

Israel: Telling a New Story

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We have come a long way since the rituals described in our Torah portion today--a long way since Yom Kippur was focused on the Temple, on animal sacrifice and the central figure of the High Priest. At the center of the Biblical Yom Kippur were rituals of purification, for the Temple itself, for the High priest and his family, and for the entire community of Israelites. The High Priest made symbolic expiation for his own sins, and his entire people's sins, through a series of sacrifices and confessions. For the one time of the entire year, he would enter the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctum of the Temple, to achieve this purification. Then he would place upon the head of a goat the sins of the entire community, and send it into the wilderness, carrying all the people's transgressions with it.

The Temple in Jerusalem is long gone, the priesthood is long gone, and we no longer send a goat into the wilderness. We do not have a central authority to take on the responsibility of absolving us of our sins; we need to do that for ourselves. In fact, beyond fasting, there is so little that connects what we do today on Yom Kippur to the practices of our earliest ancestors, it's remarkable to realize that we have inherited their traditions. Yet there is some kind of thread that connects us, some way that we are invited to hear in this ancient text an echo of our own search for forgiveness, our own attempt to make a fresh start.

One way we keep that thread connected is by telling the story - by reading this Torah portion today, and, in the traditional Yom Kippur Musaf, by re-enacting the High Priest's ritual. We tell the stories and we know ourselves as the inheritors of this tradition, even if we can't actually trace our family back to ancient Canaan, even when we know that our roots lie outside the Jewish people. We tell the story, and we locate ourselves inside that story, so it becomes ours.

Stories are important; they tell us who we are, what our purpose is, and where we are going. Every community has a story of its roots, of its values, of its hopes and dreams. And when a communal story starts to fray, when there are disparate versions and irreconcilable outcomes, the community suffers. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Torah—and the Hebrew Bible as a whole—is that it's an amalgam of different, sometimes contradictory versions of the same story, a bunch of texts by many different people that some brilliant editor or group of editors managed to weave into a semi-coherent whole, in order to keep the people who understood themselves as *bnei Yisrael*, the children of Israel, together. The Hebrew Bible is a holy mess of political disagreements, differing theologies, remnants of rejected myths and subversive stories, all rubbing up against each other, and, in all that barely held-together tension, creating opportunities for dialogue and debate that have defined much of the Jewish conversation for the past 2,000 years.

In many ways, I think we are in a moment when we are similarly being called to take up a fraying, contradictory story, and re-weave it, re-assemble it, for the sake of our community. That story is the story of Israel – not the people Israel, but the place Israel, the land and the state of Israel. And because Yom Kippur is a time when we reflect not only on our own

souls and spirits, but the day when the High Priest sought expiation for the entire people, I thought it might be appropriate today to talk about what it might mean to write a new narrative around our relationship, as individual Jews and as a Jewish community—including our non-Jewish members—to the land and state of Israel.

There are a number of things I do not particularly want to talk about. I don't want to tell you how you should feel, or shouldn't feel, about Israel. I don't want to talk about how peace might finally be achieved between Israel and her neighbors - although I fervently hope and pray that that time will come soon. I don't want to share my opinions, or ask you to reconsider yours. What I would like to do is to ask you to join me in considering a project of reframing, of creating a new narrative - a narrative expansive enough, like this Torah here, to have a place for all of us in it.

Why do I want to do this? Because I think our community, our American Jewish community, is suffering because of our inability to talk about Israel. Some of us can barely think about it, much less enter into conversation about it, we are so conflicted, or confused. There is so much pain, so much silence, because it is the one topic that can cause such disagreement and distress, even among people who care for and respect one another. And I really believe it's not the place itself that is causing this problem - because there are other complicated places and issues we can talk about. It's the narratives that frame it - or the limitations of the narratives at our disposal - that have created this problem.

I have been engaged in conversations about Israel since I was 11 years old at a Labor Zionist summer camp, and at many different junctures in my life I've felt as if I'm negotiating some kind of ever-shifting battle-field, where the enemy line is constantly being redrawn, and I have to be careful where I walk.

When I was in college in the early 1980s and joined the local chapter of New Jewish Agenda, it was taboo in the Jewish community to utter the letters "PLO" in any context that suggested dialogue might be worthwhile. Our little Middle East Task Force actually spent 18 months discussing whether or not those three letters would appear in our mission statement.

Around the same time, in my early 20s, I was blacklisted in the youth movement I'd grown up in and told I couldn't be hired at one of its summer camps because - I'm actually not sure what the reason was, except that I had joined New Jewish Agenda, and I wanted to be able to ask questions about what it meant to create a Jewish state in a country where other people were also living.

When I was living and working in DC after college, I very rarely told my leftwing friends about my involvement in my Zionist youth movement, even though it was one of the most important aspects of my life. I knew they would think it was a problem. In more recent years, I've had to justify my involvement in J Street to my more conservative colleagues and explain my decision not to be active with Jewish Voice for Peace with my more radical colleagues. I've clenched my teeth at services where the rabbi was defaming Palestinians, and I've braced myself at peace marches for the inevitable anti-Israel vitriol.

What is implicit in all of these scenarios is that there are "sides" that one must choose to be on--the Jewish side, the Palestinian side; the side of survival, the side of justice; the realist side, the idealist side. In any given situation, the side I'm on could feel safe, or feel very unsafe. And instead of real conversation, each situation becomes a game of allegiances, of justification, of staking out a position and defending it, or of trying to prove something—that I really do care about the Jewish people, that I really do care about all human beings, that I am a just and good person.

To be honest with you, I'm tired of all the negotiation, tired of trying to position myself in such a way that I'm not excluded from some imaginary collective that I'd like to be a part of - the collective of the Jewish community, the collective of people committed to peace and justice. I am tired of calibrating every statement I make, making sure that I don't say more negative than positive, or more positive than negative. Whatever organizations I choose to support, the reality is there is no one organization that speaks for me, no one analysis that incorporates all the facets of my thinking. The truth is that I have my own personal, complicated relationship with Israel, just like many people in this room have their own personal, complicated relationships with Israel. There is beauty and sadness and joy and shame and nostalgia and love and anger in my relationship. There are smells and faces, tastes and sounds, profound and painful memories--all of this and more goes into that relationship.

And I know there are many folks here who have a more abstract relationship, who haven't ever been to Israel or the Palestinian territories. Maybe it feels very distant, or maybe it's a place you've always wanted to go. Maybe it's a place you've been told you're supposed to care about - either about Israel the Jewish state, or about the struggle of the Palestinians. Maybe the whole issue is just too confusing, too scary, to even think about too much.

But however untenable the whole conversation has become, I believe with all my heart that whether or not we want to be engaged with Israel, we need to be. Not in the same way as the people who live there; for those folks, it's real life, and they have daily realities to contend with. For us in America, we are dealing not just with a real place, but with a strange amalgam of myth and reality, of the "upper Jerusalem," the heavenly place of our rabbinic ancestors' imagination, and the "earthly Jerusalem," the place that we know from personal acquaintance, from the news, from the stories we're told and that we tell ourselves.

I think in some way Israel has become our goat, that little animal burdened with all of our sins, and also all of our hopes, our questions, our stories about who we are as a people. "Israel" stands in for so much--for what it means to be a Jew in the 21st century; for what it means to be a tiny minority in America and in the world; for what it means to have power, whether we like it or not.

I think it's impossible for us to read our Torah stories - stories written thousands of years ago, taking place in an entirely different reality than the one we now inhabit - it is impossible for us to read those stories about the promise of the land, the conquest of the

land, the beauty of the land, exile from the land - to read those stories and not think about what is going on in that land today. It is impossible for us to wrestle with our peculiar legacy as a people - on the one hand, disempowered and stateless for 2,000 years, on the other hand surviving and flourishing when other ancient cultures have disappeared forever - to wrestle with this legacy separate from the realities of power that Jews have taken on in the modern Jewish state.

We Jews have conflicting stories that we're holding on to, and it's getting difficult to reconcile them. There is the story of Jewish victimhood, the deeply felt sense that our existence is precarious, that enemies seek to annihilate us at every turn. How do we tell that story, and at the same time reckon with the very real power wielded by the state of Israel? There is another story of Jewish powerlessness, one in which we naturally identify with the oppressed, with those similarly without power. How do we tell that story, and reckon with the fact of Jews being in power, and wielding it just as imperfectly and sometimes immorally as most people who hold power?

And then there are all the smaller stories - our own stories about the land of Israel, the people there, whether Jewish or Palestinian, Muslim or Christian. Stories of family and friends; stories of ourselves visiting or living in Israel; stories about our desire to visit but not yet making the trip. And our stories not about the actual place, but about our relationship to it: the fights we've had, the conversations we've avoided, the books we've read, the organizations we've joined or refused to join. Many years ago, when I was working in DC at a progressive nonprofit, I had a co-worker - like me, a Jewish woman in her mid-20s' - who told me that whenever the topic of Israel came up, she'd put her hands over her ears and start to hum! Even that is a story.

What I want is a new kind of story; a big story that can somehow contain all of our stories, make room for them, and allow their differences to live next to one another. A narrative that can help us understand what it means to be a Jew in the 21st century. A story that somehow acknowledges the mythical place of Jerusalem, of Zion, in our collective unconscious, without needing to either exalt or reject that myth. A story that would have room for all the messy complexity of Israel today. A narrative that would be gracious and understanding of the other narratives surrounding that piece of real estate - Palestinian narratives, Christian and Muslim narratives, a new narrative of refugees from other places in the world that make their home in Israel. A narrative that would neither feel the need to apologize for Jewish power or to justify its perversions. A narrative in which no question would be taboo. A narrative, most fundamentally, that would make room at the table for all of us, with all of our questions and our convictions, with all of our own personal stories.

I personally really need this new narrative. It feels to me at the moment like the only alternative to a painful silence. And I would really like your help in creating it. The best Jewish texts - the Bible, the Talmud, the midrashic tradition - these are all communal creations. They bubble with many voices, with inconsistency and dissent, yet somehow hold together. That is what I want from our new narrative. I hope that those of you who are interested will join me in a 7-session class that I'm teaching this fall, where we will undertake this project of beginning to create a new story. I don't entirely know what it's

going to look like, but I think it'll be interesting. And demanding. It'll demand of us open minds and hearts, a willingness to let go of whatever agenda we might have, and to really listen to one another.

There is a poem by the Israeli poet Yehudah Amichai that points to the starting place for such a conversation, and I'd like to share it with you now:

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

Amichai writes: "From the place where we are right, flowers will never grow in the spring": I hope that when we come together for this conversation, we can all leave our need to be "right" at the door. I hope that together we can plant some seeds that will blossom into beautiful flowers.

He writes: "Doubts and loves dig up the world" - I hope we can bring both doubt and love to this conversation; love for one another, and a willingness to doubt our own certainty.

"And a whisper will be heard in the place where the ruined house once stood." A whisper - the beginning of speech. The beginning of a new story. Not the shout that tries to drown out other voices, and also not the silence of fear or confusion. An inviting sound, something we need to bend close to hear. May we bring that willingness to hear one another, to be quiet enough to hear that whisper, to be brave enough to begin to speak our hearts.

May we all have an easy fast for the rest of the day, and may all of our words - our conversations, our prayers—be for the good. *Gmar chatima tovah.*

Yom Kippur 5774