

Looking at the Land

This week and next, we find ourselves in the final chapters of the book of Deuteronomy, *Devarim*. We find ourselves on the mountaintop with Moshe, standing in the plains of Moav, looking over into the promised land. God has taken Moses up to the top of Mount Nebo and says: Here, look—look across the length and breadth of this land. You may not go in, but I want you to see all of it.

And I think, as Moshe looked, that he was able to see very far; not just in space, but also in time. He stood there and looked across that land flowing with goat's milk and date honey, a land of barley and olives, figs and pomegranates, and he saw all that would be in this place, all the beauty and all the bloodshed that would mark it.

And I think Moshe gazed right up to our very own time, he looked at what is happening in that holy land today, the violence and the fear and the rage, and he saw something that perhaps was a bit hard for him to take in: that we Jews really are just like everyone else.

If it was hard for Moses to admit, it's hard for us too. All this time, all these thousands of years, we've been telling ourselves and telling others that we are somehow different. And it's true that our history has made us different in certain ways. There are peculiar contradictions that Jews have often experienced. In many countries over many centuries, there have been Jews who were very close to power while Jews as a community remained locked out of power. At times when other peoples were wiped out or converted, we were tolerated, and at times when others were tolerated, we were exiled or annihilated.

And we thought we were different because we had the prophets, who brought their message of justice, and we wanted to bring that message to a world that couldn't always hear. And we thought we were different, because where other nations, who depended on armies and governments, disappeared into the history books, we who depended on our houses of study and our codes of law, survived. We thought we were different because we are so few yet we've had influence in so many ways, as individuals, as communities.

Our history, our particular experience, does make us different, but it's our hearts that make us the same as everyone else. This is the lesson I am learning as I hear the news from Israel this week. We are not different. We are not different, because we have taken our fears, and the horrible hurts that were done to us in this century, and in Israel we have turned that fear and that hurt into the oppression of another people. And in America we hide behind that fear, we care more about what non-Jews will think when they read the paper than we do about human beings who are dying—Palestinian, Jew, it doesn't

matter—human beings are dying. We are not different because, like other people, our own wounds make us angry, make us indifferent, make us hurt others.

We are not different because, like people in power all over the world, we do not know how to handle that power properly. We are not different because we commit the idolatry of excessive nationalism, we consider pieces of land, stones and buildings, more holy than the holy spark in every person. We are not different because if we are far from power we do not speak up, we do not take action, we blame others or try to distance ourselves from what's happening.

I say “we” because even if, as Jews, we're in the end not so different from everyone else, we're still Jews; we're connected by our history and our ancestry and our relationship to Torah and to one another; we bear some responsibility in all of this. Each of us carries within us the legacy of Jewish history. And that legacy is a difficult and complicated one. Each of us carries this subterranean fear shaped by the last 2,000 years of our people's experience—fear of expulsion, of exile, of annihilation—and how could we not? It's happened so many times, it's part—if only part—of what being a Jew has meant.

There are Jews in this room who carry the legacy of these hurts, these fears, the reality of anti-Semitism. People whose parents didn't tell them they were Jewish until they were teens, until they were adults, who never told them. People whose families went through the Holocaust, who carry the pain and the terror of that catastrophe. People who find their own Jewish identity a source of confusion, not of joy. For some of us the hurt is buried very deep, almost invisible; for others it's as close as yesterday.

This legacy gives all of us, I think, a very funny relationship to power. We Jews are very attached to this idea of being the victim, and we don't quite know what to do when we're not—whether it's in Israel or here in America. Israel has one of the strongest militaries in the world, and has the backing of the most powerful nation on the planet—and yet there remains this fear that it could all vanish like a puff of smoke. In America we enjoy a greater degree of assimilation and acceptance than any other Jewish community in history, we enjoy material abundance and access to all sorts of types of power—yet as a community we cling to a fascination with the Holocaust, to our own self-image as victims. We tremble when Israel appears in a negative light in the news, we worry that an observant Jew running for vice president might somehow endanger us. It's hard for us to admit that perhaps in some ways we're not so different—that we're neither victim nor victimizer, just human.

I do not know exactly what we can do about the horrible violence that is happening in Israel and the occupied territories; actions for peace will have to wait until after the holiday. But I want to believe that there is some work, some internal work, that perhaps we can begin tonight.

I began by saying we're not so different, and I think that's true; we need to be able to think about ourselves and other Jews in a way that does not obscure our basic humanity, for better and for worse. But I also believe that we need to explore what it is that is particular to us, the specific ways in which we have been hurt, as Jews. I learned something important a number of years ago from Cherie Brown, the director of the National Coalition Building Institute. Cherie spoke about how each people who has suffered oppression internalizes the dynamic of that particular oppression. So we Jews tend to hurt ourselves in a way that mirrors how we have been hurt over these past millennia. And the basic message of anti-Semitism has been: you as a Jew should not exist.

In Christian Europe we were told we're a theological impossibility—how could one still be a Jew after the coming of Christ? So we must stop being Jews, and convert. In this century, we were told by the Nazi regime that we are a socio-biological impossibility—an “anti-race”—and so we must cease to exist, period.

And so we absorb this horrible distortion—this idea that we as Jews should not exist—and we turn it against ourselves and against other Jews, telling ourselves all the ways that we should not be. We're too religious, or we're not religious enough. We're too Zionist, we're not Zionist enough. We try to minimize our own existence by going into hiding, downplaying our Jewishness, mocking Judaism, by being afraid of being “too Jewish.” Can one be too Italian? Too Irish? Too Japanese? What does it mean to be “too Jewish,” except ashamed of who we are?

And some of us go in the opposite direction, hiding our fears by proclaiming the superiority of everything Jewish, cutting ourselves off from non-Jews, becoming suspicious of all outside our own community. But it's still based in fear, and hurt—just the flip side of the coin.

These are things we need to understand, because they're part of who we are. We need to understand that Jews aren't so different. That Israel is a sovereign nation and has a government and that this country, this government, has the capacity to act badly and the capacity to act honorably—just like any other nation in the world. Both our criticism and our support of Israel need to come in response to the reality of the situation and out of our hope for peace and justice for all involved. We have to not worry what the rest of the world will think but worry about what we think. We need to voice our criticism and our support not out of fear or shame, not out of denial or paranoia or guilt, but from a place of clarity and integrity.

We will only be able to do this if we can heal some of our own hurts as Jews. Anti-Semitism is a distortion and we have absorbed that distortion, and it affects our ability to see things clearly. This distortion affects our capacity to see ourselves, it affects the way that we relate to Judaism and to Israel. We cannot look at the current situation with any amount of clarity if we are peering through a veil of shame or denial or fear.

We need to get to know ourselves a little better as Jews. Where are the places of hurt inside me? Is there fear, is there shame about what it means to be a Jew? Who are the Jews who I wish did not exist? Which Judaism is it that I can't stand? What are the Jewish parts of myself that are difficult for me to love? Where did I learn this, and why do I hold onto it?

And we need to get to know the positive parts, as well—to look for those places where our Jewish identity, our Judaism, gives us a healthy sense of pride, a sense of connection and groundedness. We need to find those parts of our Jewish selves that we most adamantly do want to exist. And we need to be able to imagine what it would be like to be a Jew without shame, without fear, without any hiding.

I'm not Moses; I can't see beyond this moment. All I can do in this moment is pray with all my heart and soul that peace for Israel and the Palestinians is still a possibility, that somehow out of this blood and intransigence, out of all this rage and fear, out of this complete failure of leadership on all sides, some good can come. I pray that our own country can act for the good of both Israelis and Palestinians and stop this suicidal violence. And I pray that each of us can find the courage and vision to see clearly and to act with integrity in the days to come; that we will not hide our eyes or stand idly by the blood of our brothers and sisters and cousins.

And I pray that the words of the Aleynu can move from words on the page to some kind of reality; that we can take it upon ourselves *l'taken olam b'malchut Shaddai*, to repair the world with all the Godliness that we can muster. That there will be a time when God will have a name that we can all agree upon, when one truth binds us together, instead of partial truths tearing us apart.

May the One who makes peace in the heavens make peace for us, for Yisrael, for Yishma'el, for all who inhabit this earth.

Rabbi Toba Spitzer

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