

Rabbi Jen Feldman, Rosh Hashanah 5771: Earthly and Heavenly Jerusalem

At this time of year, my mind and heart seem automatically to tune in to images of homecoming: As I read our toddler his bedtime story, I feel a connection to the animals returning to their peaceful Big Red Barn at the end of a busy day. I hear from a friend who is on the road, and I think about the comfort and peace she will feel at the end of a two-month cross-country trip, when she climbs, at last, into her own bed at home. I connect with the youth from our congregation who have returned from summer adventures of traveling and camp, and watch as they settle back into the routine of school, friends, and community.

Rosh Hashanah offers a different form of homecoming – a spiritual homecoming. A homecoming for the soul. After a year of navigating both the predictable and unforeseen events in our lives, after circumstance and choice may have pulled us far off center, we have time to breathe, and to reconnect with those core Jewish ideals of forgiveness, hope and renewal. The Days of Awe offer us the opportunity to reflect, and to return to our essential selves.

This year, I stepped into this process a bit early. During the summer, a mini-sabbatical afforded me the opportunity to travel to Jerusalem to study. Israel is a place of spiritual homecoming for me in some very specific ways: It was in Israel that I truly learned Hebrew and immersed myself in the study of sacred texts. It was during the three years that I lived there that I first felt fully surrounded by the rhythms of Jewish time and the cycles of the Jewish year. When I lived in Israel, I came to feel a profound openness to God, and a deep connection to our ancient and modern history. In short, it was there that my Jewish soul came into full expression.

My life since those formative experiences has taken me far from Jerusalem's Katomonim neighborhood. It has been nearly thirteen years since I lived in Israel. My last visit there was eight years ago, and I acknowledge that my sense of connection was beginning to feel more distant. The trip back to Israel this summer reminded me of how foundational Israel is to me as a Jew – of how strongly I am linked to Judaism's homeland at the same time that I stand firmly rooted in the rich soil of American Jewish history and community.

In recent years, though, it has seemed to me that the complexity of the political situation and a growing polarization of opinions have made open-minded and open-hearted discussions about Israel harder and harder to find. Even as a new round of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks focus international attention on the region, I have been struck by the increasing number of North American Jews I have encountered who are simply apathetic about Israel or who actively distance themselves from any association.

I went to Israel this past summer both to reawaken my own personal connection – and because I have come to believe that the relationship between North American Jewry and Israel is in crisis. I wanted to think with the best and the brightest about how to help people engage with Israel. And so I chose to participate in the Hartman Institute's Rabbinic

Seminar, “Engaging Israel: Jewish values and the Dilemmas of Nationhood.” This morning, I want to initiate a conversation with you about this complex topic.

Those of you who care deeply about Israel may not be familiar with the growing apathy that I am talking about. So let me lay some groundwork. Peter Beinart’s insightful and essential article in the *New York Review of Books* this past spring, “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment,” laid out facts that are painful for those with a long and deep love of Israel to hear.

Professor Beinart quotes a 2003 study, funded by several Jewish philanthropists, that sought to understand why U.S. college students were not supporting Israel on campus. During focus groups, the researcher found that Jewish students did not even bring up Israel unless prompted and then, when discussing the situation used the language of “them” not “us”. Beinart says that these findings are unsurprising. He quotes Steven Cohen of Hebrew Union College and Ari Kelman of the University of California at Davis, who summarize several recent studies:

... “non-Orthodox younger Jews, on the whole, feel much less attached to Israel than their elders,” with many professing a “near-total absence of positive feelings.” In 2009, the student senate at Brandeis University, the only nonsectarian Jewish sponsored university in America, rejected a resolution commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the State.

Now, I'm going to pause here before I go further because there is something I need to say very clearly. For many of us who are engaged in these issues, emotions run high when it comes to Israel. Some of us experience spiritual and historical connections to Israel that are central to our sense of ourselves as Jews. Some of us have ties that are deeply and directly personal -- we may have family there, we may have relatives who died defending the country or who were killed in attacks; I know in our community we have individuals who fled persecution in Europe and risked their own lives to establish the State. Those of us who have such connections may experience criticism of Israel as a personal attack, an assault on our Jewish identity, and an existential threat to the Jewish people.

At the same time, for some of us, questioning and challenging Israel’s domestic and international policies forms an equally strong part of our Jewish identity. The Torah’s twin calls for justice and compassion lead us to insist that Israel as a Jewish nation must aspire to and achieve the highest possible ideals. For these members of our community, automatic acceptance of Israel’s actions is a threat to core Jewish values.

So let me be clear: I am not here this morning to take up the banner of the Left or the Right, to argue for or against AIPAC or J-Street or Jews for a Just Peace. On this Rosh Hashanah, I applaud those of you with strongly held commitments to Israel, whether Left, Right or Center -- and I ask you to join me in facing the fact that Professor Beinart puts before us: a new generation of Jews is turning away from Israel. To put it bluntly, some really don’t care,

or don't see Israel as relevant to their lives.

You rarely see opportunities for those who connect or struggle with Israel and those who may actively or passively deny connection to sit down together and grapple with each others' perspectives. That, of course, is part of the problem. And so I hope all of you will be open this morning to a discussion of Israel, the challenges of engagement, and some suggestions for where we might go from here.

While it certainly is not true that all younger American Jews are apathetic about Israel and all older American Jews care deeply about her, the shift in attitude toward Israel is, in part, generational; I'm going to discuss two reasons for this generational shift.

The first is that our views of Israel are largely shaped by our lived experience. Consider that those among us who have lived about 70 years or more are likely to have powerful, personal memories of the horrors of World War II, and of the founding and flourishing of the State of Israel in its wake.

Those over the age of about 50 will have memories of the ominous series of events leading up to the Six-Day War, when it appeared that Israel might not survive; of Israel's astonishing and overwhelming victory, and of soldiers *davenning* and crying at the Western Wall when Israel captured the Old City of Jerusalem.

Those of us who have reached 40 or so will remember the massacre of the Israeli Olympic team in Munich in 1972, the Yom Kippur War, the heroic, brilliantly executed rescue of hostages at Entebbe Airport in Uganda in 1976, and Israel's welcoming of millions of oppressed Jews from the Soviet Union, Ethiopia, and around the world.

These events during Israel's first 30 years led to what we might think of as the two classic paradigms for imagining Israel: As tiny David, bravely wielding his slingshot while surrounded by huge – and better-armed – Goliaths; and as the last, best, and only truly safe haven for Jews in a world that has been hostile toward us in many places and times. In these models, Israel was heroic, its victories clear and clean. Israel was required to use every available resource in its efforts to secure its very existence; and its Jewish citizens, religious and secular, Labor and Likud, joined in common struggle for their nation's survival. American Jews in their 40s and older identified with Israel: As Israel's hardy *chalutzim* (pioneers) demonstrated to the world, over and over again, that Jews would not be pushed around or pushed into the sea, Israel's survival was our survival, and its victories our victories.

Fast forward, now, to the foundational experiences of today's younger Jews: Those in their teens, 20s and 30s did not live through the events I've just described; instead, they have come of age during the first and second Intifadas, the first and second Lebanon Wars, Sabra and Shatilla, operation Cast Lead in Gaza and, most recently, the controversial Gaza Flotilla incident. They have never known an Israel without occupation of Gaza or the West Bank.

For many younger Jews, the Israel they know is not reflected in the image of a slingshot-wielding adolescent: its well-trained army, high-tech arsenal, and large military budget seem to assure its existence. Israel no longer appears to be a nation of unified pioneers, but a fractious society fragmented along religious and political lines – one whose population has been deeply divided and shaped, in part, by, in Beinart’s words, “the culture, politics and theology of the occupation.” For this generation, Israel’s moral terrain is more complicated. They question her use of power and her commitment to human rights.

Moreover, many younger Jews have not had the same kinds of experiences of Anti-Semitism in the United States that their elders had. Universities, corporations, and clubs that barred Jews or limited our entry fifty years ago have been open to us for decades. Young Jews are accustomed to a substantial Jewish presence in the highest echelons of power and achievement – a *Seder* in the White House? A former First Daughter married under the *chuppah*? Of course! – and feel as secure or insecure as their non-Jewish neighbors in regard to their rights, opportunities and safety.

In other words, the two classic paradigms for Israel – as David battling Goliath, and as the only safe haven for our people – simply do not portray the world as many younger American Jews have experienced and understand it.

A second reason for decreased connection to Israel relates to changes within our broader society. In the past, American Jews’ views of Israel were often shaped – and our views sometimes united – by a cohesive view of Israel presented by large Jewish organizations and institutions. Now, in the age of the Internet we access information – or are flooded by it – in quantities far too large, and sources too diverse to evaluate critically. Research shows that most people respond to such “information overload” by sticking to a few sources that already mirror their own beliefs. In regard to Israel, this means that, picking and choosing the sources we are comfortable with, we are less able to agree with one another about what the facts *are*, much less to discuss what they might mean.

Moreover, in the last several decades, as a nation we have become more fragmented. As Robert Putnam and his team documented in the 1995 article (and subsequent book) [Bowling Alone](#), Americans in general are more likely to pursue immediate individual interests, less likely to join a social service organization or even join together to accomplish a common goal. Living in an increasingly individualistic society, we may feel little need to find common ground and join in common cause. And so some Jews who do not already have a personal connection to Israel understandably look for meaning elsewhere, and commit their time and energy in other places.

But if you do not already have a personal connection to Israel, why should this generational shift away from Israel be worrisome to you? If the arguments of political Zionism – Israel as safe haven, Israel as the realization of our national aspirations – do not speak to you; if the religious Zionist view of Israel as divinely promised homeland does not resonate for you –

then in what other ways might Israel be an important place to you, and a meaningful part of your life?

As a Reconstructionist rabbi I turn first to the Zionist philosophy of Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist approach to Judaism. Kaplan was a strong Zionist specifically because he saw Judaism – in the hallmark Reconstructionist phrase – as an evolving religious civilization. That is to say, Judaism has religion at its center but also encompasses history, peoplehood, arts, culture, food, and language; we understand that it evolves, and that we can be active, conscious participants in its evolution. A land where Jews could truly determine how their government might be guided by Jewish values, where the language of our sacred texts would become a modern, living language, where arts and culture would be the creative collective expression of Jewish life – such a land, like no other place in the world, could provide the conditions for the fullest expression of Jewish civilization.

Kaplan viewed Israel and the Jewish communities of the Diaspora as contributing to each other. Strong communities outside of Israel would develop unique expressions of Judaism that would influence and support life in Israel, even as Israel could be the intensified experiment, if you will, that could radiate out to feed world Jewry. He wrote:

... [Zionism] has to foster among the Jews both of Israel and the Diaspora a sense of interdependence and process of interaction; and... it has to give the individual Jew the feeling that participating in that interdependence and interaction makes him more of a person." [*A New Zionism*, Mordecai Kaplan, 1955]

Examples of these kinds of interaction come readily to mind. For instance, progressive forms of Judaism that have evolved in the Diaspora have influenced the development of independent, uniquely Israeli, liberal Jewish spiritual communities. On the other hand, rabbinic students from all of the liberal denominations study in Israel, and what they learn and experience there informs their work in communities around the world. The flow of expertise and material support to Israel from Jewish communities in the Diaspora, the Israeli literature and art that enrich our lives – you need look no further than our *machzor* for poems on the binding of Isaac by Yehudah Amichai, for instance – the list goes on and on.

So, Kaplan's Zionism, with its sense of interdependence and mutual benefit, continues to make sense to me today. But it is only a start. We need to go further:

In the mystical tradition there is *Yerushalayim shel Ma'alah* – a heavenly, idealized Jerusalem that exists in the divine realm – and *Yerushalayim shel Matah* – our Jerusalem of the earthly realm. Too often, I think, images and discussions of Israel stay in one of two absolute, idealized forms – two kinds of *Yerushalayim shel Ma'alah*. There is Israel the hero who does no wrong, and there is Israel the villain — a place with little regard for human rights, a place hostile to pluralistic expressions of Judaism.

But the real Israel -- *Yerushalayim shel Matah* -- is more complex, far more interesting and engaging, even compelling. The key, I think, is learning how to help people experience and talk about the messy, lived, sometimes contradictory place that is Israel: A place that is always forming, wrestling, refining, and in its own way, creating itself.

During my recent visit, short though it was, I got a clear sense of how rich, varied, intense and complicated the issues are in Israel that are so often experienced as black and white from this side of the ocean. Let me give you a few examples of this real Israel:

In regard to religious expression, we often think of Israel as divided into two camps: non-religious, on the one hand, and, on the other, religious -- by which we usually mean a rigid and intolerant Orthodoxy. These tensions definitely do exist, and the country does seem increasingly polarized. But that is not the whole story. When you are in Israel, looking a little more closely, your eyes lead you to the in-between, to complexity and richness.

I was invited to attend Friday night services outdoors at the Port in Tel Aviv. There, a non-denominational congregation, Beit Tefillah, holds services that bring Shabbat to a largely secular gathering of 500-700 Israelis. At a recent service, which has been posted online, the service leader, Estaban Gottfried, invites those gathered (and here I'll quote directly from a translation of his remarks)

“to the largest, *greatest beit k'nesset* [synagogue] in Tel Aviv. The largest, most beautiful -- under the dome of the heavens, with the ocean behind us and the setting sun symbolizing for us the entrance of Shabbat. There aren't many places in the world where this can happen. The *Kabbalat Shabbat* that we create isn't only for those who have come especially because it is Shabbat, but for anyone who happens to be passing by and senses that something here speaks to them. A *Kabbalat Shabbat* that combines the old and the new [ancient words of prayer with modern readings and current Israeli music].”

Beit Tefilah Israeli was created to address the lack of a relevant, vibrant Jewish spiritual community among the secular population in Israel, and to develop a Jewish community life that combines Jewish and Israeli identities. Liberal American Judaisms imported into Israel have met with only limited success; but they have inspired Israelis to explore, create and nurture their own, indigenous forms of liberal celebration, study and inquiry.

At the other end of the spectrum, in the ultra-Orthodox world there is a new phenomenon of dedicated individuals working against internal opposition to create universities which teach secular subjects and trade. One of these institutions, The Lustig Institute, opened its doors in 1999 with nearly 30 young women and today enrolls 450. The goals are to help lift the Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) sector of Israeli society from poverty, and to connect them to the broader Israeli economy and society.

Israel's conflict with the Palestinians, of course, is even more likely to evoke black-and-white thinking than the religious / secular divide. But, like that issue, it is not black and white. And perhaps it is the area in which we should most resist the urge toward simplification.

As part of the Hartman Institute program during my recent trip, I spent a day on a study tour of two Israeli Arab towns located in Central Israel, with the Interreligious Coordinating Council, an organization that is dedicated to building peace through interreligious dialogue, education and action. First, we learned about the complexity of the four-part identity of Israeli Arabs – Muslim by religion, Arab by language and culture, Palestinian by identification (to a greater or lesser extent) with the plight of relatives and friends in West Bank and Gaza, and Israeli by citizenship. Next, we traveled to Baka el Ghabriyah where we spoke with women studying at the Al Qesemi Academy, the only college in an Arab-Israeli town. According to one of the senior faculty who teaches Islamic studies at the college, they are teaching an approach to Islam that counters fundamentalism, that is open and progressive. The Academy is in the process of trying to develop into the first Israeli Arab university in the state of Israel. From there we continued to Kafr Kassem, the site of a 1956 massacre of Palestinians on the eve of the Sinai War. In Kafr Kassem, we saw first-hand the disparity between the conditions and municipal services in the Arab village and the neighboring Israeli town. The vice-mayor told us how the Israeli government had forbidden any expansion of building there, so that his people lived in crowded conditions; we heard about the joblessness, and about the economic struggles of the town to meet the needs of its residents. We were told with great emotion and anger by the head of Psychological Services how their tax base was eroded by discriminatory decisions made by the Israeli government. The conversation among the people speaking to us at one point became quite heated, with some asserting that under the new Israeli Ministry of Minorities conditions were improving, while others insisted that their situation continues to worsen because of entrenched institutional discrimination against Israeli Arabs.

The next day, back in West Jerusalem, we studied with Tal Becker, a former senior policy advisor to Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs and a lead negotiator in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations during the Annapolis peace process. He presented us with the United Nations report that he authored on the state of Israel's minorities – one that laid out the intention of Israel to “reach true equality of rights and duties between the citizens, Jews and Arabs alike, as soon as possible.” We also studied classical texts on the treatment of the stranger, and modern writings on the tensions between preserving the Jewish nature of Israel and allowing minorities to express their culture and identity. My head spun and my heart sank as I considered the disparity between our goals and ideals on the one hand, and the reality I had seen on the other.

The next day, a different teacher, a Jewish, Israeli scholar of Zohar -- who was teaching us about zealotry in the mystical tradition – told us she was ending class early because she was part of an Arab-Israeli Peace Project. She got word that some Palestinians had gotten clearance to come to a meeting. She had to go. She left because she has not given up: for her, to be Israeli is to constantly work for peace, justice and mutual understanding. And my

heart rose again.

The Israel these examples evoke is more complex than the sound bites we are used to. During my recent studies there, another consideration became very clear as well: In addition to focusing on the lived complexity rather than the simplified, idealized version of Israel, we as American Jews need to learn how to talk honestly about power and sovereignty.

As I have learned from one of my teachers, Professor Micah Goodman, the great Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, argued that Jews always maintained the highest moral standards in the Diaspora because they did not have a state of their own. Treated as foreigners, we had no power, and so we developed a special sensitivity to the realities of those who are powerless. If we were to acquire power, Rosenzweig believed, then we too would be at risk of becoming morally corrupt. Professor Goodman posed the question to us – was Rosenzweig right?

What have been the consequences of Jews being powerless and what does it mean for Jews now to have power – political and military power? What does Judaism have to say about power and, equally importantly, about the ultimate test of power – restraint?

The real Israel, the complicated one, is the place where, in regard to Jewish exercise of political power, the complicated reality is unfolding every day with life and death consequences. It is a place where people are struggling to create a country based on Jewish values, rooted in uniquely Jewish culture. It is a compelling place that raises issues of critical importance for us all

So we need, all of us, to contend with Israel as it truly is, in all its complexity. And we need to have the hard discussions together, with people from varying perspectives, about how we relate to Power.

I am so grateful that this community has made mini-sabbaticals possible for me during this past summer and next summer. This year, as I come to you from the intense and multifaceted time that I spent in Israel, I want to challenge us all to start engaging and speaking about Israel in new terms. In doing so, let us create an environment that not only enables us to talk with one another and consider different points of view, but that also invites those who might have turned away into the conversation.

I want to start by inviting all interested to join me in planning a community trip to Israel. Its goals will be yes, to have a good time and to see key sights, and also to engage with the country in its complexity. To look at the Arab-Israeli conflict through both Israeli and Palestinian eyes. To look at the interaction between secular and religious Israelis, and to look for the in-between places.

I also invite you to join with me in two intensive study sessions on power. Let's examine Jewish ethics of peace and war, of self-defense and preserving life, of the exercise of

political and military power. Let us nurture a conversation that can encompass people of different perspectives so that we can learn together. We may wind up with more questions than definitive answers, but that is the nature of complex issues – and those questions are the sparks that lead to greater engagement.

As you can tell, my summer was a rich one. It has brought me to this Rosh Hashanah with a sense of homecoming, and it has also given me new energy to reach out. To help create new paradigms and conversations about Israel that will engage us, connect us, and enrich our spiritual, intellectual, and communal lives. Join with me in this new year as we return, as we reconnect with our highest values, with our truest selves, and with a place that is core to our living Jewish history.

I wish you a New Year of blessing and return, of strength and peace.