

## **What Endures? -- Rosh Hashanah 5766 (2005)**

As some of you know, my son Micah's favorite color is orange. Before camp this summer, I took him shopping for clothes and we bought anything orange he could find – from t-shirts to hats. Little did we know what a challenge his wardrobe would later present.

Right after camp, we went on a family trip to Israel – just as the Gaza strip was being evacuated. And, as it happened, orange was the color of the Israeli settlers, who were protesting everywhere. Poor Micah.

On the streets of Jerusalem, swelling crowds assembled in orange t-shirts. Orange ribbons flew on car antennas. And orange banners hung down defiantly from balconies.

Micah's parents suggested that Micah may want to avoid orange for a couple of weeks, lest he be accidentally swallowed up in a protest rally.

Identity squashed, Micah found other colors to wear, while stealthily taking advantage of the orange opportunities, by buying orange yarmulkes for the return home.

It was an historic time to be in Israel. As we traveled around the country, we could feel the pain of Israelis who were pitted against each other politically and physically. For the first time, Israeli soldiers were called upon to take action not against an enemy, but against fellow Israelis, who refused to obey government orders and leave their homes.

Whether one wore blue and white in support of the withdrawal, or orange in solidarity with the settlers, it was worn with a great deal of mixed emotion and a sense of real loss – as hard won land was given away.

I will never forget one particular poster I saw plastered up on a billboard. It was of that famous Roman Vishniac photograph of a young boy, yellow star pinned on his coat, hands up in the air in surrender to the Nazis. The star was colored in orange, and the caption below read, "Expulsion again?"

It was not lost on Israelis that the Gaza withdrawal took place on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Holocaust. The most strident settlers and rabbis likened Israeli soldiers to Nazis which, in turn, touched off a storm of criticism against such an inappropriate comparison.

In the end, the withdrawal was efficient and fast, with few disturbances. The remaining settlers were led out, their houses were bulldozed, and the Israeli tanks rolled out of Gaza. Aside from some remaining fields and greenhouses, and the synagogues no one was willing to demolish, there was virtually no trace left behind of a once thriving Jewish community.

I then returned to San Diego, and quickly began to pack my own things. Finally, the move into our new building was at hand. A week of boxes and moving trucks, and we embraced our own piece of history – as we marched our Torahs down El Camino Real and placed them in their new home. And what a spectacular home it is!

I have yet to catch my breath. But these two juxtaposing images – the demolition and withdrawal from Gaza, and the dedication of our shiny new building – are knocking together in my thoughts.

I have begun to ask myself, are we Jews crumbling and in retreat, or are we thriving and building? Are we Jews advancing as a people, or are we in decline? What is the meaning of destruction and construction? What is temporal, and what endures beyond our lifetime?

This year, Elie Wiesel, perhaps the greatest voice to rise from the stunning silence of the Holocaust, reflected on what we have learned after 60 years. He wrote:

*Most of the questions that I had 60 years ago when I was first released from Buchenwald, and so many others, remain unanswered. I would go further and say: That's how it is, and that's how it must be. Even if there is an answer, I refuse to accept it.*

So, 60 years after Auschwitz, we have had commemorations and confessions, reflections and renunciations. But we have come not one iota closer to understanding what happened. Have we changed in 60 years? Have we learned and grown? Have we changed in 600 or 6,000 years? I am tempted to look at Darfur in Sudan, at the conduct of our American guards in Abu Graib prison, and say – not much! Though our technology advances exponentially, our basic human condition apparently remains the same wrestling match between good and evil, between nobility and depravity, between tearing down and building up.

I have touched upon Israel, but against this backdrop of the last 60 years, how do we American Jews measure up? The studies we do on ourselves say, we are in decline. The most recent study of San Diego Jews shows an exceedingly high rate of out-marriage with an exodus from Judaism, and an alarmingly low rate of membership in any Jewish institution, let alone a synagogue.

So, what does all this mean? Is humanity in an unchanging state of moral ambivalence? Is Israel collapsing in on itself? Are we American Jews headed toward extinction as, in 2006, for the first time, the Jewish population of Israel will exceed the number of Jews living in the United States?

Well, I think it all depends on how you look at it. The first place to which a visiting dignitary to Israel is brought is, Yad Va-shem, Israel's Holocaust memorial and museum. This is primarily because it's a crash course in Israeli history. Though I have been there many times, this summer was the first chance I had to tour their brand new museum.

The building itself is an architectural statement. The walls are tall concrete slabs that lean in on one another. The floors are sloped and uneven. Anyone who walks through this remarkable multi-media presentation of the Holocaust, is literally unsteady on his or her feet. The horror of Nazi inhumanity is visceral and unfathomable. And then, there is the final room of records. Identical neat black notebooks spiral up the circular walls – each bearing pages of names that, presumably, add up to 6 million.

But at the end, one ultimately emerges from the black and white past. And directly ahead, is a floor to ceiling window, with a brilliant panoramic vista of the golden hills of Jerusalem. I stepped out onto a large veranda, and gazed at Israel – land and people, alive and well – thriving in the place God promised Abraham and Sara.

The overall message of Yad Va-shem is that out of the ashes of 6 million Jews, the Jewish State and the Jewish people rose up and were reborn. Despite all evil, there is good; in the face of depravity, the noble vision was not tainted and it endures.

So, yes, Israel withdrew from Gaza and four West Bank Settlements this summer. And more withdrawals will likely follow. Homes that had been tended, land that had been nurtured was razed to the ground and given to the Palestinians. It is painful. But former Gaza residents have been given the resources to rebuild their lives. And Israel is stronger today than it has ever been in its entire history.

When I visited with my friends and colleagues who have made aliyah, they shared some of their despair with me. My long time friend and college roommate, Gershon Gorenberg, who is Associate Editor of the "Jerusalem Report," was very unhappy that the Sharon Administration acted unilaterally in the withdrawal. My former North Hollywood colleague, Rabbi Danny Gordis, expressed the same criticism, and also his deep sense of loss that Israel had to give up precious land.

As we sat in conversation, I spoke as an outsider who is not living in the day to day-ness of Israeli life, as one who looks at Israel from a broad perspective. I pointed out – look what Israel has accomplished in its brief existence. A thriving physical and technological infrastructure, a homeland

for more than 5 million Jews, a vibrant culture, a free democratic society, and one of the premiere defense forces in the world. Given that just 60 years ago, Israel was not permitted statehood, that refugees from Europe were being hauled off their rusting tin Hagana ships by the British and interned in barbed wire camps in Cypress – this country is a miracle!

Coming home to our Torah March gave me the same sense of optimism here! Close to 800 of you poured out into the street to be part of our Temple history. Despite what the demographic studies say about us, we, too are alive and well.

Many years ago, the scholar Simon Rawidowicz coined a phrase. He called the Jews, “an ever-dying people.” It was a facetious way of refuting all those who were predicting our demise. For thousands of years, from the earliest days of our prophets, we have been shrying gevalt! But, it seems, despite everyone’s best intentions, and our worst fears, we are still here – this ever-dying people, living when others sought to extinguish us, thriving despite what the statistics may say about us.

It has been noted that, today, every Jew is really a “Jew by choice.” The door swings two ways – both in and out of the American Jewish community. Every one of you here has chosen to enter – and I applaud and thank you.

Seniors, whose children are long gone from your homes, who have already built other temples, are here.

Preschool families, who add temple membership to the cost of raising a young family, are here.

Traditional families, who choose to make this their community, and non-traditional families, who don’t fear to mainstream and find a home at Temple Solel. You are all here.

Especially interfaith families, whom I personally thank when we meet. All you non-Jewish partners and parents who foster a Jewish home, raise Jewish children, and work to create a Jewish family – you are the unsung heroes who go the extra distance as part of the community of Temple Solel.

It is hard for me to get too depressed about the future of the Jewish people from my vantage point.

Our young congregation has now raised one whole generation. Children born here, are entering their 20’s and reaching their 30’s. They are going off to Israel, and making aliyah – following the dream started here, of joining and strengthening our Jewish homeland. Others are studying to be Jewish educators, and some even want to be rabbis. I am standing beneath their chupahs and sending them into their own adult Jewish lives, and even shedding a tear, as some are starting to return to our midst, and come full circle to raise *their* families here.

So what is temporal and what endures? A building is temporal. Gaza settlements can be dismantled and relocated. Temple Solel can move from one home to the next.

But what endures is this – us, we Jews in some form. This light of creation depicted on our bima. This inextinguishable flame of Jewish life and longing. Our dreams and prophetic visions.

So, as you sit here tonight/today, I hope you’ll reflect on the miracle. The miracle of this beautiful new home, which is still just a building, waiting for us to fill it with light and life. The miracle of this ever-dying people – still strong after 3,500 years. And its call to you, to each of you, to embrace the flame that has never been quenched.

Like the eternal flame that burns at Yad Va-shem, the light has been passed to you, from torch to torch, from hand to hand, from generation to generation.

Now it is yours. How will you feed it? Where will you shine it? To whom will *you* pass it?

This new building calls on each of us to enter and light up these fresh new walls with *our* dreams! Fueling the light of Torah and Jewish learning; illuminating our spirituality and connection with the holy; and bringing the burning flame of justice and compassion to our community and our world.

Come to Synaplex, our brand new multi-experiential Friday night. Come to Mexico to build a house, or host guests in our Interfaith shelter. Take a Hebrew class and learn the one language that unites all Jews throughout the world. Or attend anything from a single lecture to a multi-session course. Help our Israel Action committee support our partners in Sha'ar ha-Negev and Kibbutz Ruchama. Join our Hineynu and Keshet communities as they reach out to us and connect us to one another.

Find your place, share your light, and watch as the miracle of Judaism rises up from our midst.

60 years after the Holocaust, I agree with Elie Wiesel. The human condition is an absolute enigma, and humanity seems to be in perpetual struggle with itself. Buildings rise up and are destroyed. People migrate from one spot to another. There is ebb and flow – despair and exaltation.

The danger is, when we are too close up, that is *all* we see – and we miss the miracle. Yehuda Amichai, the famous Israeli poet once wrote:

*From far away, everything looks like a miracle,*

*But up close, even a miracle doesn't look like one.*

*Even a crosser of the divided Red Sea*

*Saw only the sweating back of the walker in front of him*

*& the movement of his large thighs . . .*

Tonight/today, I ask you to take a step back and realize that, indeed, you are in a miracle. To dwell on the loss of Gaza is only to see the walker in front of you – step back and behold the thriving nation of Israel.

The gloomy demographic studies are only a view from inside the marching crowd – remember, we have always been the ever-dying people – cast your gaze on Temple Solel, and see a spirited community of Jews.

As we take residence in our new home, as a promising future awaits us and our families – stand back, look up, and see that you are in a miracle. Your presence here tonight/today, says: *Am Yisrael Chai* – the people of Israel live!