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“Israel or bust”

“Do I have to care about Israel?” a Jew asked me the other day. “I just don’t really, no more than I care about any other country anyway.” To some of us it may sound like treason. How do you be a Jew and not care about Israel? Doesn’t “caring about Israel” – however you define “caring” (and that may be the real source of the problem) – come with the territory of being a Jew? Isn’t it a prerequisite for calling yourself a Jew – whether you’re born a Jew or become one later?

Haven’t we all absorbed – consciously or unconsciously -- the teachings of our liturgy, of our tradition, of our Jewish literature and history – ancient and modern, that would make us all into lovers of Zion (*Chovevei Tzion*)? Don’t we all, somewhere deep inside us, and yet also very close to the surface – haven’t we all taken into our very being the words of the 12th century poet Judah HaLevi:

My heart is in the east, though I am in the far end of the west— Or the psalmist who determined the direction Jews face when we pray – toward Jerusalem, and gave a reason for the glass we break at weddings, our happiest times:

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem.
Im esh-ka-kheikh Y’rushalam

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem
Let my right hand forget
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
If I do not remember you;
If I do not keep Jerusalem in mind
Even at my happiest time. [Psalm 137]
Im lo ah-ah-leh et Y’rushalam
Al rosh simkha-ti

Haven’t we all taken into our very being our poets’ passion for Israel?

And here comes the dreaded answer – No, we haven’t.
A person *can* be a Jew—and not care about Israel, just as a person can be a Jew and not care about Judaism. Or not care about God—not even believe in God.

Some people think loving Israel is a bit like believing in God – loving God.
Some people believe in God – and never needed convincing; some don’t believe in God – and nothing could convince them. Is it possible to teach such a belief? To learn such a belief?

But I don’t think that’s how it works with Israel. I think a connection to Israel can be learned. In fact, I know many people who learned it – even some atheists! One reason people

don't learn it is because we're not invited in. Oh sure we're invited to travel to Israel on missions designed to raise money and awareness. We're invited to rally round Israel – to attend rallies of support, to send money when there is war, to send money when there is peace, to buy products made in Israel. We're asked to speak up in support of Israel, or to attend dinners or lectures in support of it. We're invited to stand up and be counted when numbers matter. Invited to pray for Israel. Invited to take our place as good Jews – unwavering support for Israel a given. But for the most part we're not invited to study all sides of an issue concerning Israel, we're not invited to probe or query or form our own opinions. About Israel, we're mostly not invited to do all the things Jewish tradition teaches us to do in our learning and in our daily lives, in our relationships with each other and with God – we're not invited *to ask questions or to argue*.

So tonight I want to talk about inviting Israel in – in to all our hearts. And it starts with inviting one another in — into the conversation about Israel – each one of us an equal, valid member of the conversation -- no matter our background and political views, confusions and ambivalences, pain and anger, alienation and fear, love and devotion.

It's strange to be a Jew in the U.S. in our life times. To be asked to accept – and largely to accept – a spoonfed view of Israel. Why do we accept? Perhaps because we lump Israel in with Jewish study in general—something we're ambivalent about at best. We praise Judaism, Jewish tradition, Jews in general for our willingness to question, to argue with God and each other -- 2 Jews, 3 opinions; 1 tradition 4 explanations of how it came to be a tradition – we love that stuff. We love that about our tradition, but we mostly don't take part in it. Even though many of us might engage our intellects those ways easily in our secular lives– and even credit our Jewish heritage with making us good at the work we do – still – ODDLY – so many of us decline the opportunities to really engage when it comes to Jewish study or to thinking about Israel.

I've talked about this with many of you. When it comes to Jewish study, so many born Jews opt to stop at age 13. No wonder so many adult education classes are filled with Jews by choice, who come to the learning with the enthusiasm and maturity of an adult and none of the childhood baggage. It's not easy, I know, for an adult born Jew to seek out Jewish study – we feel years behind, we feel inadequate, we think everyone else knows more than we do, we think we should already know this stuff. Someone new to Judaism – they have a good excuse for not knowing much, but what's our excuse if we did go to religious school as a child, if we did become bar or bat mitzvah, if we did take a trip to Israel as a teenager? Or even if we didn't, *what's* our excuse?

No one wants to feel inadequate – especially when we're used to feeling capable, knowledgeable, expert even, and especially when classes are voluntary?

The same seems true with the way many of us consider Israel – a bit childlike, a bit naïve, a bit wary and uncomfortable. We're not good at the language, but we think we ought to be. We haven't really studied anything about it since our youth group summer trip there, but we think we ought to have a sophisticated analysis.

But how can we have a sophisticated analysis when we can't find a place to talk about it without defensive responses: don't criticize what you don't know, what you don't understand, if you haven't lived there you can't know, if you're not a citizen of Israel you don't have a say. If you don't go on your trip just because of a war, you're not a real Jew, you're not a real lover of

Israel. We can be a tough crowd – not very inviting. No wonder we get quiet, or just stay away altogether.

But does it have to be that way? Why ARE we so defensive when it comes to Israel? We all know some perfectly legitimate reasons – fear, worry, protectiveness, overprotectiveness. We worry for Israel, we worry for Israelis, we worry for ourselves and for our children. We Jews – we’re worriers. That we come by naturally because we’ve had good reason to worry.

And here’s something else we all know, and yet many of us seem to resist:

Even we lovers of Zion come in many different forms.

Even those of us who love Israel with a deep passion, who know that we are connected to it forever, and want for it only the best and all the best, even we hold differing views of how to be supportive of Israel, of how to be a lover of Israel.

In fact, that term – *Chovevei Tzion* – “lovers of Zion” not so many people use it anymore, I know – it comes from the 19th century Jews of Russia who organized to escape pogroms by returning to Zion, and there were many 19th c American Jews who claimed the title, as they worked too for colonizing a Jewish homeland. I like the term – I like the passion of it – and frankly, the ambiguity. The word *khavav* [chet – bet- bet] – “love” – is not the Hebrew word for love we’re most familiar with – that’s *ahavah*, as in *v’ahavata* – “you shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might....”

Khavav comes from a Hebrew root meaning “to embrace,” “to hug to one’s bosom,” “to be tied together,” from Aramaic meaning “to kindle, be set on fire,” [BDB, 285], but the root, the *shoresh*, also means “to wrestle,” [Jastrow, p. 416]. Remind you of anything? Maybe the name Israel – *Yisrael*? – which, as Jews are fond of noting, means “one who wrestles with God.” And not only that, the root (the *shoresh*) *khavav* – “love” – is also related to the root *khavah* (w/ both *aleph* or *hay* ending) meaning “to withdraw,” “to hide” [BDB, 285]. Draw close, embrace, be tied together, be set on fire by – be bound together, and yet wrestle with, and sometimes withdraw from, hide from. I can’t think of a better description of my own relationship with Israel – I, who *am* a lover of Israel—in part because the Israel and Israelis I know also struggle, as I do, wrestling with the complexities of existence, admitting to failures, striving to do good, willing to make changes when necessary.

But I am only one Jew, and I well know my relationship to Israel is not the only way to be in relationship to Israel.

Some Jews -- some in this sanctuary no doubt – put Israel in a category of its own. It can do no wrong, or if it does we have to forgive it immediately because of its fragility and because of its importance.

Some Jews – some in this sanctuary no doubt -- put Israel in the same category as any nation – hold it to the same requirements and expectations we would hold, for example, the United States.

And some Jews – some in this sanctuary no doubt -- hold Israel to higher standards than other nations. Doing so with the same blend of Jewish chauvinism and fear with which we hold Jews

to higher standards. The old formula: “Is it good for the Jews or bad for the Jews?” Good for Israel when it gets attacked, and fights back on its own? Bad for Israel when Lebanese civilians get bombed and killed in larger numbers than Israelis.

And all of us in this sanctuary -- Jews and non Jews – no matter our attitude toward Israel -- all of us weep for all the dead of this most recent war, and of all the wars Israel has had to face. We weep for the losses on both sides of the border. We weep for the fact that the Hezbollah leadership talks of their missiles hitting “occupied Palestine” – “Occupied Palestine” of course is their term for Israel, and we sigh, because we know that as long as two sides speak such different languages there is little hope for peace.

We weep because – no matter our feelings about Israel -- we know the truth of this commonly heard statement:
that if every other country in the Middle East *except* Israel put down its weapons, there would be no more war.
BUT if only Israel put down its weapons, there would be no more Israel.

Israel is always in a tenuous position, to say the least. And more and more that tenuousness spills over onto Jews elsewhere in the world. So much so that some Jews with no obvious Israel connections may struggle to feel attached, indeed may even question why we should try. If that’s you, know you are not alone. You may have tried, but just don’t feel anything. You may have tried *not* to – why get invested in such a risky investment? Why try to love yet another imperfect country – isn’t one enough? Why open our hearts to yet another place, another people that promises so much heartbreak?

If you, like so many Jews today, have not visited Israel, have no relatives there, and no Holocaust survivor relatives, no stomach for politics or for war, no personal experience of anti-Semitism, no sense of impending doom because we are Jews – it may seem there is little that *would* connect you to Israel.

The old reasons don’t seem so compelling anymore. The ones many of us grew up with: – Jews need a homeland. We need to have some place that will welcome us if *this* place (like Nazi occupied Europe) becomes unwelcoming.

Even those of us who watch with raised eyebrow and elevated heartbeats the anti-Jewish acts and words that keep occurring here in the U.S. (including the swastika flags that were draped over an overpass to the eastbound 101 on the Friday Rosh Hashanah began), few of us doubt, if we give it any thought – that if all Jews did indeed try to move to Israel, not only would there not be room, it wouldn’t be long before some neighboring nation or two or three would wipe us out. Even if we believe Jews need someplace to go just in case, Israel just doesn’t anymore (did it ever?) look like it could really be that place. Safer to live in the diaspora -- spread out – we’ll be harder to hunt down.

Those of us who feel at home somewhere outside of Israel, might not feel a need for a homeland there. But at the same time – knowing that feeling of home – might make it easier for us to support our Israeli friends and relatives – for Israel is their home.

And this too is a hard thought to take in: In today's world – as we hear Israel described as the new Jew, the new scapegoat, the new target of the old anti-Semitism -- some Jews may feel more threatened by Israel than in love with it, more bothered or frightened by its existence than amazed and enchanted by it. Perhaps our desire for connection or our lack of it is coupled with fear – fear that Israel not only won't *be* a safe place for us, it will endanger our current safe places. It's oh so complicated, isn't it? The emotions are huge, and for many of us unexamined, and unshared.

So what should we do about it?

Well, some of you have come to me with an idea:

Let's actually talk about Israel – in a serious and open way in our congregation. Let's ask questions, and study it, let's bring in speakers and films to talk about it. Let's stop being so protective of ourselves or each other that we stop talking altogether about that remarkable place called Israel. We can begin tomorrow afternoon – among the choices during our break in services, Allison Diamant will be facilitating a conversation about Israel. And we continue on October 24, when Mike Hamel, Director of Aguda, the GLBT center in Tel Aviv will be speaking with us about the glbt youth who came south during the Lebanon conflict and now find themselves in difficult situations in Tel Aviv.

And let's add some more actions to our discussions too. BCC's Tzedakah Council has long been committed to sending a portion of our collective giving to causes and organizations in Israel. Take home a pushke tonight or tomorrow, fill it with coins over the next few weeks, and then help the Tzedakah Council decide where in Israel to send our contributions. The need to decide will give us the opportunity to study all sorts of societal needs and problems in Israel, and how Israelis are working to meet those needs, and solve those problems.

And one more big idea: let's a whole bunch of us go to Israel together - soon. We had 19 people signed up for BCC's trip to WorldPride in Jerusalem this past August. That is, we had 19 people until missiles began to fly, and the conflict, the war with Hezbollah began. We postponed the trip – and we're looking now to go sometime next spring – around Pesach – we have yet to close in on the dates. COME with us – not just to bond but to wrestle – come see the complexities, come be part of them. In 1999 36 of us went to Israel together. It was, I think we'd all agree, an amazing trip that connected us to each other and to Israel in ways none of us expected. Those of you who went before – come again.

Those of you who have never been – what better way to venture there than with your congregation? Those of you who have been many times, come with us and show us around – show us what you don't like so much, and show us what made you fall in love with Israel.

Among other stops, we'll go to S'fat to visit Arlan Wareham and David Fyffe – the BCC couple who made aliyah this year. We'll study before we go, and we'll learn while we're there. We'll walk some paths so old they're described in the Bible, and we'll make some new paths – toward peace and reconciliation, understanding and friendship. If you want to get on the mailing list, e-mail the office or talk to my partner Tracy Moore.

Tomorrow, in addition to the traditional *al cheyt* liturgy for Yom Kippur – the long lists of wrongs we did before God -- we'll read also a more contemporary list composed by our friend

Rabbi Richard Levy. His list includes these three wrongs that our congregation has been guilty of communally, especially in our silence and our reluctance to really talk about Israel, in our judgmentalism and our doubt about one another's convictions, beliefs, passions. We've committed these wrongs in the past, but together we can stop committing them right now and forever:

For the wrong we did before You by forgiving in Jews what we condemn in others.

For the wrong we did before You by forgiving in others what we condemn in Jews.

For the wrong we did before You by taking Israel for granted.

[*Wings of Awe*, p. 354, c.1985]

V'al kulam Eloha s'lichot, s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kapper lanu.

For all these wrongs, O God of forgiveness, forgive us, wipe the slate clean, grant us atonement.

Help renew our commitments to Israel and to one another. Help us be unafraid to learn together, talk together, make our way along this difficult path together.

[PAUSE]

Avinu sh'bashamayim tzur Yisrael v'go-a-lo

Source of Life and Guide toward Peace:

bless the people and the State of Israel.

Shield the Land with Your love,

and spread over it Your shelter of peace.

Send Your light and Your truth to its leaders and advisors,

and help them with Your good counsel.

Strengthen the hands & hearts of those who protect this sacred Land,

These same hands & hearts that seek peace and pursue it.

Grant them courage and resolve and hope,

and success.

Grant harmony and tranquility in the Land,

and open the hearts of all, so that bloodshed

and violence

may cease.

May the children of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar,

the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac,

come to live together in harmony and well-being,

each people fulfilling its dream of "home."

May shalom come soon.

Do not delay, O God.

We need You.

With wounded hearts & minds & bodies,

and with ever hopeful souls –

We await Sukkat Shlomeicha – Your canopy of peace..

To this, can we all say: amen. _

CHOIR COMES UP FOR *TEFILAH*

[Jon Lee Anderson, “Letter from Beirut: The Battle for Lebanon Has Israel’s assault weakened Hezbollah – or made it stronger?” *The New Yorker*, August 7 & 14, 2006, p. 35, left column 1st full paragraph]

(*CBS*) *ENCINO, Calif.* Two flags depicting swastikas were draped over an overpass to the eastbound Ventura (101) Freeway in Encino Friday, the day the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashana begins, authorities said. . . . Swastika symbols were displayed about the same time from two freeway overpasses in San Diego County.
http://cbs2.com/topstories/local_story_265154243.html

PRAYER FOR THE PEOPLE AND THE STATE OF ISRAEL

By Rabbi Leila Gal Berner [adapted by Rabbi Lisa Edwards]