

## **White Shells and Gray Shells: Being Part of *Am Yisrael* Today**

**Kol Nidrei 5770  
Temple Shir Tikva  
Rabbi Neal Gold**

It is a late spring day one hundred years ago, on the shores of the Mediterranean. The skies are clear, for the winter rains have passed, and a cool breeze blows in from the sea. A community of people is gathered on the beach, people of all ages, huddled closely together. There are elders and children. Some are dressed in their *yom tov* finest; others wear shorts and workshirts.

Behind the dunes, hundreds of yards to the south, lies the city of Jaffa. It is the place where, in biblical times, Jonah fled from G-d. In the spring of 1909, like in the days of Jonah, Jaffa is an important port city. It has become a center for much of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine. All of these people on the beach this morning live in Jaffa, but not for too much longer. Today they stand on the beach, waiting for their Chairman, Akiva Aryeh Weiss, to come back with their instructions.

One woman, Rivka, nudges her husband, “I hope we get a house on the end of a street,” she says. “Neighbors only on one side of us will make things much more tranquil.” He shushes her.

Another woman, Shulamit, whispers to her neighbor, “I hope we are close to one another. I couldn’t imagine living too far from you.” And the sentiment is reciprocated.

Suddenly a hush settles across the group. Chairman Weiss has come up from the sea, with two children – a boy and a girl – flanking him on either side. Each child carries a bucket.

Now Weiss demands the attention of the entire group. With a flourish he pours the contents of each bucket onto the sand. Each has been full of seashells; one bucket is all white shells and the second is full of gray shells. The shells now litter the sand in front of the assembled group.

“*Chevra*,” he says, “This is how the lottery will work. Inside each white shell is a family’s name. Inside each gray shell is a number. My volunteers – these children – will draw one shell from each pile, and that is how each family will receive their plot of land. There will be no appeals or reconsidering. Is that clear?”

There is murmur of assent. The air is heavy with excitement.

All of the sudden, there is a disruption. A man with a great shock of unruly white hair calls out loudly, and the group turns and faces him. “Who is it? What is he doing here?”

Shulamit leans towards her neighbor again. “It’s that Feinberg! That *meshumad*! What brings him here?”

Feinberg, with the crowd’s attention, calls out in a shrill voice: “*Meshuga'im!* Crazy people! That’s what you all are!”

“That evil man,” Shulamit’s neighbor whispers back. “He’s opposed this project every step of the way.”

“*Meshuga'im!*” he yells again. “Don’t you know that this entire enterprise is madness? Like Jonah, you’re going to find yourselves at the bottom of the sea!” He spits at them, and, grumbling, he turns and leaves, trudging over the sand dunes like some prophet of doom.

Akiva Weiss struggles to regain the people's attention. They turn back towards him. He nods to the boy who draws the first white shell. Weiss looks at it, and calls out, "Azariah family!" The Azariahs – husband, wife, and two young daughters step forward. Weiss nods to the little girl, who draws a grey shell. "Lot number four!" he cries. And the crowd, caught up in the excitement, has already forgotten crazy old Feinberg. After all, they have much more pressing things. Each is waiting for his own family's name to be called, because these families, together, are about to embark on a grand experiment. They are about to found the first Hebrew speaking city in history. They are about to create Tel Aviv.<sup>1</sup>

That's my made-up account of a real event, the Seashell Lottery, which took place one hundred years ago. This year the city of Tel Aviv is celebrating its centennial. Some say that people still go down to Tel Aviv like Jonah did: to run away from the voice of G-d! After all, in the time since Akiva Aryeh Weiss led 66 families to draw shells for their new settlement, Tel Aviv has become the secular heart of the State of Israel, the complement to Jerusalem's soul. Today nearly 400,000 people live in this bustling metropolis that is Israel's economic, cultural, and communication center. Tel Aviv's great metropolitan sprawl incorporates over 3.2 million residents. Today the city is crowded, often ugly, snarled with traffic, and home to tens of thousands of foreign workers, many in the country illegally. It is home both to Israel's richest suburbs and also depressed slums.

The truth is, with all of our traditional emphasis on Jerusalem, Tel Aviv represents an important part of the spiritual meaning of modern Israel. After all, just as we celebrate our ancient ties to Jerusalem, we also celebrate the temporal now of modern Israel, which is symbolized by Tel Aviv.

Indeed, the State of Israel herself has come a long way in one hundred years, since the days of the Seashell Lottery. And we should take pride in some of her more remarkable accomplishments.

Here's a few of those:

- This summer, two Israeli companies announced the development of the world's smallest video camera: a medical camera that measures 700 x 700 microns, or about seven times the width of a human hair. It is an extraordinary piece of technology that can be inserted in to the human body, and it makes diagnosis and cures more available and more affordable in all sorts of ways. The first samples have already been distributed to hospitals around the world.<sup>2</sup>
- Israeli technologies are at the soul of *A Jewish Heart for Africa*, which is delivering solar panels and other Israeli products to the developing world. Israeli cutting-edge technology is pumping water and generating electricity in the parts of Africa that are most desperately in need.

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of these ideas I took from the author Ruvik Rosenthal in his [historical fiction] collection *Ha-Or v'Ha-Kesem: Tel Aviv shel Pa'am* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot Press), excerpted in *Jerusalem Report*, May 25, 2009, p.18.

<sup>2</sup> On the website of Israel 21C, posted August 5, 2009, at: [http://www.israel21c.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=7089:israel-developing-smallest-camera-on-earth&catid=62:briefs&Itemid=141](http://www.israel21c.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7089:israel-developing-smallest-camera-on-earth&catid=62:briefs&Itemid=141)

- Furthermore, those amazing internet smartphones and so much other microtechnology that we use every day wouldn't be possible with technologies that were developed in Israel.

So these are some of the achievements of Israel this year, which we should celebrate together. However, wondrous as these things are, there is an even bigger accomplishment on Israel's horizon that shows just how far it has come since that day that 66 families gathered on the beach of Jaffa.

According to the most up-to-date figures, Israel's population today is 7,465,000 citizens. 75% of these citizens are Jews, with a Jewish population of approximately 5,634,000 people. According to the Jewish Agency, there are approximately 5.4 million Jews living in the United States. Now that number is debatable – Jewish people are notoriously difficult to count, given the way in which debates rage over “Who is a Jew?” But here's the point to these statistics. We reached a milestone very quietly, a milestone which should have a major impact on the way in which we view Judaism and our spiritual lives.

**If it hasn't happened already, the time is imminent when Israel will pass the United States and have the largest Jewish community in the world.**<sup>3</sup> More than that: that means that for the first time since the Destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70, the largest Jewish community in the world is located in our biblical homeland. And that is something new.

For all her accomplishments, perhaps that one alone illustrates the most striking success of the dream that began with Theodor Herzl, Ahad Ha'am, David Ben Gurion, and others, including those families on the Jaffa beach. That astounding fact gives us an important opportunity to reconsider our relationship with the State of Israel.

For me, it means that we must recognize our stake, as Jews, in Israel. If the preponderance of the world's Jews lives there, then surely anyone who cares about the well-being of Judaism must be invested in Israel's security, safety, and moral health.

When you go to Israel today, there is one face that you will see everywhere: on billboards, on taxicabs, in the newspapers, everywhere. It is the face of a young man named Gilad Shalit. Gilad was 19 years old when he was captured by Palestinian forces in a cross-border raid. Tonight, Gilad has been a hostage of Hamas for 1,190 days; this is his fourth Yom Kippur as a captive, away from his family. Gilad's cause has been taken up everywhere in Israel. We know, from many reports, that he is still alive in Gaza. We know this even though Hamas refuses to allow the International Red Cross to visit him. Just last week, Hamas leaders offered to release Gilad – in exchange for the release of 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails.

Now when I was in Israel in February, my family and I spent Shabbat as we often do at the Reform congregation *Kehillat Mevasseret Tzion* in the outskirts of Jerusalem. My friend Maya Leibovitch is the Rabbi there, and they have built a beautiful shul nestled in those Judean hills. We arrived early, and I looked around the empty sanctuary – how it had grown since the last time I was there! And then I saw something that caught my eye. In a middle row... about four rows back... halfway in from aisle... there was something taped to the seat. I looked closer: It was a rose, and a note. The note said: **מחכים לך, גלעד** : “We are waiting for you, Gilad.”

---

<sup>3</sup>. Jonathan Sarna, “Reinventing American Judaism,” *Reform Judaism*, Fall 2009.

Gilad Shalit is not from Mevasseret, and as far as I know has never stepped foot in their building.<sup>4</sup> Yet there is a seat empty, waiting for him, every Shabbat, and I'm sure, tonight as well. And this scene, metaphorically at least, is happening all over Israel.

When the Talmud says *כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה*<sup>5</sup> -- "All Israel is responsible for one another" -- this, too is what it means. While Gilad Shalit is in captivity -- because he is a Jew who was serving his country -- we have a shared responsibility to wait for him as well. At Shir Tikva, we have been praying for Gilad's safe return at every Shabbat service for a long time now.

"All Israel is responsible for one another." That is a vow that we have made as a people. On this night of Kol Nidrei -- this night of taking stock of the vows we have made -- I wonder to what degree we are keeping our word.

For some time now, prominent studies have noted the declining attachment to the State of Israel by American Jews, especially among young people.<sup>6</sup> In these studies, fewer and fewer Jews say that "I feel very connected to Israel." Fewer and fewer of us consider caring about Israel to be an important part of Jewish living. And fewer and fewer -- especially young people -- respond affirmatively to the statement, "The destruction of Israel would be a personal tragedy for me."

For many, this has been a source of great worry. Of course, there are many explanations for this trend. Some are obvious: the distance, as the years roll on, from the Shoah and from the victories of the Six Day War, both of which were huge catalysts for generating emotional attachment to Israel. There is the lasting impact of two Intifadas, which prompts some people to say, "You're letting your children go to Israel? I heard it's so dangerous over there." (It's not.) Additionally, there is the constant drumbeat of propaganda, especially on college campuses, of how Israel is this perpetual source of aggression and evil in the world. That is hard to hear over, and over, and over again, and some of us have begun to internalize it. And finally, detachment from Israel is a symptom of assimilation: the more that American Jews are accepted into every aspect of American society, the less many of us think we need a Jewish homeland ten thousand miles away. All these make an impact on our collective psyche. It leads to Israel fatigue.

But I think there's something even more crucial at play in American Jewish attitudes. And that is the declining willingness to recognize that we are part of a *people*, this people called *am yisrael*.

You know, one way in which American society urges us to assimilate our identities is by urging us to consider Judaism to be... a religion. I know Judaism is a religion, but I would argue that "religion" is just a small part of what "Jewishness" is all about. Consider, for a moment, what being Jewish means to you. I'm willing to bet that stuff that we put in the category of "religion" is only part of all the different things that being Jewish means to the people in this room.

And that's as it should be: When you scan the vast corpus of Jewish literature, you never find the term *dat yisrael*, or "religion of Israel." But over and over and over again, the Torah and all the subsequent literature speak of *am yisrael*: the People of Israel. What is it that connects us to one another and to Jews in Russia and China and Egypt and South Africa and Germany and

---

<sup>4</sup> He's from Nahariyya, in the northeasternmost corner of Israel.

<sup>5</sup> Talmud, *Shevuot* 39a

<sup>6</sup> Steven M. Cohen & Ari Kelman, *Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel*, The Jewish Identity Project of Reboot, Andrea & Charles Bronfman Philanthropies; the entire report is at <http://www.acbp.net/About/PDF/Beyond%20Distancing.pdf>

Australia and Tel Aviv on this Yom Kippur? Is it that we all share the same faith, the same beliefs, the same rituals? Hardly! We might all recite the Shema around the world – but my presumption is: if there are 50 people reciting the Shema together, there are probably 50 different interpretations about what it means! We are justly famous for being suspicious of dogma and credos. We question, we argue, we disagree – those are the Jewish religious hallmarks.

So what binds us together? Is it not that we have a common fate and destiny, that in our diversity and our differences and our disputes we are part of the same ship?

The day of Yom Kippur has begun. It is a day devoted to the principle of *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, of sorting through the inventory of our lives: our hopes, our fears, our relationships, our successes and our failures. Part of this day should be devoted to broader themes: to a national *cheshbon nefesh*. As a people, what are our hopes, our fears, our relationships, our successes and our failures? And we should each ask ourselves: How will we move the people of Israel closer to our ideals in coming year? And for which sins should our people repent?

The Kol Nidrei prayer, which was chanted so beautifully a little while ago, urges us to carefully consider the vows that we have made this year. Among those vows we should ask: What commitments have we promised by being part of *am yisrael*? And to what degree have we lived up to those vows this past year?

With that idea in mind, I want to remind every student and every parent in this room of our recurring commitment: To send every child in our community to Israel before graduating high school, for a minimum of a summer or more.

In fact, maybe you'll take up our Temple's challenge one step beyond. Maybe you'll apply for the Temple Shir Tikva Study-in-Israel Youth Scholarship, which has been made possible by some very generous and devoted members of our community. This scholarship is designed for the student who wants to spend a high school semester in Israel -- for instance, on the Reform movement's Eisendrath International Exchange, -- or a 'gap year' in between high school and college – for instance, on the Hadassah/Young Judea Year Course program.

Truly, I believe that long-term study in Israel is the **third best way** to invest in and cement the identity of a Jewish young person. As for the other two ways? They should be obvious: They are: a commitment to a vigorous Jewish education that continues far beyond bar/bat mitzvah, and a Jewish home where Shabbat and holidays are celebrated with joy and gratitude.

And what is true for our young people is true for our adult community of all ages as well. I ask you, during your reflective time on this Yom Kippur, to consider again the role that Israel plays in your life, and to consider again how all of *am yisrael* is responsible for one another.

You know, none of us drew seashells from the ocean in order to get here today. Our spiritual journeys to this sanctuary on this Yom Kippur are many and variegated. Some of us have chosen this path. Some of us were born into it. Some of us, by virtue of the people whom we fell in love with, have decided to cast our lot with the Jewish people.

But all of us are here together now, as part of this corporate entity called *am yisrael*. And in a different way, two shells are being drawn on this Yom Kippur. The first shell has each person's name on it. In that way, G-d calls upon every single person on this day. The other shell has a number, an allotment, a responsibility to be filled. Where is your responsibility to this people today? What vows have been made that have only partially been fulfilled?

Tonight, and tomorrow, we affirm the vows that we made once, long ago. And on this Yom Kippur, I hope more of us can say with pride the extraordinary blessing that is found in our morning prayers:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שְׁעָשִׂי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Blessed are You, Ad-nai our G-d, who has made me part of this people of Israel.<sup>7</sup>

Amen.

---

<sup>7</sup> From the morning liturgy.