

I have always written poetry. Not to publish, and not always to preach it, but I have always appreciated the ways in which written language can transcend itself to express the things we feel that remain beyond reach, beyond description - like God or Love, any strong emotion. Trying to translate an emotion into language, to paraphrase Bialek, is like kissing your lover through a veil. But poetry comes close.

The first time I saw the Western Wall, Hakotel Hama'aravi, I felt this kind of emotion. I think I was equally moved by the stones themselves as the prayerful people clustered around them. Such calm stones, almost inhuman in their construction. I stood there imagining the longing hands which caressed these lines down through centuries. I pictured the soldiers crying in their famous photograph, the very first Jewish faces in two thousand years to look upon this place. I pictured doves of freedom in bushes growing right out of the wall, nesting high above the fray, perched between the synagogue on the ground and the mosque at the summit. The stones hummed with the energy of it, so much history, so much story all in one place. Only stones this huge could contain it all.

I knew it was Shabbat, that first time I saw the wall, and I knew writing on Shabbat was inappropriate for Orthodox Jews, who consider pens and other writing instruments to be against the spirit of the day. So I hurried to the other side of the plaza, far away from the hum of the stones, and the throb of the crowd. I sheltered my journal, and wrote a few lines of what I was feeling. It felt very much like the thing to do on that particular Shabbat.

"Asur" spoke the soldier, tapping my journal lightly with his rifle. "not allowed," he meant. "forbidden." There are plenty of Jewish communities in Israel finding their own way, but at these holy sites, the Orthodox have created de-facto synagogues; and it is their rules which are enforced by military police. With rifles. I put my journal away. My first thought was frustration – growing up in a free country, we are simply not used to others forcing their religion upon us, certainly not using the business end of a rifle to do it. My second thought was an awareness of the irony. How strange, to think of Orthodox Judaism as a different religion? Wasn't this MY homeland, after all? Why did Orthodox Judaism have control over this sacred place?

I have since taken many groups to the Kotel, the Western Wall. It has become more and more challenging each time we visit. I love this wall. And I hate it too. The Kotel has become a symbol for the challenges facing the nation, and for the complexity of our connections with Israel, and the Jews there who we call our brothers and sisters.

I long for the simplicity of days gone by. Our grandparents and parents gave willingly to Israel, and visited whenever possible, because they were caught up in the overwhelming significance of the historical moment. Creating a modern Jewish state came with many costs, but they were all costs we felt more than willing, even obligated, to pay.

We were rescuing communities from Europe, fulfilling our destiny, reconnecting ancient lines of geography with Hebrew lines of Torah, and paving them as new roads. We were righting ancient wrongs, and resuscitating an ages-old vision we had only encountered in the books of the Prophets. We were the ancient Israelites, finding manna in the morning dew, marching towards the Promised Land.

Over the decades, Israel's moral authority has been challenged time and again. And I have offered plenty of my own criticism of hawkish government policies which see only military options to a wide range of societal issues. As an American Reform rabbi, I see myself not as an Israeli, but as someone deeply engaged in the continuing dance between American and Israeli Jews. It has felt more like a marriage than anything else. We love each other, we go through periods of intense intimacy and other times of strange distance, we press each others buttons, but our concerns and criticisms are always born from love.

My love for Israel is best described through my poetry and the poetry of others. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "When I go to Israel every stone and tree is a reminder of hard labor and glory, of prophets and psalmists, of loyalty and holiness. The Jews go to Israel not only for physical security for themselves and their children; they go to Israel for renewal, for the experience of resurrection. (Israel: An Echo of Eternity)

And the late Elie Wiesel shared his own conflicted relationship with Israel this way: "How can it be explained that a Jew like myself, attached to the destiny of Israel with every fiber of his being, has chosen to write, teach, work, found a family, and to live far away...? Israelis put this question to me, as they do other Jews in the Diaspora.... Is there a satisfactory response? If there is, I don't know it.... For the moment, this is all I can say: as a Jew, I need Israel. More precisely: I can live as a Jew outside Israel but not without Israel." (*Midstream*, May/June 1998)

We still need Israel for renewal, and to be reminded of the hard labor and glory our people experienced there. We are still attached to the destiny of Israel with every fiber of our Jewish beings. We still need Israel, and she still needs us. And my overwhelming sadness about Israel, lies in the thought that we may have forgotten how much we need each other.

In our lifetimes, we have witnessed a tidal shift in perceptions around Israel. And I am not speaking of Arab countries or the U.N. I mean specifically Jewish Diaspora communities - on college campuses as well as synagogues, in our very own classes and at conferences. We have moved away from carte blanche support of Israel, away from support of Netanyahu's

government. And far more tragically, away from our own feelings of attachment to the Jewish homeland.

We are losing the idealism and optimism of our parents' generations. We no longer relate to the philosophy that Jews are the world's underdog; that we survived the ultimate attempt at our destruction to emerge victorious; that against all the odds we are now a free people, determining our own destiny, in the land of our ancestors. We once were passionately in love with Israel. We aren't so sure any more.

Imagine, or recall landing at Ben Gurion airport for your very first time and feeling, halfway around the world, that you have come home. Cheers erupt from every row on the plane, and many begin singing – Am Yisrael Chai, Heiveinu Shalom Aleichem. Every signpost greets you in Hebrew, which fills you with immense pride, even the ones you cannot read yet. The flight attendants show you to the stairs using Hebrew as well, and you touch the ground of the Jewish state. Years ago we exited directly onto the tarmac, and stopped to bend low and kiss the pavement – ground fought for by Jews, cement poured by Jews, mixed by Jews, landed on by planes flown by Jews. For our grandparents in the shtetl each of these facts was a miracle. For the first time in two thousand years, there was no need to look over our shoulders.

Standing there on the tarmac, you feel what it took to build this place, and why we had to build it. Not merely because of the Holocaust, and the expulsions of our families from almost every single country in the world – but because of a dream our ancestors shared with us, a dream we had carried with us on our backs from the shtetls and ghettos of Europe, and villages all over the Middle East. This dream to bring Judaism to life as it had once been, a living, breathing religion, a culture and expression. Yiddish and Hebrew thriving in theaters and newspapers, Jewish philosophy written and discussed in the town square, plays and music and dance and science and technology all celebrating who we are. It all lives here now, in Israel. The artwork of Marc Chagall come to life as I had only read about in books. *Am Yisrael Chai*, the people of Israel lives, in the land of our ancestors.

This is the Israel we need today; the Israel I first fell in love with. I learned not only that the *Chalutzim* or pioneers had made the desert bloom and drained the swamps; I learned how many died of malaria as these twenty-year-olds figured out the process. I saw the innovations and technologies that were born in Israel out of sheer necessity – sheltering milk cows in the desert with daily showers, drip irrigation invented by Israel to allow the arid land to become fertile. We needed miracles to survive. Every single tree in Israel was planted by a Jew. Every forest, every mountain or hill tells the story of a generation of Jews who built layers upon layers of our story. Modern Israeli society is literally built from the same stones that supported the Temple millennia ago. Archaeology in Israel doesn't happen in isolated fields and forgotten ruins – it happens in your next door neighbor's basement when they realize King Solomon may

have left buried treasures in the backyard; that Hezekiah may have built another Colosseum right where your swing set happen to be today.

This is not Israel's narrative today. When asked to speak about Israel, as we often are, rabbis confront ignorance, bias, and crisis. Interfaith dialogue around the Peace Process, which used to thrive in Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities now feels next to impossible. And of course there are many reasons, some of them justifiable, for us to be critical or even outraged at Israel's policies: the lack of equality for minorities, the disparity of wealth and social services, and the battle for recognition of liberal Judaism. But if these critiques of Israel cannot be held in the context of the dream of Israel, the joy and true miracle of her birth out of the swamps and deserts, then our criticism feels inaccurate, uneducated, offensive and biased.

I have seen the propaganda distributed by those who would have Reform Judaism completely negated in Israeli society. I have read speeches of those who would see Orthodox Judaism the only acceptable strand in Israel. I have visited Hebron, the second largest Palestinian city in the West Bank, and I fully realize the unsustainability and destructive nature of the Occupation – to both the Palestinian people and to the Israeli psyche. But focusing solely on these flaws without embracing Israel's vitality – that is tragedy on another scale entirely. We are, and always have been, the Lovers of Israel, of Zion and Jerusalem, and she needs us now more than ever.

There is a story we tell each year about the time in which the Temple was destroyed, which connects that historical national crisis with our own. It explains our ancestors' connections to Israel, even when they could not have imagined ever begin allowed to go there themselves. It seems that their feeling of connection was based not on some Biblical mandate when God promised parcels of land to individual tribes, to the exclusion of other tribes. Instead, their connection rests on feelings of mutual respect and the love felt between brothers and sisters, and even neighbors. When we reject those values, we no longer deserve the land which bears our name.

Once a man had invitations sent out all across the city of Jerusalem inviting his friends to a great party. However, the invitation he had addressed to his friend, Kamza, was accidentally delivered to his enemy with a similar name, Bar Kamza. Bar Kamza, the Talmud teaches, decided that the host of this party must have finally decided to clear the air between them, and put old grudges to rest. And so he went to the party. Everyone was there – every notable rabbi was in attendance, it was a wonderful party. That is, until the host, whose name remains hidden from us, noticed his enemy Bar Kamza in the entryway. And in front of all his guests, the host demanded that Bar Kamza leave.

In what way, you may ask, is this leading up to the destruction of the Temple? Where is the mention of the superior forces of Rome, or the sins of the Jewish people which might bring

on God's punishment? No, say the rabbis. None of those terrible transgressions can explain what occurred. Instead they pin our greatest national disaster on a single, small feud which is about to spiral out of control.

Bar Kamza says to his enemy, "Please, do not embarrass me now that I am here." He offers to pay for what he eats and drinks, but still the host says, "no." I imagine this argument playing out in front of the entire party. It must have caused quite a scene: both of them trying desperately to save face before their friends. Even when Bar Kamza offers to pay for the half the party and then the entire party, rather than suffer embarrassment in front of his community, he is thrown out onto the street.

Armies fight, and win or lose wars. Nation-states rise and fall, political and economic levers are pulled, Machiavellian manipulations shape countries, and entire civilizations disappear. But the greatest of these forces, according to our story, is the force of kindness, or the lack thereof. Civilization can become unraveled when we lose sight of the love that binds us together. The host saw only someone to criticize and confront, and missed every opportunity to forgive, to connect, to repair.

We might blame others even more than our host for this failure of empathy. Every city official, every guest who watched, every rabbi in attendance had the chance to act. Why did those charged with providing ethical guidance not feel emboldened to speak out, correct this wrong, to make peace where there was strife? Unfortunately, we understand why they did not. It takes an incredible act of will and courage to speak up, speak out, and step in. These are all-too familiar pressures. This is Rosh Hashanah, when we recognize the harm we are capable of, without vigilance. We know ethical behavior is a choice we make in the smallest of interactions.

The story continues that Bar Kamza feels betrayed by the community leaders who did nothing to stop his embarrassment, and he is fuming. He goes to the Roman Emperor Nero and tells him that the Jews are planning a rebellion. "If you don't believe me, send them an offering for their Temple and see if they'll accept it," he says. Nero sends the offering, but Bar Kamza marks the animal in such a way that he knows the rabbis won't be able to accept it.

The Talmud says that embarrassing someone is never a small offense; that draining the color from their face, is the same as murder. Bar Kamza must have felt that way, for he seals the fate of Jerusalem out of his desire for revenge. Nero sends Vespasian and his son Titus to destroy Jerusalem, convinced the Jews are about to rebel.

We blame ourselves for the Temple's loss, and our expulsion. We transform a military battle into a morality play about the way we treat one another. It is as if the ancient rabbis are saying to us, don't forget what is most important about Judaism, that all Jews are responsible

for one another, American and Israeli, liberal and traditional. When we forget we are family, we lose our right to any place on Earth, but especially this most symbolic and precious place on Earth, the place of our birth.

I am a Zionist. That means I love the idea of Israel, and all it represents. And that commitment and passion for Israel makes me work harder to strengthen American Democratic Reform Jewish values in Israel, to ensure that Israeli society benefits from our wisdom and experience, too. It comes from my deep, lifelong love affair with Israel. It cannot be any other way.

My poetry about Israel these days looks very different from what I wrote as a teen. Netanyahu has alienated many of us, as have many commentators who once celebrated the deep bonds between our two Jewish communities. Israel's new Nation-State Law rubs salt into old wounds about what it means to be a non-Jew and still feel a part of the community. Yes, Israel is the home for the Jewish people, as the law states, but if Israel forgets to care for the rest of its citizens, what the Torah calls "ger b'toshav – the stranger among us" Israel abandons her founding principles and her commitment to Torah values at the same time.

Israel struggles with women's equality and every form of inclusivity, including the variety of expressions of Jewish identity we call Reform. The gender gap in Israel, and the socio-economic inequality in the Jewish state are great challenges we must face. But none of these things makes me love her less. I still long for the dream articulated in the Sheva Brachot, the Jewish wedding blessings – Od Yishama b'arei Yehuda – someday may these things again be heard in the cities of Judah and the neighborhoods of Jerusalem – the voice of joy and happiness, the singing of brides and grooms celebrating under their chuppahs, rejoicing as free people in a free land. I know we can still get there, if we remind ourselves of the love we feel. I know this because of the great poetry of the father of modern Zionism, Theodore Herzl, "Im Tirzu ein zo gadah - If we will it, it is no dream."