

Busha: Rosh Hashanah 5784 – Day I

There is a blessing that tradition has us say when we find ourselves in an אוֹבְלוֹסָא יִשְׂרָאֵל - a very large gathering of Jews which the rabbis define as 600,000 or more corresponding to the number of people who once stood at Mount Sinai. It's not entirely clear whether an assembly of such magnitude ever actually existed, although some say that it occurred at Har HaBayit (the Temple Mount) during the time of the pilgrimage festivals in days of yore. Even the 2020 Siyyum HaShas ceremony at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey celebrating the completion of a seven-year-cycle of Talmud study “only” totaled 92,000. Still, I felt myself keenly to be part of an אוֹבְלוֹסָא יִשְׂרָאֵל as I stood earlier this summer in the midst of the largest group of Jews I'd ever been a part of at the weekly Saturday night hafganah (demonstration) on Kaplan Street in downtown Tel Aviv. תְּכַבֵּם הַרְזִים ... בְּרוּךְ – I said silently to myself. “Blessed Are You Who Knows All Secrets.”

On the face of it, תְּכַבֵּם הַרְזִים – knowing secrets – is not the most intuitive blessing a person might say upon witnessing an enormous crowd of Jews. The Book of Genesis is replete with metaphors expressing how large the descendants of Abraham will eventually grow to be, and it would be an elegant nod to God's promise to us fulfilled to say something more like “Blessed Are You Who Made Us as the Sands of the Sea” or “Blessed Are You Who Numbers Us as the Stars in the Heavens.” Either way, we might expect that the blessing upon seeing many Jews together in one place would be about the miracle of our growth and survival, the strength and might that such a large group of us all in one place represents, but instead the blessing lifts up elements of human uniqueness and difference. As it says in the Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 58a: שְׂאִין דְּעַתָּם דּוֹמָה זֶה לְזֶה, וְאִין פְּרָצוּפֵיהֶן דּוֹמִים זֶה לְזֶה – God sees that “their minds are unlike each other and their faces are unlike each other.” Yet God knows their secrets all the same.

As we well know, it is near impossible to get a group of Jews to agree on almost anything which is but one of the many elements of the hafganot that struck me immediately this summer. It isn't *just* that the assembled crowds are diverse although this certainly is true: from tattooed hipsters to families schlepping strollers to legions of older adults, even as protest movements are often fueled by the young. There are American accents and French accents and Hebrew accents; pride flags and gender equity flags and so many Israeli flags; doctors for democracy and reservists for democracy and peaceniks for democracy. There are black hats and knit kippot and bare heads. There are white collar workers and blue collar workers and tech sector workers in hoodies. Their minds are unlike each other and their faces are unlike each other and yet they've managed, for more than 35 straight weeks no less, to put aside whatever identity politics or turf wars or policy disagreements they might have and come together in common cause. It is hard to imagine such a thing ever taking place here in the United States.

Of course, there are plenty of Israelis who do not support the hafganot and there are people in this congregation who do not either. I felt *called* to give this sermon this year because I know that many Jews are in existential crisis – torn apart by the question of how to love Israel even when she no longer seems to embody the very values upon which she was created – and they are finding their synagogues, this synagogue, to be glaringly silent on the issue.

I also *hesitated* to give this sermon this year because I know that in so doing I will inevitably alienate members of our community, people who I respect and value even if we don't always agree with one another. A viral video out of Israel earlier this summer entitled "*Ani Lo Soneh* – I don't hate" (and then subtitled, ironically, in the English with "well, actually I kind of do") gives voice to the many nasty stereotypes that exist surrounding folks on both the left and the right, the ad hominem insults and assumptions that have come to color the way we see each other, making it hard to speak and listen

across difference. I hope that those who feel less dissonance at this moment between their dreams for Israel and the realities of the day will understand, if not necessarily support, the choice I've made this morning. My door is always open for those who wish to speak further with respect.

I'll first start by saying that it would be easier if we lived in Israel. Yes, it would be far harder too, of course, in all kinds of ways ranging from security concerns to economic concerns to psychic concerns - any emotional pain that we, as Diaspora Jews, feel over Israel piling in comparison to those who have built lives and communities there. For the first time, I'm hearing friends who made *aliyah* - individuals who moved far away from their families, acclimated to a lower standard of living, huddled in bomb shelters during terrorist attacks, and sent their children to the army - asking at what point they would decide to leave - a question that they have never entertained before: even in times of war, even in times of economic upheaval, even in times of strenuous opposition to government leaders or policies. It is a moment of existential crisis for them as for us - but Israel is not only their homeland but also their home.

Yes, it is far harder to live there in all kinds of different ways, but in terms of holding the duality of love and disapproval, love and fury, love and despair that many of us feel in this moment, those in Israel have one enormous advantage over the rest of us: they can - and do - protest every week. And not only that, but they protest in the most patriotic way possible! The hafganot either begin or end with Israel's national anthem, HaTikvah, their symbol - absolutely ubiquitous in the hands of each and every demonstrator - is the Israeli flag, their defining call is Democratzia! Writer Danny Gordis of Shalem College in Jerusalem points out that these are not protests of anger characterized by violence and looting but rather demonstrations of love of country characterized by insistence on a better

future. Their chants are not “Lock him up!” but “Busha (Shame!)” They are less about being *against* - the government, the proposed judicial reforms, the status quo - and more about being *for* - a state that is both Jewish and democratic, a Constitution that would enshrine a national balance of powers, a new vision for the country based on democracy, pluralism, and the dignity of all people. Yossi Klein HaLevi, Senior Research Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute, points to the protests, ironically, as perhaps the single most optimistic sign of Israel’s ultimate success. It shows how very much its citizenry cares for their country and how much they’re willing to sacrifice and fight for her very soul.

The genius of a protest movement that is unabashedly patriotic is that it manages to champion Zionism while at the same time rejecting what many of us would characterize as a perversion of the Zionist ethos. The protestors are, in effect, saying “Busha” - How dare you desecrate Israel’s name! *You* are not the custodians of Zionism; We have an equal claim! *This* Israel does not speak for us, and it is not true to what Israel was meant to be. We will proudly wave our flag for all that Israel is meant to represent, even as we recognize how far she has fallen. Israelis can separate love of country from disgust over what that country is currently doing by asserting the present moment to be an illegitimate expression of Israel’s true purpose and values. It is far harder for us, as American Jews, to do the same.

Over the last many months there have been congregations in the United States who have stopped saying the traditional Prayer for Israel in their Shabbat morning worship; some here have asked if we might reconsider the banner over our building: “Wherever we stand, we stand with Israel.” To me, neither of these is the right way forward and not only because Israel is much more than her government - she’s her citizens, too, including those protesting in the streets who need our support now more than ever. And it’s not because I fear a slippery-slope towards abandoning our congregation’s strong Zionist ethic either, although I do have my concerns at times when I look at how younger generations of Jews

view Israel - no doubt shaped by many of the disturbing phenomena that concern many of us as well. Beyond these things, though, to get rid of our building's sign or to cease saying *Tefillah liShalom haMedina* feels to me like a capitulation, allowing others to define what Israel stands for (and then rejecting that) rather than asserting that we *know* what Israel stands for, even when she has not yet realized that promise. Perhaps it's not quite fair to expect her to have done so, being just 75 years young.

My teacher, Rabbi Eddie Feinstein, suggests that this moment of Israel's 75th is a time both to evaluate Israel's progress over the past seven-and-a-half decades and also to set new goals for her future. Undoubtedly, Israel is a grand success, providing a safe and secure homeland for our people and creating material, cultural, and technological flourishing unimaginable to its founders. She has made the desert bloom, birthed a Start-Up nation, and achieved such a strong and confident military, amidst unremitting violence and attack, that it is hard for many - particular the younger amongst us - to remember that she was once very much the vulnerable underdog and only lately the triumphant victor. Israel's law of return means that we will always have a place to go, something particularly meaningful to the families of Holocaust survivors here today and, increasingly, to those who see antisemitism rising and wish to have a solid Plan B. Israel has revitalized the Hebrew language, created a modern society that beats to the rhythms of the Jewish calendar, fostered an explosion of musical, culinary, and artistic expression, and emerged as a world leader in environmental policy and various kinds of humanitarian concerns.

For many of us, however, all of this is not yet enough. Zionism has always been aspirational, looking beyond the practical realities of politics and governance to build an ideal society based upon Judaism's highest ethics and values. In Feinstein's words, "The goal of living as a 'normal' people with no vision

beyond our own security and prosperity never satisfied the founders of Israel [who]...were taken up with a secular messianic vision. Where is that dream today?” As Israel has become a fully sovereign nation, no longer the scrappy underdog but rather a powerful hegemon with ample resources at her disposal, how will she model just, compassionate leadership for all people for whom she is responsible, being, in the words of Yossi Klein HaLevi “a state for every Jew whether or not they are citizens and a state for every citizen whether or not they are Jews?” How will she balance protecting her people from vicious terrorists who often live around and amidst decent, law-abiding Palestinian families whose lives have been severely diminished by the many restrictions imposed upon them? How will Israel deal with questions of settlement building and non-Orthodox expressions of Judaism and even “regular” old problems like affordable housing, public education, and ethnic tensions between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews? To be sure, there are many different ways to approach each of these impossible questions. To realize the promise of the next 75 years, however, I assert that we must do so in a way that upholds democracy, pluralism, and human rights.

I think that perhaps the reason that the blessing for seeing a very large group of Jews together is **חַבְדֵּי סֵדְרָה** - knowing secrets - rather than something that emphasizes our survival or might is that strength and continuity are simply insufficient unless they’re achieved and maintained in a way that also upholds dignity and difference. Despite the enormous pride and invulnerability that we might naturally feel upon seeing hundreds of thousands of Jews gathered together in one place, tradition reminds us that this is not the moment for triumphalism and swagger, it’s actually the moment for character and humility. If we can gather together 600,000 Jews (a number, by the way, that is less than 10% of all the Jews who currently live in Israel so I think it is fair to say we’ve reached that point, even if we interpret the idea of being “in one place” a bit broadly) then we should have the autonomy, resources, and security to be able to do the right thing - not only for ourselves but for the smaller, weaker, and more

vulnerable people who live within the orbit of our influence. If we can gather 600,000 Jews together in one place, we are no longer in an infancy phase where pragmatism often rules the day but rather in a place of maturity where we should be building towards highest ideals and values. If we can gather 600,000 Jews together in one place, we should necessarily be reminded of how vastly different we all are - how our minds and our faces are unlike each other - yet feel a responsibility towards one another all the same. And God - who knows all secrets - will be watching.

As we hear the Shofar tomorrow, the glorious ram's horn that was sounded at Sinai, perhaps the last time before the emergence of the modern State of Israel that we stood 600,000 together, may we remember the tremendous responsibility that comes from being in a place of power and strength.

Shana Tova!

Rabbi Annie Tucker

