

## **We Stand with Israel; We Pray for Peace in the Middle East**

Kol Nidre, 5767 – Mount Zion, Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker – October 1, 2006

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The scene opens with Natalie Portman sobbing uncontrollably for eight full minutes. She is seated in the back of a taxicab parked by the Western Wall – the Wailing Wall – in Jerusalem. The camera lens focuses on her face, out of context, crying. These eight painful minutes begin Israeli director Amos Gitai's new film, the Free Zone.

Portman plays Rebecca, an American tourist. She refuses to leave the cab and ends up riding with her driver to the economic free zone in Jordan where her Israeli driver engages in business with a Palestinian, but the deal goes awry. The film progresses from here focusing on their relationships. All three characters are women. Rebecca, a daughter of an American non-Jewish mother and an Israeli father is the onlooker, struggling with her Jewish identity. From a distance, the situation among the three looks exotic, but once the lens comes in close there is great disagreement but also dependency among the characters, complexity and confusion mark their journey as they both embody and transcend the struggles of their people, the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis.

Gitai's films deal with contradictions within Israeli society, a view not often seen on this side of the Atlantic. Our media is much less nuanced and thus less true to life as it portrays issues more in black and white.

As we reflect on this most holy of nights on Israel and its relationship to our identity, which images have most shaped our views?

What pictures have formed in our minds of what happened there this past year, from the months after Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, through the stroke that incapacitated Ariel Sharon, the election of a new centrist party with PM Ehud Olmert, the surprise election of Hamas to lead the Palestinians and then the 34-day war against Hezbollah.

The image of Portman's character Rebecca's tear-stained face looking out at the Western Wall captures her struggle with identity.

Take a moment to recall three stills from your summer, three moments relating to Israel. What would the picture of your face look like? How would someone read your reactions and feelings upon:

1. First hearing about soldiers being kidnapped and rockets raining down upon Haifa across the north of Israel.
2. Seeing images and reports on the news about Israel's bombing in Lebanon
3. Weeks later, here at Mount Zion, seeing for the first time or reading about the sign on our lawn, "We Stand with Israel, We Pray for Peace in the Middle East."

As you imagine your initial reaction to each of these three moments, which ones were clear, singular emotions and which ones conveyed more complexity, a mixture of feelings, not so easy to sort out?

Do your self images reflect any change in the place of Israel in your identity?

In 1982, during the war in Lebanon, American social activist leader, Leonard Fein wrote:

There are two kinds of Jews in the world...

There is the kind of Jew who detests war and violence, who believes that fighting is not 'the Jewish way,' who willingly accepts that Jews have their own and higher standards of behavior. And not just that we have them, but that those standards are our lifeblood, and what we are about...

And there is the kind of Jew who thinks we have been passive long enough, who is convinced that it is time for us to strike back at our enemies, to reject once and for all the role of victim, who willingly accepts that Jews cannot afford to depend on favors, that we must be tough and strong....

And the trouble is, Fein continues, most of us are both kind of Jew.

Twenty-four years later, Fein wrote this past summer:<sup>1</sup>

Alas, I am no longer certain that "most of us are both kind of Jew." The years of conflict have taken their toll, and it seems clear that many Jews, both here and in Israel, have become the one kind of Jew who believes that "nice guys finish last," that force is the only language Israel's neighbors, including its Palestinian neighbors, understand.

I am perhaps more optimistic than Fein. I believe that there are still many who embrace both sides, who can firmly say, "We Stand with Israel," with the people of Israel, for the existence of a Jewish state and "We Pray for Peace in the Middle East," peace for all peoples in Gaza, West Bank, Lebanon and Iraq, life, dignity and self-determination for all peoples, freedom from fear for all.

Are there contradictions between the two statements on the sign, standing with Israel and praying for peace? I would argue no, but there is certainly a tension there that demands further discussion.

When Amos Gitai was recently awarded a "Freedom of Expression" award by the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, the Festival's Director Peter Stein said: "There is a sense that Jewish life throughout the world is under siege; Israel as a nation is under siege. But what is really remarkable about Jewish culture is the insistence on self-questioning....Gitai's interest from the outset has been to consistently ask those troubling questions and to do them in a way that is aesthetically interesting."<sup>2</sup>

This emphasis on self-questioning was inherent in our congregational trip to Israel this past summer, during the days just before war broke out. Our guide Mike Hollander stressed the point. As soon as anyone felt he or she was now understanding the conflict between Israel and its neighbors or coming up with some grand solution, he would smile

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<sup>1</sup> [The Forward 9/15/06],

<sup>2</sup> NPR, *All Things Considered*, 8/18/06

and say, “You’re not getting it yet.” The reality is much more complex than what meets the eye.

We were a group of over 40 people, an intergenerational group, with a span of 80 years from youngest to oldest. Our trip was marked primarily by pure fun, mud baths at the Dead Sea, sleeping in a Bedouin tent next to camels in the desert serenaded on the oud, tours of mystical synagogues of Safed, walking through the trickling waters of the headwaters of the Jordan, Shabbat in Jerusalem, wine tasting at the Israel museum and much more.

There were also the moments that felt poignant in retrospect:

-- riding a cable car in the North overlooking Lebanon, where our guide remarked how stable this border has been despite the katushas that would rarely, but randomly fly over into Israel the past six years;

-- sitting in a synagogue in Haifa, Or Chadash, with Rabbi Edgar Nof singing a prayer for peace and for the safe return of hostage Gilad Shalit who had been already taken into Gaza;

-- gathering in East Jerusalem in a bomb shelter of our hotel -- ironically the only room available -- to hear interfaith dialogue leaders in Israel, Sister Trudy Nabuurs and Rabbi Ron Kronish<sup>3</sup>, say that dialogue is a Western import to the Middle East and that no one talks about conflict resolution anymore between Israelis and Palestinians, only conflict management.

How do we manage our own views, our emotional connections, the teachings of tradition, the dizzying current events, and our values when the scene is becoming increasingly confusing and complicated?

We can and should question, we can and should respectfully listen to each other’s views on Israel and how it impacts one’s identity. Tomorrow during the afternoon break, we will thoughtfully engage in this open discussion. All are welcome.

Tonight, though, let me suggest some clarity. The clarity comes from stating firmly, we stand with Israel; we pray for peace in the Middle East.

### **We do stand with Israel**

*How can we not stand with Israel* when hearing this report from the United Jewish Communities: “The trauma of 30 days in bomb shelters – sometimes 12 or 14 or 16 hours a day, with dozens of other families with no entertainment for the kids and no respite for the parents. With only the continuous sound of sirens and rockets breaking through the several feet deep concrete walls that kept the air at a stifling 100 degree plus. Even 3 or 4 weeks later, young children are still clutching their parents’ hands for dear life. One social worker in Akko said that before the war 15% of their children were at risk, “today, they all are.”

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<sup>3</sup> Sister Trudy Nabuurs is director of the Ecce Homo Convent in the Old City and Rabbi Ron Kronish is Director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel.

*How can we not stand with Israel* when Israel is attacked by too many out of proportion to other countries: As Thomas Friedman noted: "Criticizing Israel is not anti-Semitic, and saying so is vile. But singling out Israel for opprobrium and international sanction out of all proportion to any other party in the Middle East is anti-Semitic." Listening to many blame Israel for its response to Hezbollah was like a street fighter complaining to the police, "It all started when this guy hit back."

*How can we not stand with Israel* when its very existence is being questioned. In an article entitled, "A World without Israel," foreign policy analyst Josef Joffe wrote "Long admired as a state of Jews who survived against all odds and made democracy and the desert bloom in a climate hostile to both liberty and greenery, today Israel has become the target of creeping deligitimization." He suggests that one form of denigration comes in the form of blaming Israel for all the ills of the Middle East and having corrupted US foreign policy. The second simply says that it is not how Israel acts that is the problem, it is its very existence which is no longer tenable.

*How can we not stand with Israel* when people like you and me who live their Judaism in the land of our ancestors have to send their sons and daughters after high school not to college or to take a break or to work, but to the army to defend their country. This summer, Israeli author David Grossman lost his teenage son, Uri. In his eulogy, he said: 'In the night between Saturday and Sunday, at 20 to three in the morning, our doorbell rang. The person said through the intercom that he was from the army, and I went down to open the door, and I thought to myself - that's it, life's over. But five hours later, when Michal and I went into Ruthie's room to wake her and tell her the terrible news, Ruthie, after first crying, said: 'But we will live, right? We will live and trek like before and I want to continue singing in a choir, and we will continue to laugh like always and I want to learn to play guitar.' And we hugged her and told her that we will live.'

## **We Pray for Peace in the Middle East**

We live, we say *l'chaim*, when our goal and hope is clear, when it is peace.

We pray for peace with our words and our hands, with our thoughts and our actions.

*We pray for peace when* our hearts are broken also for every Lebanese and Palestinian child and adult caught in the conflict. The loss of life is devastating even though we know that Israel uses every technology to spare innocent life, even calling people on their cell phones in Gaza and Lebanon warning them to leave certain buildings. The loss of life is devastating even when we can blame Hamas and Hezbollah for using civilians as shields for their heinous and cowardly acts. As Jews, we believe that the death of every human being diminishes God's presence, for each of us bears the stamp of God. We are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image. That is why we have no concept of "holy war" in Judaism. While there are permitted and even obligatory wars for self defense, the taking of life can never be holy. Israel would lay down its arms tomorrow if peace was assured.

*We pray for peace when* we can also criticize the Israeli army and politicians for decisions that seemed to endanger too many lives. We ought to do so though with caution for our understandings are often limited. There is no doubt that Israeli soldiers in battle have not always done the right thing, that Israel has been responsible for painful losses of life. But there are times when reports of devastation turn out to be false and

staged by terrorists. Several incidents that were headlines this summer which so affronted the world's and our conscience turned out to be false, not done by Israel, or exaggerated. We can be proud that, nevertheless, the day after all of these events, Israeli leaders publicly apologized, editorials in all the Israeli papers decried the deaths, soul-searching took place among many in Israel. No one celebrated.

*We pray for peace* when we say that there can still be hope, a chance that negotiations can again start, ways beyond violence in the Middle East. We can support Rice's upcoming visit and Bush's involvement in his remaining days in office to work for peace. We can watch for secret channels opening up with Saudi Arabia. We don't have to have all the answers, but know in our hearts that non-violence is better. Recent polls have shown that 67% of Israelis and 70% of Palestinians want negotiations immediately with each other including from the Israeli perspective with Hamas if necessary.<sup>4</sup> I personally have signed a letter published in the national Jewish paper The Forward with 300 other rabbis that states in part: "As we enter the season of *teshuva*, turning, we hope that hearts that have been closed by hate can turn to compassion, and that minds set on violence and destruction can be turned to the reconstruction of societies damaged by war. The great faith that change is possible is the central message of our *Yamim Noraim*, our Days of Awe. May we have no less faith that a new way is possible in the Middle East, that the vigorous, nonviolent pursuit of peace is not a naïve dream, but our only real hope.

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It isn't easy being Jewish, affirming values that can transform and perfect the rifts that trouble our broken world, yet being connected by choice or not to one of our era's most entrenched conflicts, the one between Israel and her neighbors. This however is a fact. We are connected to Israel. The only question is how we affirm it. Many are raised with a love for Israel, others discover it on a trip or through reading and prayer. If we think back to our reactions to the events of this summer, those photo stills of our feelings will be telling. For some, as Fein noted, hearts have hardened and the need for strong force is clear. For others, there is uneasiness about the need to resort to war.

As we discuss our positions and questions, I hope we all can stand with Israel and pray for peace.

Despite the complexities, we can be clear and proud of our identity. Regardless of growing pessimism in our world, we can even dare to be hopeful. We can, if we choose, be both kinds of Jews, holding to ideals of peace and standing with Israel's right to exist and to defend itself.

May every stone be turned in the pursuit of peace; may our hearts and minds deepen their connections to Israel. And then when we say, "Next year in Jerusalem" as we do at the end of Yom Kippur, may our tears only be tears of joy.

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<sup>4</sup> Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki found that more than 70% of Palestinians support immediate negotiations between Abbas and Olmert, and an Israeli poll conducted by researchers at Hebrew University