

Israel

About seven years into my rabbinic career I was given a three month sabbatical. We decided to spend one of those months living in Jerusalem, renting a small apartment in the Baka neighborhood and setting out for this adventure with no particular agenda but with two very young children in tow. Truth be told it took them most of the month to get over the jetlag - there were a lot of late nights.

We did manage to get around quite a bit, often on long walks in that walkable but hilly city, including pushing a double stroller through some of its narrow and uneven alleys, all without the benefit of Google maps. We have some great pictures, and some great memories. And some not as great memories. Here's one of them.

At some point on the trip we decided to journey up north. Consulting with a friend we found a tzimer, kind of an air bnb that many Israelis take advantage of as the weather warms up. A getaway, if you will, like people here might rent a place down the shore. And we rented a car, though we had never driven in Israel before and that experience can be somewhat daunting. It took us a few tries to find the right road out of Jerusalem but soon enough we were on our way, and found a lovely cabin type of accommodation with an awesome breakfast in a basket delivered each morning we were there.

One kid friendly activity we found was to go cherry picking. This was fun and interesting and the baskets we filled made for great gifts to bring back to family in Jerusalem. I remember very well pulling into the dirt parking lot. I thought: I'm not going to park where everyone else parks, I'll park a little further away, still in the designated parking area, but it's a rental car and I didn't want anyone to accidentally ding it while pulling in or out. So I park, we go in and have a good time. Covered in cherry juice, after a couple of hours we headed back to the car. As you have probably surmised, the car had been hit while parked, and noticeably dented.

This was disappointing to say the least. As we surveyed the damage, we saw a note stuck in the windshield wiper. It was in Hebrew, of course, with an apology, and a phone number. Not really knowing what to do I called the rental car company with all of this information. If memory serves it took a couple of days to process it all. But the upshot was: once the person who left the note found out it was an American visitor whose rental car they hit, they stopped answering the phone. We were on the hook for the full and not insignificant deductible, and no responsibility was ever assigned, except to us.

Fast forward to just this past summer. Our youngest Ayal participated in Ramah's Israel seminar together with a bunch of other Beth El and south Jersey kids and hundreds more from all over the United States and Canada. Ramah also runs our Confirmation trip which I'm glad to say is going again this December, and they do a great job with all the teens they guide through Israel. Late in the trip, maybe three or four days from the end, we were woken up at around 3 am by a call that Stephanie's phone says is from Ayal. This is a little disconcerting; by now he has understood the impact of the seven hour time difference between countries. She picks up and a woman we don't know is speaking in fast Hebrew. Stephanie gives me the phone.

My Hebrew is ok but conversationally, like most non-natives, it is a struggle. I gather that she has found the phone. She is in Eilat, where the kids had been recently - we knew they were no longer in Eilat. She found the emergency contact labeled Ima and called - I'm going to guess she thought she might reach another Jewish mother, albeit an Israeli, not an American. She won't give me her phone number, she said to call back on that one if we wanted to try to get the phone back. Then she said, in Hebrew, you know it's an iPhone 14, very expensive. Between this observation, my broken Hebrew, the kids already being out of the area, and a flashback to the note on the rental car outside of a cherry orchard the thought in my head was: we are not getting this phone back.

Unlike some rabbis I don't always give an Israel sermon on the holidays. Generally I think that you are just as well informed as I am, and for the most part, if you are part of Beth El, you love Israel just as much as I do. But tonight is 50 years since sirens sounded throughout Israel and the surprise attacks of the Yom Kippur war threatened Israel's survival. And we cannot ignore that this has been an uncommonly challenging year to fully express our love and support for all aspects of Israel's blessed existence, as we look on from afar at a country deeply divided to the point of some predicting its reaching a point of no return. While the trigger and manifestation of this division is referred to as "judicial reform", we know that it is also about simmering tensions that are sometimes just below the surface. Like magma from a volcano this burning hot stuff, in the form of protest, name calling, doomsday predictions, and lots of shouting, spew up with unforeseeable consequences when the surface calm is ruptured, as it was this year.

I don't know what the right path is in connection to specific legislation, or what kind of compromise might yet be forged. I certainly do not know what the deepest intentions of Israel's longest serving Prime Minister are in connection to backing this controversial reform, supported most strongly by members of a coalition with whom many in our community agree on very little. I promise you they agree with us on even less. Most people can't talk about the substance of this issue for more than a sentence or two; they know it is complicated, they admit the structure and balance of the Knesset and the Courts is probably not perfect, certainly no more perfect than the imperfect but usually functional system of checks and balances of our three branches of government is here. But I want to share two reflections that I think are important for us to hear. And then, yes, I will tell you how the story of the lost phone ended.

The first is why we should be gravely concerned about this issue of governmental procedure in a place where we don't vote. More than one of you has told me something to the effect that whatever Israeli democracy has broken, Israeli democracy can also fix and we should trust the voters there to do so. That may be true, or it may not be, but it is not the whole story, it is not all that matters about these issues that have brought

millions to the streets. The sides that have been taken in this round of debate and argument remind us that Israel as much as anywhere else in the world is an amalgamation of people from all different backgrounds, varied sets of primary values, different ways of connecting to Judaism or their other faith traditions, and also the inheritors of their parents' and grandparents' successes and failures. Successes are many and include building an incredible country, a modern marvel and miracle by any definition, in addition to the strong and effective army and security service operating, I'm not the first to point out, in a very dangerous neighborhood.

But as in any society the unaddressed schisms and unresolved hurts of past generations also bubble up to negative and even destructive effect. The divide between those of Ashkenazi and Sefardic and other non-European descent is represented in today's conflict. The effort to integrate Jews of Russian and Ethiopian origin and other places too is robust and sometimes wildly successful, but it takes more than a generation to do so fully and that division is playing out today as well. Significantly, for Israel and for us, the widening divide and seemingly non-integratable worldviews of the religious and not-as-religious populations of the modern state are threatening to tear Israel's social fabric apart. It was always hard to address that - maybe impossible. Which is why past generations didn't expend enough effort toward what felt like a losing effort, and instead allowed these divisions to take an even deeper hold, until there was barely any common language left to use for dialogue and to make needed progress. It will not be easy to do that now. Yet without it Israel will effectively be divided against itself; I need not tell you what that will look like and the destruction that it can lead to.

Before I turn more hopeful, let's delve one step even deeper into difficult territory. The greatest rabbis of our tradition did their work mostly well after the destruction of the second Temple, well after the loss of sovereignty over the holy land, well after being stripped of all power other than minor aspects of local administration and religious life and practice. They knew that at any stage of its prior existence Israel was never a superpower in the region, that its relatively small army could not regularly stand up to stronger forces whether Babylonian, Assyrian, Greek or Roman. But when they

explained how Israel, God's chosen people in God's chosen land, could be defeated and exiled they didn't blame it on stronger armies and their better weapons, balances of power and the vicissitudes of history. Doing so would have been reasonable, defensible, and quite sane. Israel after all was caught in a strategically important land bridge connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa, where powerful armies were often sent to expand or defend empires that rose and fell, to be replaced by another, and then another, all eventually trampling through this sliver of land as they did so.

The rabbis knew this but they did not teach history this way. No - the rabbis turned inward. They talked about baseless hatred between Jews. They taught of Jewish messianists and zealots who insisted that only their way could prevail and must prevail without compromise. A state or nothing. A Temple or nothing. Communities governed by their understanding of Torah law - or nothing. They talked of these zealots burning storehouses of food to make sure the people would rise up and fight their oppressors because the other option was starvation. And they taught of people who refused to even dialogue to see what could be worked out by way of live and let live compromise, the type of which might have been used as a template for a more understanding, less bifurcated Judaism. That did not happen, and Israel continues to live with that historic failure.

Messianist voices have not only threatened Israel in the past, they have actively paved the way to its destruction. The spiritual heirs of those for whom there is only one way forward, without compromise, are working within the democratic structure to achieve aims that are not likely to bode well for Israel's relationship with the United States, with the majority of Jews in the Diaspora, or for the values of equality and the seeking of peace through negotiation and dialogue rather than armed conflict, all which have been hallmarks and bulwarks of Israel's security for most of the last seventy-eight years. We have to express our concern for all of the ways this modern zealotry goes unchecked in the form of intolerance, verbal assault, and even destruction of life and property.

What can we do? A whole lot. We have to work with those organizations like our own Masorti Conservative movement, Jewish Federations, and other time-tested pro-Israel groups that are seeking a better and more productive way forward, a more robust democracy, and the guarantee of freedom of religion in Israel including - in one of life and Jewish history's greatest ironies - freedom to be Jewish.

We have to plan to vote in the upcoming World Zionist Congress elections, for which I'm glad to say will see a much better organized effort this year than last time around, when organizations that generally align with our values fared very poorly. I dare say it will be an expectation of Beth El's membership to stand up and be counted by voting in these elections about which you will be hearing much more in the coming year.

As always it would be a great show of active love and support for Israel to stay informed, to not turn your back, to never say "Israel no longer speaks for or speaks to me" or is no longer on my personal list of primary concerns. This would be tragic, and we must not allow ourselves to reach that point of despair and do all we can to reverse the trend of younger Jews outside of the Orthodox sphere from doing exactly that. Learning about Israel's past and present through our congregation's programming and regular updates, through our community's Israel events and gatherings. Supporting your kids and grandchildren when they ask you if they should do Ramah Seminar, or Birthright, or BBYO's Israel Passport, helping to make sure our amazing Confirmation trip remains a reality as prices skyrocket and competition for our kids' attention grows ever greater, thinking about gap year programs for our high school graduates and putting Israel at the top of your list to go to or return to, is the modern equivalent of "If I forget thee O Jerusalem"...

That is my concern, and as one of the ten core commitments of Beth El Israel will always be on our minds and in our hearts. Here is why I am hopeful it will be. On our confirmation trip in December that I accompanied there were some worries that the kids would not take the experience seriously enough, that they would see it as more of a vacation than something to impact them strongly and make them lifelong lovers and

supporters of Israel. They had their fair share of fun, and ate their way through a delicious country, 50 shekels of lunch money we handed out at a time.

The most serious day of the trip is when we go to Yad Vashem, and next door to Har Herzl, Israel's largest national military cemetery. How would they respond? The founding of the State of Israel is as far away from these kids' lived experience as the Civil War was to those who were alive when World War Two began - the stories of the Haganah and Ben Gurion and the Partition Plan are more or less ancient history. I'll tell you how this group of American Jewish teens, your kids, our kids, responded. With fully attentive respectful silence. With their undivided attention to the words of the Yad Vashem guides. With many tears streaming down while standing at the graves of fallen soldiers. With hugs for our tour guide who shared her personal connection to a friend buried in that sacred space. And ultimately with a stronger belief in Am Yisrael Chai than they ever had before. They got what we also get but need to remind each other of and reinforce at every opportunity. Israel and our Jewish future are inextricably intertwined. We need each other. We have to listen before we talk but we also have to talk. And most of all we get that a world with a state of Israel is infinitely better and more secure than a world without one, as it was for two millenia, to our detriment, to our lament, to our threatened demise. We all have a responsibility to partner in making sure that if we are to live up to our deeply held commitments, we stand up for and find allies to stand with in Israel, and to do so with unending love.

We reached Ramah staff with the story of the somewhat ambivalent phone call. They called Ayal's phone and reached the woman who had found it, and sent a staff member on a mission to retrieve it. She gave it to them, with no questions asked or expectation of a reward we would have been happy to provide. Just a Jew returning a lost item to another Jew who had lost it, a Jewish mother looking out for the child of another one, family looking after family when we are at our best and maybe especially when we are less than that, and he soon had the phone back in his hands. This year, while others turn away, and while still others seek to stoke division, animosity, and worse, we will turn toward Israel, learn the lessons of a complicated history and the reverberating effects of

her unprecedented re-establishment after two thousand years. We will give thanks in the form of dedication and study, mature conversation and sincere reflection, for this modern miracle for which our concern may run deep but for which our gratitude and support must remain unbounded.

Am yisrael chai, Shanah Tovah, Gmar chatimah tovah.