

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5771

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Good Yom Tov!

Exile and return. This is the pattern of our spiritual journey each year as we attempt in this season to return from whatever spiritual places of exile we have gone astray and to turn back in *teshuvah* to our best and most focused, in-tune self to renew our journey toward our highest potential in the beginning and newly unfolding year. This pattern of exile and return seems to be inscribed in the DNA of the Jewish experience for Jewish history has been a sequence of exiles and returns. The Greek word for our places of exile is Diaspora. It means a scattering. As Jews, we certainly have been scattered and we have been gathered in.

As we gather within this sanctuary on this sacred night of Rosh Hashanah, I believe that each one of us here has a unique sense of Jewish identity. The question, "Who is a Jew?" can only be answered by our own introspective questions about who we each are as Jews.

The great scholar [Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz](#) wrote a book entitled, *We Jews*, in which he discusses some of the complexities of Jewish identity. He points out that we are not just a religion. After all, there are many secular Jews who are just as Jewish as religious Jews but simply do not choose to practice the religion. He goes on to point out that we are also not a nation. After all, we do not live in one common land or all speak a common language and we are citizens of many nations. We are certainly not a race for Judaism has always welcomed into the fold people of all races who seek to be in a covenantal relationship with other Jews. Steinsaltz finds most resonance with describing Jewish identity as a matter of family connection. To be a member of *Beit Yisrael*, which means the Household of Israel, is to be a member of a family.

We are here tonight because we have a bond of connection through a collective sense of Jewish identity as members of Beth Israel, The Household of Israel. Each of us has a unique inner makeup of elements that together form our Jewish identity. Some primarily carry an inherited sense from the home and family in which we were formed while others have grown their Jewish identity through a process of discovery and exploration of Judaism. For some this exploration has culminated in the realization, after much study and experience, that indeed their inner sense of self had grown into an identity seeking a sacred bond with the Jewish people.

The range of elements that form our identities as Jews includes to some degree our shared connection with the Jewish religion in its many and varied expressions, Jewish culture, Jewish history and a sense of shared destiny and shared responsibility for one another. As our sages teach, "*Kol Yisrael Areivim zeh bazeh*, All of Israel is responsible one for the other." We have a

fundamental *mitzvah* – *Ahavat Yisrael*, a commandment to cultivate loving relationships that bind our household in unity. This core mitzvah is not so simple. When we consider the depth of divisions within the Household of Israel, we understand how great this mitzvah is.

It is our religious obligation to seek ways to love even those within the household of Israel whose views we find offensive. Those whose views we find offensive almost certainly take equal offense at us. How broad is the range of understanding about what it is to be a good Jew? Just as we might not be able to fathom the interpretations of others in the family, you can be sure our ways of being Jewish are simply beyond their grasp. What monumental work we have before us - to love the family of the household of Israel.

It is always interesting to notice how a sense of Jewish identity has fluidity as it responds to the fluctuations of the Jewish image reflected by the focus of the media. When Elena Kagan was recently sworn in as a Justice to the Supreme Court our sense of pride was notable. How wonderful it is when one of ours rises to such a place of honor. When we read of the criminality of a Madoff, we collectively shudder with shame. We are all brought down in the shadow cast by a Jewish name brought low in disgrace. We are bonded with these other members of the family for good or for bad - they are ours.

This dynamic is much more constantly in play when it comes to Israel. When Israel shines for some remarkable accomplishment, our Jewish identity reflects that shine and when some cause for embarrassment is the focus of world media attention we can feel a personal diminishment. The way in which the world relates to Jews in the *Diaspora*, those of us who live outside the land of Israel, is very greatly affected by the way in which Israel is perceived.

The land of Israel, a place of promise and pain, gives us much cause to reflect on the *mitzvah* of *Ahavat Yisrael*. We also must consider the depth of the bond between that part of the household of Israel living in the *Diaspora* and those who live in Israel the homeland.

It is this aspect, our personal identity specifically as it relates to Israel, that I wish to explore with you this Rosh Hashanah, for we are all aware of the crucial new beginnings of peace talks and Israel will certainly be on our minds and hearts in this new year.

A few months ago, Shonna and I had the opportunity to spend several weeks in Israel. When we began our planning for the journey, I was not very enthusiastic, for so much of my time and energy had been consumed by relentless debates and challenging issues that inevitably become the primary focus during conversations about Israel. My spirits were low, I was drained, and I did not anticipate being replenished while being in Israel. After all, if I were there in the land, I would feel an obligation to go to the places that form the core content of the painful issues. I would have to go to the West Bank and to East Jerusalem, to the Security Barrier and all of the places that fueled the debates about Israel in Eugene and everywhere else. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I was losing my sense of a positive relationship with Israel and this was terribly demoralizing and deeply saddening as Israel had always been, throughout my life, such a bright inspiration in my heart.

Fortunately, Shonna had a different perspective and with her clarity she forged ahead with renting us an apartment in Jerusalem and arranging for connections with family and friends.

When we arrived, I was amazed at the immediate sense of wonder, excitement and love that welled up within me. Those feelings had always been there in the past and I was so happy to feel them again, as I have each time we've been blessed to spend time in Israel. The difficult issues that had worn me down back in Eugene certainly were abundant, profound and worthy of great attention. Somehow, these challenges took on a different scale in light of the enormity of what is being accomplished in Israel. How could I not be moved by the vitality and diversity of the people everywhere in that land? How could I not be moved profoundly by the beauty of the ingathering of Jewish people from so many places, people who have carried the difficult burden of Jewish identity through terrible times and now had the opportunity at last to freely develop their Jewish identity within the place of refuge for so many Jews who have suffered. It was thrilling to my ears to hear the sweet beauty of young children, chattering away in Hebrew, and I couldn't help but wonder at the faces of the elders and imagine how they gained the deeply carved story lines written in their faces.

The only experience of Israel so many of us have is the one that comes to us through the limited filter of the mass media. There is no way to fully grasp the wonder of the big story of the day to day beauty of Israel, the wonder of Jews from so many varied lands living together in this new nation. Imagine the range of backgrounds, from New York City to Gondor Province in Ethiopia, from Paris to Tunisia, from Argentina to South Africa, Yemen and Australia, throw in some British, Moroccan, Russian, German, Polish, Scandinavian and – who knows perhaps even a few *yiddin* from the South Pole are walking around – send them all to Ulpan to study Hebrew, a language that wasn't spoken as the vernacular for two thousand years, and you start to get the sense of how wonderfully amazing Israel is and how complex the challenges of Israeli society are.

One of the most significant experiences we had while in Israel was the intensity of deepening connection with family. In Holon, a suburb of Tel Aviv, Shonna helped to organize a family reunion with forty-five members of our family who had made *aliyah* from the former Soviet Union. My brother and his wife came to Israel from the holy city of Pittsburgh and for their first time met these long lost relatives. One man, Lava, looks so much like our father, of blessed memory, that my brother and I exchanged knowing glances acknowledging to each other the remarkable resemblance and the undeniable evidence of deep family connection.

We felt such joy in rediscovering family who had been hidden from our lives for so long behind the Soviet Iron Curtain. Shonna and I had met some of these relatives twenty years ago when they had just arrived in Israel with neither the knowledge of Hebrew nor the ability to work in their medical professions. With the passing of twenty years, they are well established. The young ones are, of course, fluent in Hebrew. And by now, so are some of the older family members.

Sima, an elderly cousin in her late 80s, was not able to come to the reunion, so we went to her home to meet with her. She sat with us and reminisced about her childhood with my father z''l in Russia. She remembered the day in 1929 when my dad, then twelve years old, and his parents and sisters climbed aboard a horse drawn wagon to begin their journey toward America. She could still clearly remember that day as her father accompanied the family to the train station. That day began the long decades of separation that had come full circle with our visit.

We are witnesses to the magnificent story of a nation being reborn and, G-d willing, facing and overcoming challenges that are beyond imagination. The enormity of the challenges that all of our family members living in Israel carry every day is something that we who live in the *Diaspora* must appreciate. Virtually every home of the friends and relatives we visited had young people who were serving in the IDF, the Israel Defense Forces. This is not something that these young people are thrilled about. They are not, in my experience, warmongers who relish aiming guns. The young people that I met and spent time with were far more interested in art, in study, in social work or science or medicine. But this is a duty that comes to each household. And it is with sadness that Israeli parents accept the reality that their children must spend their young adult years fulfilling such an enormous and difficult responsibility.

Renewed in my connection and deep love for Israel I felt ready to confront some of the painful issues that had brought my spirit so low before our visit. I met with Rabbi Arik Ascherman, director of [Rabbis for Human Rights](#), and he offered to take me into the West Bank and East Jerusalem and to help me understand the suffering of the Palestinian people under the weight of occupation.

I must tell you that among the precious moments I experienced on this journey there was none more precious than the day I spent in an olive orchard with Palestinian farmers. I went as a participant with Rabbis for Human Rights to stand in solidarity with these farmers, as they went about their work in what had become a hostile environment with frequent acts of provocation from nearby settlers. The farmers were tending an old olive orchard that had been held by Palestinian farmers for generations but was now situated next to Kedumim, a Jewish settlement known for its aggressive encroachment on Palestinian land. I must say that it was confusing for me to look up from my work and see in the nearby settlement a Jewish person on a tractor, also working the field. It seemed so simple and human. I was left to wonder why these people who all want to work the land cannot be at peace. Perhaps the Jews in Kedumim will need to leave or perhaps they will become citizens of the Palestinian State.

Later that day, after work, we had the honor to sit in the home of the Palestinian family who were farming with us and who worked in unity with Rabbis for Human Rights. It was so good to share laughter and some of the strongest coffee and freshest halva I've ever tasted, all within the pleasant air of friendship and goodwill. May the peace process that is newly initiated find fulfillment and bring about the blessing of a Palestinian State, living in peace alongside a peaceful and secure and flourishing Israel.

The international media's focus on the struggle between Israel and Palestine, as well as the struggle with other Arab nations in the neighborhood, often deflects attention from other concerns and dynamics within Israel that we as American Jews must concern ourselves with.

Israel must have a secure future and we must do all we can to support that future. That means staying informed about and engaged with what is going on. Reading online news sources to stay up to date with the challenges to peace. Using our voices to promote an Israel that will grow toward the direction that our best judgment discerns. While we pride ourselves on Israel being the only vital democracy in the Middle East, we must be vigilant to protect that democracy from internal forces within Israel that are anti-democratic. Some of these forces take the form of ultra-orthodox religious fanaticism that will utilize the democratic process to create a theocratic state, one that would make no room whatsoever for any form of Judaism outside of ultra-orthodoxy. This is a very real and dangerous concern in Israel today.

There are ways that we can help to establish Jewish pluralism and work for religious freedom for Jews within the State of Israel. At this time, there is no equality under the law for differing strands of Judaism. A recently founded organization called [Hiddush](#) provides a channel for American Jews to help expand Jewish pluralism in Israel. The Judaisms that we enjoy in America can greatly uplift the lives of the household of Israel living under the sad illusion that Judaism is only orthodoxy with no other legitimate forms. A conversion law that would have caused immeasurable damage to Israel-Diaspora relations recently passed its first reading in the Knesset and then was suspended under pressure from Netanyahu. We must carefully monitor and resist this law. It could greatly impact the framework of the Law of Return and delegitimize many American Jews as Jews. It is a horrible prospect that we must pay attention to. We must assure that Israel continues to evoke the ideals articulated in its Declaration of Statehood, Israel will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the Prophets of Israel, it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, and conscience.

There are also anti-democratic forces that operate in the same spirit as the devastating days of McCarthyism that America experienced. Voices that work to delegitimize human rights organizations and to cast them as traitors to the state. This is a troubling part of the picture in Israeli society today. One of the most effective ways of supporting a healthy democracy in Israel is to support the [New Israel Fund](#), a granting source for some of the finest Israeli human rights as well as social service organizations within Israel.

To love Israel, to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *Ahavat Yisrael*, is not to turn from the challenges to our unity or to lull ourselves into thinking that all is well. Nor is it the overemphasis on all of the flaws without fully appreciating the wonderful accomplishments. Love requires honesty and engagement.

We owe the most profound debt of gratitude to those in the Household of Israel who daily carry the weight of sustaining the Nation of Israel on the land. We must be aware of the personal toll that the stress and strife of living in a country that has never known a day of peace

takes on the people. The wounds of the wars are evident in the markers that memorialize fallen Israelis in the midst of simple neighborhoods in Jerusalem. Israelis carry visceral memory of the explosions that shook their cities as cafés were targeted and buses blown up.

Our apartment in Jerusalem was directly across the street from a café that had been the target of terror ten years ago. Thank G-d that Israel has found ways of securing the safety of its citizens and the air is much freer to breathe since those security measures have been implemented. Israel gives to us and to our Jewish identities a depth of qualities that we cannot fully fathom. Only those in our congregation who lived in Europe before there was a State of Israel can fully appreciate the shift in Jewish identity that has emerged since that time of horrific vulnerability. I cannot imagine the loss we would feel if, G-d forbid, those who seek to delegitimize and destroy Israel would succeed in their constant onslaught.

Just as we owe an enormous debt to those who live in Israel, we too have something great to offer the Household of Israel in the land. In our Diaspora we have created thriving expressions of Judaism that could nourish the Jewish spirit of Israel. Slowly our offerings are being planted in Israel and becoming vital spiritual resources for Israelis. [Kol Haneshamah](#), a Reform synagogue in Jerusalem is a hub for progressive Judaism. Their Rabbi Levi Kelman is a leading voice for Human Rights in Israel. [Nava Tehila](#), is a newly emerging Jewish Renewal community whose Rabbi Ruth Kagan is the direct descendant of a line of eighteen generations of rabbis. She is the first woman rabbi in her family line. Both of these outstanding rabbis were trained in America and they are bringing to Israel gifts of Jewish pluralism that are slowly growing. These of course are only two examples of a growing presence of Progressive communities that have formed in recent years. These new expressions are allowing Israelis to experience new possibilities for their Jewish identity and as they are embraced increasingly in Israel, they will serve as bridges of understanding and connection unifying our Household.

We have something precious to offer Israel as American Jews who know the blessings and possibilities of living in a thriving and pluralistic democracy. Our experiences are so dramatically different from the daily experiences of our family in Israel. Fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *Ahavat Yisrael* requires our sensitivity to their struggles and requires generosity of spirit in bringing what we can to Israel's continued flourishing.

Some may say, as we have heard many times before, we Diaspora Jews have no business meddling in Israel's politics. After all, we don't live there and our lives are not on the line. I say that this view is unsatisfactory. Israel is the Jewish homeland. It is not just the Israeli homeland. Our wellbeing in the Diaspora is determined by Israel's standing in the world. We have much to give to the continued building of the country and certainly as American Jews we have contributed greatly to Israel's early foundation and continuing wellbeing. Israel must not separate itself from Jews in the Diaspora any more than we in the Diaspora can afford to separate ourselves from Israel.

Above all I hope that in my words this Rosh Hashanah you will hear a call to awaken to contemplate your own Jewish identity and how that identity embraces a relationship with

Israel. I hope that you will hear in my words a message that encourages active engagement with Israel by staying informed beyond the information available through the mass media. I hope you hear the great value of visiting Israel and creating a personal connection with the land and its people. I hope you hear that there are wonderful ways of engaging in the continued creation of the State of Israel as a vibrant democracy and as a Jewish homeland that flourishes spiritually through embracing Jewish pluralism. I hope you hear the importance and urgency of this time in Jewish history as a time of unparalleled opportunity for fulfillment of the age-old vision and the hopes of countless generations who have come before us. A yearning to at last live in peace and security after returning from the long exile.

May we be blessed to succeed in our *teshuvah* as individuals and as a family, the Household of Israel, and be blessed to fulfill the *mitzvah Ahavat Yisrael*. *Shana Tova Tikateivu* – May you all be inscribed in the Book of Life for a year of abundant blessings.