



Yom Kippur Sermon 5772/2011

Rabbi Amy Schwartzman
"Two Peoples – One Future"

I was on vacation when the invitation came in an e-mail. They say you're not supposed to read your e-mail while on vacation and I hadn't for the first few days of our trip. But Kevin was taking a walk and the free wifi in the plush business room of the hotel was too tempting.

The invitation to join a small rabbinic mission to Israel and the West Bank left me reeling. My mind jumped all over the place. Israel is in crisis; can I make a difference? Would meeting the Palestinian leadership be seen as disloyal by some? Would I feel safe in Ramallah? Would all my assumptions and fears about the conflict be confirmed or turned on their heads?

Between moments of excitement and concern, I felt a familiar pang. It's a pain I've lived with for a long time. It's a feeling that many of you might also know. It lives somewhere in the intersection between my love for Israel, my concern for her safety, my commitment to democracy and freedom for all peoples and my belief that a Palestinian state is essential for Israel to thrive. Holding onto all of those commitments at once can be tough, and sometimes impossible and it often leaves me with a stomachache. *So much for the rest of my vacation.*

The invitation came from my colleague Rabbi Ken Chasen and Felice Freidson, a journalist from the independent news firm Media Line. Together they envisioned how meetings between a diverse group of American rabbis and leading Israeli and Palestinian authorities in both government and business might bring new insights to the American Jewish community. At this critical point in history, with the UN vote looming, and many unanswered questions from both sides, this trip gave us face-to-face access with some of the key players of the peace process. Felice suggested that after this experience we would never see Israel or the Palestinian conflict in the same way – and she was right.

While much of the information we received during our two days of meetings was neither new nor surprising, it did increase our sensitivity to the complexity of the issues. I left some sessions with a feeling of greater

understanding but others even more confused. There is no question that all of the meetings with the government officials, both Israeli and Palestinian, were filled with emotion, passion, pain, frustration and plenty of righteous indignation. At times there were reasons for hope but those came mostly from the business leaders and the members of our small group. It was an intense experience – accompanied by that pain in the pit of my stomach. *I should have brought Maalox.*

Moving from one meeting to the next was like swinging back and forth on a wild amusement park ride. We were tossed from one issue to another, from one set of statistics to another. Surely you can imagine the discussions. How critical it is to the Palestinians for Israel to stop building settlements. How essential is it for Israel to be recognized by the Palestinians as a legitimate Jewish state. Beyond recognition and security, refugees and Jerusalem, there are water issues, air rights, broad ban control, and so much more. The rants from both sides go on and on, from one offense to the other, from one set of facts to another. If you feel your head is spinning or your stomach is starting to ache, try doing this for two days or even for years – 18 since the Oslo Peace Accords, 44 since Israel acquired the West Bank in 1967 and 63 since the birth of the State of Israel in 1948!

I could weigh in about these many presentations, their accuracy, their significance, and their role in the resolution of this conflict. I could propose a solution or present my beliefs about who is right and who is wrong. I am not going to do that. This short but intense trip revealed a facet of the conflict that one can only absorb in the presence of individuals living daily with the issues – a dimension of the conflict that we can't easily appreciate from a newspaper article or video clip. I'm speaking of the state of mind, the attitude, the outlook of the people with whom I met.

Nothing affected me more deeply than the mentality of both the Israelis and Palestinians. Nothing gave me greater despair than sitting with both groups of government authorities in Jerusalem and Ramallah. While nothing raised my hopes for peace more than my conversations with leading businessmen and women from both sides. These experiences together capture the most significant lesson of my trip and I believe that within them are important truths that, if left ignored, may destroy any possibility of peace; but if understood and embraced, may be the foundation for a better future.

On our first night we sat around the dinner table at one Jerusalem's most famous restaurants – The Anna Ticho House. Anna and Avraham Tichos bought it in 1924. It's now a restaurant with lots of little rooms filled with Anna's paintings and photos of Avraham, a doctor, with his Jewish and

Arab patients, a true Jerusalem landmark. Last month I sat at a table with Prime Minister Netanyahu's spokesman, Mark Regev, and Minister of Information and Diaspora, Yuli Edelstein. The conversation moved from lively to impassioned. There was a certain tension in the air, a tension that was out of step with the Ticho family's contributions to early Jerusalem. The minister was adamant about his understanding of the issues. He assured us that he knew what we thought, he assured us that he knew what the Palestinians wanted and how they planned to get it. He assured us that there was one road to solving the conflict.

The next meeting, we were in Ramallah in a spectacular conference room. It had a huge stonewall that matches the one in the front of our building. We sat around a beautiful wooden table, there was fruit and cake and juice and dark strong coffee for anyone who was brave enough to try it. Our host was Palestinian Prime Minister Fayyad's advisor, Jamal Zakout. White haired, lean and stately, he sat at the head of table. As he answered our questions his face turned redder and redder. His frustration jumped out at us as he could barely stay in his chair. He explained to us all that has happened over the past 44 years. Did we know the real facts? He assured us that he knew what the Israelis wanted and how they planned to get it. He assured us that there one road to solving the conflict.

These attitudes defined almost all of our meetings with both Palestinian and Israeli officials. There was a sense of deep entrenchment. Questions from our group, be they from the right or the left, could not chip away at the wall that seemed to surround each official's unwavering views. It became hard to breath in these sessions. The windows were metaphorically closed. Even more than a sense of certainty, there was a great definiteness from both sides that left no room for 'the other' - his opinion, her experience, their narrative. And there was the pain again. *And I don't know how to say Tums in either Hebrew or Arabic.*

In contrast to these sessions, meetings with business executives in both Israel and the West Bank were uplifting and hopeful. Even more, they were exciting and they opened doors to the potential for two communities to thrive together. The CEOs of the Israeli-Palestinian Chamber of Commerce are an inspiring pair. Avi Nudelman is in his 60's and retired from the Israeli Army where he worked in the West Bank with Palestinians on security issues. His partner, Mohammed Abu Ein, is half his age. They work to bring businesses together across the borders, the fences and the walls. They shared great stories of cooperation between factories and produce companies and textile industries. These ventures are not only supporting economic growth, they are also building real trust. As inspiring as it was to hear about each budding enterprise, it was even more inspiring to see these

two men together. It turns out that while assigned to the Territories, Avi knew Mohammed's father and they worked side by side. The connection between these men was genuine and personal and so human. This is where hope takes root. *Maybe I won't need those Tums after all.*

Huda El Jack is the only businesswoman in the West Bank who owns a franchise. It's a trendy, upbeat coffee chain with cushy couches and cute tables called Z'man. She has a master's degree in business from the Kellogg School, which offered a program for executives in Tel Aviv. There she studied alongside Israelis and learned from the success of the famous Israeli coffee chain Aroma.

Samech Masri owns the largest car dealership in the West Bank. Sitting in his meeting room, while cars are assembled next door, he shows us his cell phone. "I have more Israeli numbers in here than Palestinian ones." He knows many of the car dealers in Israel and works with them regularly. They probably sit around and drink Huda's coffee and talk about their children and sports after bemoaning import taxes and problems with tires.

In stark contrast to the government officials, these people were living lives that brought them into contact with their neighbors across the border. Their stories of shared work were peppered with stories of real life and it was clear that, as economies grew, so did a deep understanding and appreciation for one another, their family stories, their pains, their hopes and even their doubts. When speaking of the two state solution, each one, while acknowledging complexities, saw possibilities, opportunities and the sincere value of reaching the goal. They even opened themselves to the possibility that their narrative was only one part of a greater story. One business at a time, one person at a time, one story, one opinion, one idea, one vision, Israelis and Palestinians outside of the walls of government, are building bridges to one future.

It is difficult to capture the dissonance between our experiences with the government officials and the business leaders. Yehuda Amichai, in a poem written over 30 years ago, says it better than I can.

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.
The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood

This poem lived in me during my trip. I saw all of this. Those so right that they stamped down every possibility; and those who brought change through whispers, who burrowed in my heart and shined new light on crumbing hopes.

When I returned from this trip and began to tell many of you about it, I felt that pain growing again in the pit of my stomach. Some people were pleased while others were skeptical. I realize I am a rabbi to a congregation pulled between its loyalty to Israel and its commitment to peace and justice for all people. As I am. Some of us are at the very ends of the spectrum, some are in the middle and some sit at multiple places at once.

I am a rabbi to people who believe that Israel should begin negotiations toward a two state solution now and I am a rabbi to people who believe that doing so would threaten Israel's security and even lead to its destruction. But this is not a problem for me because I am also a rabbi who believes that unity does not require uniformity. Further, I believe that love and loyalty to Israel is not the same as agreeing with every Israeli action or policy.

While I can serve and embrace a diverse community that has diverse views about Israel, I do not want to serve a community that closes itself off to the experience, the opinion and the story of the other. For many of us on the trip, this was the most significant 'take away.' The hope for peace for Israel and the Palestinians did not rise up from policy statements but from those individuals who were willing to listen and accept and validate the other.

This is critical for our congregation as well. Debates over how to respond to the crisis in the Middle East bring tensions, undo friendships and sap the energy of this community in unnecessary ways. The answer is not to abandon our diversity – we need many voices – those who lead us in speaking out when Israel is vilified in the press – those who facilitate relations with Palestinians locally – those who help us sort out truth from falsehood – those who train our students to stand up for Israel on college campuses – those who show us all that is remarkable about Israel even in the midst of her faults.

We need many voices. We need the wisdom of everyone who cares. The best way for us to remain whole as a community in relationship with Israel is to learn to listen to all of these voices at once.

Twice a day our tradition calls upon us to recite the Shema, the prayer we call the watchword of our faith. Shema is usually translated as 'Hear' but really it is much more. Shema, say our commentators, is not simply the act of inclining one's ear, but rather deep listening, understanding and absorbing. Listening is a process rather than a product. It requires acceptance of another's words. To do this means we must quiet our own minds so that our opinions and judgments don't get in the way of truly hearing what the other person has to say. This also requires humility. We must accept that none of us are the sole repository of truth, but each of us has a spark of truth within.

My experience last month with the entrepreneurs of Jerusalem and Ramallah was a testament to the power of connections that grow from opportunities to listen to the other. It's clear that the best way to move past the deep abyss that divides Israelis and Palestinians, and some of us here at the Temple, is not only Shema, listen, but even more to notice the human being in front of us while hushing the certainty inside of us. We must be willing to ask questions...what brought you here? What drives your opinions? And to wait patiently while their answers mix with our realities. In sharing our stories and experiences we create connections. We expand our consciousness. Shared values emerge. We experience healing from the inside out.

At Z'man, Huda's coffee shop in Ramallah, there is a man sitting alone at a table in the corner. He is smoking a cigarette; his tanned skin has deep wrinkles. He must be about 60. Shall we sit down with him? What would it mean to us to know his story, his family, his profession, his ideas about the future? What would it mean to him for us to listen?

At the hotel in Jerusalem where I stayed during my trip, two young employees are talking, one is a waiter in the dining room and the other is the man behind the desk. The waiter is an Arab, the clerk is a Jew. I can't hear them, but I want to know what they are saying. Can I subtly eavesdrop or better yet, ask to join their conversation. Maybe they're talking about the news, the UN gambit, the soccer scores, the weather – no matter, they are talking. Talking and listening and creating hope for the future.

In the coming year, may we do the same.