

ISRAEL – the place the bears our name

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There are certain places about which you dream, that you hear about as a child and see pictures of in *National Geographic*, places to which you promise yourself one day you will visit. Israel is one of those places—at least in the hearts and minds of most Jews. Especially Jerusalem. Like DNA passed from generation to generation, the dream of Zion is vouchsafed within the heart of the Jew. For over two and a half millennia our people has set the golden hills of *Yerushalayim* as a goal, sacred ground upon which you must, at least once, tread.

I did not grow up in a home of *Ohavei Tziyon*—Lovers of Zion. My parents were American Jews. With roots (on my mother's side) back to the *Mayflower*, we were firmly ensconced in patriotism and the National Football League. Israel, for me, was just a place where other Jews lived. I learned about it in religious school, largely through photos of sun-baked young people plowing fields and picking oranges. Alas, farming held very little appeal for me in those days.

Still, when I left for Israel in July of 1972, I felt an anticipation, an excitement. Soon I would be walking on the ground of Abraham and David. I would be climbing *Masada*, the mythic wilderness fortress of Jewish strength and perseverance. And I would be standing at *The Wall*, arguably the most revered place in Jewish history.

Chicky Marks and I arrived in Jerusalem at night. (We were both first-year rabbinical students from Detroit.) Once the *sherut* or communal cab got us from Lod Airport to the central bus station in Jerusalem, we took the Number 15 bus—as directed by our travel packet—up toward the Hebrew Union College. “Please tell us when you get to *Yimka*,” we politely asked the bus driver. *Yimka*. The YMCA. Directly across from the *King David Hotel*, finding the Hebrew Union College was not hard. We knew it was a block away from the *King David* and I knew what it looked like. We climbed the steep steps up to the main entrance only to discover it was closed. But we were prepared for this; we knew to go back across the street to *Yimka* and get beds for the night. Yet with our backpacks and our suitcases in hand, Chicky and I decided—for some reason I can't remember—to walk around the back of the college.

Now I only knew one person in Israel. Rabbi Hank Skirball, who had been the director of NFTY and *Kutz Camp* where I worked from 1968 to 1971, had recently made *aliyah*. In this whole country of two and a half million Jews, I knew only one of them. And as we walked around to the back of the College, there he was, taking something out of his office and putting it into the trunk of his car. The Lord works in strange ways.

Hank let Chicky and me sleep on the floor of his office that night. We had our sleeping bags, there was an Israeli-version of a convenience store just up the block, and his office windows—albeit only about 8-inches wide (to protect from nearby sniper-fire)—had an unobstructed view of the walls of the *Old City*. The crusader walls lit-up to give a golden glow against the nighttime sky, I felt like I was in a fantasy. “This is the stuff we dream of,” I remember thinking to myself.

So, the first-time-tourists that we were, our first destination was the *Kotel*, the “Wailing Wall”. It wasn't as polished and orderly as it is today. The buildings that used to be in front of it had been cleared out after '67, but there was no expansive plaza leading up to this 2000-year-old

retaining wall to Herod's Temple. There was no fence or gate you had to go through, there was no security. Just a small barrier separating the men's and women's sections, a couple of tables to read Torah from, and maybe 20 people standing around, *davening*, kissing the wall, and *schmoozing*. Chicky and I went up the wall, touched it, kissed it, and tried to look like we knew what we were doing. We were dead give-aways. This *Hasid*, a twenty-something American Jew dressed in black comes up to us and says, "You Jewish?" "Yes," we replied. "Why are you here?" he asks. Like idiots we tell him. "We're studying to be rabbis." "Really?" he comes back. "Would you like to meet a 'real' *rebbe*?" he asks. Then like bigger idiots, we said "Sure".

Before we knew it, Chicky and I were on a bus with this guy traveling to Tel Aviv. (We had no idea what we were doing, and I readily admit this was all Chicky's fault.) By mid-afternoon we walked up the steps to the *yeshiva*, somewhere on Diezengoff Street, Tel Aviv's main artery. Our friend from The Wall escorted us to the back of the main room. The *rebbe* was in the next room. I went in first. Not surprisingly, by the time the *rebbe* discovered that my mother's mother was born a Presbyterian who converted to Judaism by a Reform rabbi, I was excused and asked to go back out into the larger room. Then Chicky went in. Did I tell you that Chicky could be confrontational? After maybe fifteen minutes I could hear yelling coming from the room. Some kind of fracas was going on, something about us being "no-good-Reform-Jews" and "goyyim". (I presumed that latter phrase had to do with me.) As abruptly as he got us out of Jerusalem, our (so-called) "friend" pointed to another door and said, "I think you should leave!" (Something tells me he was about to have a very serious talk with his *rebbe*.) A minute later we were standing on Diezengoff Street with absolutely no idea where we were let alone where to go. Fortunately, one of the *yeshiva* students who still retained a measure of *menschlekeit* took *rachmanes* on us, followed us downstairs, and told us how to get to the bus station and how to get back to Jerusalem. "Welcome to Israel," I thought to myself.

As I look back on this sequence of events, I wonder if it does not have a lesson to teach us about the enigma we call *Israel*.

A sacred land, filled with mystery and delight, the ancient birthplace of our people rich in history and antiquity, *Israel* is also the nation of a people who are complex and confusing, and who come from every corner of the earth with a common history but competing perspectives of that history. From the *Kotel*, with its majesty and pathos, to *Rechov Diezengoff*, a tree-lined thoroughfare filled with traffic and falafel stands and *yeshiva bochers* and sandal stores, *Israel* is "all of the above". In that one day we found compassion and confrontation, outreach and rejection, a sense of commonality and an insight into the tension that seems to perpetually threaten to break us apart. How precarious is this nation *Israel*! And how resilient! How confounding! Yet how inspiring! And the fact of the matter is, you don't get to pick and choose. You can't have one without the other.

Later this year we will celebrate the 60th anniversary of *Medinat Yisrael*, the State of *Israel*. We will celebrate the restoration of our people to its homeland. We will recall the visionaries and the pioneers. We will sanctify the memories of fallen heroes and continue to sing of the day when *Israel* will finally know peace. We will also painfully acknowledge that the dream has been overshadowed by a reality, that *Israelis* are not immune to failure and wrongdoing, and that pain permeates the land through the hands of all of those who lay claim to it.

It is worth noting that not everyone agreed on the choice of the name for the new nation. For the entirety of our people's history, *Israel* was the name of the Jewish people. Some felt that to call the Jewish state *Israel* would be confusing. After all, are we not *Israel*, too? But, of course,

that is the point. It is our land as well. And thus, can we truly be surprised if the reality of Israel does not match the idealistic dream of its founders? How can we object to Israel's fractures when they merely reflect the weaknesses we all bear? How often we joke about the island with one Jew but two synagogues: the one he prays in and the one he wouldn't step foot in. But Israel has not the luxury of creating different states for opposing views. Having *one* homeland as a refuge from the tyranny we have endured is nothing short of a miracle; and if we are to be an *Or Lagoyim*—a Light unto the Nations, then we had better learn how to work it out among ourselves. Like it or not, we are One People.

Now all we Jews need to do is figure out how to do that.

This past spring many of us ventured into Manhattan to participate in the *Salute to Israel Day* parade. In fact, Temple Ner Tamid had by far the largest representation of any synagogue from MetroWest. Nearly 75 members of our community walked up Fifth Avenue accompanying the beautifully decorated *Lions of Judah* (one of which, magnificently designed by Nava Shoham, is on display at our Broad Street entrance). It was, by all accounts, glorious. The sidewalks were filled with waving onlookers, as the din of celebration filled the air.

Until, that is, we got to 58th Street.

On that one block, right in front of the Plaza Hotel, was a small but vocal group of protesters. Anti-Israel protesters. This is not surprising. It's just who was standing behind those barricades that we found disconcerting. Of course, there were Palestinians. That was to be expected. With them was a small cadre of Jews (identifying themselves as such with placards), who were there to protest Israeli government policies in the disputed territories. But again, this is not surprising because such protests by Israelis *in* Israel are pervasive and commonplace. What was most startling, however, was that the clear majority of those condemning the State of Israel were a maybe thirty-strong group of *hasids*, wearing the traditional garb of long black coats and black hats. My sense is that they were less vocal than their colleagues standing in front of The Plaza, but then again they didn't need to say much—their simple presence spoke louder than any competing megaphone.

Of course, to most onlookers—and that would include those of us parading up the Avenue—their camaraderie with Palestinians seemed bizarre. “What are *they* doing there?” I got asked not a few times as we crossed 59th Street and walked alongside Central Park. But what I think most people missed is that while they stood with the Palestinian protesters, their motivation was not the same. Those ultra-Orthodox Jews were *Neturei Karta*. They are, in principle, opposed to the State of Israel. Because the Messiah has not yet come. By their understanding of Jewish theology, we are living not merely in diaspora, a state of dispersion, but rather *galut*—exile. We are here because of the sins of our ancestors. As the Talmud teaches, it was *Sinat Chinam*—senseless hatred between Jews that led to the destruction of the second Temple. And we are forbidden to rebuild it, even to return to the land until Messiah takes us there.

If, however, as the Talmud contends, Jerusalem was destroyed because of this senseless hatred between Jews, what are we to make of the *Sinat Chinam* of the *Neturei Karta* in their denouncing of the State of Israel? What are we to make of their separating themselves from the mainstream of the Jewish world? And for that matter, what are we to make of our own inability to find commonality in Israel? What are we to make of our own lack of unity when it comes to feeling a connectedness towards the State of Israel?

The culprit here is not the State of Israel. And it's not misguided ultra-Orthodox Jews. And it's not simply the Palestinians, nor their supporters. The culprit is diaspora. The culprit, at the core of our dis-ease with Israel or with those who are critical of Israel is our diaspora-state-of-being.

Let me say first and foremost, I categorically reject the notion that diaspora is *galut*. I do not believe we are in exile, I do not believe that God has driven us from our homeland. The Babylonians did that. Then the Romans. And as a result we have come to inhabit the proverbial four-corners of the earth. In many ways we have been richer for it. From Kei Feng to Toledo, from Johannesburg to Mendoza, from Cochin to Brooklyn, we have incorporated the flavors and values and mores of the peoples of the world—and enriched our heritage exponentially. I believe that diaspora has been the saving-grace of the Jewish people. It has expanded our reservoir of traditions. It has forced us to adapt and adjust, to become stronger and more resilient. Diaspora is the furnace that has forged our sense of peoplehood.

But all too often it was a furnace nonetheless. The suffering endured in so many of those lands also shaped an anger, and a fear, a sacred paranoia that was passed on from generation to generation. We have lived perpetually in fear of what The Other will think (or do). Our perspective of the world (and our place within it) has been heavily tinted by this dark experience. Like members of an abused family, we are constantly on-edge, threatened by even the suggestion of some past injury.

And it is in this context that Israel finds itself at the center of our storm. Because the very existence of a Jewish nation-state elevates into prominence, into a kind of existential acute relief, the dichotomy between Judaism as a faith and the Jew as a member of a people. Israel challenges our existence. And this is ironic because for Herzl, Zionism was the elixir to the diaspora existence. A Jewish state was supposed to resolve the precariousness of life in the diaspora. And for many of our people, it has. Israel is our homeland. It is a place of refuge. Just ask the survivors of Auschwitz, or the Jews of Moscow, or the Jews of the Gondar region of Ethiopia. Yet for those of us who enjoy the *comfort* of diaspora, Israel's existence calls our own existence as Jews into question—on both extremes of the continuum. Whether we are “Israel-can-do-no-wrong” Jews or “Israel-should-be-held-to-a-higher-standard” Jews, our very Jewishness has been challenged like never before since the creation of a Jewish state. And for that we should all be grateful. Perhaps Israel's greatest treasure for us is the gift of self-awareness; Israel forces us to look at ourselves and ask, “Who am I?”

Do we not know how blessed we are to live at a time when our people has reclaimed the right to self-determination? Can we not see how impossible life as a Jew would have been after Auschwitz had it not been for the creation of a Jewish state? If we fail to see this, if we allow the current political climate and its discourse of disputed-truths and moral equivalencies to overshadow the deeper truth of our historic and spiritual link to this land, then diaspora will be able to claim its most tragic victim. But if we can find a way—any way—to feel the connection that every Jew has to that place, to integrate the mystery of its soul into ours, to allow it to awaken our Jewishness, then we will come to know and appreciate how it is that our mothers and fathers have dreamed for more generations than we can count of stepping foot, even for just one day, onto the hills of Jerusalem.

In Amsterdam, directly across the street from Rembrandt's House, there is an odd monument of a turtle supporting a column, a pillar on its back. The monument is a memorial to Jacob Israel de Haan, the much celebrated early 20th century Dutch-Jewish poet and writer. De Haan

was also a Zionist. Inscribed on this memorial is part of a poem he wrote about this tension between The Land of Israel and the Diaspora. It reads:

In Amsterdam, he'd often say "Jerusalem",
Went to Jerusalem a driven man,
Now murmurs softly in low tones
"Amsterdam, Amsterdam".

The truth is, neither ever lives up to our expectations. Because ideals are fantasies we create to color-in our dreams. Yet what separates the land of Israel from the oases of diaspora is that one carries *our* name. It's that simple.

Israel is where our faith was born. Not on the shores of the Red Sea, or at the foot of the mountain in the wilderness of Sinai, nor in Vilna nor Amsterdam nor New York, but atop the Judean hills. Israel is the land where Torah was written, where the stories passed on from generation to generation were first told. Israel is the place of which we dreamed when all seemed so dark and without hope. Israel is the home of the Jewish people.

You don't have to love it. You don't have to be inspired by its power to redeem. But you do have to know that without it there can be no Judaism. And you also have to know that without us there can be no Israel. We are umbilically joined.

And although there is no clear explanation for the symbolism of that monument in Amsterdam, what I have learned is that in many cultures the turtle is symbolic of the earth. It represents stability and permanence. Perhaps Israel is that turtle for us? Perhaps Israel is our earth, our foundation? After all, do we not call it *Ha-aretz*? The Land? The Earth? And the pillar? That is us—all that we build, all our hopes and dreams. But whatever we do as a people, know that its roots lie in Jerusalem. And it will always be that way.

Lest we forget, as our ancestors were led off to Babylon, in the birthing of diaspora, they sat by the banks of the waters of the river Euphrates and vowed:

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand wither and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in my mind, even on my happiest days.
(Psalm 137)

In other words, even in places like this, where life is good and the land embraces us as its own, we must never forget that—as a people—there is another place we call Home.