

## Senseless Love

Shabbat Shalom. I was recently blessed with the opportunity to spend three weeks studying and traveling in Israel. For part of the time, I was in an adult Education program with a group of 16 Reform Jews from around the United States. Everywhere we went, from the kibbutzim in the desert to the neighborhoods of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, I found meaning that deepened my sense of commitment and engagement. And I can report to you that Reform Judaism is alive and well in Israel, though its institutions need our support now more than ever. Tonight, however, I want to tell you about just a few moments of my trip, and one idea that seemed to tie it all together.

Early on in our studies, we looked at some of the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, of blessed memory. Rav Kook was an Orthodox Ashkenazic rabbi who served as the first chief Rabbi of the Jewish community of Israel, from 1904 until his death in 1935. Rav Kook devoted much energy to building bridges between the orthodox and secular Zionist communities. He was instrumental in holding together the fragile coalition of secular and religious Jews that ultimately made the creation of the state of Israel possible. When some criticized his outreach to secular Jews, Rav Kook is said to have responded that, for millennia Jews had suffered because of "senseless hatred", and that he would rather practice "senseless love". Ahavat Chinam. I fell in love with this phrase, "senseless love," from the moment I heard it, and it haunted me and was on my mind throughout my trip. As if it was the lesson I was meant to learn. But what does it mean? I took it to mean the love that one might offer in those moments when one's natural instinct might be either hate or indifference. Rav Kook writes: "This Ahavah exists regardless of any shortcomings in the beloved, and without any conditions that have to be met. There can be great differences in personalities, or disagreements in learning, or debate over the right thing to

do, but, true Ahavah transcends all of this.” Another teacher writes: Ahavat Chinam is the love we show to someone who might be otherwise invisible to us.

I set out in my own very imperfect way to see what I could learn through this lens of Ahavat Chinam. I can be a pretty judgmental person; and Israel is a very easy place to be judgmental. I was determined to see things that might have been otherwise invisible to me, but could I postpone judgment and begin instead with love? Let me share a few stories with you.

I have had little exposure to the Orthodox Jewish community, either here or in Israel. But on the night of Yom Y’rushalayim, Jersualem Day, I went to the Old City on my own to be in the middle of the massive, joyous and largely Orthodox celebration. We had been told that this holiday, which celebrates the 1967 re-unification of Jerusalem, had become quite political, celebrated almost exclusively by those Orthodox who want to ensure that no part of the city is ever ceded back. But I wanted to experience the event for myself. And so I found myself in a caravan of thousands of jubilant people, making our way slowly thru the narrow passageways and staircases of the old city to the plaza that surrounds the Western wall. I tried to relate the elation of the crowd to some of the history we had just studied. From 1948 to 1967, Jews had no access to the Western Wall. When the Old City and the rest of Jerusalem were re-taken from Jordan in 1967, much of the Jewish quarter had been destroyed and the area around the Western Wall was being used as a dump. I could understand and share in the joy in what had been restored and rebuilt over the past 42 years, and that Jews could again come to pray at this sacred space.

But there was something more to my own experience of this moment. Just a few days before, our group had visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial. Outside the main exhibit hall is a separate memorial for the 1.5 million children who lost their lives in the Holocaust. And here I was, a few days

later, standing in the middle of a sea of Jews, numbering surely in the tens of thousands, with about 95% under the age of 25. I had never seen so many Jewish young people in one place before. And surely never so many so passionate and joyous about being Jewish. There were about as many young women as men in the plaza that night, and there was a makeshift partition dividing the crowd. And as I looked at the thousands of high school age modern orthodox kids in the crowd, I knew that many of these teenagers would soon be in the Army, risking their lives to defend the country. I found myself moved to the brink of tears. And I was reminded of something we had learned just a few days before: Each month, there are now more Jewish children born in Israel than in all the rest of the countries of the world combined.

There were a few speeches, and if I could have understood the Hebrew, I suspect that I would not have agreed with all that was said. And then, the music and dancing began. Everywhere I looked there was a circle of young men, arm in arm, or hand in hand, doing the horah. I felt a bit like the outsider, the Reform Jew crashing the Orthodox party. I stood there taking in the scene as an observer, taking a few photographs. And then a group of six or seven young men began to form a new circle near where I was standing. One of them came up to me and tapped me on the shoulder, and simply held out his hand to me. There were no words, just the gesture of an invitation: Come dance with us. And I did. I do not know if I was celebrating for precisely the same reasons that they were, but I do know that my heart was filled with joy and love that night.

Another story: During my last week in Israel, I signed up for a nine hour tour of parts of the West Bank, including Bethlehem and Ramallah. There were six of us in the group; I was the oldest, the only American, and the only Jew. Our guide for the day was Tamer, a Palestinian man in his mid-30s, a self described "peace activist." We visited some of

the usual tourist sites, the Church of the Nativity, Solomon's pools. In the span of a few hours, I saw where Jesus was born and where Arafat was buried. Not a typical day for a Jewish tourist, but an eye-opening one. We drove thru the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem and took a long walk along the security wall. Despair and resentment were visible everywhere. Along the way, Tamer shared his own perspectives and frustrations. What he wanted most of all right now was to see an easing of the travel and work restrictions that have made life in the West Bank so difficult. And he was candid in saying that Palestinians must take some responsibility for the current circumstances. When pressed about a more permanent resolution, he said that in his view Palestinians do not want a two-state solution; his view of what could work was much less clear. And we argued about whether Jews are "simply" members of a "religion", as he contended, or also a people like the Arabs, deserving of a homeland. We did not solve the Israeli-Palestinian struggle that day, but Tamer and I grew to like each other.

Tamer wanted us to see that, despite the occupation, Palestinians are not embittered, and are finding ways to enjoy life. He took us to Zamn, an upscale chic café in Ramallah for lunch, and for a long walk down the bustling streets of downtown Ramallah. And he himself was as passionate about discussing World Cup soccer as he was about talking politics. We may disagree about many things, but I could tell that Tamer was someone who cared profoundly about his people, and who was looking for ways to build bridges with people who care about peace. At the end of the day, Tamer took us to the bus station in Ramallah, said goodbye to us, and put the six of us on the public bus back to Jerusalem. We were left on our own to make our way through the checkpoint that separates Ramallah from Jerusalem. I wish I could tell you that this was an easy passage. The architecture was dehumanizing, and the process was disturbing and unsettling, even for

someone like me, a Jew with an American passport. It took more time than the bus ride itself. At the end, we were relieved to find our bus and make our way back to Jerusalem, but there was little joy on that last leg of our journey.

In Jerusalem eight years ago many parents would not let their children ride the buses or sit in a café, out of fear of another suicide bomb. Today the city feels very safe and teenagers hang out in the streets until well past midnight. On this day in the West Bank, I got a small glimpse of the price that is paid for that security. And I had a chance to experience the humanity of those whose suffering had been invisible to me. Tamer and I are now friends on Facebook.

Are these stories examples of Ahavat Chinam? I don't know. And as I look back at these events with hindsight, it's not even clear to me if I was the one offering love, or perhaps the one receiving it? But what I do know is that having this idea in my mind, this idea of "Senseless Love", opened me up to some experiences and connections that might not have otherwise been possible.

On my last day in Jerusalem, I went to Jerusalem Open House, the organization that serves the city's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender communities. I spent some time with Yonatan Gher, the dynamic new director of the organization. He told me about the great work the organization is doing with their Youth programs. He told me about their Open Clinic, the only place in Israel that is offering HIV testing that is rapid, anonymous and free. He told me about the Modern Orthodox gay men's group that now attracts about 150 people to its monthly meetings. And then we talked about the Jerusalem Pride Parade. Scheduled this year for June 25, or as Yonatan put it, on Erev Stonewall. Back in 2006, with Jerusalem the site of World Gay Pride, the parade became a flash point of controversy between the LGBT and Orthodox communities of Jerusalem, with anger, hostility and resentment rising to

unhealthy levels on all sides. And this continued in 2007, with the parade drawing large groups of protesters, and with the number of police needed to preserve order greater than the number of people marching. But something different happened last year. Yonatan described to me the outreach that Jerusalem Open House made to the Orthodox communities, the series of delicate negotiations and accommodations that transpired. And so the 2008 parade was quieter, with many fewer protesters, and more joy and less anxiety among those who were marching. As he described to me how much sweeter last year's parade had been, he said something that completed my lesson plan. He said, "You know, the slogan we had for our parade last year was 'Ahavat Chinam'."

As one reporter wrote after the event, "This time around, Jerusalem Open House is calling on the people of Jerusalem, and on all of us who love Jerusalem, to consider what a future might look like if people were motivated by "infinite love," "groundless love," love that is just love for its own sake."

On this trip to Israel I saw a country that offers us so much of which we can be rightfully proud. I saw a country that is amazingly complicated, a place where an idea and its exact opposite can both appear to be true at once. And I saw a country in which there is much that needs to be repaired, much work to be done.

I invite you to take your own journey of Ahavat Chinam, and to find ways to make some portion of that work your own.