

## **Our Voice Responding to the *Teruah* of Israelis and Palestinians**

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I *Tishrei* 5782 – September 7, 2021

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Today is Yom Teruah. Rosh Hashanah, as a name, never appears in the Torah. It is called only a day of *teruah*.

So, what is *teruah*?

Our ancestors translated it into Aramaic as *yevavah*, crying. (Numbers 29:1) A day of wailing. And the consensus view in the Talmud is that this wailing emulates the feelings of a mother in the Torah. When we sound the shofar to this day, one of the three patterns is *teruah*. Nine staccato notes. Utter brokenness, connecting us to the pain of that mother. But which mother?

It could be Sarah standing radically alone and helpless by her tent in Hebron as Abraham binds Isaac upon the alter on Mount Moriah. It could be Channah in the haftarah in the book of Samuel, standing at the temple bereft as she longs to be a mother.

It could be Hagar, wife of Abraham but outcast of Sarah, banished because of jealousy.

It could be Rachel, as described by Jeremiah, weeping for the children of Israel, and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.

The Talmud says it is none of these women. When we hear the wailing, the brokenness of *teruah*, we should hear Sisera's mother crying over her son's death. This is both devastating and notable.

Sisera was a Canaanite general, an iron-age terrorist, enemy of Israel, whose army was defeated by the judge and prophetess Deborah as recounted in the book of Judges. He was seduced and killed by Yael.

On our holy new year, the wailing sound of the shofar calls us to radical empathy. Not to our own pain, but to the pain of our enemy. The Torah never doubts that Yael's actions were necessary, but the rabbinic tradition doesn't let us simply accept that truth. Every person is in the image of the divine. Every single person. And saying so preserves who we want to be in this world. Self-preservation, a defensive act, justifies Yael's actions, but justice demands our tearing our clothes and putting on sackcloth. Sisera's mother wails and we can feel her pain, and that sound wakes us up to our humanity.

In 2006, we put a sign on our lawn like every other synagogue at the time that read: "We stand with Israel" because of the lack of support for Israel as Hezbollah sent missiles into the heart of the country during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lebanon War. Unlike other synagogues, we added a second line that read: "We pray for peace in the Middle East" to suggest that our values condition that support for Israel. Some said: "We don't need that second statement," while others said: "We only need that second statement." Yet there was a sense that this sign represented our congregation.

I spoke on that Rosh Hashanah in 2006 about a little-known movie called *Free Zone* by director Amos Gitai. The movie opens with the actress Natalie Portman sitting in a taxicab crying. The film is a fraught journey of three women with the backdrop of attempted Israeli-Palestinian economic cooperation, a free-trade zone. But it begins with Portman crying for eight full minutes. Eight minutes of anguish about all the pain experienced by both the Palestinians and the Israelis.

That is a long *teruah*.

We have been wrestling with our relationship with Israel for a long time, ever since Jacob became *Yisrael*, the name which literally means wrestling.

The modern story has been miraculous and inspiring from one perspective, and from another challenging and soul-crushing. I have always spoken from this *bima* about nurturing an *ahavat Yisrael*, a love for the people, land, and country of Israel while developing the language to critique the nation-state government when needed. It has always been a precarious balance and, we know, not everyone has agreed.

But this year felt different. After May's crisis between Israel and Gaza, the *teruah* was being sounded louder than ever by many of our young adults – and not only by them.

At the end of May, Rachel and I went away for a few days of vacation with our son Eiden. It turned into a three-day conversation about Israel and Palestine. We each were reading books related to the topic and listened together to a new platform called Clubhouse, a brilliantly moderated, online space where one of the rooms included hundreds of Palestinians and Israelis who could call in during the height of the conflict and have an audience ready to listen, truly listen. All three of us were rethinking how we spoke about Israel. Eiden who, at age 11 after our first week of our family's sabbatical in Jerusalem, said that he felt as if he truly belonged in Israel, was now at age 24 conflicted about the origin of the state. It was no longer just about the Jewish settlements created since the '67 Six Day War. He also lamented that the narrative he heard from his synagogue, Jewish camp, and Jewish school glossed over many of the challenges of Israel's founding and didn't allow for real conversation, let alone disagreement. While he sometimes heard liberal values with sympathy for Palestinians, and even critique of Israel, he didn't feel there was enough action about ensuring that those values had real teeth in our relationship with Israel.<sup>1</sup>

There has been a lot of change even since Eiden grew up in the way we teach about Israel, but a larger point is more important even if it is hard to hear: Israel's miraculous birth story is not inspiring for some Jews because *it is not the full truth*. The deep emotion of pride of reclaiming our soil and soul against all odds after the trauma of our two millennia history of rootlessness isn't every Jew's first feeling. The first feeling for some is for the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza. It's what our universal values of justice demand, they say. The sounding of the shofar's

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon benefited from conversations with my family, especially Eiden and Rachel, and with Shai Avny who offered sage advice and edits. All responsibility for the words here is mine alone.

Some of the ideas about liberal Zionism and the needs of our time developed through listening to Rabbi Donniel Hartman, Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, and Dr. Micah Goodman at the Hartman Institute as well as from Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin. See especially this [article on Liberal Zionism](#) by Rabbi Hartman.

teruah is also a call to justice in the face of their tears. It is disillusioning, they say, to learn that our rootedness came at the expense of others. Add to that, in the last years, the progressive culture in the United States that sees everything through the lens of oppression and colonialism has become more effective with linking support for Palestinians and against Zionism. This critique, rooted in the horror of human suffering, is universal and even with antisemitism on the left, we should be able to cry out our own teruah for Palestinians and want to work for their self-determination.

We can, however, speak up for the uniqueness of the Jewish story over two millennia that defies easy definition, our own suffering, and the real dangers we face in this world, the insidiousness of antisemitism in progressive circles, and the reductiveness of linking all oppressed people into the same narrative.

While we were on vacation with Eiden, our other son Liam, a rising high school senior, was in Israel on a semester program of the Reform Movement. Along with 60 other teens including Max Schibel from Mount Zion, he was on Kibbutz Tzuba outside of Jerusalem and had to run to bomb shelters as Hamas rockets exploded overhead. Thank God he was ok, but many Israelis were not. I am not going to speak about all the ins and outs of that moment, the situation of Sheikh Jarrah, or of intra-Palestinian politics let alone Israeli politics, or the small number of right-wing Israel extremists instigating against Arabs, but I do want to say that most Israelis - all the people we are friends with along with the Israelis in our congregation – whose family stories of coming to Israel are heart-breaking and inspiring, feel betrayed by those who don't see the contradictions in giving a pass to Arab countries' historic use of the plight of Palestinians for their own benefit and their treatment of Jews in their own countries, Palestinian intransigence in peace efforts, the challenges of their lack of good leadership, and Iran's direct efforts to fund and supply Hezbollah and Hamas to literally wipe off Israel from the map if they could. At the end of the day, most Israelis and yes, most Palestinians, just want to live life in security and dignity.

When we came home to Mount Zion in the beginning of June from that vacation with Eiden, it was clear that it was time to address the sign in front of our building. What wasn't clear was whether the message should stay or be replaced, but we needed to talk. For fifteen years, we just didn't have a process for re-thinking the sign.

We invited the congregation to seven weeks of classes and conversations led by an organization out of California called "Resetting the Table" culminating with an input forum to share ideas about the sign. By time we got to that last session, all 80 participants had experienced our community's wide breadth of views. There was no consensus as expected. It was the value of the conversations, which many had not experienced before, that was the main outcome.

At the final session – since they were all by Zoom – I was able to participate while visiting my parents outside of DC. Once again, I had a multiple day conversation. Let's just say that my parents' views, forged in the 1950s, are not like Eiden's, and I am grateful for all their input and passionate perspectives. All of us in my family, and all in our congregation, are trying to figure out where we stand and, yes, some know exactly where they stand. Fortunately, even those with clarity can sometimes smile a little, have a little levity, thank God, even with the weight of the conversation and of this sermon.

A joke: Back in the 1950s, when it was harder to get news from Israel, a major leader from Israel was coming to the US. People at airport gather to welcome. When he comes off the plane, someone yells out: "What is the situation in Israel in one word?" Good. "Ok two words?" Not good.

Another one: Two Jews are walking in a dangerous neighborhood late at night. Suddenly, they hear footsteps behind them. One of them turns to survey the situation, and then says to his companion: "We had better get out of here quickly. There are two of them and we're alone."

Joking aside, this is actually part of the Jewish story that we must acknowledge: a generational trauma that affects our perspective. How could it not? And, at the same time it would be naïve to not speak of the real dangers that Jews face in the world to this day.

For those who came in person today to Mount Zion, you passed by two white posts on our outside lawn with nothing between them. That is where our Israel sign stood.

The Board voted to take it down temporarily while it deliberates and plans to decide this Fall whether to put the sign back up, have no sign permanently, have an alternate message about Israel and perhaps about Israelis and Palestinians, or have a sign about something else entirely such as, "Welcome to Mount Zion".

Raymond Carver wrote a short story fifty years ago called: "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." That title has helped many think about how we use our language. We Jews, as we think about what we talk about when we talk about Israel, unlike Carver's sparse prose, like to use lots of words. And we use our words to share our passionate views with others. We tend to speak people into camps and assume that we know everything we need to know based on their sign or bumper sticker. Ah, you're Pro-Israel, now I know everything I need to know. What, you're "Anti-Zionist", you must be a self-hating Jew.

These assumptions we make are a form of polarization which is a form of hate and, as we know, political polarization is destroying our country. It is, according to scholar Micah Goodman, as much a crisis today as climate change.

And if my oft said aphorism of not holding someone to the first thing they say is generally true, it is all the more so with a potentially polarized conversation. We should not hold anyone to the first thing they say about Israel and remember that we may mean different things when using the same words.

If someone first says that we need to support Israel, because who else will, or that they are pro-Israel, don't think you know everything about that person or their willingness to speak about supporting Palestinians as well.

If someone first says that it isn't right that Palestinians lost their homes just so Jews could have theirs or that they are anti-Zionist, don't think that is all they believe and that they don't love the Jewish people.

But here is the contradictory point and the point of this sermon. While we shouldn't hold someone to the first thing they say, we should pay attention to that first thing said. And we

should start with ourselves. Think about what you tend to say first about Israel and be curious where that comes from. What might you be leaving out that may also be true to you?

Some of us may need the wisdom of Hillel's first statement of his famous quotation: "If I am not for myself...who will be for me?" Standing for one's people is a Jewish value, a human value that is every bit as important as "When I am only for myself, what am I?" It is the value of self-preservation.

And let's be clear: Israel is not a hypothetical. This is not the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where we would go to the café to debate the merits of Zionism. Brandeis did not believe in a state; Ahad HaAm didn't believe in a state. Buber was against it being called a Jewish state. But that is all way behind us. There is a real country that exists that is under threat from its neighbors only miles away. Nearly half of our 15 million Jewish people live there. They are family. And whether we want it or not, Israel will continue to impact our lives as Jews in our communities and on school campuses. Israel is now inherently part of our Judaism.

Thankfully there are countless ways that Israel is a remarkable place, a light to the nations in science, health care, humanitarian rescue, innovation, and culture, with achievements and commitments far beyond its size and history. And of course, there are plenty of ways Israel falls far short. We who live outside of Israel do have a voice and while we cannot tell Israel what to do, we can tell Israel what we think, and we can impact American Jewish institutional support of Israel.

Israel has a Minister of Diaspora Affairs in the government. The current Minister is Nachman Shai who sent out this message last week to Jews outside of Israel:

[W]e in Israel are slowly but surely taking responsibility for our side of the relationship in a way that you have never seen. [W]e realize we have disappointed you and are doing *teshuvah*, repentance, with a sincere desire to make things right in the future... [This new government] is committed to learning and understanding how our actions impact your communities. [W]e believe in you, and we are ready for both your critique and your ideas. We need your justice-minded values to assure Israelis that moving toward two states for two peoples is the only solution, both for our security and our soul. We have room to be inspired by your models of pluralism and diversity, and of organized Jewish communal life within our own religious practice.

Times are changing.

Since my message is about our individual voices and paying attention to the first thing we say when we speak of Israel, if your first statement is not to support Israel, a question: as you hear the *teruah* of Sisera's mother, and feel the pain and indignity of Palestinians' lives, do you need to be more sensitive to the cries of your own people and internalize that fact that Hillel's first statement was: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

There are others in our community whose first reaction may be to defend Israel, and may need the wisdom of Hillel's second statement: "And when I am only for myself, what am I?" The Chofetz Chayim, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, who planned to move from Minsk to Petach Tikvah in Palestine in 1925 taught that when one puts on a tallit, one must wrap it tightly over the head and imagine that it is a keffiyeh to atone for what happened to Ishmael. That is radical empathy.

That is Judaism. That comes from an Orthodox Russian Jew who wanted to return to *eretz Yisrael*.

This is only one example of tens of thousands of gems like the midrash of Sisera's mother, reflecting universal values of justice and kindness that have been honed by our people in inspiring ways. The only challenge is that they were written during two millennia of statelessness, homelessness, and powerlessness. The question is what happens when we have a state, a home, and power. It is so much easier being a minority in another country. Oh, then we can be wholehearted and proclaim truth to power.

Being a Zionist, a supporter of Israel, is to accept the problematic situation of having power and thereby having what political theorist Michael Walzer calls dirty hands. States make decisions daily that are not values-based, but interest based, that result in death and injustice. Some may say that is simply reality and why shouldn't Jews be able to defend themselves and have a protected state like other peoples?

To those whose first statement is to support Israel, a question for your reflection: can you hear, really hear the *teruah* of Palestinian hardship? Can you feel that pain without saying, "but they never...?" Can you help hold Israel accountable to its own Declaration of Independence and the values of two millennia of Judaism it so beautifully espoused?

Judaism is of course about both/and, not either/or. Some progressives may need to reflect more on "*if I am not for myself*". Some staunch Israel supporters may need to reflect more on "*when I am only for myself*." All of us, wherever we place ourselves on the spectrum, must affirm both ethics and pay attention to the first thing we tend to say and work on saying a fuller truth.

I believe that a liberal Zionism is possible and can help us affirm the particular and the universal, our own survival needs, self-preservation, and our care for the other. Justice, justice you shall pursue. Justice for us and justice for others. We can hear the anguish of a Palestinian *teruah* without diminishing our own tears. Only a new liberal Zionism can do this.

And we cannot stop at tears. We need to stand up for our values against Israeli settlements that won't lead to two states that are necessary for, as Israel's minister said, Israel's "security and soul", and necessary for Palestinian dignity and self-determination. We can affirm this even as we decry in the strongest terms any terrorism.

It was a time of tears. The years following the 2<sup>nd</sup> intifada in the early 2000s. 9-year-old children, grandmothers, civilians of all ages blown up in pizza parlors, busses, and malls. The pain and fear was unbearable at times. Israelis would greet each other by saying *Ta'aseh Chayim*, literally "do life," make life. Always about life, and not giving in to worse impulses. And not only Israeli tears. Palestinian families destroyed in single missiles from Israel, as targeted as they were and as clear that Hamas was orchestrating what happened, it was entire families who were vanquished, daughters and grandmothers and sons and uncles. In 2009, I stood with Palestinians in front of their homes trying to prevent Israel from unjustly demolishing them. In the same trip, I sat with Ethiopian Jewish teens doing art therapy as they worked through the anguish of their school being ripped open by a rocket from Hamas. There was grief everywhere and a clear sense that the status quo would not hold.

Comfort was needed. Whenever I was in Israel for Shabbat, during Kabbalat Shabbat services, a melody of Psalm 121 was included before the Amidah after the prayer for protection, the *Hashkivenu*. That particular tune and those words belonged to secular and religious Israelis alike: “I turn my eyes to the mountains, from where will my help come?” And the assurance of the line “the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps ... Adonai will guard you from all harm; God will guard your life.” Not in a literal way necessarily. Hearing it sung was the comfort so many needed, to be able to handle a time of distress, of hearing the cries around us and the piercing *teruah* too often beyond the walls.

As you listen to *Shir l'Ma'alot*, a song for ascents, Psalm 121, even if the words or tune are unfamiliar, hear the wrestling in the face of the tears, the assurance of support from Above, and the reliance in our walking this path together.

For together we can hear the tears of Israelis and Palestinians and feel the heartache.

We can pay attention to what we say and be curious about what we are leaving out.

And as Hillel said, we can think both of ourselves and for others.

And if not now, when? May our hearts be softened to all pain, and we work for self-preservation and justice.