

What Color is your Israel?

Rabbi Esther Adler, Erev Rosh Hashannah, 5776

At my synagogue in the late 60s and early 70s, the most popular Zionist song they taught us kids was *Kachol V'lavan* - "Blue and White."

Kachol v'lavan, Zeh tzeva sheli;

Kachol v'lavan, Tzivey admati.

Blue and white - These are my colors,

The colors of my land.

Blue and white -Like a song, like a dream,

Like the sky and the snow.

Blue and white - forever my home.

Blue and white - My hope for shalom.

One of the reasons they taught it to us was that it is in very easy Hebrew. But more importantly, it is a song of commitment to hope written in the USSR by a Soviet Jew¹ who knew only very basic Hebrew, but whose love and longing for the land of Israel was pure and deep. His dream was to escape the oppression of his native land for the freedom of his homeland.

Recently I saw a YouTube video of a new song about the colors of Israel. This one is called *Tzeva Adom*. Code Red. It was written in 2008 by a teacher in S'derot to calm her students' anxiety as they took cover from the rockets coming daily from Gaza. *Tzeva Adom* - Code Red Code Red -is the way Israel announces a rocket attack situation in which residents have 15 seconds to take cover.²

Tzeva Adom. Tzeva Adom.

Code Red. Code Red.

Hurry, hurry, hurry, to a sheltered place.

Hurry, Hurry, hurry because now it is not safe.

My heart is beating, boom, ba ba boom, boom, boom

My body is shaking, doom, da da, doom, doom, doom

¹ Israel Rashal

² Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoB1AjVCueU>

Article: <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/125183#.Ve3i2xHBzGc>

But I'll overcome it all,
And I'll soon be standing tall.
It comes down – Boom!
And we go back to our room.
Stretch out now like a giraffe.
Breathe in deep- let it out.
Breathe in deep, now we can laugh.³

The song has movements to fully engage the students' minds and bodies. I encourage you watch the video on YouTube. It is very moving, not to mention completely adorable. To watch the video go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoB1AjVCueU>

Kachol V'lavan and *Tzeva Adom* are both songs of resistance and resilience. Both reflect the will to remain strong and keep afloat against terrible odds, to resist the undertow that pulls towards despair.

Jewish resilience is a distinct kind of resilience - it finds its source in time. When the Jewish People is faced with adversity, our greatest evidence that we can endure it is the past and our greatest motivator to endure is the future. We can carry on because generations before us have proven that we can; we must carry on because future generations depend on it.⁴

This is a season for *Vidduy* -confession - and I have to confess that recently I was beginning to be pulled into the undertow towards despair as the news from Israel went from bad to worse. Last summer children sang *Tzeva Adom* as rockets from Gaza were threatening Israel's physical survival. This summer the battle was for her soul.⁵

In June, the Ultra-Orthodox Mayor of Rehovot cancelled a Bar Mitzvah for autistic boys because it was to be held in a Conservative synagogue, and Jewish extremists set fire to a Galilee Church. In July, a woman was arrested for carrying a Torah to the Western Wall, and Israel's Minister of Religion questioned whether Reform Jews are Jews at all. August brought terrorism with the heinous killings at Israel's Pride Parade and in the West Bank village of Duma - only this time the terrorists were Jews.

More and more, between the moral repercussions of the situation in the West Bank and Gaza, and the disproportionate control of the Ultra-Orthodox in Israeli government, the question

³ Rhyming translation is mine. The literal translation can be found on the video.

⁴ Rabbi Yael Splansky, <http://www.holyblossom.org/2015/01/on-jewish-resilience/>

⁵ Rabbi Yael Splansky, <http://www.holyblossom.org/2015/08/israel-what-can-we-do/>

appears to be not whether Israel will survive in the Middle East, but whether democracy will survive in Israel.

Against the backdrop of the political morass of relations with the US, concerns over a nuclear Iran, and Israel's negative image in the International community, all this leaves me feeling more "Tzeva Adom" than "Kachol V'Lavan." I love Israel; I am bound to her, and yet the land I love is beginning to feel hard to love.

Yossi Klein HaLevi, an American born Israeli journalist writes: "My generation fell in love with an Israel that we didn't understand. We had some idealized image of Israel in its early years, but [really] Labor Israel of the 50s and 60s was much less democratic and pluralistic than Israel of today... My fear is therefore that American Jews are falling out of love with an Israel that they don't understand."⁶

It has been said that when American Jews do not see our own values reflected in Israel we distance ourselves. Perhaps this is a defense mechanism – the lesser evil in a choice between distance and despair. But neither is a good choice. The Diaspora Jewish community needs Israel, and she needs us. The Talmud teaches: *Kol Yisrael Arevim zeh bazeh* - All Jews are guarantors for one another.⁷

Halevi elaborates: "We have two extraordinary communities [that would have seemed miraculous a hundred years ago]. We have in Israel a sovereign Jewish state... And in the United States, we have the most accepted Diaspora community in Jewish history... Each has developed a different kind of Jewish life that the other desperately needs."⁸ Only by acting as mutual guarantors can we rise to meet the immense challenges before us.

Instead of despairing or distancing, we need to draw on our resources of Jewish resilience, and lean in.⁹ The resilience which connects us with our past and our future can enable us to stay engaged, to stand strong with a changing Israel.

In one of the key moments of the High Holy Day liturgy we say: *Uteshuvah Utefillah Utzedakka ma'avirin et roah hagezera*. Repentance, Prayer, and Charity, avert the harsh decree. This prayer offers a pathway to avoid despair and stay engaged. I am going to interpret these three

⁶ Yossi Klein Halevi, "Israeli and American Jewry: Are We Going to Miss Each Other Again?" Eretz Acheret, Summer 2015, pp. 12-13

⁷ Shevuot 39a

⁸ Halevi, op. cit. p. 13

⁹ Rabbi Yael Splansky, <http://www.holyblossom.org/2015/08/israel-what-can-we-do/>

Hebrew concepts a little more broadly, along the lines of the *Mussar* tradition of cultivating certain desirable character traits.

First *Teshuvah*: Literally, the word has to do with turning, changing our focus, facing towards our best selves. Resilience in any situation requires a positive outlook – turning our gaze toward the sparks of good, however small or hidden, to nurture them, and fan them into flames of hope.

Looking at Israel, there are many things to celebrate. Google “Israel's Achievements” and you will discover that she far outranks any other country per capita in university degrees, scientific papers, patents, and startup companies, especially among women and people over 55. Israel is the only country in the world that entered the 21st century with a net gain in its number of trees.¹⁰ Israel has a proud history of sending medical and humanitarian aid to disaster areas, from Oklahoma to Haiti to Myanmar to Nepal.¹¹ Her doctors are treating injured Palestinians and Syrian Refugees in her hospitals.¹² So this Rosh Hashanah I am making an effort to celebrate all the good that comes out of Israel.

Second – *Tefilah*, prayer, or more broadly considered, faith. Resilience demands that one have faith that things will get better. It is related to *Teshuva*, in that it takes faith to seek out the good in a bad situation. In the beginning of Deuteronomy, we are told “God subjected you to the hardship of hunger and then gave you manna to eat, *which neither you nor your ancestors had ever known.*”¹³ In the hardest of times, the sustaining factors are often things we haven't known, that we hardly even recognize. Finding them requires a leap of faith.

That faith is supported by our past – we Jews are a persistent people. There is an old joke that every Jewish holiday can be described in under 10 words: “They tried to destroy us; we survived; let's eat.” Our people has always looked to the future with hope – *HaTikvah* – “As long as the Jewish spirit is yearning deep in the heart, Then our hope...will not be lost...To be a free people in our land.”¹⁴

¹⁰ <http://israelseen.com/2011/07/14/collection-of-israels-achievements/>
see also <http://verygoodnewsisrael.blogspot.com/>

¹¹ <http://israaid.co.il/>

¹² See, for example, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/3/18/some-syrian-woundedseektreatmentfromisraelihospitals.html>

<https://www.standwithus.com/news/article.asp?id=1671>

¹³ Deut. 8:3

¹⁴ <http://www.stateofisrael.com/anthem/>

As one Israeli observer puts it: “I am optimistic for several reasons. Israelis, including seculars like me...are well aware that Jewish values helped the Jewish people survive, and that those Jewish values have never been about [surviving] at any cost [or surviving] as an unjust people... who do the same things to other people that were done to us. That’s never been the way we feel about ourselves. Of course we have the right to protect ourselves, but equality and justice are [mandated by our history] and we have to believe in that.”¹⁵

Finally, *Tzedakkah*, translated as charity, but as you may know, more accurately means righteous action. The third *middah* (character trait) needed for resilience in a challenging situation is the will to act, to draw on whatever strength we have to do something, however small, to contribute to healing, repairing, or improving the situation.

What can I do to make a difference in a land close to my heart but halfway around the globe, and where I don’t even have a vote? What can I do, living so comfortably as a Reform Jew in America – the safest place in the world to be a Reform Jew at this time?

One thing the fortunate few of us can do is visit Israel, and I was blessed to be able to do that just last week, and I asked some Israelis what they wanted us to know. They consistently said that they want us to understand that the situation there is much more nuanced and complex than it often seems to us. That we need to stop thinking in the extremes of ‘Israel can do no wrong’ or ‘Israel can’t do anything right.’

Yossi Klein HaLevi says: “The left-right schism that dominated public opinion until the year 2000 no longer works. For Israelis who identify as centrists – and I think we’re the majority of the country – the ...schism is no longer between rival camps; it is the fault line that runs straight through each and every one of us.”¹⁶ On any given day an Israeli might wake up in the political center, eat lunch on the left, and go to bed on the right.

While it is true that we have no vote in Israel we do have a voice. And the people in Israel who are working tirelessly for the values we cherish need to hear that we support them. In a recent interview, Naomi Paiss of the New Israel Fund said, “There are people who think that [the choice between a Jewish state and a Democratic state] is inevitable. We disagree. Israel can be both the Jewish homeland and live up to the vision of the Declaration of Independence in which equality is to be conferred equally on all citizens. We have to invest in the right people in Israel because they’re there. That includes the Human Rights Community, the judiciary, the

¹⁵ Naomi Paiss, in “The Case for Optimism in Israel,” <http://www.vox.com/2015/4/14/8410089/israel-naomi-paiss>

¹⁶ Halevi, op. cit. p. 9.

media, [and] academia.”¹⁷ Paiss then calls on us: “We’re going to need some allies. This is going to require that American Jewish organizations step up to the plate... The institutions that underlie [the progressive movement] in Israel...need to be reinforced...”¹⁸

She is asking us to help in ways that I think all of us could agree upon: by supporting institutions that reflect our own values irrespective of our politics. There are the Israeli organizations of the Reform Movement in Israel, including the Hebrew Union College¹⁹, The Israel Religious Action Centre²⁰ and the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism²¹. Here at home you can join ARZA²² - the single largest supporter of the Israeli Reform Movement.

We can support the New Israel Fund²³, which supports organizations that advance democracy, civil & human rights; religious freedom; and social & economic justice. There is also the Israel Democracy Institute²⁴, an independent, nonpartisan "think and do tank."

Israel has always been more than just a place on a map. From the beginning, it has existed as a promise... the promise of a safe place where all Jews can thrive, and that preserves our people’s ideals of justice and human rights for all. Implicit in this promise is the threat that if it were ever broken, Israel would no longer truly be Israel. It would just be a place on a map.²⁵

Israel is far from perfect and is a work in progress. There are tens of thousands of Israelis who are working every day to fulfill the vision of Israel’s Declaration of Independence: a state that is both a Jewish homeland and a fair, open and equal society for all of its inhabitants. They are why despair is not an option. They may not be the face of Israel that the world sees in the media, but they are the face of a dream worth fighting for.²⁶

I began with the words of two songs of resilience, and will end with a third, Al Kol Eleh, by “First Lady of Israeli Song” Naomi Shemer. It is a prayer asking God to watch over the complexity that is Israel:

¹⁷ Paiss, op. cit.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ <http://huc.edu/admissions/israel-experience>

²⁰ <http://www.irac.org/>

²¹ <http://www.reform.org.il/Eng/Index.asp>

²² <http://www.arza.org/>

²³ <http://www.nif.org/>

²⁴ <http://en.idi.org.il/>

²⁵ <http://www.vox.com/2015/4/13/8390387/israel-dark-future>

²⁶ Daniel Sokatch, “Work in Progress,” *Eretz Acheret* p. 15

*Al kol eleh, al kol eleh,
Shmor nah li eyli hatov
Al hadvash ve'al ha'okets
Al hamar vehamatok.*

Every bee that brings the honey
Needs a sting to be complete,
And we all must learn to take
The bitter with the sweet.

Protect the houses that we live in,
The small fences and the wall,
From war and fear and sorrow;
Please protect them all.

Don't uproot what has been planted;
May our bounty yet increase;
Let our dearest wish be granted:
Bring us peace, God, bring us peace.

Guard what little I've been given;
Guard the hill my child might climb;
Let the fruit that's yet to ripen
Not be plucked before its time.

For the sake of all I love, God,
Let your mercy be complete;
Bless the sting and bless the honey;
Bless the bitter and the sweet.

For the sake of all these things, God,
Let your mercy be complete;
Bless the sting and bless the honey;
Bless the bitter and the sweet.²⁷

²⁷ Adapted by me from a translation by Theodore Bikel. <http://www.hebrewsongs.com/song-alkoleleh-bikel.htm> For a literal translation see <http://zemerl.com/cgi-bin/show.pl?title=Al+kol+eyle>

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