



HaTikvah
10/02/06
Rabbi Tara's Yom Kippur 2006 Sermon

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There is an old black trunk that sits in my son's room, a resting spot for his dinosaur collection. It's cheap and ugly, covered with duct tape. But I can't throw it out. Its scratches and dents are a record of my most significant journeys, they mark the miracles I have encountered in my search for identity, for a place to call home.

My parents bought the trunk for my first summer away at camp. After that, it rested at the foot of my bed. Then I took it off to college and eventually to Moscow where I spent a semester in 1987. Those were the days of Gorbachov and *perestroika*, days of activism for Soviet Jews, *refusniks* we called them. There was a calling among so many of us to reach out to our brothers and sisters trapped in a land far away. I remember hauling my trunk into the cargo hold of an overnight train from Helsinki to Moscow, a Russian dictionary packed inside, hidden in its pages were the names of three families. My job was to secretly bring them gifts from the Jewish community back home, to let them know that they weren't alone.

Moscow in February, the snow never stopped falling. It was a couple weeks before I got up the nerve up to make that first call. All the phones in my dorm were bugged, so I took a train in search of an anonymous pay phone. I remember looking out the window at the endless shoddy apartment buildings against a steel grey sky. Eventually, I found a phone and began to dial the number. Then, out of nowhere, an army officer appeared right beside me. I quickly put the receiver down and slunk back to the subway station, trying to be inconspicuous. "They know!" I thought to myself, "They're following me!"

Still, I continued on, and after a few more subway stops, found another pay phone and tried again to call. When I heard a voice answer, "Alo," my heart skipped a beat. I took a deep breath. "Z'drastvuyte. Ya amerikanka, ya hochu..." Before I could stumble through another phrase, a response came from the other end of the line, trusting and warm. "Shalom." There in Moscow, a universe away from anything that felt familiar, a single word linked me, ineffably, to a person whom I had never met. Tears streamed down my face. There, standing in that cold subway station, I had begun the journey. The dream was unfolding. Little did I know, I was headed home.

But where *is* home, really? Can we capture what that means?

Recently while I was visiting friends who have relocated to Memphis, they showed me one of their most treasured possessions- a slab of drywall. I kid you not. Multicolored lines all in a row, marking the heights of their three boys at various stages, along with stickers and the messy magic marker of childhood record keeping. This chunk of sacred wall was from their former home back in the Northeast. There are objects from our past that we simply can't relinquish.

They remind us of home and keep the dreams we once held from fading too fast. They become our mooring, our anchor in the endless flow of time.

It's all about place. Ever try to piece together a dream, the morning after, as you fumble through the first gestures of your day-- left with a feeling but no concrete details to which you can attach it? Morning sets in, the dream quickly fades. "Where was I?" you ask. "Oh yeah, that room..."



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Every dream is linked to a place.

I have journeyed so far in order to find *my* place, somewhere to call home, somewhere to unpack my dreams. After a semester in Moscow, I returned, my trunk filled with Russian souvenirs, but there was one thing I could not take back with me. I had made a good friend in Moscow, Masha. Hers was the voice at the other end of the line on that snowy day. Although she was associated with the *refusnik* community, Masha knew that she herself would never get out. Her parents were card-carrying communist party members. They didn't want to leave, and she would not leave them. Masha didn't want to write, or even try to keep in touch, because she thought I would only remind her of unrealized dreams.

The trunk became a symbol of my travels, serving as a coffee table in various apartments. Then finally, ten years ago I entered rabbinical school and packed it for Jerusalem. What to put inside? This time, a Hebrew dictionary, and "Bring a raincoat," a friend advised. "It rains hard in Jerusalem in the winter."

I had no idea what that year would hold. I was starting almost from scratch with so much to learn. After a few Sabbath dinners, I had become familiar the *birkat hamazon*, the blessing after meals. It begins: From the song of ascents-- *Shir hama'a lot b'shuv Adonai et shivat Tsiyon hayinu ka-holmim*. "When God returned us to Zion, we were like dreamers." That's just how I felt. Finally, I had arrived at the place where I could live out my dreams for the future and, at the same time, return to my past. I knew that I was coming home, to a place that had forever been inscribed upon my heart and soul.

But could *I* feel that way, really? I mean, I came to the whole "Jewish thing" pretty late in the game. First, through my mother's decision to remarry a Jew, my stepfather, and then by my own choice to formally convert as an adult. For most of my life, I have been Tara Elizabeth Campbell, not exactly a nice Jewish name. Come on, shouldn't I be craving return to the Scottish Highlands or to the Swiss Alps perhaps? *Those* are my genetic roots. How *is* it then that I feel somehow, mysteriously called home to Israel? This is the stuff of dreams.

And I'm not getting sentimental here, quite the opposite. Israel is, in reality, complex, abrasive, and jarringly secular. Its people, pushed together into that tiny strip of desert, have no time for American niceties. *Sabras*, they call those born in the land, like that Mediterranean fruit, prickly on the outside, sweet within. There's nothing neat about life in Israel. The chaos boarding any *El Al* flight will tell you that, and Hebrew isn't just the pretty language of prayerbooks - it lives and breathes with words for the latest techno innovations and all the gritty nuanced slang of daily life. Israelis are, like us, prone to the same fears, mistakes, and excesses of all human kind. Israel is simply a nation like any other, striving to exist. So what is it then about the light, the air of our Homeland, that changes me?

Let me describe for you Jerusalem on Yom Kippur. There are no cars on the road, so on the eve of *Kol Nidre*, kids take over the streets on their bikes and skateboards. The hum of industry and traffic, at long last, falls still. It's like the quiet you feel on Christmas day, multiplied ten-fold.



HaTikvah
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Can you imagine it here in Memphis? No TV, just snow on the screen. No radio, only static. No planes flying overhead, not even FedEx. On Yom Kippur in Jerusalem, the world stops. And you know what you hear? Voices, voices intermingling in conversation and song. I remember wandering from synagogue to synagogue in the stillness of the late afternoon, the sunlight golden—as it can be only in Jerusalem. Never before had I had the experience of being cradled in Jewish time.

Pluralism and diversity define my American life, and I crave those things. Still, there is a dimension of my soul that can come to life only in Israel. As Elie Wiesel writes, "I *can* live as a Jew outside Israel but not without it."¹

What is it that makes Israel so essential to me? It's something about how I feel watching that old woman as she rests her forehead upon the *kotel*, the Wailing Wall, whispering into its stone her soul's deepest plea. Like that sacred piece of drywall inscribed with markings of height, a record of family growth, to touch the *kotel*, is to touch the growth of our people throughout the millennia, our near destruction, then our rising up from the ashes. Century after century, we have faced this Wall in prayer. Stone can absorb the longing of the ages just as it holds the warmth of the sunlight long after dusk. We have inscribed ourselves onto the desert rock of Israel, and Israel, in turn, has become inscribed on the Jewish soul. Israel pulsates with memory.

But it is not only about the past. Home is the place that enables us to dream in peace, reminding us not only of who we are, but of who we aspire to become.² Since the days of Abraham, our Holy Land has inspired us to dream a future, imbuing our people with a sense of purpose and hope. And we *have* begun to touch, to taste, to realize the dream.

Don't let your eyes glaze over now. The statistics I'm about the rattle off are *true*, evidence that the impossible has somehow come to be. Listen!

Relative to its population, Israel is the largest immigrant-absorbing nation on earth. In 1984 and 1991, we airlifted 22,000 Ethiopian Jews fleeing for their lives. Tribal Africans, many of whom had never encountered a set of stairs or a tea kettle never mind an airplane, and all of them have been provided with healthcare, education, housing... The dream of return and its miraculous realization.

When it became a state, Israel was 65% desert, but now those deserts bloom. Since its inception, the Jewish National Fund has planted over 150,000,000 trees in Israel. In this age of massive deforestation, Israel is the only country to enter the 21st century with a net gain in its number of trees.³ Israel boasts, in all the world, the highest number of university degrees and museums, and also the highest rate of patents filed per capita. Both cell phone and voice mail technology were developed there. Perhaps most important, Israel is the only liberal democracy in the Middle East. When Golda Meir was elected Prime Minister in 1969, she became the world's second elected female leader.

I am so proud of Israel's ideals. In 1948, when the State was formed, Israel's Declaration of



HaTikvah
10/02/06
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After Reading, click on your browser "back" button to return to the Message Page

Independence proclaimed, (Listen to this!) "The State of Israel will... promote the development of the country for the benefit of *all* its inhabitants; will be based on the principles of liberty, justice and peace as conceived by the Prophets of Israel; will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens without distinction of religion, race, or sex; will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions..."

These are difficult ideals to uphold anywhere, never mind in the Middle East, and, truth be told, Israel has indeed fallen short of these dreams.

It's so much easier to try to live out the ideals of equality and acceptance at a safe distance from our battered strip of Holy Land. When Meir and I lived in Brooklyn, holding fast to the dream of what Israel can be, we decided to send our son Gavi to a Palestinian woman for day care. (That kind of thing can only happen in Brooklyn.) Rita was her name, and she was wonderful with children. It felt like our little piece of *tikkun olam*, healing our broken world, that we could *do* that... that Meir could walk into Rita's home wearing his *kippa*, she at times, in her own headdress... We could see her picture of the Dome of the Rock on the wall and entrust to her all that is most precious to us, our child. Gavi flourished in her loving care, and a deep friendship evolved between Rita's family and our own. "Yes, this *can* happen," I thought as I watched Meir dance at Rita's son's wedding, surrounded and embraced by a crowd of huge Palestinian men.

But that was Brooklyn. While Israel, our homeland, is the place where so many of our dreams have been born, home (the birthing place of dreams) *can* be the hardest place to embody our ideals. We all know that. Just look at our families.

A wise teacher once told me that we should love people, *see* people, not for who they are, but rather for who they *could* be, for who they are striving to become. We should love them for the dreams they possess.⁴ I love Israel that way.

However she may stumble, whatever her failings and misjudgments, Israel dreams of two things: life and peace. I love her for those dreams. Peace. That's why we worked with Sadat and gave back Sinai. That's why Barak ended the Israeli presence in Lebanon. That's why Sharon made a complete withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. The summer before last, 9,000 Israelis left their homes, costing the Israeli government 1.7 billion dollars. This withdrawal made Israel the first country in modern history to give up land acquired in a defensive war.⁵ Peace. That is why hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens elected Ehud Omert on the basis of his plan to withdraw from 90% of the West Bank.

But how do you make peace with those who seek only your annihilation? Did you know that the first Arab terrorist attacks against Jews began in the 1920's, before the state of Israel had even come in to existence, before there *was* such a thing as a Palestinian "occupation"?⁶ The very *thought* of our state's existence incited violence against us.

So what do we do? We fight back. There is blood on Israel's hands—and therefore on the hands



HaTikvah
10/02/06
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After Reading, click on your browser "back" button to return to the Message Page

of every Jew. But I believe there *is* a moral difference between those who shoot rockets at civilians, rockets packed with 1,000s of ball bearings in order to randomly kill and disfigure as many people as possible -- There *is* a difference between that and a focused Israeli military attack, the purpose of which is to destroy, not citizens, but those aiming the rockets.

This past summer, out of the 9,000 Israeli air force sorties, there were only a handful of mistakes.⁷ (Not to diminish these tragedies, for that is what were...) But *more* often, rather than risking the lives of civilians, Israel chose to sacrifice the lives its own most elite soldiers, sending them, on foot, into apartment buildings to disable balcony launching pads. And Israeli soldiers died. Threatened with the complete annihilation of their county, what kind of army acts like that?! Only an army of dreamers.

As Jonathan Kay writes in the National Post, "Hezbollah may wage war hiding behind women's skirts and baby rattles, but Israel stubbornly adheres to a more human creed." And those times when Israel feels it necessary to make a different choice and to initiate a broader attack even after warning citizens to leave, these incidents "are treated as war crimes."⁸ A *Maariv* reporter pointedly asks, why there is not similar outrage at the one hundred citizens killed each day in Iraq- Sunnis, Shiites, Americans... or when the Russians burn down large cities in order to repress a revolt in Chechnya or at the genocide in Darfur? What it is about us, the Jews... that arouses this cosmic sense of justice in the world? What is it we have that all the other nations don't?⁹ I would answer him: It is that we Jews hold *ourselves* to a higher standard. From the very core of the Jewish soul, comes a cry for justice. We rage and weep at the death of innocents. We should.

Our sages teach: *B'makom she-ayn anashim l'hishtadel lihyot ish*.¹⁰ In the place where no one acts like a human being, strive to *be* human. Be a *mensch*.

But still we fall short of the dream. Israeli soldiers have killed children. We have, at times, acted impulsively, out of fear and the desire for revenge. Palestinian women have given birth, waiting at check points. The humiliations and wounds we have inflicted are too many to number. But when our enemies bleed, we do not dance on the rooftops. We weep. Each act of violence takes a toll on the heart and soul of our people. As Golda Meir said to the enemy nations surrounding her, "I can forgive you for killing our sons, but I will never forgive you for making us kill yours."

Whatever we need to do in order to survive as a nation, we must always remember that Israel's objective is not death. It is peace. It is life

Christmas 2004, two days after the tsunami, Israel filled a jumbo jet with 18 tons of supplies. In 2001, when an earthquake struck Western India, Israel sent an entire field hospital, doctors and equipment to help treat injured civilians. In 1998, when the U.S. embassy in Kenya was bombed, Israel was there in one day and saved three victims from the rubble.¹¹

These events do not make the headlines, but we should celebrate them. When the world deals us centuries of oppression, genocide and exile, we Jews say *l'chaim*—to life, for us, for all



HaTikvah
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After Reading, click on your browser "back" button to return to the Message Page

people!

As the great civil rights activist and philosopher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel puts it, "The ultimate meaning of the State of Israel must be seen in terms of the vision of the prophets: the redemption of *all* people." He continues, "The religious duty of the Jew is to... see(ing) that justice prevails over power, that awareness of God penetrates human understanding."¹²

Our tradition teaches: *A dream, un-interpreted is like a letter that has never been opened. As Jews, each of us is called to go home to the place of dreaming and to open the letter, the dream that Israel represents. For each of us is, in some way, connected to Israel, for she is the place of eternal homecoming.*

Remember the trunk, the phone call in Moscow, and my friend, Masha? Well, here is a Jerusalem story. There are so many like it, sublime Jewish geography. It's 1997, ten years since my semester abroad. A warm spring evening and I am walking along King George Street. A woman passes by, pushing a stroller, her husband beside her. She is slight and fair, nondescript. I'm not sure why I even notice her. The street is dark. We both keep walking for about half a block, then stop dead in our tracks and turn around. Masha, it's her.

Every journey leads us back home -- home -- that place where we can unpack our trunk of hopes and ideals, where we can live out the dream.

The dream feeds us. The dream needs to be fed. Israel needs us now.

So what can *we* do?

I have three ideas:

- 1) Get educated. Study and read all you can. Learn to look beyond the headlines. Make *The Jerusalem Post* or *Ha'Aretz* the home page on your computer.
- 2) Help to make progressive Judaism a reality in Israel. Most Israelis are secular. They have rejected orthodoxy, but have not yet been exposed to a way of Jewish life in which women have an equal voice, where social justice is central, where tradition is in dialogue with the modern world. *We*, American Reform Jews, need to be the teachers. The future of Israel depends upon a progressive Jewish vision.
- 3) If you can, visit. I promise. A trip to Israel will change you.

The time is now.

As Rabbi Greenstein taught so eloquently at the Israel Solidarity Rally this past summer: The Hebrew word for darkness- *shachor* is linked by its very roots letters to the word *shahar*- dawn. I believe that dawn *will* come and that we will not forget the dream. I believe that Israel will



HaTikvah
10/02/06
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establish itself as a haven of justice and peace, and that even when we must defend ourselves, our deep humanity will not be lost.

May the darkness of terror and bloodshed give way to understanding and light, for Israel, for all people. This is *hatikva*, our hope, the hope of the ages.

Kol od baleivav p'nima
Nefesh y'hudi homiya
Ulfa'atei mizrach kadima
Ayin l'tzion tzofia
Od lo avda tikvateinu
Hatikva bat shnot alpayim
Lihiyot am hofshi b'artzenu
B'eretzi tsiyon vi'yrushaliyim

So long as still within the inmost heart a Jewish spirit sings,
So long as the eye looks eastward, gazing toward Zion,
Our hope is not lost,
The hope of two millennia,
To be a free people in our land,
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

Israel's National Anthem
Written by Naphtali Herz Imber, 1886