

The Dream of Zion

10 years ago, I shared the following midrash as a frame for the purpose of Judaism:

There was once a lone Jew wandering the roads of Babylonia. In the midst of his wandering, he witnessed two birds engaged in combat, one clawing the other to death. The victorious bird then plucked a small plant and applied it to the lifeless bird. Miraculously, the bird stirred and came to life. After witnessing this miracle, the man said, "I shall go, and I will revive the Land of Israel." He went to the plant, took a bundle of its leaves, and left for the Promised Land. Along the way, he encountered the carcass of a fox. Touching the plant to its body, the fox came to life and ran off. He then encountered a wounded lion, and applied the magic plant. Its wounds healed and the lion too was revived. It then rose, roared, and devoured the man who had saved its life.¹

I love this story and imagining the Jewish purpose as one of revitalizing the world in the face of lions. But a decade later, I'm still asking myself, what is this magic plant, and where can I get some?

100 years ago, the Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig wrote, "My own experience does not convince me that the air of Palestine renders men

¹ Leviticus Rabbah 22:4

wise. But I do believe that my Frankfurt wisdom could not exist without the land of Israel, and not only without that which was, but also without that which will be, that which has a future. The source of our hope is Zion.”² The belief that we can change the world. A better, brighter future, a land flowing with milk and honey and peace and prosperity.

But Rosenzweig would never step foot in that land. It was not the air of Israel, or even the earth of the land, but the idea of Zion that fueled his spirit and those of a hundred generations before him. Whether explicit or implicit, beating within the Jewish soul has always been an eternal heart of hope. The hope of Zion. The hope of Israel.

Here we are today with the State of Israel at 75. There is much to celebrate, much to acknowledge, much that deserves discussion. And yet, the two most controversial words I could utter from this bimah are “Israel” and “Zionism”. Over my years at Rodeph Sholom, every *single* time I have mentioned these words, I have received outcry and offense; whether I mention falafel, ponder policy, or reference Israeli cinema.

In the landscape of American Judaism, two trends result: either to use these terms in the most extremist of ways, either left or right, and reshape Jewish community as ideologically homogenous, or, even more

² Nahum Glatzer, Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought, 1998, pp. 345-6.

commonly, to simply avoid speaking about Israel or Zionism at all. Both of these paths – ideological extremism or utter silence– abandon intellectualism and indeed, abandon the complex and necessary engagement with the dream of Zion. And I do not see a future for an Israel abandoned from its ideal, nor a Judaism that is divorced from its dream.

It is vision that spurred striving from our biblical roots to today, that animated the founders of Rodeph Sholom, and that inspired the matriarchs and patriarchs who started the State of Israel. My fear is that, as American and Israeli Jews have found greater prosperity and power than any other generation in history, we have let go of our claim to the dream, favored comfort over courage and allowed idealism to be occupied by extremists.

In the words of the philosopher Isaiah Berlin:

[W]e must weigh and measure, bargain, compromise, and prevent the crushing of one form of life by its rivals. ...But you must believe me, one cannot have everything one wants – not only in practice, but even in theory. The denial of this, the search for a single, overarching ideal because it is the one and only true one for humanity, invariably leads to coercion. And then to

destruction...eggs are broken, but the omelet is not in sight, there is only an infinite number of eggs...ready for the breaking. And in the end, the passionate idealists forget the omelet, and just go on breaking eggs.³

There was a time, only a century ago, when Zionism was seen as inherently idealistic and pluralistic. Annual Zionist congresses hosted debates about different futures of the Jewish people and the world. What bound them together was agreement neither about the texture of that future nor the best way to get there; rather, it was agreement that it began with dreaming of tomorrow and believing that all are needed to reach it. The pep rallies that tend to define such gatherings today, the inability for AIPAC and JStreet and New Israel Fund to join together in conversation, proves Isaiah Berlin's prophetic warning – when passionate idealists believe homogeneity is desirable, when visionaries focus more on shattering the imperfect than building the ideal, our world falls apart.

Right now, we witness millions of Israelis struggling for the soul of their country. Religious and secular, nationalist and opposition, the populace is reawakening to the need for dream to animate reality. And idealism is returning to the national conversation, the Israeli flag returning as a banner

³ Isaiah Berlin, A Message to the 21st Century, November 25, 1994, delivered at University of Toronto.

of hope, and in all the discord and terror around change, we see engagement over apathy.

Zionism has never been about a single dream, but rather the engagement of a collective willing to strive and struggle together. As the road between reality and dream is forever fraught, and if we abandon our willingness to dream together, then we lose any cohering aim for our future.

Never in history has a Jewish nation wielded the power of Israel. In only 75 years, Israel rose out of desert to stand as a superpower on the world stage. 2,000 years of rabbinic text and ethical exploration could not have prepared us for the challenges of Jewish democracy, war, and coalition-building on a national scale. Strip away the antisemitism that surrounds Israel, and most of its struggles center around problems of power. Some believe that the possession of power is inherently evil – that the underdog is definitionally moral. Others believe that if one possesses the power to root out evil and raze it to the ground, then one is obligated to do so. As Abraham models in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, power, even divine power, must be subjected to the ideals of justice. Assessing these cities as irredeemable, God prescribes total annihilation. Abraham argues with God that the presence of worthy and righteous people even amidst a tide

of corruption should complicate divine judgement. As he says, "Shall the judge of all the earth not deal justly?"⁴

This Yom Kippur will mark 50 years since one of the bloodiest wars in Israel's history. For those who would point to such persistent existential threat as justification for the death of innocents, our tradition raises the voice of Abraham to temper even God's display of such dominance. As Prof. Yuval Noah Harari, one of Israel's most famous authors and historians, wisely warns, placing the state above all other values is where fascism takes over from nationalism.⁵ But to simply stand at the sidelines and decry Occupation and human rights violations without commitment to betterment and redemption is the very moral vapidness that we read of Jonah on Yom Kippur – an eagerness to burn down what we find offensive without any responsibility to build something better. We need a more sophisticated view of power.

Such a view celebrates power as the blessing that birthed Israel and enabled its ongoing survival, but at the same time takes great care to remember that moral power prohibits indiscriminate destruction. There are those who view the moral guidelines placed on the IDF as weakness and defeatism; I would argue such moral guidelines ensure pragmatic

⁴ Genesis 18:35

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHHb7R3kx40>

reality is forever connected to our animating ideal - the vision of a world redeemed. There are those who view the actions of a military as inherently inhumane; I would argue that if we cannot believe that human conflict and morality can coexist, then we have abandoned our belief in humanity. In Judaism, the purpose of power is to reach with responsibility towards a collective ideal. We recall the Israelites standing on the brink of the Promised Land, prepared for war but called to ethical example. There can be no Zionism without moral power.

The prophet Isaiah was one of the harshest critics of Israel. And yet, coming to the end of his book, his tone shifts, leaving us with this message:

"Who has ever heard of such a thing?
Who has seen anything like it?
Can a country be born in a day?
Or a nation be brought forth in a moment?
...As a mother comforts her child,
So will I comfort you,
and in Jerusalem you will find comfort."⁶

⁶ Isaiah 66: 8-9, 13

The return to Israel, he says, will seem as if overnight a nation was reborn. But no nation can be built in a mere moment. Like our ancestors journeying for a generation through the wilderness, so too has our collective history been one reaching towards a Promised Land. For the Israelites, reaching the land did not immediately open into milk and honey, but rather generations of war and continued struggle towards justice and morality. We look to our Israel today and see a country that may appear to have been born in a night. And it is still becoming. Though we may now be able to breathe the air and touch the earth of the holy land, Zion is still ahead of us, a vision for the future as it has been in every generation. And the way we get there will not be through a singular vision of Zion, nor an extremism that seeks the vanquishing of disagreement. Following the destruction of the Temple and the upheaval of the Jewish world through exile, our early sages sought to bring opportunity out of rupture. They offered this image of how a Jewish future would be built in Israel:

At the end of our persecution our rabbis entered to Usha... They sent word..."All who have studied, let them come and study, and all who have not yet studied, let them come and study." They entered and learned and met all their needs.⁷

⁷ Song of Songs Rabbah 2:5; gratitude to Yehuda Kurtzer for teaching me this text with this particular contextual understanding.

Those who are willing to show up in the aftermath of conflict are those who shape our future. And what is most powerful about this text is that this act of showing up, of being in community, is itself a moral act.

Teachers enter as teachers, learners enter as learners, but in the end, everyone who enters becomes a learner. This is part of the dream of Zion – out of a time of fracture, the pluralistic space that sees discourse and learning as our necessary path. By showing up in learning, we reclaim the Zionism that inspired debate and relationship around dream.

There is a legendary story an incident that took place before the establishment of the Jewish state. David Ben-Gurion sought the wise counsel of his trusted colleague Yitzhak Tabenkin in making a crucial decision. Tabenkin gave Ben-Gurion his advice, and Israel's first prime minister said, "I accept what you say, but from whom did you seek advice?" "From two people," answered Tabenkin. "From my grandmother who died 10 years ago, and from my granddaughter who is not yet born."⁸

This, truly, is the Jewish perspective. One of ancient roots, but whose vision is forever on the road ahead, imagining the world of our grandchildren. As it was for Tabenkin, may it be for us as well. That as we look to Israel, to celebrate her existence and the incredible journey that

⁸ Credit to Rabbi Rick Jacobs for sharing this story; I've adapted it here to bring the presence of women into this story; <https://www.jta.org/2012/06/12/ideas/op-ed-reform-judaism-has-obligation-to-change>

has brought us to this moment, we also look ahead, envisioning the Zion still yet to be realized. That when Israel falls short of this dream, we will neither ignore imperfection nor simply be egg-breakers, but instead take up the mantle of building towards that dream. That we will, as the wandering Jew of the midrash, take up our magic plant, this hope for the future, and bring it to the Promised Land. By visiting the land of our ancestors, by learning, and studying, and lobbying, and donating. By celebrating and struggling and questioning. By making Rodeph Sholom a place in which, in our disagreements about vision and dream, we stand together as dreamers and strivers. And through this continued engagement, may we see the day when Israel and Zion may meet.

And in the vision articulated in Israel's Declaration of Independence:

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture....⁹

⁹ <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/general/declaration-of-establishment-state-of-israel>

What is that magic plant of legend? It is the Jewish call to bring dream into reality. Where can we get some? It is here – embedded in these walls, instilled in our hearts, filling our prayers and texts and oneg tables. The dreams of our ancestors that call us today.

I wonder about Tabenkin's imagined granddaughter - I hope one day she was born into a better world because of her great-great grandmother's strivings. And I hope she chose to be in conversation with both her grandfather's dream and that of *her* future grandchild. And I hope, one day, as people look to the Israel of the future, the same will be said of us – that we carried the plant of hope, that we sowed the seeds of Zion, and that we brought the world one step closer to a dream.