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“Are We Headed For Divorce?”

I'm beginning to wonder if we're headed for a divorce. I already know what the divorce papers would say – “irreconcilable differences.” The passion is waning, we seem less important in each other's lives. We are arguing more and the children are getting the message that we might be better off apart. Yes, we'll always love each other, but maybe it's time to call it quits.

Of course, as with any relationship that's on the rocks, it's natural to reflect on how exactly we got here – and even to remember how and when our love affair began. For me, it was in the early 1960's. The walls of my synagogue classroom were decorated with posters that said, “Make the desert bloom.” We sang Israeli folk songs, danced Israeli folk dances, and brought Tzedakah every Sunday for *Keren Kayemet L'Yisrael*.

By 1967, I was in Jr. High. I honestly don't recall many of my teachers. But I will never forget Gym class with Mr. Zebrowsky. During Israel's Six Day War, Mr. “Z” blasted loudspeakers onto the athletic field, keeping himself and everyone else in earshot abreast of the war news. There weren't a lot of Jewish kids out on that field, but we few Jews felt tremendous pride in Israel's remarkable victory – surrounded by Arab armies on all sides, David had once again defeated Goliath.

In 1975, I finally got to see Israel firsthand on my college semester abroad. I spent a month on *Kibbutz Ein HaShofet*, picking fruit and learning Hebrew with the other volunteers and new immigrants. At 4am, before the heat of the day, we would drink some strong coffee and head out to the fields to work. In those days, the kibbutz was communal in every respect – from children's houses, where the children all lived and slept together, to the several cars in the parking lot that were shared by all the kibbutz members. Then there was the communal dining hall, where hundreds of kibbutz members and volunteers would break from their labors around 8am to enjoy the freshest fruits, vegetables, eggs, and dairy I had ever tasted.

After a month, my group moved from that pastoral landscape to the bustling city of Jerusalem. From time to time, we could hear the terrorist bombs exploding downtown, and later step over the broken shards of storefront windows littering Zion Square. City life posed a very different kind of pioneering challenge. Israelis had to wait at least a year to get a telephone in their apartments. Heat only ran in the morning and again in the late afternoon, shutting off well before bedtime. Since our apartment didn't have any heat, we used a portable *tanur*, that burned some kind of horrible kerosene and filled the room with toxic fumes.

For a young college student, this all added up to a budding romance. Shlomi Artzi, one of Israel's most popular singers, had a song on the radio in those days. The words were actually written by Amir Gilboa, a very well-known Israeli poet:

Pitom kam adam ba'boker u'margish sh'hu am u'matchil lalechet.

Suddenly a man gets up in the morning.

He feels he is a nation and begins to walk,

And to everyone he meets on his way he calls out 'Shalom!'

And he laughs with the strength of generations from the mountains,

And all the humiliations of the past bow down to the ground...

Suddenly a man gets up in the morning.

He feels he is a nation and begins to walk,

And he sees that spring has returned...

This was the Israel that I, and perhaps many of you, fell in love with. A nation reborn after 2,000 years. The Hebrew voice of our ancestors ringing again through the hills and cities. A decimated people, beaten down by exile, servitude, pogroms, ghettos, and death camps, now blossoming its land, as spring returned to the Jewish people.

It was a fairytale romance between us and Israel. In America of the 1960's and 70's, a new "Secular Judaism" was born out of our U.J.A. campaigns and pro-Israel lobbying. As much as Israel needed our support, we needed Israel to give us new purpose and vitality.

Yehuda Amichai, another of Israel's great poets, wrote of that holy city of kerosene heaters, shattered storefronts, and history reclaimed:

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.
Its holiness sometimes turns into love...

I and so many others made pilgrimage to Israel exactly because of that – to rediscover our heritage, our dreams, our people and our land; to find the kind of intoxicating holiness that turns into love. Israel was truly the place where our "dream containers fill up like oxygen tanks."

But, lately, those dreams are turning dark and restless with nightmares. The nightmare of war after war changes a country and its dreams. We see the continued expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, the imposing concrete separation barrier, and begin to question how Israel will remain Jewish and democratic if it holds onto the

territories and the Palestinians on the other side of that wall. We see the human suffering in Gaza and feel that one more war could be the fatal blow that blasts Gaza back to the stone age. Israel is no longer the diminutive David against Goliath; it is a world class military power that is walking the finest of lines with Hezbollah, Hamas and Fatah. One misstep, and a landmine could blow them all to the heavens.

And especially this past year, the ultra-Orthodox have strengthened their authoritarian regime in Israel, in spite of the vocal protests of our American Jewish community. We screamed this year from night terrors as the plan that was painstakingly brokered by Natan Sharansky and ratified by Prime Minister Netanyahu for an egalitarian prayer section at the Kotel, was suddenly and shockingly abrogated by Netanyahu in order to appease his ultra-Orthodox coalition members.

This summer, Rabbi Dov Hayoun, a prominent Conservative rabbi in Haifa, was *literally* awakened from his dreams – roused from his bed by police at 5am and taken to the station for interrogation. What was his crime? His crime was officiating at a Jewish wedding as a non-Orthodox rabbi.

Also this summer, again under pressure from the ultra-Orthodox, a new law was passed that denies gay couples the legal right to have a child by means of surrogacy. Immediately after that law was signed, tens of thousands of Israelis turned out for a massive protest at Rabin Square in Tel Aviv.

Netanyahu's actions have made it clear that his first priority is maintaining his government coalition and accommodating his ultra-Orthodox partners in order to do so. So, gay rights have been restricted, Reform and Conservative rabbis cannot legally perform conversions or marriages, men and women will not have a space in the central plaza to pray together at the Kotel, and over 400,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union will be listed in the population registry as, "no religion" because their lineage is suspect in the eyes of the Chief Rabbinate. After enduring religious persecution as Soviet Jews, they now reside not in Siberian exile, but in the Israeli no-man's land of non-identity.

And it seems that we are on the verge of a divorce. Delegation after delegation of our American Jewish leadership has gone to Israel to plead our case – to no avail. Our brand of Jewish pluralism has been marginalized and dismissed. The nationalism and tribalism we see emerging around the world is apparently just as virile in Israel as it is elsewhere.

So, as with any marriage that's coming apart, we have to ask, what hope do we have to stay together? This is the question we American Jews are asking right now. On this night of Kol Nidre, of broken vows and oaths and promises, how do we deal with the betrayal we feel as Reform Jews, with the disappointed promise of our love affair?

Maybe we need some counseling. Perhaps we need to look deeper into ourselves and Israel, in order to understand our hurt and anger. I will tell you that, as one who feels deep pain in these actions of the current Israeli government, this is something I have tried to do.

And what I'm beginning to better understand is this. Just as America cannot be characterized as a nation by one administration's policies and actions, neither can Israel. Politics, as we're learning, are fluid and, in a democracy, the pendulum swings both ways over time. A country is more than one party or one policy.

At this moment, Israel is governed by a right wing Likud coalition with ultra-Orthodox parties, just as we in America are led by a Republican administration that is sympathetic to Evangelical Christians and their religious values. I will leave it to others to explain our U.S. politics, but I can tell you why I think this has occurred in Israel. And it's mainly because the majority of Israeli voters have given up hope for a two-state peace agreement with the Palestinians any time soon.

Ask almost any Israeli on the street and he or she will tell you how every overture for compromise and peace has been rejected, beginning in 1947 with the UN Partition Plan that created two states for two peoples, which Israel accepted and the Arab nations not only rejected, but then waged war against, with the intention of wiping Israel off the map. Again, in 1967, they attacked, and on Yom Kippur in 1973, they attacked again, followed by two more wars in Lebanon. Still, Israel stood ready to make peace. Rabin sacrificed his life for peace in 1995 and, in 2000, President Clinton and Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered the most comprehensive land for peace agreement ever at Camp David, which Yasser Arafat ultimately rejected. Then again, in 2008, Ehud Olmert offered a return of 93% of the West Bank with land swaps to make up for the other 7%, a shared Jerusalem as the capital of two states but, yet again, Mahmoud Abbas rejected it.

Then, there is Gaza. Israelis to this day re-live the trauma of leaving Gaza unilaterally in 2005 under Ariel Sharon. They watched horrified as their army forcibly dragged its own settlers into cages to remove them, leaving carefully tended greenhouses and schools and a synagogue behind, which Hamas promptly destroyed and used as bases to launch terror against Israel, instead of a base for economic advancement and state building. Speaking of terror, there has been the abject terror inflicted on Israelis by two Intifadas, in which innocent civilian men, women, and children were blown up randomly on busses and in cafes, and the continued and persistent rocket fire from Gaza, which has created a situation in which residents of our sister community in Sha'ar HaNegev must even now be no more than 15 seconds away from a bomb shelter at all times, and little children are so traumatized that they are peeing in their beds at night.

These are just the highlights of Israel's rebuffed efforts to build peaceful co-existence of two states side by side. And this is why the left-leaning Labor Party is out of power, the

Israeli peace camp is virtually non-existent, and Israelis have turned rightward to a coalition government that is focused on nationalism, and even tribalism at times. Most Israelis, even the most moderate, will tell you that the dream of peace is currently dead because there is no there there – no one on the other side with the credibility or the vision to reach a two-state agreement with Israel. So, *kacha zeh* – this is how it is – for now.

But, even as hopes for peace are distant and politics are what they are, we can't allow ourselves to forget that Israel has all the democratic institutions that are the hallmark of a free and open society. Israelis are the first to openly criticize themselves in the media, to speak out forcefully against government policy in public protests, and to fiercely debate within the courts and the government itself.

My therapy has reminded me that it's precisely here, within these enshrined democratic institutions, that Israelis will work through their complicated religious and social issues, just as we do in America. The Kotel, civil marriage, the rights of the Reform and Conservative movements, provisions of the recent controversial Nation-State Bill – all of these are right now being argued and hashed out in the courts and the Knesset and the public square. My therapy has led me to accept that Israel is not perfect and, as in any relationship, there are times when we just don't agree.

So, how do we handle these rough patches? How do we keep from signing the divorce papers and walking away? One of the things any good therapist will tell us, is that when we become obsessively critical, we also have to remind ourselves to look at the positive qualities of our partner – and, hopefully, rediscover the attraction that brought us together in the first place.

This summer, I did precisely that. I went out to see what Israelis are doing on the grass-roots level that is visionary and inspiring, how they are building from the ground up with the same pioneering spirit of the early state, and not waiting around for political leaders at the top to solve their problems.

I visited Machshava Tova, where one group of High Tech Venture Capitalists realized that all the high tech advancement they've led is also creating a digital divide that is leaving behind the most vulnerable populations in the country. So, they created Machashava Tova to teach technology, computer literacy, and even 3-D printing.

Machashava Tova now has centers around the country and mobile computer vans that are giving Israelis with disabilities employable skills, at risk youth, minorities, and immigrants a level playing field to get ahead in school, and homebound seniors the ability to communicate with the outside world on their computers. Rather than accepting Israel's widening social gap, these social entrepreneurs are stepping up with solutions!

Another remarkable group of social entrepreneurs I visited are not wealthy venture capitalists, but modest residents of an Arab village inside Jerusalem. One of their big challenges is emergency medical care. Israeli ambulances coming into the village have to be accompanied by the Israeli military. So, instead of five or six minutes, it can take twenty minutes or more for an ambulance to get to a resident – too much time in some critical cases.

Members of this village decided to do something about it. They formed an emergency response team called, Nuran. They're an all-volunteer group that secured its own funding and trained in emergency medicine with Magen David Adom. They now have an all-terrain vehicle and three ambulances that are staffed by doctors and nurses. They can reach anyone on or off road in their village within minutes, and transport their patients directly to Israeli hospitals, where they have full privileges. Rather than being embittered by the security situation in East Jerusalem and waiting for peace to one day come, Nuran did something about it.

This is what gives me hope for the future and reminds me of the outstanding qualities that Israelis and Palestinians can exemplify. Beyond the politics, there are so many visionary people and programs that still align with our values.

Theodor Herzl once said of the future state, "If you will it, it is no dream" and, even as this year Israel turned seventy years old, we still have so much to accomplish in order to achieve that dream. So, rather than walking away from our relationship with Israel because of the current political climate, why not dream with the people who are building peace and hope on the ground? No relationship is easy, and no partner is exactly what we want them to be. It takes effort, understanding, compassion, and most of all, love to keep a relationship alive.

And this is really what I want to tell you tonight, as I give my final Kol Nidre sermon as your senior rabbi. I have spoken many times with you over the years about Israel – always honestly, from my heart, and sometimes critically. But, I want you to know that, despite the deep fractures in our relationship, my love for Israel has not diminished. My Israel therapy has taught me that real love is always tested; and real love survives pain and conflict.

In the spirit of Kol Nidre, I know that there will continue to be broken vows and oaths and promises. Because Israel is still trying to work out what it means to live with a Jewish soul, with a heart that beats to Jewish time, in a powerful body that will never again be beaten in Pogroms or gassed in Auschwitz. Its language is resurrected from the ancient dust of holy books that now contains words like "*telefon*" and "*autoboos*." Its weekend is called, Shabbat, and its most holy days are Yom HaShoah and Yom Hazikaron – Holocaust Remembrance Day and Memorial Day for Fallen Soldiers – when sirens sound and everyone stands at attention, even on the motionless highway next to their stopped cars.

Hamutal Bar Yoseph, a modern Israeli writer, poignantly described this old/new place:

I am from here, most women light Shabbat candles here
For a whole week every year it is hard to get bread in most places.
One day a year a desert silence quiets most of the traffic
Two days a year the sound of the siren is a fire skewer
Heart wrenching.

Not a big people, not numerous
Living in a Jewish state
The only one we have loved and will love
And for whatever it's worth, for good and for better
It is a good reason to be proud
Even now.

So, my hope for you is that you will stay faithful, even when your faith wanes, that you will remain in love, even when not feeling loved by Israel in return, and that whatever your misgivings about broken vows and promises, you will never, ever leave her.