

ISRAEL: A KNIFE IN THE HEART
ROSH HASHANA AM 5779
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

The celebrated Israeli novelist, David Grossman, wrote recently: “Home is a place whose walls-borders – are clear and accepted; whose existence is stable, solid, relaxed...whose relations with its neighbors have been settled...And we Israelis, even after 70 years... we are not yet there...Israel was established so that the Jewish people who have never felt at-home-in-the-world, would finally have a home. And now, 70 years later, strong Israel may be a fortress, but it is not yet a home.”¹

This is what is called an existential problem. The very reality of Israel’s existence is not a settled fact by much of the world. So this morning, I am going to speak about Israel – but it won’t be the sermon you might expect. As you know, I spent some time in Israel again this summer. I love Israel AND, as you know, I have been critical of her on a number of scores. I have expressed my concern about Israel’s presence in the West Bank, and about the bulldozing of Palestinian and Bedouin villages. But that is not what I want to discuss today. Today, I want to talk about Israel’s absolute need for defense and security, about the depth of Israelis’ concern for their existential safety, something I have become increasingly sensitive to over the years during my visits to Israel.

The Torah reading for Rosh Hashana actually speaks to this concern. Soon, we will read The Akedah, the Binding of Isaac, the story of God’s request that Abraham sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. On the way up the mountain, Isaac asks his father: “Where is the ram for the sacrifice?” Abraham responds: God will provide, my son.” In the end, an angel of God intervenes and Abraham sacrifices a ram instead. This is a very disturbing text on so many levels. But for modern Israel, it has a completely contemporary resonance because almost every Israeli son and daughter HAS to serve in the army, and is thus exposed to the possibility of being killed or

¹ Yom HaZikaron, April 17, 2018

maimed in defense of the country. Israelis must ask themselves continually whether it's worth the price -- sacrificing their children for a higher, greater good, certainly, but at what cost?

This is undoubtedly why so many Israeli poems have been written about the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac. Poems by women in the voice of mothers who refuse to give up their sons. Poems about the succession of wars in Israel and the legacy of spilled blood. Poems about a heritage of pain and agony caused by our history of persecution and oppression.

Haim Gouri, a poet and a journalist who covered the Eichmann trial, wrote what may be the quintessential Akedah poem about the Israeli – and the Jewish soul. It's called "Heritage."

HERITAGE

The ram came last of all. And Abraham did not know that it came to answer the boy's question – first of his strength when his day was on the wane.

The old man raised his head. Seeing that it was no dream and that the angel stood there – the knife slipped from his hand.

The boy, released from his bonds, saw his father's back.

Isaac, as the story goes, was not sacrificed. He lived for many years, saw what pleasure had to offer, until his eyesight dimmed.

But he bequeathed that hour to his offspring. They are born with a knife in their hearts.

As Jews, I think we can all identify with the image of that knife in the heart – whether we had relatives in the camps, whether our families came here to escape from the tsar’s Russia, whether our brethren were forced out of Egypt or Iraq following 1948. Certainly, Jewish history attests to the trauma we have been through as a people, especially the profound wound caused by the Shoah. And as miraculous as the recreated state of Israel is, it has come at an enormous cost: the war of independence in 1948; the Suez war in 1956; the Six Day war, the Yom Kippur war; the Lebanon war; battles with Hamas in Gaza; terrorism, including the assaults of suicide bombers. For Israelis, the knife is thrust that much deeper.

According to Rabbi Uri Regev, one of the interesting aspects of politics in Israel is that there is no Red and Blue divide. You can be on the Left with regard to the situation of the Palestinians on the West Bank or with regard to the situation of the Bedouin in the Negev, but you can be on the Right with regard to security. Not that the Right and the Left agree on the matter of how to handle security, but security is pretty much a concern for everyone. You all know, I am sure, how small a country Israel is, and how vulnerable its borders are. Hamas is in Gaza in the southwest, Hezbollah controls Lebanon on the northwestern border. Iran is entrenched in Syria on the northeastern border. And all these groups want Israel to be destroyed.

To the east, on the West Bank, what some Israelis refer to as Judea and Samaria, the Palestinian Authority is corrupt, run by the aging Mahmoud Abbas who is not a clear partner for peace. And, when he goes, we have no idea who or what will follow.

Over the years that I have been visiting Israel, two moments have stood out for me with regard to the security situation. The first moment occurred when I was in Israel in 2001, in the midst of the Second Intifada. Before this, the Oslo Accords had given Israelis enormous hopes for the prospect of peace with the Palestinians. Israel brought Yasir Arafat back from Tunisia, set him up in the West Bank with a police force, and offered the Palestinians semi-independence.

On the heels of this agreement, the Second Intifada ushered in a period of violence and thousands of casualties.

It struck Israelis like a kick in the teeth.

So many felt immensely betrayed, and there has been no significant advance in peace-making since.

The second powerful moment occurred two years ago during my trip with AIPAC. A political journalist was asked why Benjamin Netanyahu keeps getting reelected. He responded that Israelis, quote, "have been mugged by reality" -- the reality of their vulnerability.

This summer, to my surprise and dismay, no one in Israel was even talking about the two-state solution or the possibility of peace with the Palestinians.

Journalist and author Yossi Klein Halevi, a scholar at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, explains why in a New York Times opinion piece: "In 2002," he writes, "when much of the international community was severely criticizing Israel for its tough military response to the wave of Palestinian suicide bombings known as the Second Intifada, the United Nations secretary general, Kofi Annan, asked with rhetorical exasperation, 'Can Israel be right and the whole world wrong?'"

Most Israelis would have surely answered: Of course."

"After all," Halevi continues, "only two years earlier, Israel had offered to withdraw from virtually the entire West Bank and Gaza. In return, it received the worst wave of terrorism in its history. That Israeli narrative of why the peace process failed transformed Israel's politics for a generation, leading to the near-total collapse of the left as a viable political force."²

Now, I am not a political expert so I cannot speak to the solution of this dilemma. But I can speak to the emotional undertone that permeates the Jewish Israeli psyche. There is real pain, and real fear. And there is also real longing for the land of our ancestors. And, of course, on the other side, there is also real pain, fear and longing. Political negotiations have not been successful. So it might be time to try a different approach.

² www.nytimes.com/2018/05/04/opinion/how-israelis-see-the-world.html

Maybe, if we can share our stories with each other, and really hear the stories of the other side, then just maybe we can move the agenda forward where politicians have failed.

And that is what HaLevi is proposing in his new book, Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor, which he discussed at the Hartman Institute this summer. For Halevi, it is not about politics, but about the heart and the spirit. “One of the main obstacles to peace” he claims, “is an inability to hear the other side’s story.”³ In a recent Op Ed piece for the Los Angeles Times, he writes: “The seemingly endless war between Palestinians and Israelis isn't only about substantive issues of borders and land and sovereignty. It is, in essence, a war of competing narratives.” He continues: “This week as Israelis celebrate 70 years of victory over repeated attempts to destroy the miraculous rebirth of Jewish sovereignty, and Palestinians mourn 70 years of defeat, displacement and occupation, each side clings to its founding story as an affirmation of its very being. One reason that peace between Israelis and Palestinians has been so elusive is that the real elements of the conflict — faith, memory, identity — have gone largely unaddressed. Diplomats focus their so-far futile efforts on the tangible issues dividing the two sides. But this is a fight over intangibles.”⁴

Is it possible for the Palestinians – and much of the world for that matter – to listen to our story? To understand the knife that is in our heart? To acknowledge our tie and our need for the land of Israel? Halevi begins his book with Tisha B'Av -- the anniversary of the Temple's destruction and of all tragic events in Jewish history, including the Holocaust. That is the knife in the heart that we carry. But he ends with Sukkot, the holiday that will mark the end of the High Holy Days. To quote Halevi: “The very act of building and inhabiting the sukkah is an expression of defiance against despair. This open and vulnerable structure is the antithesis of the fortified concrete room in my basement, which every Israeli family

³³ www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books/reviews/article-review-yossi-klein-halevis-letters-to-my-palestinian-neighbor-looks/

⁴ <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-halevi-israeli-palestinian-impasse-20180513-story.html>

is required by law to build, against possible missile attacks. We live with that threat as a constant reality. But the sukkah is our spiritual air raid shelter, promise of a world without fear.”

May we resist despair and look to Sukkot with the hope of a future that embraces our story too. May we too find an angel to stop the knife in our heart. And may we have compassion on our children and those of our neighbors as God did with Efraim.

Ken yehi ratzon.