon's family sat down to a celebratory Shabbat dinner in honor of the recent birth of a grandson. But the celebration turned into a bloody massacre when a Palestinian terrorist, armed with a large knife, entered the Salomon's home and stabbed to death three members of the family. Report of the terrorist

attack hit the Israeli media within minutes. Sarah was devastated by the news. Early the next morning, Sarah's friend Muhammad called. He invited her to coffee at their favorite café in the Old City. Sarah didn't want to go. She didn't want to be near Muhammad. She was too distraught by the news of the massacre, by what his people did to her people. Reluctantly, Sarah accepted, curious to hear what he would say about the brutal killing. Muhammad said nothing. He sat silently, sipping his coffee. After a while, Sarah asked why he was so quiet, if there was something he'd like to say to her. He replied: "Why are *you* so quiet? Don't *you* want to talk about what happened?" "What happened?" Sarah asked, recognizing the pain etched into his face. Muhammad took a deep breath. He explained that the day before, in the Old City of Jerusalem not far from where they were sitting, three Palestinians were fatally shot in separate clashes, in outbreaks of violence that erupted over Israel's recent placement of metal detectors at entrances to the Temple Mount. Sarah had no idea. She was too caught up in her own heartbreak about the Israeli family. Muhammad had no idea about the Salomon family. He was too caught up in his own heartbreak about the Palestinians who were killed. Sarah related to us that as they shared their stories, as they shared their pain, the chasm between them narrowed. Yes, Sarah was an Israeli Jew and Muhammad was a

Palestinian Arab. They would always be different people with different narratives. But in that moment, they were just --- friends, comforting one another for their loss.

Underlying “The Band’s Visit” is the hope that face-to-face interactions between adversaries can and will lead to understanding others’ points of view, that open dialogue will lead to friendships and, eventually, that friendships will lead to peace. The author of “The Band’s Visit,” Itamar Moses, cleverly set the drama in the Beit Hatikvah. Beit Hatikvah means “House of Hope.” What occurs that night in this fictional town in the middle of nowhere is his vision of what could be: a world in which people who don’t speak the same language, literally and figuratively, interact as people, one human being to another. In this “House of Hope,” stereotypes are overcome, preconceived notions are dispelled, and strangers become friends. Sure, it’s fantasy, but who’s to say that dreams can’t come true?

On Yom Kippur, we conclude the ten day process of *cheshbon hanefesh*. We know that through our words or our actions, by our silence or indifference, we didn’t do all we could to make the world a better place. Now is the time to forgive ourselves for the past. In the final hours of this sacred day, now is the time to look forward, to energize ourselves for the future. Now is the time to think about how we can make a difference in

building bridges between people who are dear to us and in reaching out to people who are not yet our friends. Beit Hatikvah is a fictional town. Petach Tikvah exists. It was established in 1878; it's older than Tel Aviv. Petach Tikvah means "Entrance to Hope."

That is what this New Year offers: entrances to new possibilities, entrances to new opportunities, entrances to hope: hope for us, hope for our loved ones and friends, hope for Jews worldwide, and hope for the people and the State of Israel. In this New Year, may we all have the determination and the courage to take the first steps through the entrance of hope to a better tomorrow.