

Eternally Egypt?

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*Standing on the parted shores of history
We still believe what we were taught
Before ever we stood at Sinai's foot;*

*That wherever we go it is eternally Egypt
That there is a better place, a promised land;
That the winding way to that promise passes through the wilderness.*

*That there is no way to get from here to there
Except by joining hands, marching together*

Eternally Egypt? Where we go it is Eternally Egypt? Does anyone even believe that anymore? Growing up on Long Island is as far removed from Egypt as I could possibly imagine. As a Rabbi I have often recited this reading at services just before the *Mi Chamocha* prayer, a prayer for redemption and freedom from slavery. It is meant to inspire the idea that wherever we are we must not forget that we were once slaves in the land of Egypt, that wherever we are we are never home, we are always strangers passing through the wilderness.

Yet, I have to admit, I'm not sure that I believe that. America doesn't feel foreign, nor do I feel like a slave in this country. This is my home, this is where I feel I belong. And this, is one of the greatest conundrums of being a Jew in the twenty-first century. America is my home, yet Torah and our liturgy is riddled with lessons that our home is Israel.

In speaking with many congregants about their strongest Jewish memories, most will speak of Passover Seders at their grandparents' house, lighting Chanukah candles with their parents, or eating Shabbat and holiday meals with their families. Though the importance of synagogues and other Jewish institutions cannot be minimized, the home remains the place where most people first encounter Jewish ritual, and where much of Jewish life takes place.

It is perhaps a function of the Diaspora experience that the home has assumed a central role in Jewish religious life. Lacking, for most of Jewish history, a national homeland, Jews have instead focused on creating holy space within their own personal dwellings.

The Jewish home is especially central to the American Jewish experience. During time spent teaching and working with conversion students, many ask questions centered on the Jewish home. How do we create one? How do I make it look like a Jewish home?

The truth is, it is especially simple to identify a Jewish home. A Jewish home can be identified both by the objects in the home and by what takes place there. While individual families differ in their religious practice and Jewish interests, certain elements link Jewish homes to one another—and to other Jewish homes throughout history.

As Rabbi Jill Jacobs, Executive Director of Rabbis for Human Rights-North America, notes, “one prominent symbol is the mezuzah, a box-encased scroll that serves as a literal acting out of the biblical command to “write these words on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 11:20). Other examples include: ritual items—such as candlesticks, kiddush cups (with which to say the blessing on wine sanctifying Shabbat and holidays), and special plates for the challah loaves—and books on Jewish subjects or by Jewish authors. These objects help outsiders identify the house as Jewish and remind the inhabitants of the house of the centrality of Judaism in their home life.”

The unequivocal identification of the home as the center of Jewish life seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon. Early rabbinic sources speak often of public spaces, such as the synagogue, but only rarely mention the religious life of the home. While there is much discussion of legal issues relevant to the home, such as kashrut and blessings over food, there is little talk of the home as a concept in and of itself.

Some have argued that the description of the home as the center of Judaism was a deliberate creation of the modern era. According to the historian Paula Hyman: “From the period of the Enlightenment to the last third of the 19th century, when a vigorous public debate about Jewish Emancipation (and hence about the value of Judaism) raged in Western and Central Europe, even critics of Jewish culture and religion acknowledged the admirable qualities of the Jewish home. Because domestic orderliness and serenity within the family were central values of the emerging bourgeois culture of the 19th century, Jews seeking to acculturate to the standards of the urban middle classes of their societies could, and did, point to their family life as compelling evidence for the worth of Jewish culture and as a sign of their own adherence to bourgeois norms.”

In the late nineteenth century Naftali Herz Imber, a Galician Jew, wrote the poem that would later be set to music and become the national anthem of the State of Israel. In a few sentences, Naftali Imber captured the undying hope of the Jewish people, through the long years of exile that they would someday return to independence in their own homeland.

Kol 'od balevav penimah, Nefesh Yehudi Homiyah: As long as the heart beats within, a Jewish soul still years for home.

Today, I proudly call New York City my home. This is where I belong. I see my future here in America, and at this moment, here in this city. I am an American Jew who can only imagine a future in America. Lately I have asked myself to consider what it means for me to make my home here, but always feel as though my homeland is in Israel.

I do not see a future for me as a resident of Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel. But I am a proud citizen of Am Yisrael, the people of Israel. Jews have a timeless relationship with Israel; a relationship that transcends the realities of the political situation. America is our home, but Israel is unequivocally the Jewish homeland.

Yehuda Halevi put it best when he wrote, "My heart is in the East, but I am in the West". This contorted relationship between one's home and homeland is appreciated in the struggle of many of us sitting here today. Lately, I have become more and more concerned about how the relationship between American Jewry and Israel seems to be drifting farther and farther apart.

In a 2016 Essay for Mosaic Magazine Former American Diplomat Elliot Abrams writes, "...everyone knows that American Jews and Israel are drifting apart—and everyone is confident of the reasons why. Israel, it is said, has become increasingly nationalistic and right-wing; "the occupation" violates liberal values; and the American Jewish "establishment," with its old familiar defense organizations and their old familiar apologetics, has lost touch with young American Jews who are put off by outdated Zionist slogans...In brief, the fundamental problem resides in the nature of the Israeli polity and the policies of the Israeli government, which together account for the growing misfit between Israelis and their American Jewish cousins."

Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict over Israel by Dov Waxman, A British Jew who has lived in the United States for half his life, describes the narrative going something like this: the "pro-Israel consensus that once united American Jews is eroding," and "American Jewish conflict over Israel is replacing the old era of solidarity." In fact, while "Israel used to bring American Jews together," it is now "driving them apart."

The American Jewish community's relations with Israel, from the rise of the Zionist movement through Israel's birth and its wars Zionism always presented a dilemma to American Jews, who did not consider themselves to be "in exile" from their homeland.

In preparation for the Confirmation class's journey to Berlin, Germany last winter, we spent many weeks learning about the history of the Reform movement. At its essence, the Reform movement is about the unique relationship between assimilation and tradition. In 1966, the late Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Gerson D. Cohen, delivered a commencement address with the provocative title "The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History." While acknowledging the challenge of living in a free society, Cohen demonstrates as a historian that from the very first Jewish Diaspora, the Jewish historical experience has been marked by an anxiety over assimilation coupled with a revitalization of Jewish life resulting from that very experience.

Cohen writes, "we Jews have always been and will doubtless continue to be a minority group. Now a minority that does not wish to ghettoize itself, one that refuses to become fossilized, will inevitable have to acculturate itself, i.e. to assimilate at least to some extent...so it has always been, and so it will continue to be."

Reform Judaism is motivated by many different spiritual and practical factors. Indeed there was strong drive to "fit in" to modern society, taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the emancipation of the Jews in Europe in the 19th century, as well as an honest attempt to reconcile religion with the findings of science and rationality

The nature of the Jewish identity, whatever it might be was not nationalist according to 19th century Reform Judaism. For every other nation in Europe, modernization and nationalism went hand in hand. Yet just as every other nation was discovering its identity, reform Jews were trying to lose theirs, in the

name of the same modern rationalism. They did not want to appear to be different, or to have their loyalty called into question because their allegiance might be to another people.

The opposition of Reform Jews to idea of a Jewish people and the centrality of Zion to Jewish life predated political Zionism by many years. In the USA, in 1841, at the dedication ceremony of Temple Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina, Rabbi Gustav Posnanski stated that "this country is our Palestine, this city our Jerusalem, this house of God our Temple."

So I suppose the question then is, if the Reform Jewish community felt so strongly about its relationship with American vs. its relationship with Israel, than it what sense did Israel ever bring not only American Jews together, but Jewry together?

I believe that answer lies within the beginning of our story as a people. The history of the Jewish people begins with Abraham, and the story of Abraham begins when God tells him to leave his homeland, promising Abraham and his descendants a new home in the land of Canaan. This is the land now known as Israel.

It is the difference between longing for something and finally having something. This is the difference between what nineteenth century Jews and twentieth century Jews have to struggle with. Our ancestors longed for a State of Israel, they prayed for a time that one day God will bring us back to the land. But none of them could have possibly imagined the success of the land of Israel today. Nobody could have predicted that Zionism was going to work. And so, we the descendants of those dreamers, are challenged with fact that Israel exists.

A few years ago, I had an opportunity to travel with American Jewish World Services to the border of Thailand and Burma. There I sat and listened to the stories of Burmese who have been forcibly removed from their home. In the middle of the night, many were woken up to the sound of gunfire, and kicked out of the land of their ancestors – the land of their birth and told to go. They wandered for days, finally finding their way into Thailand. But Thailand is not their home. Their home exists as a distant memory, it exists in song, it exists in their language and their stories.

As a delegation we sat with a group of Burmese women on the floor of their makeshift huts. We were visitors to their homes located in a displaced person's camp on the border. We shared a meal, and listened to their stories. We shared stories of our home and our mission. We shared smiles, perhaps this might make their situation a little bit better.

But the women wanted us to share more than just smiles and a meal. They wanted us to share the essence of what they have heard the Jewish people are. They asked us "How did the Jewish people survive as a people without a land? And most importantly how did you get your land back?" We froze, staring at each other. You see, I had never really thought about that at all. I love Israel, I love being Jewish – but staring in the face of a Burmese refugee I saw the Jewish spirit – the longing that a Jew feels to be at home.

If you only had a few weeks to live, where would you go? Would you go home? If so – where would that home be? What does it look like? Is it filled with joy and laughter, or is it a place where sorrow and hatred fill it walls

Theodore Herzl said: “*Im Tirtzu Ein Zo Aggadah*, If you will it, it is no dream. Herzl spoke of the possibility of Jewish homeland existing in our world. Today, a Jewish homeland exists in Israel, but it is not the only home for Jews. The *mishkan* traveled with the Jewish people. As the people traveled, so too did God. And another name for God is *makom* – the place. Jewish tradition teaches that home is here, there, and everywhere. Anywhere that a holy community convenes, God is present. And wherever there is God, there is home.

And yet, through it all, there is Israel. If you have never been to Israel, this is the time to go. In fact, in August 2017, I will be leading a Family Trip to Israel with Cantor Garfein. This trip is for first timers and returnees. The best way that I know to show how special Israel is, is to be standing there with you. How can I tell you how small one feels at the Western Wall, unless I am standing below it looking at the towering structure? How can I possibly explain the beauty of the Golan, unless we are together looking at out at the rolling, majestic green hills? How can I possibly encapsulate the mysticism of Sefat, unless we are walking through those tight streets surrounded by the blue walls and doors? I can’t do any of these things, unless you join me – and I promise you will not regret.

Another important task that you have is to educate yourself on Israel. It is not acceptable for anyone to watch television, hear the news, and when we don’t like what is being said, turn away. Every Jew today must have some relationship with the state of Israel. It can small or it can be great, but it has to exist. Perhaps you want to begin to read books on the state of Israel. Or perhaps you want to set-up a meeting with a Rabbi standing in front of you to talk about your relationship with Israel? Or, perhaps you want to sit and read a copy of poetry from Yehuda Amichai – who so beautifully captures the Israeli spirit.

Jonathan Sarna wrote: “In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries arose the image of the romantic pioneer in Israel: the hard-working agricultural colonist, the brawny Jewish farmer. In the second decade of the twentieth century, Zionists like Louis D. Brandeis added a further twist to this image: Zion became for them a utopian extension of the American dream; a Jewish refuge where freedom, liberty, and social justice would reign supreme. Israel became an “outpost of democracy” that American Jews could legitimately, proudly, and patriotically champion”.

This is how I understand my relationship with the Jewish Homeland and my American Home. I look to an ideal of Israel that transcends politics, a homeland far away from my home. It remains a Jewish refuge where freedom, liberty and justice reign. And though in one hand, I hold my frustrations with the political situation, in the other I hold my love of the place, my people, and the ideal of Zion.

Thousands of years ago, the Temple was destroyed, the city of Jerusalem lay in ruin, and much of the Jewish people were forced into exile. Degrade and demoralized, the Jews of the exile and their way of life should have disappeared. But they did not. They thrived: prayer replaced sacrifice, and *it continues today*. Scholarship and learning flourished...*and it continues today!*

There is great concern in the Jewish world today about continuity. Yet, to achieve permanence is not an end in itself. We must concern ourselves not only with how to assure continuity, but also *why?* What is it that we are so concerned with passing on?

The great Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz describes the struggle of Jewish continuity like a millennia-long relay race in which “the ‘baton’ is some manifestation of our special relationship with God. Abraham and Sarah passed the tradition on to Isaac, and he and Rebecca passed it on to Jacob. And just as the upcoming runner strides in tandem with his predecessor before the latter completely relinquishes the baton, so, to, each of us – ideally – has the opportunity to share our understanding and appreciation of our tradition with our offspring, before entrusting them to continue the journey.”

We who live in the Diaspora have a choice. We can either assimilate, close up shop, and listen to PEW study after PEW study tell us that Jewish life is shrinking. Or we can build something great right here. Excuse me for saying, but we must continue to work to build this country and this place as a center for Jewish life, a vibrant and creative community that exists outside of the State of Israel.

This will demand much of you and me: different plans and different ways of thinking. It will require us to rethink our institutions and you to rethink your relationship with them. It demands a deeper involvement by a much broader base of people who are committed to growing and changing.

American Jewry has done quite well these last two centuries. Yet as a community, we must not think about what we have done, but thinking about what we will do. Congregation Rodeph Sholom is a part of that story, a 175 year part of that story. But in order for us to see through the next 175 years it is going to take a major investment from you. I’m not talking only about money – but, as Steinsaltz too believes, “people investing *themselves*: their time, their energy, their passion, and their souls.”

With determination, hard-work, and hope we can reenergize our communities here in America and our relationship with our homeland in the State of Israel. These are important goals not only for ourselves, but also for our children. If tomorrow has a meaning, then our children will invest in that promise. We have survived for thousands of years outside of the land of Israel, ever since the destruction of the temple, and we will continue to thrive outside of that land. Together with the State of Israel, our two nations will serve as a beacon, as a light unto all the nations.