

THE ECLIPSE OF BEAUTY

Kol Nidre
5769

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It was our first Saturday night in Israel. The moon, brilliantly white, was slowly rising over the mountains of Jordan. In fact, it was so bright, you could just barely make out the three stars necessary to confirm the beginning of the next day, the conclusion of Shabbat.

There is something truly magical about walking in the Negev desert at nighttime. It's filled with mystery and romance. This is the place where Abraham walked with his camels. The view is no different today than it was then—the outlines of the Jordanian hills, the warm sand running through your sandals, the moon—completely full—casting shadows and lighting the way ahead. This was the full moon of *Av*. *Tu b'Av*—Israel's version of Valentine's Day.

Originally celebrated in post-Biblical times, *Tu b'Av* was a matchmaking day for unmarried women. In the *Mishnah* Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel says that along with *this* day, Yom Kippur, *Tu b'Av* was the best day of the year. "There were no happier days for the people of Israel than the Fifteenth of *Av* and Yom Kippur, since on these days the daughters of Israel go out dressed in white and dance in the vineyards..." (*Ta'anit* 4). Now that was "good old time" religion.

Although the observance fell away over the centuries, it has regained popularity in modern Israel, no doubt—at least to my thinking—because it follows just six days after *Tisha b'Av*, the 9th of *Av*, the saddest day on the Jewish calendar whereon we commemorate the destructions of the first and second Temples as well as the expulsion from Spain. A kind of counterbalance to our centuries of persecution and suffering, our exile from the land of Israel, *Tu b'Av* now comes as a reminder that we are back home in the land of our mothers and fathers, that the darkness represented by the fasting on the 9th of *Av* is of the past; the joy of Israel's reality is of the present. And the *love* we celebrate is less about romantic love between people than it is about the romance our people has with the land—*Ha-Aretz*.

Imagine then that love, that romance in the middle of the desert, beneath the brilliantly white, completely *full* moon.

That night we took a walk through the desert at *Kibbutz Lotan*. We learned about desert life, bird migrations, the challenges and mysteries of survival in the *midbar*, the wilderness. After about an hour and half of walking through the sand dunes, I looked up again at the moon. I said to Woody Eisenberg, "I thought the moon was supposed to be *full*." "It is," he said. "So look at it," I said. "It's not completely full, is it?" Woody concurred. "That's odd. It looked full before." Then I said, "My God, I think we're witnessing an eclipse." Indeed, it was.

After our desert walk, our group returned to *Kibbutz Yahel*, where we were staying, and for the next two hours sat out on the grass and watched the moon slowly disappear. It was a *near-full* lunar eclipse. Stunning. Mesmerizing. Breathtaking. In the middle of the Negev, watching a brilliantly full moon slowly fade to black.

I knew there was going to be a sermon in this. But I wasn't quite sure what it was going to be until last week, as I listened to the Vice-Presidential debates, when they got onto the subject of the growing nuclear menace of Iran, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

An eclipse is an extraordinary experience. I remember as a little boy watching a solar eclipse by taking a piece of shirt cardboard, folding it in half (the long way), punching a pin hole through one side, and then looking at the shape of the crescent sun projecting through that pinhole onto the “flat” side of the cardboard. There’s something deeply fascinating about seeing an object so permanent morph before our very eyes. Unlike primitive man, we now understand what is really happening when the sun or the moon begins to disappear. We understand that it’s not really changing, it’s not really disappearing. We know that something is merely coming between us and the thing we’re watching. We know that the obstruction will continue on its way, and before too long the sun and the moon will return just like they were before.

For me this eclipse became a metaphor for the way in which we see Israel.

Listening to that debate last week, I realized (once again) that Israel has become for so many of us a subject of politics. Not that there’s anything wrong with this. It’s reality. The geo-political dynamics of the Middle East are at the very center of the challenges facing our world, and Israel—for reasons both accurate and distorted—is at the center of the conflict in the Middle East. But the result is that, for many of us, these political realities have obscured the beauty and mystery that is Israel. Like an eclipse, we have allowed the realities of the world to get in the way, to shield our view of the entire picture. We end up seeing only the dark part, the missing part. And like the primitive watching that eclipse, we are prone to lose sight that the obstruction is temporary.

This is not to suggest that what lies behind this eclipsing political reality is without flaw. On the contrary. Yet for me, it is those very imperfections that comprise the true beauty of Israel. No different than the moon’s pockmarked surface, the impact craters of the Jewish people are what make up the fullness and richness of the Zionist dream. But like the moon, those craters are still only on the surface. It’s what lies beneath the veneer, it’s what lies beneath the surface that is the substance and soul of this land and its people.

Of course, you know all this. It’s like I give this sermon every year. But I do it because this gap, this chasm, this space between us and Israel is still there. We still have difficulty seeing what lies behind the eclipsing obstruction. And we still have a hard time appreciating that this eclipse is temporary, that—*Gam zo ya’avor*—this too will pass. We still are prone to mistake the temporal for the perpetual.

So tonight I don’t want to talk about the threat from Iran, or Israel’s dysfunctional government. I don’t want to dwell on Israel’s failed West Bank policies, or Hamas’ and Hizbullah’s evil schemes. I just want to share with you what I saw—what fifteen of us from Temple Ner Tamid saw this past August—that reminded us all why it is that Israel is, in fact, so wonderful, so beautiful, so inspiring.

I want to speak about just one experience. Monday.

We traveled up from the Negev the day before. Now we were in a metropolis. No more sand, except that is the warm soft grains of the beaches along the Mediterranean. Indeed, our first stop was to go to the beach and pray. It was a creative *shacharit* or morning service. We did the *Shema*. We said *Kaddish*. But I began the service with one of my favorite poems: *Eli, Eli* by Channah Szenes.

Oh God, my God
I pray that these things never end
The sand and the sea
The rush of the water
The crash of the heavens
The prayer of man

Szenes, a young woman who made *aliyah* as a teenager and died in a Nazi prison as a member of the *Haganah* after volunteering to parachute behind enemy lines to assist the partisan cause, was also a poet. This poem was written at the same sea, the same sand some 70 years earlier. It just seemed like the perfect text to read for so many of us who were hearing the rush of those waters for the very first time. In fact, however, it was the last verse of her poem—*tefillat ha-adam*, the prayer of man—that came to be the most authentic articulation of her Zionist dream. And this was seen nowhere more clearly than the next stop on our trip after our morning at the beach.

We got back on our bus and went into the heart of Tel Aviv. Not the beachfront cafes or the tree lined boulevarded Diezengoff street. Instead we went into the older, more *urban* part of the city. A block away from the central bus station. We crowded into an unimpressive little building, into a room that could just barely hold the total 40 travelers of our trip, with nothing more than a very weak window air conditioner to relieve the stifling 95-degree heat. This was *Mesila*.

Mesila is, by all accounts, a very small social service agency. It doesn't have the large staff you would find at an absorption center. It won't get the kind of publicity that Israeli-Palestinian youth initiatives merit. *Mesila* doesn't even have its own website. But the work they do there is as central to the spirit of Israel as anything I have ever experienced.

Mesila is an aid and information center for foreign workers and refugees in Tel Aviv. In its cramped walls, its total staff of just 10 (of which only two are full-time) and permanent community of 100 volunteers offers material assistance, counseling, advocacy and mediation services to the foreign worker and refugee population—with special emphasis directed toward their children. Of the approximately 35,000 foreign workers in Tel Aviv, 2000 of them are children. But in addition to these, there are another 10,000 refugees who have fled to Israel from Darfur and Sudan. Like so many of Israel's original Jewish population, they come to Israel with nothing but the clothes on their back. They have virtually no money, no resources, they speak no Hebrew—they just know that Israel is a place of refuge. They know that Israel is a place that will lend a hand, give them help, give them hope.

In this small room we met with one of *Mesila's* administrators and one of its social workers. We also met with a young man from Sudan named Hamad. He told us of his odyssey across Africa to Egypt. Of how the word in Egypt—where these refugees from Darfur were anything but welcome—was that he could find haven across the Sinai desert. Listening to him, I couldn't help but think of how it was when *our* ancestors made their way out of Egypt, how it was that *Eretz Yisraeil* was an *eret z'vat chalav ud'vash*—a land that flows with milk and honey. I couldn't help but remember that it was in that same wilderness of Sinai that he crossed to get to Israel that *our* people embraced the *mitzvah* of helping the orphan and the widow and the stranger—because *we* were strangers in the land of Egypt.

I have learned that of all the phrases in Torah (excluding the “And the Lord spoke to Moses...” texts), the most oft repeated sequence of words in the entirety of Torah is to care for the stranger “...because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Perhaps more than anything else,

this is our *raison d'être*, the reason we exist as a people. We weren't slaves in Egypt by accident. It was God who hardened Pharaoh's heart. It was God who made us into slaves. It was God who wanted us to experience the *maror* of oppression—so that we would know its taste. So that we would be sensitive to the pain of others. So that we would do something about their pain. And it was here, at *Mesila*, at this little social service agency in downtown Tel Aviv, where I came to see *why* Israel is so central to our existence as Jews.

Israel is not just a haven for our people. Israel is not just a place where Jews can go to be Jews without fear of anti-Semitism. Israel is also the place—more than any place on the face of this earth—where Jews can go to be Jewish. And by Jewish I don't mean just a place where we can light *Shabbos* candles or keep kosher. Israel is the place where the performing of *mitzvot* transforms from a good deed to a sacred act. Israel is the place where the voice of conscience is understood as the *kol d'mamah dakah*—the still, small voice that Elijah heard in the same wilderness across the border with Egypt.

Now you may not agree. To be sure, there is just as much work to do down Bloomfield Avenue in Newark. The people there are just as needy. Their pain is just as great. But, and I speak—of course—for myself, the *inspiration* to act, the feeling of being *metzuev*, of being commanded to help was somehow more compelling that afternoon. So all of us, as a group, walked the block to the bus station which, on its lower levels, has a small shopping mall—including a supermarket. We went in and, from a printed list of suggested items, bought—as a group—over 2000 shekels worth of cereal and toothpaste and pasta and coffee. Things that you and I wouldn't think twice about. But when we carried these bags back to the *Mesila* building, the look of joy and gratitude on the faces of the women who had briefed us an hour earlier was unmistakable. And the sense of satisfaction we each felt was undeniable.

All things considered, what we did was no big deal. I admit this. But how many travel vacations do you go on where standing in-line at a supermarket rates as your most memorable experience? How many travel agents will try to sell you on the virtues of this or that excursion with promises of visiting impoverished communities? In Israel, this is what we do. Because this is what Israel is. This is why we have an Israel to begin with. A place, a sacred place, where we are free to be Jewish. A place, a sacred place, that inspires us and encourages us to listen more carefully to the commanding voice of our tradition.

This was the first time in Israel for most of us on the trip. No doubt the anticipation of standing atop *Masada*, the thought of praying at the *Kotel*—the Western Wall, the simple idea of walking the down the narrow streets of Jerusalem's *Ir Ha-Attika*—the Old City was beyond exciting. It was the stuff of which we dream. But none of us could have prepared ourselves for what we were to feel that Monday afternoon when we got back on the bus after *Mesila*. It was then that I saw in the eyes of my fellow travelers the magic I know to be Israel. Beyond what we see as ordinary tourists, deeper than the headlines of political realities, that day we saw inside the *neshamah*, the soul of Israel.

Yehudah Amichai, arguably Israel's greatest poet, created a beautifully insightful (and memorable) image of this dichotomy between the surface and the deeper reality that is Israel:

Once I was sitting on the steps near the gate at David's Citadel and I put down my two heavy baskets beside me. A group of tourists stood there around their guide, and I became their point of reference.

“You see that man over there with the baskets? A little to the right of his head there’s an arch from the Roman period. A little to the right of his head.”

“But he’s moving, he’s moving!”

I said to myself: Redemption will come when they are told, “Do you see that arch over there from the Roman period? It doesn’t matter, but near it, a little to the left and then down a bit, there’s a man who has just bought fruit and vegetables for his family.”

I read Amichai’s poem with our group about six weeks before we left for Israel. I have no doubt they appreciated his words the initial time they heard them. But I also have no doubt that it wasn’t until after *Mesila* that they came to truly understand his intent.

Perhaps the poem’s most critical line—if enigmatic—“But he’s moving, he’s moving,” suggests that what makes Israel *Israel* is not its remains, the static monuments from its past, but its people. Alive and moving. Constantly in transition. Israel is not this glorious, mythic place that so many of us have been raised to see it as. Nor is it the soundbyte of which we so often hear on the radio and cable television. There is a beauty to Israel that cannot be seen from a tourbus window or in a photojournalist’s image. Israel is a complex place. Like any other nation, it is not immune to human frailty. But unlike any other nation, it has one defining characteristic that is both ancient and modern, imbued with an indefatigable impulse toward the holy. Israel is Jewish. And it is this that continues—every time I walk its streets—to inspire me, to sustain my hope in Amichai’s vision of redemption. We’re not there yet. God knows, we’ve got a long way to go. But the sand and the sea, the rush of the waters, the crash of the heavens—in Israel—continues to give me hope in the prayer of man. Because in Israel—the prayers and the *mitzvot* they lead to—are guided by the words of Torah.

The thing is, eclipses are seductive. They (literally) capture our attention. And in so doing, they have the allure and the power to blind us to the deeper and more enduring realities.

That near-full eclipse on *Tu b’Av* was extraordinary. But the fact is, the full moon that night was—as it always is—beautiful. Yet for so many of us, the eclipse made us forget that it was, after all, a full moon. The same full moon that inspired our ancestors to seek out love.

How tragic it would be were we to allow the obstruction to get in the way of seeing the beauty that lies just beyond. Like the adage “missing the forest for the trees”, there is more to this view than meets the eye. And if we can’t see that, then just ask Hamad—and the thousands of others from Sudan and Darfur who see Israel as a symbol of hope.