

Drash On Israel – Rosh Hashanah Day 1, September 30, 2008

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I sometimes have to remind myself that I am $\frac{1}{4}$ Palestinian. My grandfather, *Avraham* Danzig [olav ha'shalom] was born in 1902 in Jerusalem, Palestine. Both his father and his grandfather were also born in Palestine. The Danzig's were a clan of rabbis who migrated from Danzig, Prussia to Vilna, Lithuania in the 1700s, and then on to Palestine by the early 1800s. Once settled in Jerusalem, they lived thru Ottoman, Egyptian, and British rule. As a child and through his adulthood, Avraham spoke Yiddish with his fellow yeshiva *bochers*, and Arabic with his Muslim and Christian friends. He received his *s'micha* – his ordination - in 1920 from Rabbi Abraham Isaac Cook, chief Rabbi of Jerusalem at the time. Soon afterwards he married my grandmother, Sarah (olav hashalom), also born in Palestine. After the *Nabi Musa* riots – the Arab pogroms against Jewish populations in Jerusalem – he joined the Zionist Revisionist movement headed by Zev Jabotinski. My Zadie had a bit of a falling out with the British Authorities, and he, himself, began feeling a bit as an **unwelcome guest in his own land**. Seeking a new beginning, Avraham and Sarah, and their daughter, Rebecca quickly immigrated to New York in 1927.

This summer, my personal connection with Israel grew not entirely out of my own volition, but through immediate family ties. On June 30, 2008, my sister Adina Danzig married Dan Epelman of Be'er-Sheva, Israel, with whom she fell in love while leading a Stanford graduate exchange in Israel two years ago. Suddenly I found myself connected to a new family, living in Israel. I selfishly rejoiced when I was assured that Dan would be moving to join Adina stateside. But I suddenly found myself pondering the very real possibility that some day, my sister and her family may choose to live in Israel, rejoining her in-laws and Dan's friends – their friends – *ba'Aretz*, in *the Land*. What would life be like for her? Would she and Dan ever be able to return to a land fraught with the stress of war and terrorism, and a looming nuclear threat from Iran? As a progressive leader of a multifaceted American Jewish institution such as Hillel, would Adina find a thriving religious community that affirmed her own expression of what it is to be a Jew? How would she fit into Israeli society professionally and personally?

This past July, I stood before you alongside a few other fellow congregants to be sworn in as newly elected members of the Va'ad, our congregation's Board of Directors. Together, we recited an oath to serve in the best interests of this congregation and its constituents, but also to serve in advancing the welfare of Jews throughout the world. To me, within that oath, the commitment to the welfare of Jews in Israel is deeply implicit. My family ties me to Israel, but even if it didn't, each of us – you and I – are defined to a certain extent by our relationship to Israel. Perhaps it's through our personal connections with those living in Israel, or when we read about troubling events in the papers, or when we attend our city's Jewish Film Festival, or when we hear about Middle East policies, or when we are asked questions by our non-Jewish friends – 'Have you been to Israel? What's it like there?' – Throughout our lives we are, to at least some extent, inextricably linked to the land of our heritage. It just comes with the package of being Jewish.

This year, as a congregation, we acknowledged Israel's 60th anniversary by inviting Ismael Khaldi, Israel's first Bedouin consul, to speak at Sha'ar Zahav on the Shabbos that immediately followed *Yom Ha'atzma'ut*, Israeli Independence Day. Once a year, we have a national appeal for ARZA, the American Reform Zionist Association. Rabbi Angel has led inspiring trips to *Eretz Yisrael*, and I was glad to hear that she is planning yet another group tour in the next couple of years. But it's probably fair to say that by and large, as congregants, and as a congregation, we don't have a comfortable finger on the pulse of Israeli goings on. We don't have a consistent or designated fund raising effort channeled directly towards an Israeli cause or organization. Some of us voice very strong opinions, while many among us get really uncomfortable about Israel – we don't want to offend, and we don't want to be offended. It often seems like the proverbial elephant in the room.

The same can be said about today's Torah portion, the story of Hagar. We read of our collective ancestors Abraham and Sarah, who expelled Hagar and her son Ishmael from their family and from their land. This very portion foreshadows the chronic separation and tension between Jewish and Arab peoples. It's a very uncomfortable story, yet on this very day, each and every year, all Jews come together throughout the world and confront this particularly sensitive passage in the Bible. From our origins, it is about distinguishing a place of our own, and defining who is a 'member of the tribe' – and who is not.

Like the story of Hagar, one thing is for sure, Israel as a nation is incredibly complex, and particularly as Jews in the diaspora, we often don't give it sufficient due diligence. It's a little ironic coming from a people of the Talmud, which has **more due diligence, opinions, arguments, cross-arguments, commentaries and counter-commentaries** than most folks can comfortably tolerate. We are a people of the **question**. We're not supposed to **clam up**. Clams aren't *kosher*.

And while at our very roots we are unified by the God of our ancestors; **throughout the *Tanach***, our sacred and complex trilogy, we are a people born out of tensions and conflicts *amongst ourselves* much more so than with those 'outside the tribe.' If you haven't quite grasped this notion, I invite you to attend our next Ritual Committee meeting and you will quickly cast aside any doubts. But seriously, we need only look to Genesis 32, *parsha Va'Yishlach* for the first utterance of the very word, *Yisrael* – when we absorb its meaning and its context, we get a pretty big clue of what is in store for us Jews. We know it means, literally, “a struggle with God.” Israel is our ancestor, Jacob, renamed, who, having deceived his father Isaac to receive the blessing of the birthright intended for his brother Esau, comes to wrestle with an angel as he endures a night alone in communion with God. [I know you've read a lot about this story as of late...] Chapter after chapter, ancestor after ancestor, prophet after prophet, throughout the *Tanach* we are defined as a people steeped in humanness and humanity, jealousy and righteousness, deception and accountability, plagues and miracles, of the glory of temples, **and the doom of exile**.

Looking objectively at a nation united by such a rich and complex heritage, Israel itself is a country of fascinating and unsettling contrasts: On one hand, Israel holds out the promise of citizenship for any person with a Jewish grandparent; on the other hand, the sanctioning of Jewish religious life, extending to marriage and divorce, conversion, and ordination of clergy is held hostage by the orthodox rabbinate. It is the one country in the world that brought blacks out of Africa to offer them citizenship rather than enslaving them, and it struggles with unforeseen internal prejudice against its Ethiopian Jews. It is the one country in the world where the net count of trees actually increases year over year, yet abuses occur toward its natural resources. Its Supreme Court is one of the more progressive in the world when it comes to LGBT rights, and Israel is the one place in the Middle East where Arabs can be openly gay; yet Israel allows the building of settlements, which is counterproductive

to the peace process. It is a land bursting with expression in art, music, and poetry. And it is a land steeped in wars and conflict. It is a country of cutting-edge scientific advances in solar, computer, and agricultural technology. And it is home to an Old City seemingly frozen in medieval time by its orthodox constituents of Jews, Muslims, and Christians. For a modern state of just **60 years**, Israel's evolution is truly fascinating, with all its wonders and bewilderments.

How very lucky are you and I to be living in this day, age, and place – in the diaspora *by choice*. Unlike other Jews currently living outside of Israel, we're not simply *tolerated* by our host country. And unlike our fellow Jews in so many countries and communities, we *San Francisco* Jews can afford to voice our minds in public, out loud, as Jews, without fear. We elect our leaders and affect the laws governing our own community and, if we're persuasive enough, maybe even the world around us.

Therefore let us make the conscious choice to connect with Israel *the dream*, the Israel in our hearts, the Israel we aspire to. An Israel where all Jews can feel liberated from the constraints of exile, persecution, and discrimination. An Israel of religious pluralism. An Israel of justice and of peace for all its inhabitants.

Yet especially as Jews, you and I both know dreams don't come true through prayer and hope alone, but they require practical thought, struggles, challenging decisions and hard work, and investment of time and resources. We must also connect with Israel, the political reality.

So I invite you – I *challenge* you – to carve but a portion of your energy and resources to build your own connection with Israel.

Start by getting informed – get your finger on the pulse of some aspect of life in Israel: With Internet access, you can read from among several leading Israeli newspapers published in English. You will find Israeli journalists true to their Jewish heritage, long on critical thinking and criticism of national policy.

If you are passionate about LGBT rights in Israel, you can support **Jerusalem Open House**, led by a small group of courageous, outspoken young adults who coordinated Jerusalem's first Gay Pride Parade in the face of intolerance by that city's ultra-orthodox community. The challenges continue, and they can most definitely use our help.

If you believe in Jewish religious pluralism, then perhaps you will support the **Israel Religious Action Center**, whose goal is to advance pluralism in Israeli society and to protect and defend the human rights of all Israeli citizens.

And if you believe that integration of Israeli Jews and Arabs is critical to the prospects for long-term peace, then you may want to contribute to **Yad b'Yad**, the **Hand in Hand Center for Jewish-Arab Education**, which was founded to build peace between Jews and Arabs in Israel through development of bilingual and multi-cultural schools.

This year I am asking – imploring – each of us to do a little *tachlis* – to get down to ‘brass tacks’ – on what *Eretz Yisrael* means to each of us, and how we will renew or even initiate our commitment to Israel.

As Jews, it's not in our nature to sit on the sidelines of our people. It's not in our nature to act provincially. It's in our nature to act. In the words of Rav Zalman Schachter, *Jew* is not a noun, but a verb: *We Jew. We do.*

I think back to Jews like my grandparents, who came so close to living the dream of a place they could call '**home**'. Where they could, after thousands of years of living in exile, in shtetls, in ghettos, in the face of discrimination and vilification, and under foreign mandate, have a place where each could live his or her life as a **welcomed citizen**.

In 1948, that dream became a reality. For those Jews that survived the horrors of the Holocaust, and for those Mizrahi Jews who were expelled or otherwise persecuted throughout Arab nations in the years leading up to and following the birth of the Jewish State, Israel became a place they could call **home**. It's the one place on the planet where there is a special buzz and smell on Friday afternoons as Shabbos arrives, and where there is still relative quiet on Saturdays - as opposed to shopping sales... Where, once a year, the country literally stands still remembering the holocaust; where during Tu B'shvat, Jews don't just sing a song about almond blossoms, but watch them bloom on the streets... Where observing Jewish holidays doesn't go against the rhythm of the national calendar. *Whether you are a religious or a cultural Jew, Israel is a reflection of the Jewish neshamah.*

May this year be a year of greater understanding and of renewed support for Israel, and a year of peace for all who live there. I wish you a sweet and fulfilling year, a year of blessings, and a year of peace. *Shanah tovah.*