

Sha'alu Sh'lom Yerushalayim

Kol Nidrei 5766

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Temple Shir Tikva

There is an old story that is recorded by Saul Ansky in his classic Yiddish play, *The Dybbuk*. It goes something like this:¹

There are four measures of holiness in the universe. Each is measured in concentric circles:

G-d's world is great and holy. Among the holy lands in the world is the Holy Land of Israel. In Israel, the holiest city is Jerusalem. In Jerusalem the holiest place was Mount Moriah, the site of the ancient Temples, and in the Temple the holiest spot was called the *kodesh kodashim*, the Holy of Holies.

Furthermore, tradition had it that there were 70 peoples in the world. Among these holy peoples is the holy people of Israel. The holiest of the people of Israel was the tribe of Levi. In the tribe of Levi the holiest are the *kohanim*, the priests. Among the priests, the holiest was the *kohein gadol*, the High Priest.

There are 354 days in the Jewish year. Among these the holidays are holy. Higher than these is the holiness of Shabbat. And among *shabbatot*, the holiest is Yom Kippur, which is called by the Sabbath of Sabbaths.

And there are 70 languages in the world. Among these is the *lashon kodesh*, the holy language of Hebrew. Holier than everything else in this language is the Torah, and in the Torah the holiest part is the Ten Commandments. In the Ten Commandments the holiest of all words is the mystical 4-letter Name of G-d. Yud-hey-vav-hey, the name which today goes unpronounced; we say "Ad-nai" instead.

Four supernal elements of holiness found in the world.

And Ansky writes: Once during the year, at a certain hour, these four supreme sanctities of the world were joined with one another. That was on Yom Kippur, when the *kohein gadol* would enter the Holy of Holies and there utter the Name of G-d. And because this hour was beyond measure holy and awesome, it was the time of utmost peril not only for the high priest but for the entire House of Israel. For if, in this hour, there had, G-d forbid, entered the mind of the high priest a false or sinful thought, the entire world would have been destroyed.

That was what this day meant. That is the spirit in which we enter into this Yom Kippur.

The world in which we live hangs in a delicate balance at this time of the year. Our rabbis have taught us to look at the entire world on Yom Kippur as if it is perfectly balanced between light and dark; between good and evil. Between order and wholeness, or exploding into entropy and chaos.

Nowhere is this cosmic drama felt more closely than on the stage of the streets of Israel. Perhaps it's because Israel is a small country, in a compact place, with far too much history on its hands. Perhaps it's because the famous "six degrees of separation" that connect all people to each other in Israel is reduced to about "two degrees."

¹ S. Ansky, *The Dybbuk and Other Writings*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

Elie Weisel tells an anecdote about one of his visits to Jerusalem. Once, he walked up the long road from the valley to the Jaffa Gate, one of the most bustling centers of activity in the entire city. The Jaffa Gate is a thoroughfare of activity and commerce; there are Arab women selling sabra cactus-fruit and little boys hawking wooden camels; there are taxis waiting to depart, tourists trying to navigate their ways to the Kotel or the Holy Sepulcher, and old men watching the activity as they suck their water-pipes.

Weisel notes that not far from the entrance to the Jaffa Gate, you can peer up at the stones and see a subtle but remarkable sight. Look up and you can see, fading into history, the letters engraved in the wall: “Leg X.”

What is “Leg X”? It is the last remaining graffito of the Roman Tenth Legion. The troop that conquered Jerusalem for Rome two millennia ago. Rome: conquerors of Europe and Asia, virtually their entire known world. Rome: the largest empire of human history. No doubt that as they conquered Jerusalem and its inhabitants, the Romans figured that this minuscule people, these Jews, would quickly become like many of the disappeared ethnic groups that became generically, “Roman.” I don’t know who inscribed those letters into the wall... but I imagine that he felt that Rome, the conquerors of the city, would be there for 2,000 years to come.

What is so remarkable about that inscription is that today you can go and stand there and gaze at those Roman numerals fading into the Jerusalem stone. You can go and do that – as a Jew.

There are no Romans around anymore. The conquerors of the world are no more. But we are here.

I was thinking about this story this past summer, which will surely be recorded as one of the most pivotal times in the history of the Jewish state.

Like America, which seems ever more divided into RED states and BLUE states, Israel found itself polarized on color-coded grounds this past summer. Israel was awash in ORANGE and BLUE. Orange represented the supporters of the settlers in the West Bank and Gaza, especially the settlers of the Gaza Strip. Blue was the color of those who supported the Sharon administration’s plan to unilaterally remove and resettle over 8,500 Jews who were living in the Gaza Strip.

Think back to the long, hot summer weeks that led up to the withdrawal from Gaza. It was a time when rhetoric was inflamed, and got out of hand. Day after day, there were massive rallies throughout Israel.

All summer long, some predicted that Israel was about to descend into a civil war, marked by the orange and the blue.

Others – these are Jews, mind you – invoked the rhetoric of the Holocaust. The cynical motto of the pro-settler camp this summer was: “A Jew does not expel a Jew.”

Some predicted – and encouraged – huge ranks of conscientious objectors from the army.

The religious right confidently predicted that G-d would never let the Gaza withdrawal take place.

And then – there was the miracle. None of the doomsday predictions came to be. There was no civil war. The whole enterprise – the dismantling of twenty-five settlements – took place in six days. The Israel Defense Forces – which surely must have earned the title of the most sensitive military in the world – carried out their orders with a remarkable degree of compassion. Many of the soldiers removed the settlers with tender tears in their eyes and even the hugs of extended family – but carry out their orders they did, with conviction.

The Gaza withdrawal certainly generated lots of commentary in the Jewish world. I could share my two cents with you tonight on whether or not it was the right thing to do – it was; it was an essential act for the future of the Jewish state. But, frankly, my heart's not in it.

Instead, I want to focus on that other aspect of the Gaza withdrawal that received far too little attention. The victory of a thriving Israeli democracy to carry out difficult, virtually unprecedented actions for the sake of peace. No matter where you stand on the issue – although I'll remind you that 79% of Israel's citizens support the withdrawal² -- what comes through is the remarkable compassion of the Israeli people, and the incredible strength of Israeli democracy to do this. No arms were taken up against the soldiers. The opposition used their freedom of speech and, at the end of the day, they lost in the marketplace of ideas.

It made me proud to be a Jew.

Politics can, and should, be a topic for another day. I am not a rabbi who shies away from speaking about politics. But as we reflect on our relationship with Israel today, it is important to emphasize that our relationship is so much *more* than the politics of the day. Our connection to our spiritual homeland does not rest on whether any particular administration is to the left or the right. (We do have a responsibility to urge it to conform to the highest values of our people, of course.) But our bond, our connection, is one of love, of family. And the shifting tides of the day's public opinion should not change the way we relate to our *mishpocha*.

As you and I begin to get to know one another, we are going to find out about what mutually excites us about Jewish life and living. Tonight I want you to know that I am a Jew whose soul is bound up with the Land of Israel. As a rabbi, I believe it is a moral responsibility of Jews everywhere to continually find creative, meaningful ways to foster connections with our Israeli brothers and sisters. Part of what excited me about Temple Shir Tikva during my interview process here is that I think you feel the same. So we are going to have many dialogues, G-d willing, about what it means to be a Zionist in the 21st Century.

Indeed, modern Israel is a miracle – the fulfillment of a 2,000 year-old dream that was stubbornly clung-to by our great-great-great grandparents for all those years. Nowhere else in world history can one point to the rebirth of a far-flung people who returned to their ancestral home, along with the rebirth of their *dead* language. Miracles!

So we have a challenge – to continually refine and strengthen our connection with our brothers and sisters in *Eretz Yisrael*.

It is our responsibility to find every creative, off the wall ways of reaffirming that connection. That is some of the work that our wonderful **Israel Action Committee** does here at Shir Tikva – I hope you've had the opportunity to see the report that they've issued about the incredible work that we do here. It is an exciting and fundamental part of our Shir Tikva community.

Furthermore, our 11th & 12th graders are going to be spending time in Haifa this winter with Israeli peers. And if all goes according to plan, those same Israeli students will be coming to America next year, to work with our Shir Tikva students at a Habitat for Humanity site.

And I would encourage every Reform Jew to become a member of ARZA today. ARZA – the Association of Reform Zionists of America – is us. They reflect the international voice of Reform Jews in the Diaspora and in Israel, a voice that speaks out for justice, democracy, freedom, and peace for all the people of Israel.

² Ma'ariv-Teleseker poll and the Peace Index Poll conducted by the Steinmetz Center for Peace Research on Israeli public opinion regarding Prime Minister Sharon's disengagement plan, on the Israel Policy Forum website: www.israelpolicyforum.org/serial.dvm?id=10&sub=57

But all of that is still not enough. The Jewish Federation system in America coined a powerful slogan a few years back, during the height of the Intifada: “I care. And I’m going.” I’d like to invite you to come to Israel with me. I am proud to announce a **Temple Shir Tikva Family Trip to Israel** in December of 2006 – about 19 months from now. I certainly hope we’ll have many opportunities to go to Israel together in many capacities in the years to come. But it was important to me that our first community trip to Israel together would be about families. My children are going to be joining me, and I hope you and yours will come along as well.

After all, our ancestors – wherever they lived – turned and face the direction of Jerusalem when they prayed, every day. Every day they offered prayers to G-d to restore the Jewish people to our national homeland. We happen to live in a generation when those prayers actually came true. How can anyone not be moved by the profundity of that – that we live in a time when the prayers of a people for two thousand years have actually come true? How can anyone say that there are not indeed miracles all around us?

A story about the State of Israel.

One of the madmen who brought the state into being was born in 1858 in a small town in Lithuania. His name was Eliezer Yitzchak Perelman, although he is much better known by the name he took for himself after becoming a Zionist: Eliezer Ben-Yehuda.

Ben-Yehuda was trained in the yeshivot of Lithuania before becoming transformed by the Enlightenment, especially by the prospect that the ancient language of Hebrew could possibly be used to express modern ideas. The *zeitgeist* of nationalism spread throughout Eastern Europe, and Ben-Yehuda began to publish articles about what it means to be part of a nation in the modern world. Foremost was the need for a common language. Ben-Yehuda – who was fluent in Lithuanian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Aramaic, French, German, Russian, and Arabic – became the most outspoken proponent of the idea that the Jewish people needed not only a land, but a language as well.

Understand, please, how outrageous this idea was. Hebrew was hardly a “dead language,” so to speak – any Jew educated in his faith knew the language of the Torah, the Mishna, the prayerbook. But for no one in the 19th Century was Hebrew a native language. In this sense, it was akin to learning Latin or Ancient Greek; it had a classicism about it, but hardly had the flexibility of new vocabulary to be used to articulate the modern world of the 1800’s. But Ben-Yehuda argued that Hebrew was an essential part of the Jewish soul, and that it was one of the ultimate factors that bound Jews all over the world together. Like many prophets, Ben-Yehuda’s message was vigorously opposed by the cosmopolitan Jews of Europe – before it came to be considered an essential truth.

In 1881, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and his wife Devorah made *aliyah*. After making the arduous journey from Europe, upon their arrival in the port city of Jaffa, Ben-Yehuda turned to his wife and announced that, since they had safely arrived in the home of their ancestors, from then on they would only communicate to one another in Hebrew. This was easier said than done, however. For starters, Devorah barely knew any Hebrew. Second, even the great linguist himself came to realize that there were an enormous number of situations for which he simply lacked the word to communicate. It is said that he often resorted to desperately pantomiming what he wanted to say around the home rather than speaking anything but Hebrew! He also would invent Hebrew words on almost a daily basis – and would hope that his wife would be

able to understand what he was talking about. Thus he began compiling his Dictionary of the Hebrew Language.

Into this – shall we say *unusual* family dynamic – was born a son, Ithamar³, in 1882. As you can imagine, the baby Ithamar Ben-Yehuda was slightly developmentally delayed in his speech, no doubt due to the strange setting of broken Hebrew and pantomime in his family home. He was four years old and had not yet spoken his first word.

Yet think about it for a moment: when the time would come for Ithamar to speak, he would be the first *native* Hebrew speaker in two millennia. He was the first infant in two thousand years to hear Hebrew as the primary language in the family home. Therefore, it would be extremely interesting – don't you think? – to know what his first words were.

They say that the four-year-old Ithamar was playing at home and heard his parents arguing one day. And that was the day that the young boy opened his mouth and uttered the first words of Modern Hebrew: לֹא לְהִתְלַחֵם. “Stop fighting.”⁴

“Stop fighting” – the first words spoken by a native Hebrew speaker in two thousand years. This is what the Talmud⁵ has to say about the words of our children: אִם אֵינוּ נְבִיאִים הֵם, בְּנֵי נְבִיאִים הֵם! “If they aren't prophets themselves, then surely they are the descendants of prophets!”

Think about what it says about who we are that the first words spoken in our national tongue was “Stop Fighting.” Consider what it says about our national values, about who we are as a people. And be proud.

On Yom Kippur in days of old – thousands of years ago – four supremely pure and sacred things came together. The *kohein gadol*, who would enter the Holy of Holies on this sacred day and utter the four-letter Name of G-d. And the world would hang in the balance.

Today, we don't have a *kohein gadol* and we don't know the ancient pronunciation of the mystical Name of G-d. But we have Yom Kippur, and we have a modern city in Jerusalem, built on the soil where our ancient ancestors offered their atonement. And the world still hangs in the balance, on the decisions that we make over the course of this day.

The day ahead of us is a gift. It is an opportunity to step back from busy lives and really investigate what is most important for us. May this Yom Kippur inspire us to weigh the words on our lips throughout the year-to-come; may they be words of peace and of blessing; words that inspire us to “Stop Fighting.”

And may each of us contribute to the peace of Jerusalem, by reaffirming the eternal bond that connects us back to our ancient home.

Amen.

³. Actually his birthname was Ben-Zion Ben-Yehuda; he later was called Ithamar Ben-Avi.

⁴. Joel M. Hoffman, *In the Beginning: A Short History of the Hebrew Language*, New York & London: New York University Press, 2004, p.187-189.

⁵. Talmud *Pesachim* 66a,b