

SERMON Yom HaAtzma'ut 5779

May 10 2019

One of my earliest memories of Israel is really much more a memory of my father than of Israel. My father was definitely not a Zionist in his younger days. He was an assimilationist, who believed that Judaism was a religion, not a nationality, and felt our priority should be to blend into American society. My mother was a Zionist who would never forgive my father for proposing to her shortly before she planned to go to Israel as a nurse in 1948. It was one of the many things they argued about passionately.

Then the six-day war hit. I was six years old, and what I remember is my father glued to the evening news, cheering with my mother, and then sobbing when pictures of soldiers at the Western Wall came over the tube. He couldn't speak to explain why he was crying, but after that he was a proud supporter of the State of Israel and had no trouble with the word Zionist.

When he was a alive, I talked to him about it, and he said that somehow Israel winning had given him back his sense of dignity as a Jews, his pride, something that the image of the emaciated suffering Jews in barbed-wired from the Holocaust had taken from him. He said that he hadn't really known it was taken from him until the six-day war and that something had broken open then.

Today it seems that while some of us continue to feel great pride at Israel's accomplishments, celebration at the miracle of what our people have achieved, building in 71 years a first-world nation from nothing, becoming a world-leader in technology, innovation, and becoming one of the strongest military forces in the world, it seems that for many

American Jews, something close to the opposite of my father's experience is happening.

Where they feel great pride at being Jewish, Israel's actions, particularly under the government of Benjamin Netanyahu, has become a source of shame. It has become something they feel a need to apologize for, or to say that Israel does not represent the Jewish people. In the process, these Jews, some of whom are good friends of mine, seem to see Israel as a monolithic nation where everyone is in agreement, especially about the treatment of Palestinians. They point to Netanyahu's reelection as proof.

That is why I wanted to share that on Yom HaZikaron this year in Tel Aviv, in HaYarkon Park, close to 10,000 Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs who had either participated in the conflict or lost a family member to it, gathered to remember those who had died in the conflict *on both sides*, and to commit to non-violent solutions. Netanyahu banned Palestinians from attending, but the Israeli courts overturned him. Outside the gathering, Israeli protesters gathered and held signs calling those Israeli's that attended "traitors" and "Nazis." The event was protected and guarded by Israeli soldiers and police.

The understanding of the conflict in this gathering seems so much more thoughtful than the left or the rights version of things here in America. The Palestinians spoke of their own participation in the cycle of violence, about the danger of thinking in terms of 'winning' instead of human life. The Israelis spoke about family members they had lost to Palestinian terrorism, but also their profound opposition to some of the policies of their government.

Of course, this was a small slice of Israel, the leftist educated cultural elite in Tel Aviv. But it clearly shows me that the idea of choosing sides of who is right and wrong in this conflict misses the point. The conflict itself has a life of its own. The leadership of all sides profit from and stay in power from the perpetuation of the conflict. The recent barrage of missiles fired into Israel from Gaza was done in large part because the leaders in Gaza knew that Qatar would give them a lot of money when they stopped. Netanyahu knows his base expects a 'shock and awe' military response. Iran deflects from its own internal tensions by focusing on the need to destroy Israel. Saudi plays both sides, and so the "beat goes on."

What I want to say in a brief sermon on Yom HaAtzma'ut is simply this: it is much wiser – but also more difficult – to hold the complexity of a situation than to resolve it into good vs evil, right vs wrong. I am an ardent life-long Zionist. Tim and I were founding members of TaMaR, the Reform movement for young Jews wanting to make aliyah. I am also very critical of the Netanyahu government, its treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank, its treatment of non-Orthodox Jews, it's growing gap between rich and poor.

Yet, there is this pressure to choose sides. I went to AIPAC with a group from Temple Sinai, and I got a lot of blow-back from colleagues and friends asking me how I could support such an organization? How could I sit in the room with *those people*? I have to say that it was not always easy. Listening to Mitch McConnell bash Democrats and praise Trump made my legs twitch with a desire to walk out. Walking out would have made me feel good, sanctimonious even that I had such strong values. However, I think that sitting there listening showed values that to me are much deeper and much more Jewish.

I thought as I sat there about how rare it is these days for us to actually sit in a room with people we don't agree with and to listen respectfully to speakers we think are awful and wrong. We knew we agreed about some things and virulently disagreed about others, yet no one booed when speakers on the other side spoke. No one yelled at us when we stood up for what we agreed with, and we didn't yell at them when they stood up for things they agree with that many of us very much do not.

I kept thinking of Rabbis Shammai and Hillel, and their ability to argue over decades, and yet both see the other's opposite views as valid. In the Talmud, after a long argument about whether a particular animal can be made pure, we have the following:

Rabbi Abba said that Shmuel said: For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These said: The halakha is in accordance with our opinion, and these said: The halakha is in accordance with our opinion. Ultimately, a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the halakha is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.

When asked why Hillel wins, the answer was because Hillel showed patience, and when he taught, he taught both his own opinions and the opinions of Rabbi Shammai.

To me, this is a profound challenge the times we live in, and a spiritual challenge – to be able to hold complexity, to be able to know that our narrative of events is not the only narrative, and that there is truth in narratives that don't fit our experience or reflect our sense of right and wrong. It is much more difficult to sit with doubt, to admit something is not fully knowable, to feel both pride and shame at the same time – these are spiritual challenges for us to be able to hold the complexity of the human experience and the human condition.

So on this Yom HaAtzma'ut I am profoundly proud of the State of Israel and all it has accomplished in 71 short years.

I am also deeply concerned about the direction the current government is taking the State of Israel.

When I celebrate Israel's independence, I do not need to forget that for Palestinians, the same event is El Nakba, the catastrophe – I don't need to choose.

I can fully and wholeheartedly celebrate Israel's independence and the miracle that as a Jew, I get to live at a time when I can visit or live in Israel, when Jews being attacked anywhere in the world have a strong national advocate and a place to go, knowing that is not available to all peoples.

I can be proud and celebrate that this time in history, we won, just as I celebrate July 4 knowing all the national sins that the US carries with it, and my strong disgust with some of the actions of the current administrations.

One of the miracles and challenges of being human is that we can see complexity, and that our broken hearts can be a source of strength and spiritual growth. I can have my heart break for the average Palestinian, while also sobbing at the same picture that got my father sobbing at the TV when I was six years old.