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To Be Jewish, To Be Human (Yom Kippur Evening 5779)
Temple Sinai, Washington, DC

I'm upset. There have been so many problems going on in the Jewish world this past year that we (the clergy) have not been able to keep up. Many of these incidents have been in or involved Israel but not exclusively. The general consensus says we are at a historic low point, a breaking point, in the relationship between Israel and the American Diaspora. There is a chasm dividing the Jewish world today, but I do not think the issue is really about Israel. I believe we have in the Jewish world two main schools of thought on what it means to be Jewish, on the priorities for our community and its resources, and our place and purpose in the world as Jews. Israel is often the focal point around which the two sides clash and American Diaspora Jews are often the loudest critics so, in a nod to the two Talmuds of the ancient world, I'll call them the *Yerushalmi* (Jerusalem) School of Judaism and the *Yoshvei Tevel* (Inhabitants of the Earth) School of Judaism.¹

The differences between them are not about primarily about Israel. I do not think the two schools differ much on the right to a Jewish homeland in Israel or around the classical issues of Zionism. I think most *Yoshvei Tevel* School Jews are Zionists in ways that Herzl, Brandeis and the founding Zionist thinkers would recognize. The schools differ over the meaning of Jewish identity and Jewish community. We can see our differences most evident over two big issues: The Holocaust and assimilation or to be more specific, how we respond to the challenge of living in modernity.

One of the great problems from the past year highlighting this divide is Gaza. Over 60 people were killed and over a thousand were shot and wounded by Israeli troops during six weeks of protests at the Gaza border fence culminating on May 14th but continuing afterwards even a bit to this day. The incident produced a bitter clash between Jews defending Israel and Jews criticizing Israel. They tend to shout past each other because they think they are debating Israel but they are not. The question that remains unanswered - even unasked - is not why Israeli troops responded with such force or whether Palestinian terrorists were manipulating the situation but where did all those Jews come from on-line and in the media to weigh in on the issue? Why did so many Jews and Jewish organizations make their loudest (or only) public Jewish pronouncements of the year in a rush to defend or criticize the shooting of so many people in a single day?

The answer, I believe, is the Holocaust. When we debate each other over the morality of using force in Gaza, we are debating the lessons of the Holocaust. How you understand the Holocaust and what lessons we must learn from it inform very important

¹ *Yoshvei Tevel* means "all humanity" and appears as a phrase that some people increasingly insert at the end of "Oseh Shalom" where the prayer asks God to make peace "for us and all Israel [some insert here: and all humanity]."

decisions about how we interact with the world, with fellow Jews, and what actions we think are right in the face of a threat. When we believe that the Holocaust is a unique event in human history; that Jews were the victims of something no one else has ever faced; that nobody who had the power to save us did so; and that antisemitism, the ancient hatred which fueled the Holocaust, is alive today; when we believe those things, we can then give ourselves permission to do anything we need, by any means necessary, against any perceived threat. Accordingly, because Palestinian leaders continue to speak like antisemites even if they also sometimes speak like peacemakers; and because Palestinian organizations and people have throughout the past decades hurt and killed Jews for being Jews; and because some of those organizations and people were clearly involved in the Gaza protests, then according to that school of thought, the occupation, killing, and second class status of Palestinians is not unreasonable; it's not even bad.

On the other hand, if we understand the Holocaust to be one manifestation of that "problem from hell,"² the hundreds of genocides throughout history; if our experience, while tragic and personally most important to us, is not different from the experience of Armenia, Rwanda, Bosnia, or Cambodia, then we have no moral higher ground and no special position from which we can do anything different than anyone else in the name of self defense. Indeed, if we are a shining example of how a people can rise from the ashes of genocide to create the "start up nation," then our lesson should be to help all humanity and use our tenacity, our genius, and our rich cultural heritage to stop genocide and oppression anywhere against anybody and foster freedom and human betterment for everyone including Palestinians.

What makes me think the Gaza and other debates are really about the Holocaust? I had a friend in a previous congregation, a conservative older guy, who, when he got frustrated in political discussions about things like Gaza and the Palestinians would say: "You liberal Jews would've missed the last train out of Poland." He also used to say he was a one issue voter. The only thing that mattered was Israel. I came learn the he didn't fully understand himself. He was a one issue voter but his issue was making sure he'd never have to worry about the last train out if it meant blowing up all the tracks before they could run.

We hear a similar refrain from people like David Friedman, current US Ambassador to Israel. His infamous critique of JStreet and its supporters is that they are "worse than kapos." Kapos were Jewish prisoners in concentration camps who were used by the SS to keep control over fellow Jews and aid the Nazis in their work. It's a telling smear. We are debating Gaza or the two state solution or Iran and in their strongest argument they don't call us stupid or ill informed. They go to a particular type of Holocaust imagery: sheep led to the slaughter and worse, Jews complicit in the torture and destruction of their own people. Folks like Friedman don't just have a policy

² Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age Genocide* (Basic Books, 2002).

critique that upsets them. They believe we have not learned the lessons of the Holocaust and we represent an internal threat, which is more grave than an external threat.

This critique is actually embodied in the design of Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust Museum. Its exhibit starts with a movie on constant loop with actual footage and images of Jews from pre-war Europe living their daily lives – at parties, outdoors, schools. The movie is projected onto the first wall inside the museum building which, you can see from the outside, is actually a free floating extension off the building's foundation. To go inside and watch the movie is to see Jewish life without any real base. As happy as it looks and probably felt to the people themselves, the design says something very significant. We (the viewer) know how the story ends so it is heartbreaking to watch: These Jews are literally missing the last train out of Poland and laughing. They are dancing over a cliff into the pit.

This stands in stark contrast to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. In the spring, our clergy and some staff went to the museum during Yom HaShoah week to participate in the continuous reading of names of victims in the museum's remembrance hall. This year was particularly moving. After we read the names and offered a memorial prayer in the remembrance hall, we visited the current exhibit in the Museum's Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide. That exhibit is called ["Syria: Please Don't Forget Us."](#) a major effort by the museum "to sound the alarm for policymakers and the public about atrocities being committed by the Assad regime." It features artifacts and tells the story of Mansour Omari who survived imprisonment and torture. He smuggled out evidence of those crimes, which are on display in the exhibit, including five scraps of fabric on which Mansour and his fellow prisoners wrote their names in an ink they made of rust and their own blood. They agreed that whoever got out first would take the list so he could inform his cellmates' families about what had happened to them. It's very powerful.

Our museum's design also conveys a statement about what we should learn from the Holocaust. It is no coincidence that the Syria exhibit in the Center for Genocide Prevention is the first thing you encounter upon leaving the story of the Holocaust (the main exhibit). It is also no coincidence that you enter the museum to the voice of American liberators - from 15th Street under a quote from General Eisenhower, leader of the liberating army, inscribed on the outer wall of the Hall of Remembrance. For this school of thought, the most important lesson of the Holocaust is our responsibility as humans to stop genocide and the murder of innocent people – even strangers from countries half way across the world with no connection to us at all.

The Israelis know exactly what we stand for and sometimes they need us. This past winter, the embassy called and asked if we would host a very special visitor they were bringing to the States, the spiritual leader of the Druze, Sheikh Moafaq Tarif. He came to Temple Sinai with an entourage of Druze politicians and some embassy

diplomats. The night was a classic example of what we value: interfaith worship with a sheikh, Israeli embassy staff, a beautiful, musical service with Neil on the piano and our clergy team, followed by a dinner with a group of temple members catered by a newly arrived Syrian refugee chef from a company called Foodhini. The Sheikh presented me a gift of traditional Druze prayer beads and I gave him a challah cover embroidered with the words “Shabbat Shalom” that was handmade by Central American immigrant women at a community center in South Texas where we once volunteered. It was almost ridiculous; a caricature of American progressive Judaism, except that it’s no joke. It is such a beautifully true picture of who we are and what we believe is most important to us.

When the Nation State Law passed in Israel over the summer, those who follow the Jerusalem School of Jewish identity swelled with pride at how clearly it elevated the importance of Jewishness over anything else. That seems like something all Jews could agree with: the importance of Jewishness. But again, Jews began fighting with other Jews over the propriety of that law and the way it denigrates others and their culture as much as it elevates ours. I saw how differently from them we think about our Judaism and our relationship with other people when suddenly our obscure guest from the winter was the face of the protest. Sheikh Tarif and the Druze community along with many Israelis, Jewish and not, took to the streets of Tel Aviv and across Israel to protest the chauvinism of the law. It brought back a memory from his visit: the Sheikh had told me that even though he is a religious and communal leader in the heart of the Jewish state he had never before been invited to a Shabbat service or dinner. That was how the Nation State Law brought me a moment of swelling Jewish pride.

Much ink has been spilled on Prime Minister Netanyahu and why he would embrace so many policies and decisions like the Nation State Law that seem to be purposefully widening the distance between Israel and the American Jewish community. There is politics at work, no doubt, but more than anything, I believe that Benjamin Netanyahu is a leading proponent of the Jerusalem school of Jewish identity. He sees himself as not just a politician. At the Paris memorial service following Charlie Hebdo and the Kosher Market attack, he portrayed himself as the leader of world Jewry who had come to save the Jews. He spoke at a synagogue, not the French parliament or in a public venue, because he does not see himself as simply the elected political leader of a state standing with its ally. To him, Jewish identity and continuity are important parts of his job.

An incident from October 1997 is worth revisiting because it captures the essence of the divide between the two schools and foretold this summer’s breaking point. Benjamin Netanyahu, then newly serving as Prime Minister, visited the sukkah of religious leader Rabbi Yitzchak Kadouri to celebrate their birthdays, which fell on the same date (Netanyahu was turning 48; the Rabbi, 100). Not realizing that an Israel Radio mic was recording him, Netanyahu leaned over to the rabbi and said, “the Left

has forgotten what it means to be Jewish.” There was quite an uproar and it elicited a response from Yossi Sarid, then leader of the left wing Meretz Party, who said, “Netanyahu has forgotten what it means to be a human being.” The traded barbs echo a famous line of Yehuda Gordon Leib’s poetry from the Jewish enlightenment in the 19th century: “Be a human on the streets and a Jew in your own house.” It’s a line that came to represent an entire way of being for many Jews.

Fast forward to this summer and we find that same dynamic at work. The Israeli government and leaders of world Jewish organizations like the URJ were locked in a battle over an egalitarian prayer space near the Kotel. The government had actually built a temporary area for egalitarian use and the Knesset was debating its expansion and funds to make it permanent. Miri Regev, the Knesset member charged with overseeing the process, resigned her committee chair position saying she could not in good faith be part of such a terrible thing. She said that she had met Reform Jews when she was in Argentina and they were nice people but they should stay in Argentina where they could act like Argentinians while in Israel they would continue to act like Israelis. Another MK from the Shas party suggested that American Jews should take all the money they spend on Israel, keep it, and build themselves a Kotel in America.

We have heard these kinds of insults for years: Reform or Conservative Jews aren’t real Jews. They don’t just come from Orthodox leaders they come from non-religious leaders too. Miri Regev is not religious. I can’t help but think when I hear them: how dare you? We’re not Jewish? You’re not Jewish! Why is it that we always receive that critique but we never give it? and why don’t we finally act on the Shas suggestion? I am not talking about a temper tantrum - we’re taking our toys and leaving in a tit-for-tat reaction. I am talking about actually standing strong and acting on what we believe it means to be Jewish in 5779.

These leaders are not just drawing lines about political policy. They are drawing lines about Jewish practice and Jewish identity and we cannot accept their definition. I spoke with a temple member, Johanna, right after Rosh Hashanah. She grew up at Sinai and is now a junior in college. She attended the Erev Rosh Hashanah festivities at her school with a few friends including another woman who grew up in our area as part of NFTY (the Reform youth movement). The event was co-sponsored by Hillel and Chabad, they call it their Annual Unity Dinner and they seem very proud of this wonderful display of Jewish solidarity and unity on such an important holiday. Hooray! Right? But after the pre-service social gathering, Johanna and her friend headed to the service and walked into a *mechitza*-divided room, that’s a room with a screen separating men and women for prayer according to traditional Jewish laws of “modesty.” She was caught totally by surprise. This was the campus service for everyone; the big unity service. In the scope of world affairs, this seems like a small thing. It’s easy enough to go along and get along and it’s a great Jewish value, Jewish unity, right? She should just go in, right? It’s Rosh Hashanah after all. But no, it’s actually not right.

By doing that, we would compromise something we hold dear - one of the most important principles we have.

We have not forgotten what it means to be a Jew and we no longer accept Gordon's nineteenth century division of ourselves to be Jewish in one place and human in another. Our school of thought holds them together inseparably. To be Jewish must be informed by our connection to all *yoshvei tevel*, all of humanity. That service I described with the Sheikh is our model. This service tonight is our model. Look around you, we have men and women sitting together. We have musical instruments elevating our worship though they are forbidden by Jewish law. We have on the bima a woman - in fact, four female soloists - whose singing in front of men despite the halakhic laws of modesty have made this Yom Kippur deeply spiritual and significant. We have a rabbi who is gay. We have a rabbi who is a woman. They are some of the finest Jewish leaders in the world. The clergy and temple staff started our night with a *seudah hamafseket*, the traditional meal of separation marking the start of the sacred day of Yom Kippur, by eating a meal (coincidentally again catered by that same Syrian refugee chef) together with our building staff, admin team and security personnel - all not Jewish. I spoke to them about the importance of our work and honored one of the security officers who is retiring and we got to just enjoy each other's company and the comfort we needed before starting the holiest day of our year. If that's wrong than I don't want to be right. If this is what it looks like when we forget what it means to be Jewish, then I'm fine if you just call me human. So no, I am proud to report that Johanna did not stay. She turned around and walked out of the room before the service began - not happy to miss the Rosh Hashanah prayers - and returned with her friend to the dining room to wait for the meal, where men and women would sit and break bread and enter the new year in the best way possible: together. *Gamar tov*.