

Kol Nidre 5770

Yom Kippur is a time to look at the thorniest topics in our lives, to face boldly the issues we so successfully duck the rest of the year. It is a hopeful day, but it can also be profoundly uncomfortable.

Tonight, I'd like to share with you a personal love story. Like any love story, it has ambiguities and nuances, arguments and reconciliations. It's complicated by the fact that the object of my affection is unaware of my feelings. It's a love that has been stretched over the years, challenged, but never entirely broken. I'm speaking of my love for the State of Israel.

My love has passed through many stages over my lifetime. It started as an uncomplicated romance. I was a Sunday school student in Washington, DC, growing up not long after the miraculous victory of the Six Day War. According to my teachers, Israel was a place of breathtaking beauty whose residents spent all of their time engaged in folk dancing and tree planting. I resolved at an early age that I was going to visit: I would bank the money given to me at my bat mitzvah and take a trip to Israel in high school. My rosy vision of the land was reinforced when I discovered the novels of Leon Uris early on in my teen years. I absolutely adored his book *Exodus*, whose sabra heroes farmed all day, fought the evil Arabs in the evening, and then made love all night. Looking back now, I'm appalled at how Uris erases any evidence of ambiguity in the story. Jews: good and very intelligent. Arabs: bad and essentially stupid. As a kid who wanted to see the world in absolutes, I loved it.

I made my teen trip at the tender age of 15, under the auspices of a group called the American Zionist Youth Foundation. They devoted considerable energy to reinforcing the idea that all of the biblical land of Israel belonged to the Jews, that the Arabs were latecomers to the land, and that any rate they were a bunch of terrorists who had forfeited any rights because of their belligerent behaviour. Black and white. Just right for me.

It was really only upon entering rabbinical school that I finally realised just how complex the situation really was. My classmates in general held the opposite view of my high school tour guides. They were convinced that Israel's ongoing

occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip meant that stability in the region was impossible. Unless the Jews could find some way to allow the Palestinians to establish their own state and break away from Israel, Jews would soon be outnumbered by Palestinians, and Israel would cease to be a Jewish state. This made a lot of sense to me. I am embarrassed that it took me into my early twenties to gain the subtlety of thought I believe is necessary to untangle the situation in the Middle East. But I did finally get there.

My entrance into rabbinical school corresponded precisely with the start of the first intifada in 1987. It was a devastating time for Israel, which had believed itself the benevolent overseer of the Palestinians. Now suddenly, they were labelled as occupiers.

I spent the better part of two years in Israel between 1991 and 1993. I lived a relatively blissful and trouble-free existence in West Jerusalem, taking buses between my apartment at the Mt. Scopus campus of Hebrew University, and later living as a volunteer in southern Jerusalem. The intifada was limited to Palestinian areas, and we students knew that if we steered clear of those parts of town, nothing would bother us. Elsewhere, in the occupied territories, young people continued to hurl stones at Israeli soldiers, get arrested, and occasionally get shot. I mostly got on with my studying and volunteering. There was a low level of unease, but one that, I can now confess, was relatively easy to ignore.

I wrote about my few encounters with the intifada upon my return to the United States in 1993 and prepared to speak about the dismal hopes for peace at the High Holy Days that year. Instead, I watched with amazement as Yitzchak Rabin and Yasser Arafat signed the Oslo Peace Accords a few short days before Rosh Hashanah. Quite a few of us tossed our High Holy Day sermons into the bin that year.

The seven years from 1993 to 2000 were like a dream. Perhaps they were. Economic growth took off, both for Israel and for the newly-chartered Palestinian Authority. Countries around the world struck up diplomatic relations with Israel for the very first time. Israelis went back to visiting the Palestinian territories, with

particular enthusiasm for the enormous casino in Jericho. On the margins, sceptics whispered that the Palestinians were not serious about making peace. They pointed to troubling images even on children's shows, including young kids appeared dressed as suicide bombers. I was too enamoured of the dream to believe what my own eyes were showing me: Yasser Arafat was talking peace to the Israelis, and talking war to his own people. In 2000, he stood at Camp David in the presence of Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak and U.S. President Clinton, pen in hand, poised to sign a historic agreement that would divide Jerusalem and return the vast majority of the west bank to Palestinian control. Signing this agreement would also mean that Arafat would have to deliver some hard news to his own people: Palestinian refugees could settle in the state of Palestine, but they would never win the right to return to the state of Israel itself. Chairman Arafat put down the pen, walked away from the table, and launched the devastating second intifada.

Things have been pretty bleak for my beloved Israel ever since. We have seen the already radicalized population of Gaza become even more so under the leadership of Hamas. The leadership of the Palestinian Authority seems less and less able to lead, and moderate voices among Palestinians are few and far between. Israel, meanwhile, has managed to carve out something like a normal existence for most of its citizens, but only by walling itself off from its neighbours. Those seven heady years of dialogue and reconciliation are gone now, consigned to distant memory. Even the most optimistic, the most peace-loving among Israelis are wary of trying to make peace when neither the Palestinian Authority nor Hamas have truly embraced Israel's right to exist. Few Israelis now even know a Palestinian. Many are just grateful to be able to drink a coffee at the local café without fear of being blown apart.

No one is objective on the situation in Israel. I include myself. There aren't that many areas where I am in open disagreement with myself, but Israel is one of them. I still hold in my heart my childhood image of Israel. I envision Israelis carrying armloads of flowers across the green line to give to their Palestinian neighbours. And

I understand that Israel now lives in a nearly-impossible reality where peace is craved but unattainable. All we have now is armistice, and suffering.

Added to the mix is the almost impossible task of figuring out what is actually true, what is really going on. Ron Hoenig was part of a group of Christians and Jews who visited Israel and the Palestinian Authority last year. Ron spoke evocatively of the mixing of narratives in the region: Israelis and Palestinians tell complete different stories of how things came to be the way they are, of how things should be. When there is such disagreement on the stories themselves, reconciliation becomes even more challenging.

I feel passionately that Israel needs its supporters. The bias that exists against throughout the world is horrifying. The United Nations has voted to condemn Israel more times in recent years than all other countries combined. It is utterly incomprehensible to me. I hit a low point several months ago when I came across a flyer posted at the Adelaide College for Divinity. It was advertising a talk by a man who was identified as an evangelical Christian and also as a staunch ally of Palestine. On the flyer was a picture of Jesus hanging on the cross. In place of a loincloth, he was draped in a Palestinian flag. I found the imagery so offensive from so many perspectives that I almost crashed the lecture just so I could offer an opposing view. But I doubt anyone would have been listening.

At the same time, I cannot in good conscience justify everything that Israel is doing in the name of protecting its security. There is no doubt that Hamas are bad people and that the shelling of Jewish towns from Gaza is intolerable. But so is keeping an entire population under lock and key for months on end. A small number of my American colleagues have begun to fast regularly on behalf of the people of Gaza. I waver endlessly as I debate whether to join them. When I hear the level of vitriol directed against Israel, I cannot imagine doing anything that might be perceived as providing them more fodder for attack. When I read of the ongoing suffering endured by the people of Gaza, I cannot stand by and be seen as supporting Israel's policies. An Israeli acquaintance of mine wrote powerfully on her Facebook

page, “Unconditional love does not require unconditional agreement. Zionism for me means loving Israel enough to keep trying to get it right.”

I do not anticipate that I will come unstuck any time soon. How can Israel negotiate for peace when Hamas continues to call for its destruction? And let us not forget that, although both the U.S. and Israel are attempting to bulk up the Palestinian Authority, it was Hamas who won the last Palestinian election. Hamas endorses terror, even suicide bombings to promote its cause. It uses civilians as human shields and intentionally fires missiles from crowded apartment blocks.

But Israel must find a way to maintain the integrity of its own soul. Nine years into this intifada, Israelis rarely feel sympathy for the innocent Palestinians who are trapped between their own bad government and Israel’s resolve to protect its people. Eighteen-year-old Israeli boys are called up to the army and regularly asked to perform duties that must, ultimately, force them to deny their own humanity and certainly that of the Palestinians. You may well recall one of Golda Meir’s most quoted utterances: “When peace comes we will perhaps in time be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons.” How will Israel hold on to its soul, its *neshamah*, under these current conditions?

At the end of the day, the best I can do is to continue to pray. **There must be peace.** There is no other viable option. Neither Israel nor the Palestinians have a future so long as this stalemate persists. And let me be clear, peace cannot come without a viable Palestinian state. But it must be a Palestinian state that is prepared to live in peace with its neighbour. Perhaps not warm and fuzzy peace, but at the very least an absence of war.

We pray for the welfare of Israel at every service. The official prayer for the State of Israel calls Israel “the first flowering of our redemption.” We affirm that Israel holds within it the potential to be a light to the world, a holy nation. If it is granted the precious opportunity to live in peace, it will achieve even greater things. Let us pray that peace will come soon, in our day, and we say Amen.