

Land That I Love
Rosh Hashanah Morning
September 16, 2004

A story: two Jews are walking through a notoriously anti-Semitic neighborhood in Vienna, just after World War Two. They suddenly realize they are being followed by two thugs. One of the Jews turns to the other: “We’d better make a run for it. There are two of them, and we’re all alone.”

A colleague of mine reports receiving the following compliment: “Dear Rabbi, what a wonderful sermon that was! I hope my son got the point.” Or: “Rabbi, do you think my mother-in-law knew you were talking about her!” Friends: I can only hope, I can only pray, in the words I say – this one’s for you. This one is for us all.

Last night we heard Rabbi Serotta speak about 350 years of Judaism in America. What a journey it has been.

But while there may be nearly four centuries of Jewish history in this land, not all of our American roots go back that far. Where were “the rest of us?” As the colonists were fighting the British, my family was on the move, seeking shelter still in the Old World. As the earliest white Americans were meeting the natives, many of our immediate ancestors were being chased by Cossacks. The atrocities out west, the suffering of

the slaves: there is sadness, yes. But why should *I* have to look inside? My family, “my” Jewish forebears, well, *they* didn’t do it. *We* weren’t here.

But, we were. Because we know that the moment we declare ourselves “Americans” it is not just “history,” but “our” story. And so: we were here with the Pilgrims. We were there on the Prairie. We slaughtered the buffalo. We shook the streams for gold. And we... we broke our word, to those who were the longest on the land.

Several years ago I had the honor of delivering an invocation at a ceremony for the naturalization of new American citizens. It was an emotional courthouse room, a kaleidoscope of humanity, Cambodian Buddhists, Pakistani Muslims, Russian Jews. After the ceremony, a man grabbed my hand. “I am Abdul,” he said. “I am a Muslim. You are a Jew. There we fight. Here we can be friends.”

Here we can be friends. Yes, the story of America is my story. As I stood with so many new Americans, I knew it would be theirs, as well. We own the story we tell as ours. With Walter Cronkite: “you are there.”

But that is only part of the picture. For what is true of our American identity... is true of our Jewish lives as well. We come together from different places. Yet the moment we say we are Jews, we weave ourselves into the fabric of a collective past and a connected present. And we are bound together, still, in a story “whose shining conclusion is yet to unfold,” a common future, a communal destiny, a shared fate.

A Jew-by-choice in the Middle Ages wrote to the great scholar Maimonides, with a question. “Rabbi: You know that part in the Amidah? Where it says: the god of *our* ancestors? *Eloheinu, v’elohei avoteinu*. Of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? So, listen. I’m a new Jew. They *weren’t* my ancestors. What am I supposed to say?”

The Rambam did not hesitate for a moment. “Say the words,” he wrote back. “Pray the prayer. They *are* your ancestors.” For yesterday, Maimonides implied, you were not a part of us. But today... today, you always have been.

A visiting American teen asks an Ethiopian immigrant to Israel: “You have your own whole experience of Judaism, and it’s so *different*. How do you relate to the Holocaust, as an Ethiopian Jew?”

“I don’t understand your question,” came the reply. “I live in the midst of my people. It is a part of my history.”

My friends, this morning of Rosh Hashanah I want to speak about a critical theme in our common tale. It is a bond that goes back to the very beginning of Judaism, the hope of our forebears, a dream beyond their grasp -- incredibly, now, a reality available just over the horizon of today. “*Im tirzu, ein zo aggadah*. If you will it, it is not a dream.” Ever since there has been a Jewish journey, there has been a destination. I want to speak with you today about

a land that I love. I want to speak with you about that faraway place alluded to by a new American citizen as “there, we fight.”

I open with a confession. Sad, but true: some of my best friends have never been to Israel. More: some of the most active members of the congregations I have served, some of the most dedicated Jews I have known, some of the leaders of our people...have never been to Israel.

But this is not just a sermon about someone else. I, too, have fallen short. Until my return with members of this community this past summer... it had been 12 years since my last visit.

My friends, we have been like an adult child who never asked to see where her parents came from. Who never wanted to meet his extended family. Who never wondered where we were going.

Worse. In these recent years of struggle and strife, we have been like the cousin who did not come when a family was in crisis. The absent sibling. The too-distant relation.

Speaking about Israel is not that easy. It's like trying to recapture a moment and realizing that: well, you had to be there. Those who have been, get it. To those who have not, it's just so many words. A post card. A place like any other. Having a good time. Wish you were here.

[It is also hard for me to speak about Israel for another reason. As our bus traveled across the land this summer, I found that I could not shut my eyes. I wanted to take in every tree, every hill, every village.

There in the green of Galilee, there in the desert night, there in the twinkling lights playing across the ancient stone walls all the memories came back, the discussions, the pull of family verses the hand of history, the spindle from which spun my own thread in the story of our people. For me, this was a road not taken, the decision I made *not* to remain after my junior year of college, and make *aliyah* to Israel. I am not sure a week goes by in which I do not think about that decision. Not with regret, exactly. But with nostalgia, of sorts, for a player on the stage of Jewish life that never came to be. But one door closes. And a window opens.]

So it's hard to speak about Israel. It is an emotional minefield of nuance and complexity, subjective impressions, infinite controversy. But speak about it we must. For remember, when the time comes to tell our tale, to write our story: if *all* of Jewish history had to fit on a single page, all four thousand years of wandering from the time Abraham set out on a journey whose end he could not know, all of it written out in a single short e-mail, then the past century alone, indeed, events in the living memory of many of you here today, would merit two full paragraphs: the smokestacks of Europe, and rebirth on the distant shore of a Mediterranean sea. In the awesome span of four millennia, we ourselves are witness to the great and the terrible, the best and the worst of that story called Judaism. No wonder the time is full of tumult. The ink on the last paragraph of our story is not yet dry. And we: we fight over who holds the pen to write the next page.

All we know about that next page in our story is where part of it will take place. For this year, or maybe it was last year, Tel Aviv replaced New York as the world's largest Jewish city. Israel is soon to pass the United States as the world's largest Jewish community. Israel is the crucible, and the crucial focal point of much of the Jewish future.

Images: lunch with a liberal Christian colleague, in which she tells me that her church had a trip to the Holy Land all planned, all ready to go, Israel and Egypt and Jordan, but they called it off. Fear? No, in protest, of Sharon's policies.

In protest of Sharon's policies? Fine. Disagree. So do I, with many of them. But, then: Mubarak? Abdullah? Paradigms of democracy? Guardians of human rights? Come on. Fox isn't the only place having a hard time being "fair and balanced." This from a liberal colleague! With friends like these! And this was *before* the Presbyterian Church USA helpfully called for divestiture from Israel. Invoking images of "apartheid." Where was their stand against suicide bombers? Who cries, for Jewish blood? Debate amongst ourselves we may, but make no mistake about it. On campuses and in companies, in churches and in circles of culture: the anti-Semitism of today is made palatable and passed off as being "merely" anti-Israel.

We bring some of the problem upon ourselves, with our generally laudable penchant for internal squabbling. David Horowitz, editor of the

excellent *Jerusalem Report*, writes in his new book *Still Life with Bombers* that in all international forums, whenever more than one Israeli and Palestinian were on panels, the soft-spoken, polite Palestinians had a clear, consistent message. And the Israelis simply shouted at each other. Each one loudly trying to figure out the right thing to do.

But there, in the groves, in the midst of the fields, just beyond Ben Gurion airport, a sign by the road, an existential truth. “*Ein lanu erez acheret*. We have no other land.”

Amos Oz, the Israeli novelist, writes of his father’s observation that before the Holocaust, European graffiti read: “Jews to Palestine.” And today? Today in Europe and beyond the placards proclaim: “Jews out of Palestine.” The message to Jews, Oz says, is “do not be there, and do not be here.” And it adds up to: “do not be.” And so whatever your politics: *ein lanu erez acheret*. We have no other land.

What, then, to do? Images: two speakers at our Jerusalem hotel, on the same night two months ago. Both Reform rabbis. Both liberals. Both American-born Israelis. The first to speak with us, Rabbi Hank Skirball, told us that the *purpose* of humiliating an entire population is that the Palestinians must learn that the violence they launched will bring no benefits to them. There can be *no* reward for terror.

Then came Rabbi Arik Ascherman. My friend, my classmate, the executive director of Rabbis for Human Rights, an organization of which

our own Rabbi Serotta is the North American co-chair. Rabbi Ascherman described seeing a Palestinian boy detained and beaten. He approached the soldiers to protest. The next day the boy told the story: “The soldiers beat me,” he said. “And then a tall Israeli Jew with a beard and a kippah came over, and tried to get them to stop.” And that story, too, Rabbi Ascherman said, that narrative – will need to be part of what the Palestinians tell about us, if ever there will be an end to this madness.

[Ends, and means. Humiliation as a tool against an evil that is worse? Or humanity, in the face of fear and frustration and oppression? And who is to say, on a given day, that any one of us might not go... either way? And do good fences *really* make good neighbors?]

I am not a politician. I’m just a Jew and a Zionist, in pain for my people, praying for peace, determined to survive. About *hamatzav*, “the situation,” I would say this: that those who cannot distinguish between the deliberate targeting of innocent civilians and the accidental tragedy of civilian loss are morally blind, political cowards, and no friends of the Jewish people. But those who will not stand up against the excesses of our own use of force, who will not still try to hold up a light even at a time of darkness are morally callous, blinded by our own pain, and unable to see the image of God in every human being. They have forgotten that our goal, in the end, is not survival alone, but a life of meaning, and value, and purpose.

Life and death decisions lay just around the corner, just on the other side of a village we pass, just on the edge of awareness. And yet against a backdrop of insanity, incredible peace. For the story of Israel is not only the political, the military, the security situation. Indeed, in our own bus, in our well-thought out travel routes, we felt... well, safer than in many American cities. Really. You just can't "get" that from CNN. You have to be there. There, where the stones are saturated with the centuries, every ordinary act fraught with weight and meaning. Heavy with history, and light with joy; it is a spiritual odyssey, a true pilgrimage. I can't promise that a trip to Israel is totally safe. But I can insist, on my own experience, that it is imperative for Jews and Jewish families. Even for interfaith families, although with interesting nuances that this will bring up. Indeed, I believe it is essentially impossible to really understand *either* our Jewish heritage or Jewish destiny without Israel.

How, then, to live with the Jewish state in our lives? We can do so by knowing more about what is going on, by seeing ourselves as part of a story unfolding on many fronts, and by getting ourselves there, for the first time, or for a return trip.

First, knowledge, and information. Now, I don't expect all of us to set our Web Browsers to the English language version of the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* as our home page – although many Israel-engaged American Jews do just that, and it's about the best perspective we could get on an ongoing basis. The *International Jerusalem Post* may be a bit

right wing, but we can subscribe to Horowitz' *Jerusalem Report*. And we can pay attention to what our own synagogue and Religious School and Jewish community offer in the coming months, expanded ways to connect with and learn about the Jewish state.

Some of what we read will make us smile. Some of what we see will make us cry. And some of us may have strong misgivings about a lot of what Israel does.

But we have to know the context as well as the content. We *should* debate Israel's policies, and we should call Israel's leaders to account for their shortcomings. But that's like -- graduate-level Israel involvement. Too many people get too critical *too early*. Yes, there's a lot to criticize, and yes, I really do believe that the organized American Jewish community often seeks to stifle real debate, suppress hard questions, and silence all critics. Columnist Gershom Gorenberg, in his recent defense of our Reform movement, writes that the *macher*-ocracy in this country "defines 'pro-Israel' as ratifying the current Israeli government's position, [accepting] dissent from the right, but does not suffer the possibility of loyal opposition from the left." But friends, *even so*, even if all of that is true, still in terms of ties to Israel – *we have to cement, before we dissent*. We have to know what we're talking about. And right now, too many of us... don't.

Second, we need to see ourselves as part of the picture. We need to remember that we are all ambassadors. We may not live on the very front lines. But we are, willingly or not, every one of us, part of an ongoing struggle for longevity and legitimacy in which Israel and Jews and Judaism are all combined and inseparable. Without a moment's notice, at work, amongst friends, in social settings, we may find ourselves face to face with an encounter that counts, which can teach or tear down, build bridges or fan flames.

The recent issue of *Reform Judaism* featured articles about encounters with anti-Semitism. The bottom line is clear: *how any one of us* handles ourselves affects the image that others have *of all of us*. We are not talking just about individual dignity and pride here. We are also talking about effectiveness. For that, we need character, a strong sense of identity... and enough grounding to turn the tides of ignorance. We can be bearers of light. But we need both faith and facts.

We are part of the story. We can affect the perception of Israel. And what Israel does affects people's perceptions of us.

A story, from far away. It is 1967. Israel has just stunned the world by winning the Six Day War. And, of all places, in the middle of Moscow, on the streets of the city, ordinary Russians, no philo-semites by any evaluation of their previous behavior, went up to Jews they knew, slapped them on the back and said: "hey, you guys did a great job."

What we do and say can affect the perception of Israel. And, still, to this day, and even here, even in this country, even in this community: what Israel does affects us.

We do not know when the moment will come. But we are all ambassadors.

Third, to go. We must go to Israel.

This year, this moment – right now – our synagogue joins together with others from every stream of American Jewry with an effort called *Go Israel*. The letter I received from the Central Conference of American Rabbis began as follows: “Last year, a miracle happened. A simple card helped jumpstart the Israeli economy, create an unprecedented moment of Jewish unity, and send tens of thousands of individuals on the vacation of a lifetime.”

At this time I am asking the ushers to distribute copies of this very card. “Israel. I Care. And I’m Coning.” All it does is ask you to indicate your intention to visit Israel in the coming year – or, as you will hear in a moment, in the coming two years. You can then return these cards either to me, or to the Israeli Ministry of Tourism.

Now, you can put any date on these cards that works for you. But I have a suggestion for us all, and a hope for Temple Shalom.

This past summer I re-learned how powerful and important a synagogue trip to Israel can be. I am deeply grateful to Temple member

Marilyn Goldfarb, who organized the trip, and Arie Mizrachi, the most wonderful guide I have ever met. [Welcome Micky Levi?] And now I know that we need to do this again.

But I also know how hard it can be to plan. There's no magic wand I can wave to make it less expensive. So what I thought was: we'll announce a date now, not for next summer, but for two years from now. A flyer is available now, with the details of our next Temple Shalom trip to Israel, July 16-30, 2006. We want to create a family-based, all ages, first-timer and returnee tour to Israel, preceded, even, by an introduction to Israel seminar in the fall of next year, and a quick course on Conversational Hebrew, so that, next time we go, we will be better grounded, and better prepared, than ever before. And with this much notice I hope it's easier for more of us to plan, and to more of us to come.

A Jewish community committed to the Jewish state helps people get to Israel. I am fairly sure that, as a medium size synagogue, we are not yet able to do an Israel-101 type congregational trip every single year. But I wonder: if we try to do an introductory tour every *other* year, perhaps, on the "off" year, we can arrange smaller, shorter, more focused mid-year missions: "The Political Situation," or "The Neighborhoods of Jerusalem." Or whatever a smaller group of congregants might want.

The details will take shape over time. What I know is this: Israel matters. It needs us. And we, in ways we may not yet know, need Israel.

The story of Israel is our story. And it is not only about what we built, and who we were. It is just as much about who we are, today.

Words of the poet Yehuda Amichai:

Once, I was sitting on the steps near the gate at David's Citadel and I put down my heavy baskets beside me. A group of tourists stood there, around their guide, and I became their point of reference. "You see that man over there with the baskets? A little to the right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. A little to the right of his head." "But he's moving, he's moving."

I said to myself: Redemption will come only when they are told: "Do you see that arch over there from the Roman period? It doesn't matter, but near it, a little to the left and then down a bit, there's a man who has just bought fruit and vegetables for his family."

Somewhere, over there, a distant cousin is going on with daily life. There is an ancient stone above him. And we also know... that there are thugs around him. All we may see, at first glance, is a point of reference in our own identity. But friends: it is also up to us to show our cousin...that he is not alone.

L'shanah Tovah.