

Kol Nidre – September 27, 2009

Kol Nidre is like a time machine. As soon as I hear the first notes, it takes me back to Worcester, Ma where I stand at services with my parents and siblings. It transports me to Bates College in Maine where I am one of forty Jewish students wishing I had gone home. It lands in Washington, DC where I revisit the nervousness of that first Yom Kippur as a twenty seven year old rabbi, the ink barely dry on my two-month-old ordination diploma. Every year at Kol Nidre, the time machine takes me to formative experiences like these.

Though the time machine's itinerary varies from year to year, it always lands at one experience that, unbelievably, took place thirty-six years ago. It prompted a Yom Kippur promise I have since endeavored to keep over the years.

The promise? As I have mentioned to you before on other occasions: if I ever had the privilege of speaking before a congregation on Yom Kippur, I would call to mind the moment when I heard air raid siren blasts drowning out the shofar calls in Jerusalem during Yom Kippur of 1973. I would recall how the Yom Kippur War, a war that raged during the first weeks of my first year in rabbinical school mirrored the uncertainty of Jewish life in so many times and places in our history. I would look back proudly on the amazing response of American Jewry when Israel faced a very clear and very present danger on a most vulnerable day of the year. And then I would speak about Israel.

There has been a lot to talk about every Yom Kippur since that war: the Entebbe Rescue, Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, two intifadehs, the tidal wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union, the fact that Zionism is not racism, the rescue and resettlement of Ethiopian Jewry, Oslo, the assassination of Rabin, the fits and starts of the peace process with the Palestinians, the first and second Lebanon wars, Gilad Shalit, the separation barrier, disengagement from Gaza, the position and struggle of non-orthodox Judaism, ... and more.

As you might imagine, we have no shortage of subject matter this year, too. But no matter what happens concerning Israel in any year, we relate to it from a certain perspective. I believe it is unprecedented in world history even as it stems from a foundational element of contemporary Jewish life that holds for us right now. It is there – even when the road is rough, or when the relationship with Israel seems difficult, or when we or our Israeli counterparts respond to each other judgmentally. Tonight I will call attention to this element in the spirit of returning to the fundamentals at the New Year. A Reform movement think tank described it this way:

“Even as *Medinat Yisrael* (the State of Israel) serves uniquely as the spiritual and cultural focal point of world Jewry, Israeli and Diaspora Jewry are inter-dependent, responsible for one another, and partners in the shaping of Jewish destiny”.

http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=42&pge_prg_id=4687&pge_id=1656

That interdependence and mutual responsibility, as we confront challenges in the current moment, spell a unique state of affairs. This differs from an alliance between nations or an agreement between groups. It is a bond of brothers and sisters that is rooted in something more enduring than geography or shared political belief. And this results in a unique relationship based on mutual goals and destiny that is even more compelling than ethnicity or common national roots.

Thus, that think tank added: “...the renewal and perpetuation of Jewish national life in *Eretz Yisrael* is a necessary condition for the realization of the physical and spiritual redemption of the Jewish people and of all humanity. While that day of

redemption remains but a distant yearning, we express the fervent hope that *Medinat Yisrael*, living in peace with its neighbors, will hasten the redemption of *Am Yisrael*, and the fulfillment of our messianic dream of universal peace under the sovereignty of God.”
http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=42&pge_prg_id=4687&pge_id=1656

This means that what begins with a partnership focused on the nuts and bolts of state building in an often hostile environment, takes on, in the future, a redemptive quality for Jews. What starts with the creation of a haven for the oppressed of our people moves toward the development of a society that models the word *shalom* in the most expansive sense of the word.

This frame of reference suggests the Chasidic teaching that before our heads can reach the heavens, our feet must be firmly planted on the ground. Before we can fulfill that “messianic dream of universal peace ...,” we need to see to the “perpetuation of Jewish national life” on the ground. It is that first stage, that planting of the feet on the ground, that still requires our attention. And we have to do that without losing sight of the long term vision. And, remember, we are partners in that first stage.

So we might ask, “How have we progressed in getting our footing?”

As they say, I have some good news and I have some bad news.

First, the good news: when you visit Israel as hundreds of us have done together recently, historic sites like the Western Wall, Masada, Yad Vashem, make lasting impressions on your soul. The history of a Temple built for serving God and then destroyed by the Romans, a tale of martyrdom overlooking the Dead Sea, an Israeli national memorial to the victims of the Shoah – these cannot fail to influence how we live even as they emphasize the profound meaning of a Jewish State and the historic need to perpetuate safe Jewish national life. They illustrate how Israel’s existence itself is good news.

Still more good news today emerges from a one hundred year old narrative of normalcy at a not so the historic site. This story of firmly planting the feet on the ground begins in the year 1909 when about 1500 Jews lived ... in the Mediterranean port city of Jaffa. <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=135&letter=J>

The densely populated city teemed with Arabs, some Christians, and a growing number of Jews. So, one account recalls, “... a number of Jewish residents decided to move to a healthier environment, outside the crowded city. They established a company called *Ahuzat-Bayit* (literally, the home stead) and with the financial assistance of the Jewish National Fund, purchased twelve acres of sand dunes from Bedouins in a place called Karm al-Jabali , north of” Jaffa. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/telaviv.html>

In order to distribute the land equitably, the group organized the so-called “Seashell Lottery.” “...During ... Passover, in 1909, Akiva Weiss, chairman of .. "Ahuzat Bayit" ..., found 60 white seashells and 60 gray seashells at the nearby beach. Inside the white seashells, he wrote the names of the each family ...in the association. In each gray seashell, he wrote the plot numbers to the land.

“A young boy and girl were chosen to select one of each color shell.” Thus each family matched with a piece of land.

By 1911, 60 dwellings had been built in this small Jaffa suburb. Soon *Ahuzat Bayit* became Tel Aviv, named after a city mentioned by the Prophet Ezekiel. Meir Dizengoff – you probably recognize his name - was one of those first sixty homeowners. (For perspective, the first residents in Glencoe settled in 1835) He became Tel Aviv’s first mayor in 1911 and held the office until he died in 1936. He bequeathed his original

home to the city for use as a museum. On May 15, 1948 that home housed the historic gathering during which David Ben Gurion declared the establishment of the independent State of Israel. As many of you know, Dizengoff's residence – one of the original sixty – now called Independence Hall - still stands today. <http://www.stampsOfDistinction.com/2008/05/seashells-and-birth-of-tel-aviv-israel.html>

But I am getting ahead of the good news story. What was it like in this new suburb of Jaffa in thirty nine years before Israel's Independence Day? It turns out that it wasn't much of a foothold.

Listen to this account. An American traveler, whose name, when she embarked, was Goldie Mayerson, said: "We left New York on the nineteenth of May, 1921, just after the May Day riots in Palestine. Everybody thought we were more or less crazy."

".... It took us a week to sail from New York to Boston; at this point several would-be pioneers in our group lost heart and got off instead of continuing on our dangerous course..."

"Ultimately the ship docked in Alexandria, Egypt after a terribly long and disease ridden voyage." Goldie's group then transferred to a train headed west from Egypt toward Palestine.

How did Golda Meir describe Tel Aviv in 1921? "I shall never forget the moment when we arrived at the "luxurious" Tel Aviv railway station on the fourteenth of July, nearly two months after we had set out. Sand, blazing sand – that was all. One comrade, who was part of our group turned to me and said: "Well, Golda, you wanted to come to *Eretz Yisroel*. Here we are. Now we can go back – it's enough." (*A Land of Our Own*, Golda Meir, p32) For Golda Meir, it wasn't enough, and she stayed.

And so did the sand, the blazing sand – that was Tel Aviv in July, 1921. That was the then not so promising land of Israel. It was hard to plant the feet firmly in the scorching sand.

But there would be good news, growing from the seeds planted in 1909. Not too many people these days arrive in Tel Aviv from the US aboard a dusty desert train. Instead one disembarks at the David Ben Gurion International airport at the edge of a now sprawling metropolis.

Sometimes an airport is only an airport, a necessary and sometimes annoying transit point. But not in this case. This one conveys a particular feeling - -and it is not the desolate, unpromising impression of blazing sand. It is not even the bare bones experience of a few decades ago: when you heard Israeli folk music over the El AL plane's PA system; when you walked down narrow steps from the plane to be blinded in the hot sun; when you rode a bus to a shabby terminal building built originally by the British where you expected to see Ari Ben Canaan of *Exodus* fame waiting outside baggage claim with a beat up Jeep.

Now you land at the still new one billion dollar ultra modern Terminal 3: no more folk music, no shaky steps, and no buses. The jet way, adorned with sophisticated advertising for wireless communication of all kinds, directs you into one of the most beautiful and sleek public buildings in the world. But it is not just contemporary and efficient.

The architects, including Moshe Safdie, sought to reflect the country's culture and climate. One of them explained that Terminal 3 was to embody the dichotomy of daily life in Israel, "a modern society imbued with a sense of ancient history and culture."

http://archrecord.construction.com/projects/bts/archives/airports/05_benGurion/overview.asp

It is attractive, climate controlled and well-organized (as airports go). And it features Jerusalem stone and mosaics - not new, but rather archeological finds from Beit Shean, Caesarea, and Bet Lechem of the North near Nazareth. (<http://www.free-press-release.com/news/200904/1239657622.html>)

This all greets you with the message that “You have arrived at a modern society imbued with a sense of ancient history and culture.” After all, this isn’t just any terminal, it is the gateway to Jerusalem and Beer Sheva, Safed, and Tiberias– the locations that unlock so many of the mysteries of our past and our present.

And at the same time, it welcomes you to 100 year new Tel Aviv. Could Golda Meir’s Tel Aviv have become what the *New York Times* travel section dubbed “the capital of Mediterranean cool...”?

You proceed from that airport into a metropolitan area that holds the center of the country’s dynamic high tech sector. They say: “Babies had cell phones in Tel Aviv before the U.S. did.” And you can’t miss the construction. The national bird might really be the crane. That *New York Times* travel report described how the “... construction in the city has brought a small swirl of brand-name architects and developers like, I. M. Pei and Donald Trump ...” to Tel Aviv.

<http://travel.nytimes.com/2008/07/20/travel/20telaviv.html?scp=3&sq=Tel%20Aviv&st=tsc>

Why wax on about matters as mundane as a city and a new airport? You know the words of Herzl: *im tirzu ein zo agada*, If you will it, it is no dream. Dizengoff in 1909 could never have imagined what Tel Aviv would become. In 1921, standing at that desolate sandy train depot, Golda Meir would never have predicted what the gateway to Israel would look like today. The good news: the modern has as much power as the ancient when considering the strength, the will, the existence, and the endurance of the Jewish people. What might only be an interesting travelogue really illustrates the renewal and perpetuation of Jewish national life in *Eretz Yisrael*. This is normalcy that has transcendent meaning. In 1973, we thought only about survival. Now we can praise God for *nisim b’chol Yom*, the mundane miracles of daily life that bespeak renewal and hope, a firm footing and...those long term aspirations.

In a letter he sent to rabbis around North America on September 17, the Israeli ambassador to the US, the historian Michael Oren, reinforced this really good news. He wrote about Israel’s achievements in science, medicine, the arts, and the relatively rapid recovery of Israel’s economy. .

Our unique Jewish interdependence, responsibility and partnership means that all Jews can celebrate the cherished normalcy and achievement of a Jewish State intended to be, as Ben Gurion put it in Dizengoff’s former house in 1948, for “... the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; ...”

The feet seem more planted on the ground than ever. But now and then it gets slippery. Now and then this good news has to steel us for some bad. Ambassador Oren continued in his letter: “In spite of a year of many achievements in a variety of fields, these are challenging times for the State of Israel and the Jewish people. The direst threat to Israel-indeed to the Middle East and the world-is a nuclear armed Iran.

“Iran's support for terrorism, its commitment to Israel's destruction, and its determination to produce nuclear weapons represents the most pressing issue of our time...” (On Thursday, Prime Minister Netanyahu addressed this forcefully and vividly at the UN) .

“While uniting (with the US and other nations) against the Iranian threat, Israel also seeks American and international support in moving toward a permanent, sustainable peace. Israel will continue to reach out to Palestinian leaders without preconditions in the hope of realizing this dream in our lifetime.”

He could also have mentioned bad news like the Gaza War, the controversial Goldstone report, crises in leadership, water issues....

But Iran comes first. The threat is clear and well publicized. Friday’s announcement by Obama, Sarkozy, and Brown shows that the world powers now see what Israel has known. The best statement I have seen about this actually appeared on the editorial pages of the *Tribune* this weekend.

“This is more than just a matter of preventing Iran from going nuclear. This is a matter of preventing a war in the Middle East.

“Stopping Iran's march to the bomb is not an academic debate about whether Iran can be deterred, ..., from using nuclear weapons. It's an existential imperative for Israel. The Jewish state is directly in Tehran's sights. Iran's Holocaust-denying president has called for it to be wiped off the map.” <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/editorials/chic-0926edit1sep26.0.1150104.print.story>

For the sake of Israel, for the safety of the entire Middle East we must support the work of the Presidents of the United States, France and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in diplomatic efforts over the coming weeks. We must urge our own representatives to pass strong, consequential sanctions bills as a way to eliminate this threat without resorting to war. No matter what, Americans should be clear as this unfolds: that there is no place for a barbaric, anti-Semitic regime in the world today.

When I think about Iran and Ahmadinejad, I think about the verses we read just before Purim about the prototypical evil of Amalek (the progenitor of Haman). The Torah’s words ring true: Even when you have settled securely in the land, *Zachor et asher asa lcha Amalek*, Remember Amalek...in the modern society, with a cell phone in every pocket, remember that base unchecked evil can exist in the 21st century unless the world community acts to stop it. What can we, together with our band of Israeli brothers and sisters, do? Fight complacency and indifference, continually raising the issue until there is no longer a nuclear threat to Israel or any other country or people.

And then Oren raised one more item: the quest for peace with the Palestinians is still just that, a quest for a permanent, sustainable peace.

Last Tuesday, in Obama’s presence, Netanyahu and Abbas shook hands in New York City. On the Today show on Wednesday, I heard and saw Israel’s Prime Minister call on Abbas to act like Sadat – to come forward with no preconditions and to settle the complicated and misunderstood settlements issue as it comes up. You simply cannot treat a suburb of Tel Aviv that looks like Gurnee in the same way you might treat something that resembles a camp site in the North Woods of Wisconsin. So far, it appears that Abbas and Netanyahu stand at an impasse. But a positive sign within the bad news is that they shook hands in the first place. That kind of meeting would have been unimaginable thirty six years ago. .

As you know, we Jews today espouse diverse approaches to this decades old dilemma about how to achieve peace between Israel and Palestinians. Israelis reflect a similar split: – remember, in last February’s election Likud won 27 seats and Kadima 28.

(http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/History/Modern+History/Historic+Events/Elections_in_Israel_February_2009.htm#results)

Whether you look from the left, right, or the center, one thing remains absolutely clear. Israelis on the streets of Tel Aviv and Beer Sheva, Jerusalem and Haifa know it. And Palestinians on the streets of the Ramallah and Hebron, Shechem and Jericho know it. Life is much better when nobody's child need descend to a bomb shelter; life is much better when teenagers ride buses to school and their parents go to work each day with dignity and without fear. No matter what you may think about our president's comments about the settlements, he hit the mark at the U.N. when he said: "The time has come -- the time has come to re-launch negotiations without preconditions."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/24/us/politics/24prexy.text.html>

That said, I respectfully suggest one overriding prerequisite: Let all the participants reset and raise the banner for what is ultimately right and good for all peoples: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor." Let that be the only precondition and then let the peace talks begin.

We have good news and we have bad news. You can see the good news in the gleaming airport, the great universities, exciting cities and the fertile fields in once arid lands. Our unique inter-dependence, responsibility for one another, and partnership means that we can overcome the bad news. We shall not remain silent about Iran's nuclear plants. We shall stand beside Israel in its pursuit of peace. We shall strive to plant our feet even more solidly on the ground...

Kol Nidre can transport you like a time machine as it stirs memories of what really matters the most. May its notes one day remind us that as the blazing sand became the center of Metropolitan cool, so, too, did the peace makers prevail. May the strains of Kol Nidre bring to mind the strong bond of partnership that characterizes one Jewish people – from Sheridan Road to Jaffa Road, a people true to its destiny and purpose – pursuing that modern as today promise of all-encompassing *shalom*.

Kein Yehi Ratzon

Amen