



***Light through the Cracks!***  
**Kol Nidrei 2009 Sermon**  
**Presented 9/27/09**  
**Temple Beth El Great Neck, NY**

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Our sages refer to *Yerushalayim l'malah u'Yerushalayim l'mata*, Jerusalem above and Jerusalem below. The ideal Jerusalem, a place of sacred potential, a city of transcendent sabbath peace. And the Jerusalem of reality: a city of crowded and impoverished homes, of garbage trucks, stray cats and checkpoints. A city where every bus ride could be your last. And these two cities coexist, *Yerushalayim l'malah u'Yerushalayim l'mata*. I lived in both at the very same time...

Nowhere on earth is the chasm between dream and reality more poignantly felt than in *Yerushalayim*. It is a city which expresses the sanctity of human dreams, of human longing, and its blood-soaked stones, monuments of rubble, testify to human failure.

Jerusalem is a city like us.

Sitting together on the eve of *Kol Nidrei*, taking stock of our lives, we come into a sharp awareness of our dreams, our vows and our failures.

*Kol nidrei, v'esarei, v'hamei... All vows and oaths we take, all promises and obligations we make to God between this Yom Kippur and the next we hereby publicly retract in the event that we should forget them and hereby declare our intention to be absolved of them.*<sup>1</sup>

The words of *Kol Nidrei* admit that, this year, despite our best intentions, we may fail to fulfill our vows, the promises we make to ourselves, to those we love, to God. *Kol Nidrei* testifies that the future is unsure.

Life is indeed precarious. In only a few months here in Great Neck, I have met congregants facing the reality that this year, they may not be able to provide for their families. I have witnessed the fear and anger that come from losing a job or a home or a marriage. I have seen the sense of vulnerability that arises from losing one's physical or emotional health and the sense of isolation that comes from losing one's faith.

If we are truly honest with ourselves, the cumulative weight of life's failures can be too much.

Thus, our first impulse is often to mask our mistakes, to cover the evidence. We tidy up the past so it doesn't look quite so uneven. We flatten out the rough spots as we retell our story to others and, more importantly, to ourselves. The fancy wording on our resume, our new High Holiday suit, our best behavior... All of these conceal the empty places, the ways in which we fell short.

Yet, the words of *Kol Nidrei*, allow for no such fiction. They leave no room for us to make excuses. Tonight, collectively and as individuals, we acknowledge the reality of failure, the fissures, the fault lines, the cracks in our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Kol Nidrei translation from *Mahzor for Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur*, The Rabbinical Assembly, New York



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Why? What benefit does this serve? Because, believe it or not, it’s through these very cracks, these imperfections, that the light seeps in.

By choosing to live for 15 months in Israel (“a self-imposed sabbatical” we called it), Meir and I set out on an exciting path, but we quickly realized, a difficult one. Without titles or job security, we began to live with a heightened awareness of risk, of the cracks in our lives. We also learned that Israel, as a nation, lives with that awareness every day.

Last December I sat on the balcony of my friend, Avishag’s, apartment. She is a left-leaning, architect who lives in Shenkin, Tel Aviv’s SoHo. It’s cosmopolitan, yuppy, sheik... seemingly far from the realities of politics, religion and violence. As we sip tea, I notice a pair of men’s boots by the door. “Oh, I didn’t know you had a roommate.” I say. “Yeah,” she answers, shrugging. “He’s been called up for duty. He’s in Gaza.”

To live in Israel, is to come face to face with harsh reality and heart-breaking choices. Yet, through that brokenness, or maybe even *because* of it, Israel continues to pray, to dream.

In Jerusalem, the Muslim calls to worship rise up early into the dark morning sky, then comes the mumbling of morning *minyanim*, stooped old men in elegant white prayer shawls, black numbers tattooed on their arms... and then, with the rising sun, the sound of church bells.

It was all there in *Yerushalayim*, a ragged burgeoning imperfection. Beautiful and broken.

Jerusalem exists on the edge, precisely on the fault line of the achievable and the impossible to achieve. Yet, living in Israel, what is palpable, is an incredible energy, a pervasive willingness to try, even in the face insurmountable odds, and a willingness to fail.

In Hebrew, the expression *bli neder* means “without a vow.” It’s a phrase which might be used like this: “See you next week, *bli neder*.” “I intend to see you next week.” “I will do everything in my power to make it possible to see you next week.” These two small words allow for the sometimes insurmountable challenges of life. You never know for sure what the future will bring. So, I promise all this, *bli neder*, without a vow.

Like the vows we relinquish tonight.

Yet, we are a people whose very identity is based on vows, and it has been so ever since Abraham left home to go forth to a land he’d never seen before and to become a blessing by building a society upon principles of righteousness and justice.<sup>2</sup> So many have striven to live up to Abraham’s vow.

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<sup>2</sup> *Gen. 12:2, 18:19.* Our mission began with an individual. It was first conveyed in the encounters between Abraham and God, and then it has passed to every succeeding generation. The promise of such a covenant is repeated 7 times in the book of Genesis.



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Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook was the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi during the British Mandate of Palestine. Although a strictly observant orthodox Jew, Kook believed that the existence of the State of Israel had the capacity to ennoble and heal humanity at large, Jew and non Jew alike, uniting rather than dividing them.<sup>3</sup>

These ideals leap off the pages of Israel’s Declaration of Independence which in 1948 declared:

...Israel will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex...

These were the vows, the dreams of so many: a glorious home-coming, safety at last and religious freedom, an embrace and flowering of Jewish identity that would result not only in the betterment of Jewish life, but would release a light powerful enough to uplift humanity at large...

Yet, 61 years after her birth, Israel is at war at least once every decade. Images of bull-dozed homes and poverty-stricken Palestinian lives capture the headlines. Religious fanaticism is on the rise, matched only by the cynicism of hard-line secular Jews. The calls for Israel’s destruction and the public debate about her right to exist are, today, louder than at any time since 1948.

*Kol nidrei*,... All these vows, these dreams have come undone. The evidence is clear. Just look at Rabin’s blood, smeared like a tragic rorschach test across the lyrics of the Song of Peace, which he sang only minutes before his assassination, then folded neatly and placed in a pocket next to his heart.

So what do we *do* about Israel? My sermon does not attempt to answer this question.

Rather, tonight I speak about Israel and share my experiences of life there to illustrate the shining example that she provides for us all—an example of how to make vows and strive to live up to them, how to dream dreams so big, so noble, that they are worthy of failure.

I love Israel for her unapologetic striving. I love her for her broken dreams.

*V’havi’einu l’shalom meiarba confot haAretz.* “Gather us in peace from the four corners of the earth and lead us upright to our land.”<sup>4</sup>

Jostling on a crowded bus, we creep past the walls of the Old City in dense, rush-hour traffic, all of us pushed up against each other: Jews with *peiyas* and black hats, elderly Russian immigrants, Arab women- some in jeans some with head-coverings, secular Israeli students pouring over

<sup>3</sup> Ed. Naor, Bezalel, *Kook, Orot- The Annotated Translation of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook’s Seminal Work, A Great Call*, Northvale N: Jason Aronson Inc. , 1993, p. 220 (calendar *Erets HaTsevi* for the year 1908)

<sup>4</sup> *Shema u’Virchotecha, Mishkan Tefilla*, New York, NY: CCAR Press, 2007



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dense academic articles, listening to their ipods or flirting and laughing, orthodox mothers with wigs and strollers, French Jews, Ethiopian Jews, Arab workers with hard hands and fiery tired eyes. A blast of exhaust from the bus and we continue up the hill in the searing heat of the afternoon.

It's gonna be a long ride. I glance over at my renegade conservative rabbi friend, the one with the beret and the earring, the one who has fought in the IDF and who has traveled the world. He leans toward me and whispers (quoting the Leonard Cohen song): *Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything... That's how the light gets in...* "I've decided" my friend announces, "that Israel is the crack." It's broken, busted, torn... that's why there is so much light around.

He's right. It's all miraculous, unfathomable-- preposterous, really. I mean, how can it be that Israel exists at all?

Shavuot, we stay up into the wee hours, and at 3 a.m. begin to make our way on foot toward the *Kotel*, the Wailing Wall. Adina is dozing inside her stroller. Gavi rides on Meir's shoulders. As we get closer, we see small streams of people flowing from every direction towards the Jaffa Gate. Merging together, we walk through the posh Mamila Mall, like we are walking out of Egypt, past names like Tommy Hilfiger and Versace.

It's still dark when we make it through the outer walls of Old City and onto her crooked streets, worn smooth by pilgrims' feet. We are now joined by hundreds, carried along by a mighty river of Jews. I lose sight of the stroller that I am pushing and tell Meir not to let go of Gavi's hand. When we finally arrive at the entrance which overlooks the *Kotel* plaza, I see before me one hundred thousand Jews, all of them gathered in prayer. There is no room to descend, so we stop right there on stairs. An Ethiopian mother, with beautiful dark skin and bright head scarf rocks back and forth beside me whispering into a tattered prayerbook. Her little boy looks longingly at Adina's snacks, so they share.

As the sun begins to rise, a young woman squeezes by me and then turns around, abruptly. "Rabbi Tara?! Do you remember me from Park Slope? You did my bat mitzvah!" The breath catches in my throat. That was a decade ago... How is all this possible? None of it should be.

The reality of Israel begs the question, "How grand are we willing to make our dreams?" and "What brokenness, what failure, are we willing to endure?" "What happens if we put everything on the line?"

Israel teaches us not to fear our vulnerability, for in that "weakness," in our imperfection, lie the seeds of our greatest potential.

The High Holiday season attempts to accustom us to vulnerability. On Yom Kippur, we rid ourselves of distractions, in order to get down to our bare, humble, essence. Sitting in a *sukkah*,



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we feel the oncoming chill of winter. And when the long-prayed-for-rain arrives at last, the paper chains, that our children have made to decorate the sukkah walls, get soggy and fall off.

As Jews, we are called to recognize that living is a messy business and that everything is incomplete. A house painter, remembering Jerusalem's destruction, leaves a tiny corner of the room unpainted. The instant a wedding ceremony concludes, such a moment of perfection, we break the glass.

But if living is inherently full of cracks, why do we so fear our imperfections? The seed that refuses to break open will ultimately dry up and crumble. It is only through the cracks that nutrients and water get into that seed and enable a sprout to grow.

During our months in Israel, my children learned Hebrew in leaps and bounds, leaving me in the dust. As I watched them, I became aware that their stunning ability to acquire language is possible not only by their sharp young minds, but precisely *because* of their willingness to fail, to say it wrong, to playfully offer imperfect words.

But in this high-pressure world, the unselfconscious freedom of early youth is quickly lost.

I recently asked a group of high school girls what worries them most. What keeps them up at night? One answered, "I am afraid of not succeeding. Not getting into college and making something of myself, of not being good enough. I am afraid of not being perfect." 14 other heads nodded in agreement.

As clergy we are no different. We too demand perfection of ourselves and can sometimes fall into the trap of resorting to the neat, the known, the done-before, rather than leaping toward a new idea. We too can play it safe, rather than risking failure...

But it is failure which opens the gates of the Divine heart.

A story is told of a man who tries to learn all the secret meanings of the *shofar* blasts. For each meaning is like a key which opens the gates to the holy, to the Divine presence. The man writes these meanings down on a little note and places it in a pocket next to his heart. But just before the *shofar* service, he loses the note. Rather than listening to the *shofar* with perfect intention and focus, he weeps bitter tears, but he is then comforted by his rabbi who says, "In the House of the King, there are many rooms and many apartments and there are different keys for every lock, but the master key of all is the axe with which it is possible to open all the locks on all the gates. So it is with the broken heart. The broken heart is the master key, it is the axe. When a human being breaks his heart before God, he can enter into all the gates of the King of Kings."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Agnon, S.Y., *Days of Awe- A Treasury of Legends and Commentaries, (Or Yesharim)* New York: Schocken Books, 1965 p.74



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This year we will indeed be judged. And the question will be-- not, "Who has succeeded?" but rather, "Who has been broken?"

"Who has dared to reach and fallen?"

"Who has let themselves get caught up in the messiness of the ever-becoming universe?"

"Who has allowed for the cracks?"

"Who has let in the light?"

"Who has listened to the whisper of dreams?"

This year, let us tether ourselves, not to perfection, but to hope.

Let us cherish the relationships which we forge with each other, with ourselves and with God as we reach for our dreams.

And let us celebrate the realization of those dreams, this time, next year....

*B'li neder.*

Without a vow.