

THE GIFT OF SWEETNESS

what we Jews have to offer each other

Rosh Hashanah morning 5767

This past week, as I was writing my High Holy Day sermons, the doorbell rang. I was upstairs, laptop in hand, and I had absolutely no interest in answering the door. I wasn't expecting anyone. There weren't any packages scheduled for delivery. And the day before I had to break from my writing and explain to two nicely dressed young men in white shirts, black ties and backpacks why I wasn't interested in hearing the *Good News*. So when the doorbell rang a second time and the dogs (my sister-in-law Carol's dog *Bulla* is visiting for the week) continued their "Stranger, you have no business at my door" barking, I was quietly resolved that the doorbell ringer would just have to conclude that no one was home.

Shame on me, for about an hour and half later, as I made my way downstairs, I noticed through the window next to our front door that a white shopping bag was resting on our porch. In the bag was a nicely wrapped package, with a bow, and a white envelope taped to it. It said "Kushner Family" with the Hebrew inscription "*Shanah Tovah*" just below our name. Immediately I knew who it was from and what it was. You see every year for several years now we receive a jar of honey in honor of the New Year from Rochelle and Izzy Rubin. Just like we get a beautiful fruit basket every year from Debby and Harvey Morginstin. This is what Jews do. For more than a celebration of the New Year, their gifts are a demonstration—simple gifts as they may be—of how it is that Jews care for each other.

It couldn't have come at a better time. I really needed that honey. It's sticky sweetness helping to overpower the bitterness of this past summer and its aftermath. It was painful enough to watch another Israeli summer become shadowed by the realities of those who deny Israel its existence, but to see it play out in the news, on talk shows, and even among ourselves added a particularly heavy burden for me.

This past August we had something of a *machloket* here at Ner Tamid. A dispute. A controversy. A matter on which we were hard-pressed to find consensus. This is nothing new, particularly when it comes to Israel. What was different this time, however, was that the *machloket* occurred during a time of war.

In some ways understanding the Arab-Israeli conflict is painfully simple: there are forces in the Arab world who seek Israel's destruction. Notwithstanding the likes of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan who have each established "normalized" relations with Israel (meaning they are simply content to despise Israel) and even growing numbers of Palestinians who are willing to agree to a settlement that would accept the reality of Israel (despite the back-and-forth posturing in the past two days of the proposed Palestinian unity government saying "Yes both Hamas and Fatah will recognize the State of Israel" and then 12-hours later Hamas retracting by noting they "...will never recognize the State of Israel"), those who begrudge Israel its existence continue to command center-stage. The peace-makers are consistently overshadowed by the "destructionists". And albeit relatively small in numbers and lacking in substantial military might, the likes of *Hamas* and *Hizbullah* and *Fatah* and *Jihad* have disrupted Israeli life far more profoundly than any of Israel's formal wars.

Only since 2001 have we in America even begun to understand what it is like to be a Jew in Israel. Living in constant vigilance of acts of terrorism is a daily way of life for Israelis. It used to be that after the Arab nations would join together to destroy Israel and Israel would then prevail, the trauma and loss of life notwithstanding, Israelis could at least go back to some kind of normalcy. But now not a day goes by that Israelis don't have to be concerned with who is standing next to you at the bus stop, to wondering if the young man entering the restaurant is unreasonably wearing a coat. The *Matzav* as Israelis call it, the "Situation," has had dire consequences. Israelis are emigrating from the land of their birth at unprecedented rates. Israeli parents now send *their* kids to *America* for the summer (and not infrequently suggest that they stay there for a while). And the political center in Israel has all but disappeared.

In short, Israel's existence remains today, as it was in 1948, precarious. But a fair and honest appraisal must also admit that there is another side. Palestinians have their "story" too.

We cannot deny that the creation of a Jewish state resulted in the displacement of many Arabs living in British mandated Palestine. We cannot deny that many Palestinian grievances have legitimacy. Life in the territories, in the camps, is dire. Conditions in the West Bank and Gaza have, according to M.J. Rosenberg of the Israel Policy Forum "...slipped into sub-Saharan Africa-like poverty...." Even though I believe it would be unfair to hold Israel responsible for the entirety of the current plight of the Palestinian, and even more unfair to suggest that these conditions can in any way justify acts of terror and state-aggression toward Israel, neither can Israel feign complete innocence. An honest appraisal on our part must allow for self-criticism. But by the same token, the fact that Israeli governments might enact unwise policies and Israeli soldiers might do bad things ought not to obscure the basic realities. We must be careful not to allow the complexities to overshadow the fundamental basic truths. And by the same token, it is equally dangerous to ignore the details in favor of the larger, simpler picture.

A couple of weeks ago I sat with a dear and respected colleague. A minister. A friend. We talked about the war this past summer between Israel and Hizbullah. At one point in our conversation I mentioned something to the effect of Israel having to endure terrorism. He quickly responded, "Yes, both the Israelis and the Arabs were guilty of terrorism." I love this man. We have so much in common, our sense of humor, our theologies, our politics. And even though I knew that he and I would probably not be in complete agreement about the war, I confess I was shocked that he would equate Israel's actions with terrorism.

Would I agree that the Israeli airstrikes evoked *terror* in the hearts of the Lebanese? Yes. Would I agree that the loss of civilian life in Lebanon was *terrible*? Yes. It was. There is no other way to see it. Even Israel acknowledges this. But was it terrorism? Can we casually dismiss the distinction between consequence and intent? To be sure, death is death, and as Leon Wieseltier noted in his *New Republic* essay about the tragedy at Qana, "The death of children is evil [regardless of the child's identity]." I don't know how anyone could argue otherwise. But the death of children at Qana was clearly unintentional, whereas the death of Israeli children was exactly what *Hizbullah* sought. And to fail to make that distinction, to group the deaths of all innocents together without distinction, to ignore that *Hizbullah* intentionally positions its military resources in residential areas, to dismiss that Israel forewarns specific locales of impending attacks (and thereby giving their enemy a decided advantage), to fail to acknowledge these facts opens a door of moral equivalence to the blurring of the line between propaganda and truth.

And the result—after seeing those lines blurred time and again, year after year, especially for those who watch from a distance—is confusion.

For those of us inclined to try and see both sides of a conflict, I sense that the continued perceived imbalance of power between Israel and the Palestinians tends to ultimately result in a weakening of our support for Israel. Particularly in the American liberal community (of which I consider myself a card-carrying member), Israel's inability to convincingly portray itself as the underdog makes for a hard-sell for those of us who seek to restore political balance to the world. (Put another way, it's hard to feel sympathetic for someone who *appears* strong.) Sometimes we forget that Israel's military prowess was created out of necessity, not choice. Israel remains overwhelmingly outnumbered by its enemies. And then this gets further complicated by our instinct to compare Israel's war in Lebanon and America's war in Iraq and, without "going there," there is one distinguishing fact that often seems to get overlooked—America is not fighting for its survival. So that for those of us who, on the other hand, believe Israel's existence to be truly precarious, who see the rise of global terrorism and the waning support for Israel here at home it is not such a leap to conclude that Israel's danger could just as easily become ours as well. As Freud reminded us, even paranoids have enemies—and we Jews have good reason to feel paranoia.

This is what I think played out here this summer. In the midst of a war unfolding daily on television, we—like many in the Jewish community—wanted to respond in ways that were consistent with our faith and our sense of peoplehood. The majority of those who voiced an opinion wanted to see a banner placed in front of our building that would read: "We Stand With Israel—We Pray For Peace." But there was a significant minority who demurred. Some did not feel comfortable making such a statement during a war where Israel's actions were seen by some as controversial. Yet most who objected to the sign did so out of a genuine fear that it would endanger our community. Without a clear consensus the board chose not to put out the banner.

It's not such a big deal. And it doesn't define us as a community. What is important, however, is how we relate to each other. (And I mean this in the broadest possible way.) At the board meeting following the congregational "hearing" that night last month, the decision to not put out the banner was rooted in a genuine effort to preserve *shalom bayit*, literally "peace of the home." Sometimes you acquiesce, sometimes you give in for the sake of communal harmony. And the board chose to do this because they care about this community. They sought to respect dissenting opinions. They felt empathy for the fears of their neighbors. And above all, to my thinking, they did this as Jews, because Jews are supposed to care about other Jews.

And that is precisely why—even if we have reservations about how Israel acts in the defense of its own survival, even if those decisions might have a negative impact on us—we must stand with them. Because they are us. And because it is mitzvah.

Torah's command to "not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor," *in context*, refers specifically to your *Israelite* neighbor. Your fellow Jew. And in that same context, you are obligated, if necessary, to "reprove him" but also to "judge him fairly," you are forbidden to "hate" him or "bear a grudge" against him, on the contrary you must "love him as yourself." All of those verses in Leviticus 19 speak specifically about relations between Jews. The truth is that if we feel a level of discomfort here in America—as Jews—because of what goes on in the Middle East, it is precisely because we are not viewed as distinct from the Jews of Israel. And the reason for that is because we are the same.

There is a term that is commonly used in Jewish jargon, especially in the Jewish communal world. *Amkha*. It is an expression that is used most frequently when referring to Jews in a collective sense. “We’re doing this for *Amkha*.” “I wonder how this will play with *Amkha*?” The people. The Jewish people. Literally though it means “Your people” and I find that odd. You would think at least in the context of its usage, it should be *Ameinu*—“Our” people or *Ami*—“My” people. Yet instead we say *Amkha*—“Your” people.

There are, I think, two ways to understand this word. One is in the sense of “They’re not my people, they’re *your* people.” As I have been taught, the oft-quoted text from the Jerusalem Talmud *Kol Yisraeil areivein zeh b’zeh* is usually rendered as “All Jews are responsible for each other,” but if you take into consideration that the word *areivin* really means “to mix” or “to blend” then it is perhaps better to translate the Talmud’s teaching “All Jews are *stuck* with each other.”

And while this sentiment might, from time to time, resonate for any number of us, I think the true meaning of the phrase *Amkha* lies elsewhere. In fact I have no doubt that the “you” implied in *Amkha*—“Your” people refers to God. When we intone the phrase *Amkha*, we are saying “Your people, God; God’s people.” And yet we never use the phrase when speaking to God, but rather only in dialogue with each other. What does this mean?

It is an acknowledgement on our part, even more an affirmation, that as Jews we are linked to God through each other. We relate to God through each other. Our identity as a people is indistinguishable from God. When we sing (as we will do in a few weeks at Simchat Torah) *Yisraeil v’Oraita Chad Hon*—Israel and Torah are One, we affirm that Torah (which is the embodiment of God among the Jewish people) and the people Israel are inextricably bound together. And therefore, God’s oneness depends on our ability to integrate Torah into our lives, not only individually but communally as well. Especially as a people. God’s One-ness depends on our one-ness as well.

We have work to do. We could all do a better job of caring for each other. We could all do a better job of fulfilling the mitzvah of supporting the Jewish people. And while we each need to do this in our own individual ways, there can be little doubt that doing it together as a community lends a measure of authenticity to the mitzvah that is unique unto itself.

Israel expects our support for no other reason than we share the same name. Israel needs our financial support. Israel needs our tourism, especially now. But above all Israel needs our solidarity, our willingness and desire to demonstrate in ways that are enduring that they are not alone. If we Jews have learned any lessons from the past century it must be the importance of connectedness. If, as Elie Wiesel has taught that “A Jew alone is a Jew in danger,” then how much the moreso that when a Jew is assailed and under attack, when a Jew *is* in danger, he must not be left alone.

Perhaps the greatest lesson of the New Year is the lesson left on my porch by Izzy and Rochelle Rubin. We each have honey to give. We each have the power to sweeten other’s lives. This is the great *hidden* and often underused gift of being human. So maybe we could take advantage of this opportunity of the New Year to bring sweetness into the lives of others. Not *maror*, not bitterness, but sweetness.

And as we—of course—pray for the peace of all peoples (especially on this first day of Ramadan), as we work to dispel the bitterness from the mouths of all who suffer anguish, may we particularly keep our people who dwell in the land of our ancestors in our hearts, that they

may finally taste of Torah's promise, to live in the land—*eretz zavat chalav u'd'vash*—that “flows with milk and honey”.

The truth is, Israel has given so much sweetness to our lives, it should be more than our obligation to stand with Israel—it should be our joy.