

## **Israel is Hard to Love, Even for Israelis -- Rosh Hashanah 5768 (2007)**

By now, I know many of you have had the chance to visit the Dead Sea Scroll exhibit in Balboa Park. For me, personally, one of the more striking photographs at the exhibit shows two men, one Arab and one Israeli, examining a scroll fragment together. What's unique about this picture from the 1950's, is that in between them is a barbed wire fence. What was this curious fence that divided them? It was actually the 1948 border of Israel that went right through downtown Jerusalem.

As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. Because today, when you visit that same street, you will see no signs of barbed wire or a divided city. What you will see are crimson banners hanging from the street lamps, with a golden outline of Jerusalem and, inside, the number 40. 40, because this past June marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reunification of Jerusalem, recaptured in the 1967 War. Just as this coming May will also mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the State of Israel.

These are major milestones not just for Israelis, but really for Jews everywhere. On this New Year, 5768, I have no doubt that we share with synagogues around the world, in reflecting on our State of Israel at the age of 60.

A lot has changed in 60 years, and especially in the last 40. Some of it is good, and some of it is not so good. The 1967 conquest of the West Bank and Gaza, once a great victory, has lately turned Israelis to despair and American Jews to a feeling of unease. Israelis getting hard, even for Israelis to love.

This summer, I had a chance to see some things I had never seen before. With a group of rabbis, I took a trip, led by Israeli soldiers, who have formed an organization called, *Shovrim Sh'tikah* – Breaking the Silence. These are all young men in their 20's, who did army service in West Bank cities like Ramallah and Hevron. And even though they commanded troops and dutifully carried out orders, they are so impacted by their experiences, that they're now breaking the silence and openly sharing their stories.

This particular trip was to Hevron. Hevron is the biblical place where our Patriarchs and Matriarchs are all thought to be buried. For centuries, there has been a sacred tomb on this site, the foundation of which is made out of Herodian stones, every bit as old and impressive as the stones of the Western Wall of the Temple in Jerusalem. And inside the Tomb of the Patriarchs today, are clusters of stooped over ultra-Orthodox Jews and fervent young Yeshiva boys in their white shirts who come to pray and hold vigil.

All told, there are 600 Jewish settlers living in Hevron, right in the midst of 170,000 or so Palestinians.

I had visited Hevron back in 1975, and what I remember seeing around the Tomb of the Patriarchs then was a bustling street, full of crowded Arab shops with tourists pouring in by the busloads. Today, it is an absolute, desolate ghost town. By military fiat, every single Arab shop has been closed down and shuttered tight. There is no sign of life, except the settlers themselves. Palestinians are forbidden to walk or drive on the main streets. The Israeli military term for this is, "sterilization." And they have done it well – I can tell you that a sterile town is one of the eeriest things I've ever experienced, like the aftermath of a nuclear war.

Downtown Hevron has been hermetically sealed around the settlers. And all those Palestinians who are unlucky enough to live there, have either had their homes confiscated by Jewish settlers, or been so severely restricted that movement is impossible. Arab children walk three and four miles to a school that's a mile away; one man we met physically carried his wife in labor over a mile from their home, just to get out of the restricted zone in order to access a taxi to the hospital.

By the way, guess how many Israeli soldiers it takes to guard these 600 settlers? It takes 500 soldiers and another 100 support personnel.

We had a chance to meet with the leader of the Hebron settler community. He's a very personable boychik from New Jersey. In fact, he was quick to tell us that Rabbi Lennie Kravitz, who coincidentally, taught some of us in rabbinical school, officiated at his Bar Mitzvah. He sees himself as a Reform kid made good. He stood before our group of rabbis, with his pistol on his hip, reviewing all the reasons this land rightfully belong to the Jews, and how, in 1979, the settlers decided it was time to reclaim it. So here they are today – 120 Jewish families making their stand.

The image that hit me the hardest was that of the young Israeli soldiers in the starkly abandoned market place. I saw a few jogging together in a pack, and one of them looked every bit like my son, Jacob, who is just their age. I tried to imagine sending my son to serve on such a mission.

I saw many young Ethiopian soldiers, sitting casually at checkpoints, riding in jeeps, walking on patrol. I thought to myself, this is the paradox of Israel. Here, Israel courageously rescued these hopeless Ethiopian Jews, airlifted them to freedom, and then stuck their children out in no-man's land with a rifle.

If you want to understand the dynamic that Israelis contending with today, this is it – 600 personnel guarding 600 religious extremists. And why, you might ask, is it like this?

Because, as any Israeli, including the soldiers who serve there, will tell you – *ein breirah* – right now, there is no choice. There are Jewish settlement blocks, large and small, all over the West Bank. Every time Israel tries to pull settlers out, they are met by open rebellion from the settler movement. And should Israel attempt another unilateral pullout from the West Bank like the one from Gaza, there would only be more chaos in the West Bank. The only plausible solution is a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians, and right now, prospects for that are remote, to say the least – with a lame duck Israeli Prime Minister, a Palestinian President who represents only part of the Palestinian people, and a U.S. President who has his hands full in Iraq. Israelis are stuck between a rock and a hard place.

So, they continue to live their lives, pursue their dreams but, at the same time, hope for better days. The entire country pulses with debates about the future of the State. Be careful what you wish for, as they say. No longer defenseless Jews marching to the gas chambers, but now in possession of land, a government, tanks and Apache helicopters, Israel has a new weight on its shoulders. Think about the fact that this is the first generation of Jews in 3,000 years, since the time of King David, to witness the reality of Jewish power, and to carry the moral responsibility that comes with it!

Israel's biggest problem is that the Palestinian population is a ticking time bomb. Israeli demographers predict that if Israel holds onto the West Bank, in a very short time, there will be an Arab majority within the Jewish State. This presents a huge moral dilemma. Will Arab rights be trampled in an apartheid-like regime in order to maintain the Jewishness of the State? Or will Israel remain a democracy, in which case Israel would no longer be a Jewish State, because Jews would be a minority political faction?

This is the existential question facing Israel 40 years after conquering the West Bank and Gazain the 1967 War. And it leads a majority of Israelis to the inevitable conclusion that the only realistic way to have both a Jewish and a democratic state, is to give up land and create a peaceful Palestinian State next to Israel. A great idea, but not one that has any prospect of happening soon.

So, Israelis are rightfully distressed about the moral conflicts they live with on a daily basis. Israelis love the *idea* of Israel, it's the *reality* that's hard to take!

And this brings me to us American Jews. It's clear to me that we, too, are increasingly conflicted about Israel. We are entering a post, post Holocaust age. For our youth, the Holocaust is a chapter in their history book. The birth of the State of Israel 60 years ago, is an established fact. These events, so recent and vivid to many of us, don't have nearly the resonance with our youth.

My son is going off to college, and I guarantee that he will encounter anti-Israel demonstrations on campus. Just like many of our Temple Solel graduates, he will have to face off not only with Palestinian supporters, but more than likely, with one or two professors who will condemn Israel's policies in front of his class. This is a very uncomfortable position for a nineteen or twenty year old Jewish college student to be in, especially for some of our teens who may not know that much about Israeli politics to begin with!

For American Jews, too, Israel is becoming harder to love. A lot of our national organizations seem to paint a rather one dimensional picture of Israel. All of the debates raging in Israel, the huge spectrum of opinion which is splashed across the country, is virtually neutralized here.

And, as Rabbi Eric Yoffe, the president of our Union for Reform Judaism, has recently pointed out, this is alienating our youth even further. Organizations such as Christians United for Israel, Pastor John Hagee's Evangelical Christian group, join forces with our mainstream Jewish organizations and raise millions of dollars for Israel. Because it brings in money for Israel, they are willing to ignore Hagee's far reaching agenda, which includes a very scary End Times scenario.

The conversion of the Jews, is really the least of our worries. I have read Hagee's seminal book, "Jerusalem Countdown: A Prelude To War," and I can tell you that he is using his influence to bring the United States and Israel into a confrontation with Iran, in order to trigger his End Times scenario. And even more immediate, in my opinion, is his fervent view that Israel should not give up one inch of land, not even in a final settlement with the Palestinians, because these are biblically ordained, and for the End Times to come about, Israel must be in control of the whole of biblical Israel.

Regardless of what your political views may be on Israel's right to the land, I would bet anything that you have not formulated your views on the basis of messianic prophecy.

And here is where we can learn something from our youth. Because, when our college students experience this kind of cognitive dissonance, between how they see the organized Jewish community acting, and what they are experiencing on campus, they throw up their hands and turn away. And these are our future Jewish leaders.

So, entering this new age, 60 years after the birth of Israel, 40 years after the reunification of Jerusalem, I pose this question: what will it take for American Jews to love Israel— a country that even Israelis find hard to love?

Things have changed a great deal since 1948 & even 1967. Israel is no longer the primitive romantic enterprise of draining swamps and planting fields. Israelis now a high tech Mid-east superpower – more like a mature lover than a young bride.

Passionate love, we know, is easy – a fire of emotion. But mature love can be harder. We know each other better – the shortcomings and flaws that make us less appealing than we used to be. Yet mature love is also more substantial and far less fleeting.

Israelis 60, and the time has come to move on from our passionate, youthful love affair with our unblemished bride, from her heroic conquests as a 19 year old soldier in the '67 War. It is now time to settle into middle age, and look realistically at our life partner.

Fundamentally, for us to love Israel, we need to know her more deeply. Israelis debate, shrill, fight, and argue everyday over the intense moral dilemmas of the State. Nothing is held back in the presses, on the television, even on the street corners. Israelis know about Hebron because their children serve in the West Bank and then come home on Shabbat. And in Israel, it is O.K. to openly bear all the angst, and then comfort each other when there is no seemingly good prospect for repair.

As American Jews, why do we find it necessary to be step lock and silent? On this Rosh Hashana, we celebrate a new Israel which, though successful in so many ways, finds itself in a compromised moral

position with no immediate solutions. Why can we not acknowledge this and discuss it publicly, just as Israelis do? Our young people get it, and so must we, lest they look for romance elsewhere.

The second thing that has to change is what we ask from each other in this relationship. Until recently, Israel was our little brother, who needed to hold our hand in order to walk. Today, Israel doesn't want only our benevolent assistance. What Israel really wants is our partnership, and respect for what Israel offers us.

For our part, the best thing American Jews could do for Israel right now is invest in her companies, partner in her technology, and open up our markets for her growing industries. Real partnership is not only giving dollars & political support, but investing our confidence in what our partner hopes to achieve.

And what can Israel do for us? Just talk to a college student who has been to Israel on Birthright, or to a teenager back from a teen trip, or to a family who has returned from a visit. They are forever changed. Studies now confirm that just one trip to Israel does more to strengthen Jewish identity than an entire Religious and Hebrew school education.

A century ago, Achad Ha'am dreamed that Israel could be a spiritual center for Jews everywhere. Today, this is truly Israel's gift to us.

The Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, perhaps captured it best. In his collection, "Songs of Zion the Beautiful," he wrote:

Jerusalem's a place where everyone remembers

he's forgotten something

but doesn't remember what it is . . .

This is the city where my dream-containers fill up

like a diver's oxygen tanks. . .

And the questions that are asked in these hills

are the same as they've always been: "Have you

seen my sheep?" "Have you seen my shepherd?" . . .

So, as Israel comes to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth, it is time for us to become mature lovers. We are entering a post, post Holocaust world, and barbed wire fences no longer divide Jerusalem. We have to look at Israel honestly, and wrestle with the entirely new experience of Jewish power. We have to not only give, but invest as partners in Israel's future. And we have to know that whatever we may give to Israel, Israel gives us more.

Yes, it's easy to have a casual love affair, to be passionate in a one night stand and then move on when we see each other in the revealing light of day. But mature love takes something more. It takes a willingness to argue without threatening to walk out of the relationship; it takes being able to stomach your lover's unbecoming illnesses, and defeats, and moral lapses; and it takes the heartfelt conviction that this is your *besht* – the partner through whom your entire destiny is fulfilled.

As much as Israelis despair of their country's problems, and we see our bride's imperfect face, we now have to forge that higher love.

The psalmist declared, "*Im eshkech Yerushalyim, tishkach y'mini* – If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand loose its skill." May this be our love for each other, a love and a longing for all time!

*Amen v'amen!*