



Rabbi Amy Schwartzman Rosh Hashanah 5775/2014

Rabbi Saxe and I share tradition. After the holiday of Shavuot, which is usually at the end of May or the beginning of June, we have a very long lunch at a very good restaurant... and brainstorm about sermon topics for the High Holy Days. Well in advance of the New Year, we start searching for the perfect theme. It was then, a month or more before the horrible and distressing events of this past summer that I decided to speak about Israel.

It happened when I read a report entitled: Reluctant or Repressed - Aversion to Expressing Views on Israel Among American Rabbis.¹ This study, which surveyed 552 rabbis, suggests that nearly 40% of rabbis self-identify as reluctant and repressed! 40% of rabbis feel that that they cannot openly and honestly share their own views about Israel with their congregations.

My first thought was ... me? Am I reluctant or repressed or worse reluctant and repressed? My second thought was... you? If rabbis can't speak openly about Israel, it's pretty likely that most of the community can't either.

We need to talk.

As for me, looking back over the last 25 years (yes, this is our 25th High Holy Day together...) I can say that I have not repressed my thoughts on Israel. Those of you who have been here a long time know that this has not always been easy. I've ruffled a lot of feathers, upsetting some, gaining support from others and even losing a few members. It's been a journey for me but I have never compromised my integrity regarding Israel. I have spoken in praise, admiration, concern and critique... and always with love.

To be completely fair though, I admit that while I have never withheld my true beliefs, I have been reluctant to share them. There have been many times when I have chosen to hold my tongue altogether instead of sharing my thoughts. I have gone silent. I guess I would have to say that I do see myself in the report after all.

Well, a great deal has happened since that lunch in June. July and August were terrible times for Israel. The Middle East was a tinderbox waiting to ignite. Naftali, Gilad, Eyal and Mohammed were murdered, rockets shot up from Gaza, bombs fell from Israel, the Iron Dome worked its marvels, ceasefires came and went, there was support, there was blame, there was frustration and exasperation. To our great sadness, the Temple's August trip to Israel was canceled.

On many levels it seemed that the Jewish world was all-abuzz with commentary – alliances, critiques, a lot of very loud voices. But like in the survey, many people remained reluctant and repressed. A friend of mine told me she didn't want to get into the discussion about Israel because she knew that whatever she said would offend someone. I am keenly aware of that right now! I felt her pain even more when she said: "I don't feel safe expressing my non-conventional views. I'm afraid to disagree. There's no room for me at the table."

In response, I assured her that a table where questioning is discouraged and obedience is rewarded is not a Jewish table. Dialogue and debate, discussion and disagreement are core values of our tradition. After a heated debate, the Talmud often invokes the phrase *elu v'elu divrei elohim hayim* – *both of these are the words of the living God* – acknowledging that more than one opinion can hold Divine truth; and that diversity of thought is God's plan. Our ancient tradition teaches us how to argue with dignity. Yet, when it comes to Israel today, we often leave little room for respectful dialogue and disagreement.

In late July as the ground war began, Rabbi Saxe hosted a discussion on the events in Israel and Gaza. This gathering turned out to be a model of what we wish the entire Jewish community could achieve – a safe place to explore the spectrum of beliefs and emotions about Israel. Our table was open – the sign read: unlimited seating. At this event, Rodef Shalom clearly lived up to its name as Pursuers of Peace, a caring congregation, a place of diversity and dialogue, inclusion and love. Love for one another, and love for Israel too.

I was out of town that week, but I am eager to take a seat at the table too. Like my friend, I imagine that in sharing my views, some people may want to judge me harshly. But I hope, instead, they embrace the image of an inclusive family

dinner where no one is sent away before dessert and the conversation and company linger long into the night.

My views on Israel come from a long relationship that began when I took my first trip there at 18. Since then I have lived in Israel, continued to travel there and followed Israel's story through both the media and my Israeli friends. Like the great 12th century poet Yehuda HaLevi, "my heart is in the east while I am in the utmost edge of the west."² Of course, long distance relationships are always complex, especially during times of turmoil such as this past summer. In the sporadic moments of calm when I had time to reflect and connect with my eastward heart, I realized that there are some things I know, and some I want to believe; some things I don't know, and others I that make me want to walk away from the table.

I know that I stand with Israel in defense of its citizens. No country should have to live under constant attack by rockets and terrorists that pop up from tunnels to fire shots at kids and kibbutzniks. *I know* that the self-stated purpose of Hamas is to rid the world of the State of Israel.

I don't know how Israel can limit the harm to non-combatants when Hamas fighters embed themselves among schools and hospitals and view the deaths of Palestinian people as strategic and political gain. *I don't know* what it feels like to live in the open-air prison that Gaza is, 1.8 million people struggling for a basic existence. While Hamas, voted into power by the Palestinian people themselves, is largely responsible for these terrible living conditions, Israel's fingerprints can be seen there too. *I know* that very little is black and white.

I don't know if Hamas wants a Palestinian State more than it wants the destruction of Israel. *I believe* it wants to force Israel to remain involved in a disproportional war that delegitimizes Israel and spreads hatred towards Israel on the world stage.

And, *I don't know* that Benjamin Netanyahu really wants a two State solution. He recently proclaimed that any Palestinian State contiguous to Israel constituted an unacceptable danger, which would require indefinite military occupation. My eastward heart is sinking. *I know* that this mentality will not bring peace.

I know it's not as simple as these few statements and I wish I had time to reflect with you on the dozens of relevant angles that are part of this puzzle. At the end of the day, *I believe* that the only way to rid Gaza of Hamas is for the Palestinian people themselves to drive them out. And *I believe* Israel must embrace its role in³ achieving that goal by taking the courageous step of changing the trajectory on which we currently stand. Are we not commanded to be *Or l'goyim* – a light unto the nations?⁴

By now most of us surely realize that there is no military solution to this conflict. As long as the suffocation felt in Gaza is not alleviated, Israel will not be able to breathe freely either. It's time for a radical rethink to end the cycle of violence before hundreds more innocent people die. *I don't know* exactly what this might look like. But I imagine it would include an end to settlements, the Israeli army pulling out of the West Bank, and a newly empowered Palestinian Authority that helps put a lid on Hamas violence.

Finally, *I believe* that we must do all of this without losing our humanity and without diminishing the Jewish values that define our Jewish State. Israel is after all not only a territorial homeland; it is a permanent moral commitment. I hear the Psalmist: *Bakesh shalom v'rodfeihu* - Seek Peace and Pursue it!⁵ As we navigate negotiations and concessions, we must never stop asking if our actions or policies make peace more or less likely. When the guns are silent, we must renew a vision of our homeland that blends security with humanity, resolve with tolerance, strength with compassion - all with a sense of serving something greater than ourselves. This, *I believe*, is the way we will shift from building walls and tunnels to building gates and bridges.

"My heart is in the East and I am in the utmost edge of the West." Some of you may disagree with my reflections but *I know* that you struggle with and care about Israel as much as I do and I hope that as the New Year begins we will both find it in ourselves to expand our table and welcome open and honest conversation.

As I imagined our conversations about Israel, my mind jumped to one of my favorite memories of the year I lived in Jerusalem – also a night of conversation. My teacher, Ada Cohen, invited our small Hebrew class to her home for dinner. Her

husband, Doron, was there, along with some neighbors. She served the most spectacular Israeli food I have ever tasted. Eggplant shimmering with olive oil, fire red peppers, humus thick and smooth like peanut-butter, salads, breads, desserts dripping in honey. Her apartment overlooked the Jerusalem Forest and on the far side the Knesset lit up the blue evening sky. Arab music was playing – Ada had lived in Morocco the previous year. Doron was showing off the technology he was developing for a project at work. Food, music, gadgets, friends... I remember it as a magical evening even...after the conversation turned to politics. Voices began to rise, opinions flew through the air - the West Bank, Lebanon, ethics, Judaism. It was 1985 but really it could have happened last month. I remember feeling both invigorated and reluctant. Like today, the problems were so complex, so nuanced, and it seemed so difficult to do justice to every issue within the debate. I was riveted but I held my tongue; scared to jump in. Perhaps afraid to be judged; perhaps afraid I wouldn't articulate my views well; perhaps afraid I didn't know enough. Sometimes it is hard not to be reluctant.

One of the things that impressed me at Ada's table was that there were many radically different views regarding Israel's politics and its security. One person told another that she must think she is living in biblical times; another person was accused of sipping too much Manischwietz. The discussion was emotional and I thought it would all end badly, but it did not. It ended with warm hugs and reminders about meeting at the bus stop and plans for the coming weekend. It seems that when it comes to debates about Israel, Israelis can be much more tolerant of each other than we often are in the American Jewish Community. Perhaps too many of us think that love and loyalty are the same as agreeing. I would add that if we always agree with someone, we're probably not in a truly dynamic and sincere relationship.

It's distressing that many American Jews, especially young adults, don't consider themselves in relationship with Israel at all. Why, because, to a large part, they cannot see themselves, nor hear their views, in the discussions and debates. They have not been welcomed at the table. The menu reads 'Solidarity or Censorship.' Many of them and us, are looking for a new menu, one that reads:

'Commitment and Critique.'⁶ Our young people have told us that if they can't find the menu they are looking for they may abandon the search leaving Israel and much of their Judaism behind. We cannot let this to happen. The table, around which the American Jewish community sits, needs to be more like Ada's table. A seat for everyone, no one left out, everyone heard with respect and a sense of positive inquiry.

It was on that night at Ada's table that I fell in love with Israel and every extraordinary aspect of the country; every problem and all of the flaws; every dusty road and every lush forest, all the crops and computers and most of all the resilient and fascinating people.

I imagine so many of you might love to share in an experience like the one I had nearly 30 years ago. Maybe you would sit silently, reluctant, maybe you would engage; deep down you would want to connect. If you haven't traveled to Israel yet, I urge you to go. Our August trip is rescheduled for this coming summer! I promise you that your opinions and beliefs, be they right or left, will take on so much more texture and depth. Your positions may not become clearer but they will migrate from your mind and take root in your heart.

If you don't think you know enough to sit at the table, pick up one book, any book, and read some of Israel's story. If you imagine yourself wanting even more, sign up to receive an Israeli newspaper in English on your email. Even if you just read the headlines, I promise your feelings of reluctance and repression will diminish. You will have things to share with your kids, your interest will be piqued, and your connection will grow. Let's plan a dinner. Seating unlimited, good food, lots of opinions, welcome company and conversation long into the night.

We need every generation, every denomination and every opinion - from right to left - at our Jewish family table. And when we hear opinions, views, radically different from our own, beliefs that seem illogical and unreasonable, we need to invoke the Talmudic words – *elu v'elu divre Elohim hayim*- *both of these are the words of the living God* – because more than one idea can hold Divine truth and diversity of thought is God's plan.

Anokhi b'sof maarav...v'libi bmizrakh

I am in the utmost edge of the west, but my heart is in the east – and I'm sitting at the table waiting for you to join me.

¹ JCPA, by Steven Cohen and Rabbi Jason Gitlin. October 2013.

² "My heart is in the East," Poem by Yehuda Halevi, 12th century.

³ "An Israel without Illusions," David Grossman

⁴ Isaiah 49:6

⁵ Psalm 34:15

⁶ Phrases attributed to Rabbi George Gittleman