

Choosing Life in the Tragic Gap: Rosh Hashanah 5777

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This sermon is dedicated to Shimon Peres, may his memory be a blessing.

We are living in complicated times.

We are caught up in the unique complexity of our lives - the pressures of our daily responsibilities: our careers; our children and grandchildren; our homes and neighborhoods; our schools and friends.

And then to live in America in 2016, we are caught in the complexity of our society. We bear witness to a seemingly endless set of images that tell a story of racism, sexism, fear, and violence.

And, if we have any energy left to spend on anxiety or despair, then maybe we have taken notice that our Jewish soul is fending off the onslaught of Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism, and a bitter struggle amongst American Jews as to who speaks for our community.

If I could convince you to stay for an hour, maybe I could talk about it all: the personal, the national and the international challenges of this particular time in our lives. But, we ask not only God, but also the rabbi to have mercy on our souls, and so, with compassion, I am returning to just one of the three – the international – that is, Israel.

Why Am I Talking About Israel?

In the last two months, I've talked with a congregant in his 20s, a retired volunteer for the Sanders campaign, who wanted to know how to talk about Israel with his co-workers in progressive politics – colleagues who stand by his side on national issues, but cannot abide when it comes to Israel and the Middle East.

I've spoken with an employee of UCLA whose new position exposes her to the frontlines of Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism on campus; the demands of her job and her gut-loyalties to Israel both produce an unfamiliar, uncomfortable sensitivity.

Congregants are terrified that Iran will use its nuclear power to destroy Israel. They wonder if they will be safe traveling to Israel with their children.

And then there are all of you who haven't called. And I don't mean to parody the Jewish parent: "Nu? You don't call. You don't write." What I mean is that some of the people who sit here today have disengaged from the conversation about Israel entirely.

I want to invite you back in.

I know most of us are obsessively monitoring the U.S. election. And if not the election, then our focus turns to our families and loved ones. But, alongside those concerns, is our challenge as American Jews to love Israel and to help her become the nation she professes to be: a nation, that according to Israel's Declaration of Independence, ensures complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex. A nation of pragmatists and dreamers still building and defining what this country, our Homeland, will be. A nation that needs you to be engaged.

My Promised Land.

Let me tell you about my Homeland.

My first trip to Israel was when I was 12 years old. We were there during Hanukkah. I remember eating *sufganiyot*, donuts, every day. I was amazed by the Coca-Cola bottle with Hebrew lettering. I climbed Masada. I planted a tree. I loved Israel.

When I was 15, I returned on a teen program for the summer. My memories include ice cream at the end of every hike, almost getting a tattoo in Eilat and ordering a screwdriver at a bar in Jerusalem only to realize I didn't like orange juice or vodka. Still, I loved Israel.

After college, I spent 10 months as a volunteer. My time on Kibbutz, working in a public school, and living in an immigrant absorption center helped me connect with the people of Israel, not just the land and its beverages. My Israeli host family, who, it should be noted, did introduce me to the delicious combination of hot water and fresh mint leaves, shepherded me through the year and then adopted me for life.

And then things got complicated.

My first year of Rabbinical School began on the Jerusalem campus of Hebrew Union College on July 1, 2001. That was the summer Sbarro's Pizza was bombed. That was the year we were told to avoid public transportation. Not to shop in the shuk on a Friday morning. Don't go out on a Saturday night. I learned the geography of the West Bank from the nightly news: a refugee camp in Jenin, a terrorist from Beit Jala, an attack in Tekoa.

Years later I would return to Israel and this time I would travel to the West Bank. To Bethlehem. To Hebron. I would listen to Palestinians talk about their lives: the oppressive restrictions on travel; the bleak economic prospects; the absence of justice when the perpetrators were radicalized Jewish settlers. I would meet peace activists from Palestine and Israel who persisted

in the work despite the seemingly insurmountable challenges. I would drink espresso with Palestinian business owners in Ramallah. I would visit with the mayor of Efrat, a large Jewish settlement just over the Green Line.

I love this country and her indefatigable spirit. I recognize it as the unrelenting spirit that I work to cultivate in myself and hope to teach my children. Here is a people who adopted Theodor Herzl's line "If you will it, it is no dream" as the slogan of the Zionist movement. And, my heart aches when I hear Israel's current political leaders, and a significant percentage of the country, respond to the question of Palestinian statehood with bitter cynicism and prejudice.¹

I love this country and her spirit of innovation. High Tech. Medical Breakthroughs. They are making the desert bloom. And yet this country of innovators cannot find a way to allow egalitarian prayer at the Western Wall or permit a Reform rabbi to officiate at a wedding, funeral or conversion.

Israel's struggle resonates with my struggle: to recognize and appreciate the miracle that is this moment in time while still maintaining a deep dissatisfaction with the world as it is. This is the Judaism I was taught and here is a nation that makes that struggle manifest in secular and sacred jurisdictions. And, despite this deep resonance, as a 21st century Reform Jewish Zionist, living thousands of miles away, there are moments when I feel distant and unconnected.

Every year brings more complexity, but I've come to realize that the more time I spend wrestling and embracing this country and her people, the deeper my commitment grows. I am compelled to defend Israel and to challenge her. I am more than a tourist. More than a Diaspora donation. I am part of writing Israel's next chapter, and you are, too.

21st c. Reform Zionism.

To be a 21st century Reform Jewish Zionist is not only a mouthful to say, it is a daunting challenge. Anti-Zionism fuels violence and hatred in the Middle East, and spills over into Europe, across the Internet, and has taken root on our college campuses. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement encourages political parties, companies and individuals to avoid doing business with Israel and makes an indelible mark on the experience of Jewish students and faculty. The Israel that we love is under fire and the goodness that we know to be true is neither recognized nor acknowledged.

And, the heartbreaking truth, is that we are fast approaching the 50th year of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian people². A military decision in 1967 that has led to a seemingly permanent

¹ "Slim Majority of Israelis, Palestinians Still Favor Two-state Peace Settlement, Poll Says" -- <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.737973>

² I recognize the word "occupation" is a political choice and has the power to shape discussions and affect perceptions of Israel. Instead of "occupation", one could also say, "as we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the 1967 war and its aftermath." Or, consider the approach of my colleague Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer: "In 5777 the State of Israel will mark the 50th

state of control over 3.5 million people who seek independence, self-determination, and economic opportunity. We are more distant than ever from a two-state solution that would assure both Palestinians and Israelis a life of prosperity and security.

A 21st century Reform Jewish community with love and fidelity to Israel must acknowledge that Israel's existence is in jeopardy not only because of Iran and Syria, but also because there is not enough political will from the leadership or the people to assure the future of a Palestinian state to exist side by side with Israel.

At this point in my life, it would be easy to surrender to cynicism. The world is broken. The Middle East is the worst example of it all. Nothing will ever get better.

It would be just as easy, and equally as dangerous, to surrender to idealism. It'll work itself out. Someday we'll all get along. Peace. Love. Kumbaya.

Rather than escape to either extreme, what would it mean to return fully to this moment and to live with the tension between what is real and what we wish were possible? What would it mean to try and live and work and love and wrestle from within this space?

The Tragic Gap.

Parker Palmer, an author and teacher, calls this *standing in the Tragic Gap* – “the gap between our knowledge of what is and our knowledge of what might be...”³

We've tried to make peace for 70 years and we've been rejected repeatedly. AND we've also seen world leaders return to the table to try again. Reform Judaism is continually disparaged and marginalized by the Ultra-Orthodox members of Knesset. AND in mid-September, Israel's Supreme Court rebuked the government for its failure to implement its own ruling to equalize prayer status at the Kotel, creating a place for all Jews.⁴

This is our Tragic Gap – the Hard Realities and what we know is Possible – and we must learn to live within it. We must learn to act within it.

The poet Audre Lorde wrote, "Sometimes we are blessed with being able to choose the time, and the arena, and the manner of our revolution, but more usually *we must do battle where we are standing*."⁵

anniversary of not only one of the most significant wars in all of Jewish history, but perhaps the single most transformative moment in Jewish power and the Jewish moral consciousness; but [he continues] most of the American Jewish community will miss it while focused on one of the projects: 1) debating whether it can be talked about, and by whom, and when and where, and using which terminology; 2) fighting against present realities through many toothless petitions and thus creating an additional interminable Occupation, of our inboxes; or 3) fighting against acronyms without acknowledging, much less engaging, their underlying moral critique.”

³ https://www.couragerenewal.org/PDFs/Parker-Palmer_politicsbrokenhearted.pdf

⁴ <https://www.urj.org/blog/2016/09/19/enough-enough-how-demand-equality-israels-leaders>

⁵ Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches

This is where we are standing today.

Now, if you don't want to stand here, the alternatives are not much better. Palmer says when we opt-out of standing in the Tragic Gap, we tend to move to one of two places. Either we surrender to cynicism, the product of embracing too much of the Hard Realities, or, we are swept away by Idealism "bred by too much 'Possibility.'" ⁶

These alternatives may "sound 180 degrees apart, but in fact they take us to the same place, which is out of the action. They disengage us from [the] place in the gap where we need to stand in order to move things forward."⁷ In order for us not to be stuck.

This year, let us pray for the strength to stand and act from within this Tragic Gap; and not just for today, or for the next twelve months, but throughout the course of our lives.

So how do we begin to stand and act in the Gap and withstand the tension of this time and space? How do we block out the siren calls of disengaged cynicism and unrealistic idealism?

Choosing Life in the Tragic Gap.

My good friend Rabbi Benjamin Ross taught that the first essential step is rooting ourselves in all that inspires us about Israel. In Palmer's terms, *what we know to be possible*. And, so, I remind myself that I am inspired by the efforts of the Israel Religious Action Center to defend the rights of Israelis and Palestinians who are threatened by discrimination and religious coercion.⁸ I am inspired by the Reform movement's fight to create an egalitarian section of the Western Wall.⁹ I am inspired by the bereaved parents, Israeli and Palestinian, who make up the Parent's Circle.¹⁰ I am inspired by the Palestinian professor who created a dual-narrative curriculum for Israeli and Palestinian students so that they could learn one another's stories.¹¹

If we hope to stand and act within the Tragic Gap, then the Hard Realities must share space with what we know to be true – what we know is possible: So, first and foremost, what inspires you about Israel? You've heard about me. It may not be the same for you. Today over lunch, or perhaps at the beach, ask yourself, or someone in your family: What inspires you about Israel? (*And, side note, if the answer is "Nothing" then please Google Shimon Peres, z'l, and read anything he's written in the past 20 years.*)

⁶ https://www.couragerenewal.org/PDFs/Parker-Palmer_politicsbrokenhearted.pdf

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rq0aeKCB41g>

⁸ <http://irac.org/>

⁹ <http://www.reformjudaism.org.uk/join-us-insist-equality-kotel/>

¹⁰ Parents Circle - Families Forum (PCFF) is a grassroots organization of bereaved Palestinians and Israelis. The PCFF promotes reconciliation as an alternative to hatred and revenge. <http://www.theparentscircle.com/>

¹¹ Explore the curriculum by Sami Adwan online here: <http://vispo.com/PRIME/> or here: <https://www.amazon.com/Side-Parallel-Histories-Israel-Palestine/dp/1595586830>

The second step is an honest check-in about who you are and what you believe to be true: about Israel, about Zionism, about Palestinians, about Jewish Americans who lobby on behalf of Israel's interests. In High Holy Day terms, this is called a *Cheshbon HaNefesh*. We are all masterful at telling ourselves exactly what we want to hear. Are we ready to closely examine what we believe are the Hard Realities of this moment? Are there new Possibilities that might shift how we see the world? To achieve this step, it's worthwhile to come into community. To allow Isaiah and your fellow congregants to shake up your internal monologue. To create some holy disruption in your routine.

Come and learn with us this year.

As a member of Temple Isaiah, you can attend four exceptional lectures on Israel sponsored by the Shalom Hartman Institute.¹² On Sunday, November 13, two prominent journalists will speak from the Left and the Right about Israel's future.¹³ This February, you can travel with me to the JStreet policy conference in Washington DC.¹⁴ In March, you can travel with Rabbi Nickerson to the AIPAC conference.¹⁵ And, you can experience Israel firsthand this summer by signing up for our next Family Trip led by Rabbi Nickerson, Cantor Coyot and Tamar Andrews.¹⁶

And if all of those learning opportunities won't fit into your schedule, then you should call us – any member of the clergy team – and we'll find a time to talk with you. To answer your questions. To listen to your challenges. To decipher the acronyms from ADL to ZOA.

The final step is learning to stay in the gap. In High Holy Day terms, this is called *Teshuva* – returning to what is real and what is true. There is no Final Exam that will graduate you from the tension and discomfort. We are in this for the long haul.¹⁷ But, if we learn to stay in it, if we practice holding life's tensions – whether it's a teenager's rebellion, the character of our nation, or the future of our Homeland – if we “step back, breathe, allow our agitation to settle, and simply start paying attention, we often see new possibilities in situations that once seemed intractable.”¹⁸

This is the self-awareness we practice during Shabbat Niggun, our new contemplative service that takes place once a month.¹⁹ Return to your breath. Return to this moment. Return to the Hard Realities that make up our lives and also what is Possible. The practice of *Teshuvah*, this

¹² https://hartman.org.il/Programs_View.asp?Program_Id=169&Cat_Id=287&Cat_Type=Programs

¹³ <https://templei.wufoo.com/forms/ilife-left-v-right-the-battle-for-israels-soul/>

¹⁴ <http://jstreet.org/conference/>

¹⁵ <http://www.aipac.org/act/attend-events/events/event-details?eventid=%7B90D05E91-A3E3-468C-9EC3-1464B6959531%7D>

¹⁶ <http://www.templeisaiah.com/israel>

¹⁷ “The gap between what is and what might be is “tragic” not simply because it is sad. It is tragic because in the classic sense of the word, it is the inevitable outcome of the flawed nature of human life. There will always be a gap between reality and possibility, and the moment that gap is closed in one situation, another gap opens up as new and vital visions call us forward.” https://www.couragerenewal.org/PDFs/Parker-Palmer_politicsbrokenhearted.pdf

¹⁸ https://www.couragerenewal.org/PDFs/Parker-Palmer_politicsbrokenhearted.pdf + “When you have two alternatives, the first thing you have to do is to look for the third that you didn't think about, that doesn't exist.” (Shimon Peres, z'l)

¹⁹ <http://www.templeisaiah.com/Shabbat-Niggun.php>

ancient wisdom passed down from one generation to the next, *L'dor Vador*, is useful *more than twice a year*. Practice with us once a month at Shabbat Niggun as we learn the tools to stand and act from within the Gap.

Miracle or Mud?

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, the founding chief rabbi of the Israeli settlement of Efrat in the West Bank, would often talk about his struggle to love Israel and to live in the country through the metaphor of coffee.²⁰ Arriving in Israel for the first time in the late 50s, he reflected on the options for coffee, noting that you had two choices: Nescafe, which everyone called *Nes* (coincidentally, the Hebrew word for miracle), or Turkish coffee -- so thick that everyone called it *Botz* (the Hebrew word for mud) because the grounds sunk to the bottom and formed a thick sludge to be avoided as you finished your drink.

And, so, he surmised, you get to Israel and your choice is *Nes* or *Botz*...miracle or mud. And this is how we can talk about Israel. This is how we can imagine our lives in Israel. This is what we might predict the future forever to be, miracle or mud. But, there has to be something in between, as well. Something between the miracle and the mud.

Parker Palmer calls that place the Tragic Gap – “tragic” because there will always be a gap between Reality and Possibility, and we are asked to live and act from within that space.

Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we are perhaps more aware than ever of the Gaps in our lives: “The gap between who we are and who we want to be; the gap between what we want for our country and what is; and the gap between what we understand to be our mission as a Jewish people, and how we manifest our communal destiny.”²¹ For the next ten days we are challenged to identify these Gaps and to consider how we might return to the space in-between. To hold the tensions. To stand and act powerfully and purposefully from within the Gap.

My friend Rabbi Yael Ridberg writes that there is “an interesting parallel to the world of prayer. Jewish tradition teaches that we should face Jerusalem when we pray. The rabbis ask towards which Jerusalem should we face? The *yerushalyim shel ma’alah* or the *yerushalayim shel maatah*.

The heavenly Jerusalem or the earthly Jerusalem?

The real Jerusalem of political conflict, thousands of cats, and garbage that doesn’t always get picked up in a timely manner? Or the heavenly one of peace, ancient history, justice, and *tikvah* — hope. The Jerusalem that struggles or the one that doesn’t? *There isn’t really a dispute*, says

²⁰ Thank you to Rabbi Sari Laufer for telling me this story.

²¹ <http://www.dorhadash.org/erev-rosh-hashanah-sermon-5776.html>

one rabbi, as both Jerusalems face one another, *and you cannot get to the heavenly one without traversing the earthly one.*"²²

There is garbage in the Gap – but there is also goodness.

There is heartbreak in the Gap – but there is the possibility of your heart expanding.

There is complexity and confusion – and there is also deep wisdom, if we can be patient enough to let the swirling waters settle.

I am asking you to return this year, and to practice standing in the Tragic Gap with me.

For those who have opted out of the conversation – return.

For those who have surrendered to cynicism – return.

For those dreamy-eyed idealists, floating above the fray – return.

Return and let us learn together how to live and act from within the Gap. Let us hold the tension between what is and what could be. It begins today. Let us pray from within the Gap for the peace we know is possible.

²² *ibid.*