

Eleven years ago on the occasion of Israel's 50th, Israeli writer David Grossman wrote:

“At the age of fifty, my mother likes to say that everyone gets the face he or she deserves.”

He continues:

“Were I to be given the cruel task of choosing a single picture from Israel's fifty years, a picture that contains the essence of Israel's face, I would choose a moment that no Israeli can forget: November 4, 1995, Yitzchak Rabin standing on the platform facing tens of thousands singing “The Song for Peace.”... that is Israel's face. Not only because his life went through the most important stages of Israeli history...not because in his face, the face of the handsome golden boy, the face of the mythological Sabra, we saw something of which we had no “historical experience”—how that Sabra matured, and how he grew old, and how the ideal and the miracle are slowly embroidered into daily life, into reality, and into time....There, that Saturday night, when we stood and sang that song together with him, and enveloped him with our love, was the moment at which one could feel both the strength and weakness of Israel—the vitality and the courage to rise above our anxieties and to be created anew. But there was also the dark extremism lying in wait in the dark, within us. And it had a pistol. From within us.” (New Yorker April 20 1998)

Grossman's image—the face of Israel at fifty—has stayed with me for over ten years now. We all have dreams—sometimes I fantasize and wonder what if? What if Yigal Amir had been stopped. Would Rabin have been able to lead Israel to a peace with the Palestinians?

Or what if Rabin's murder had led to a redoubling of the strength of the Peace Camp in Israel and the vision of Oslo had been carried through to completion?

Or what if Barak and Arafat had been able to come to a peace accord at Camp David in the summer of 2000?

Or was Oslo—all of it a charade as so many maintain?

So many, too many what ifs—so many dreams unfulfilled. Israel is now 61 going on 62. Along with David Grossman, I wonder and I worry about the face of Israel today. For some of us it is a face that we cannot take our eyes off of and some of us even remain enraptured by what is represented in the face of Rabin's youth—Israel's early years— the romance, the hope, the dreams being fulfilled. These are the good moments.

For others of us it is a face that we cannot bear to look at, tortured as we are by the face of Rabin's final moments and all that it has come to represent—the extremism both political and religious of the ultra- Orthodox, the greater “biblical Israel” movement, the political corruption, the ugly violent vehemence of parts of the settler movement.

There seem to be so many such moments when looking at the face of Israel is thrust upon us. There are the articles that are so painful to read—settler violence against Palestinians, uprooting olive trees in Palestinian groves, the separation barrier dividing Palestinian family from family, village from

farm land, neighbor from neighbor. There are the stories of home demolition in Palestinian neighborhoods, the denial of building permits to Palestinians, settlement expansion, charges of human rights violations, and Geneva Convention violations, charges of war crimes in Gaza, and the denial of access to human rights workers, the denial of access to UN Commissions. I could go on and on.

I read the articles and I move from being shaken with an unbelievable despair to being furious with the hypocrisy, lies and double standard. What about the Palestinian atrocities, the suicide bombers, the incessant terrorism, Iran's nuclear threat, Hamas in the South, Hezbollah in the North, endless rocket and mortar attacks on Sderot, terrorists targeting children on their way to school, no recognition ever of Israel's right to exist, the blinding clarity of their desire to destroy our State rather than build one of their own. I ask myself—what does the world expect? All we want is one small country—one small sliver on the Mediterranean. The world insists on asking of Israel what it asks of no one else. And then I ask myself—what do I expect?

Then, as if the ongoing torment of the West Bank and Gaza are not enough to cause a weeping for Zion, I receive letters such as this one from a friend in Israel and I want to cry—describing as it does the ongoing demonstrations by the ultra Orthodox in Jerusalem this summer in response to the opening of a parking garage on Shabbat. An eyewitness account of a Shabbat afternoon by the just opened garage:

“By 5:45 pm, milling crowds of Haredim had clustered above and behind the garage, rhythmically chanting SHABBAS, SHABBAS. The police were there in full battle gear, including some in body armor. Tourists stopped to try to understand what the tension was all about. News photographers were present in large numbers. The day was still quite warm. Signs were up everywhere inviting people to come to the International Arts and Crafts Fair that has been drawing overflowing crowds.

The (Haredi) demonstrators surged against the police and the police pushed back first with restraint – but then at times with grim determination. Some demonstrators were carried kicking and screaming to vehicles that clearly were marked as belonging to the Jerusalem jail system. The crowds cheered those who were carried off as heroes of the day, as martyrs to the cause.

I moved close to where the police and the demonstrators were in direct contact with each other. I heard the words that I feared and dreaded. These demonstrators, resplendent in their garments of 17th century Poland, opposed in every way to the Zionist state, screamed NAZI, NAZI into the faces of the young Israeli policemen. Not once; not just from a few people – that disgusting and utterly inexcusable slander, that ugly blot on the memory of the 6 million, was ringing out from various pockets of demonstrators.

I stood two feet in front of an Ethiopian policeman who probably was no more than 18. I heard the fur-hatted demonstrator scream at him: You are only an Ethiopian. You are not even a Jew. You are worse than a Goy.

My mouth filled with bile. I knew that I was trembling with impotent rage. When the surge ended, I went over to the young soldier and shook his hand and thanked him for the manner in which he had handled this unspeakable assault. He smiled sadly and just said: We should just all stay healthy.”

What then do I say and do? Do I leave Israel off of the table, knowing that to be the preference of many? What about those of us for whom Israel is in some often unexplainable way central to our lives as Jews? I feel this quandary deeply. How can I talk with you about Israel and what she means without having many of you simply turn me off? How do we achieve what I believe is so necessary to this moment—namely a wise, mature and strong Jewish attachment to Israel as American Jews and why is this so elusive for so many?

How do we come to an understanding that this government, this problem, this challenge, this wrong... are but moments in the history of a state that is of eternal importance to us as Jews.

Because, without Israel, I believe we lose a piece of who we are. I look at Israel and I see beyond the headline of the day or the tortured accusation of the moment. I behold a beauty that for me is unmatched anywhere else in the world. I see Herzl’s words come true—to be a nation among the nations.

How can we prevent ourselves from raising a generation of Jews who love the spirituality and beauty of Jewish worship, are committed to Jewish social activism, receive deep meaning

from participating in a Jewish community like Micah, but come away cold or indifferent when it comes to Israel—a kind of contemporary version of the Passover Haggadah’s fourth kind of child—“sh-eino yodea lishol. This is the child who knows not to ask about the something special that is Passover. I worry when the attitude is: ISRAEL????

My enormous fear is that Israel is for many becoming irrelevant to their self understanding as Jews. Our personal Jewish narrative is not connecting to the larger Zionist narrative. Without a narrative, there is no coherence or large overarching context granting implicit meaning. Without a narrative, we turn away and go on to something else. Without a narrative Israel is there and we are here—nothing connects us. I believe that we need to find a way to pick up the pieces.

“Al shloscha devarim ha-olam omed”, Rabbi Shimon said. The world stands on three things mirroring the rabbis’ dictum that a three fold cord is not easily broken.

So for those of you for whom the emotional bond is not there, let me examine three pieces of the Jewish Zionist story that seem to have gotten somehow lost along the way and perhaps our current project can be to seek to find a way to link them to each other and our own lives in order to more fully reclaim this part of our identity.

- Peoplehood --Avishai Margalit—Ethics of memory–

- The liberal challenge– Reform (her majesty’s loyal opposition)
 - Supporting the miracle—the goodness that is there now–
1. Kol Yisraeil Arevim zeh bazeh. This Talmudic text comes to us from a technical legal discussion on individual as opposed to communal responsibilities. The value derived has taken on a life of its own. More than anything else, I cite this verse to underscore the sense of close ties that comes as the underpinnings of Judaism.

The thick relations of peoplehood between Israel and American Jewry are being tested in our day. Margalit roots thick relations in memory— we have thick relations with people with whom we share memories.

Remember our memories of Abraham?

Abraham is called first not to preach social justice, but to go to a homeland that God would show him—and only there does God say that Abraham “will direct his children and his descendants after him to keep the way of Adonai by doing what is right and just...”

Remember the psalms?—certainly without question the most universal literature that we have bequeathed to humankind. Yet what did the psalmist write? “By the shores of Babylon, we lay down and wept as we remembered Zion....” “If I forget thee o Jerusalem.... and, Let Jerusalem be above my greatest joys.”

Simply put, the beauty, power, and majesty of all universal literature arises from a particular experience and Margalit's simplest claim is this—that Judaism and Jewish ethics without peoplehood is not possible. Peoplehood without home is a similar impossibility.

2. This brings me to my second leg—the demand of the moment and where we live.

America—our great country—is the great exception to both Jewish and world history. Look at how we flourish here as a people. America is by no means the norm. Did you ever pause to wonder why every other Jewish community in the world is such a strong Zionist community in comparison with our own? England, France, South Africa, Argentina all keep a love for Israel at the center of their Jewish life—to be a Jew anywhere else in the world is nothing like being a Jew in America. America is rooted in a set of ideas and ideals basking in tolerance. American pluralism is a kind of miracle of history and we should every day rejoice in our good fortune even as we remember that the status we enjoy in this country is a radical exception to the norm.

But I want to go a step farther. With this 'exceptionalism' comes a great challenge. We in the liberal Reform Jewish community have ignored an historic opportunity and neglected a great responsibility. If we decry the strength of the ultra-Orthodox in Israel, we also bear some responsibility for it. If we despair at the political strength of the Orthodox driven settler movement, if we shudder at the

tactics and the bullying of the ultra Orthodox community, we cannot afford to turn a blind eye. The weakness of our Reform movement in Israel is shameful and it is we who are to blame. We have nowhere but ourselves to look for fault. We who have marched for every liberal cause, organized and advocated on behalf of every wrong, been at the forefront of every great movement for justice, rights, and choice have left our sister movement in Israel to languish and mostly fend for itself. If we don't like the direction that we see Israel turning, don't doubt for a minute our own share of responsibility.

When I say us—I means all of us—even as I realize that the resources of our own Micah community have been far more generous than most in supporting our movement in Israel. What we have not done—and I am as guilty as any of you—is taken this cause on the road and pressed other congregations in this country to give and then give some more—to join in this critical effort. The record of our national movement in this regard is depressingly not at all good. History will judge us poorly if we do not stretch to the limit in every way that we can to advocate in every forum available to us on behalf of our movement in Israel.

3. Finally, I want to talk about the miracle that is Israel through the prism of the ideas and values she represents.

I love to say, and I repeat it often, that Israel is living testimony to the power of ideas to move people. Zionism is the idea that moved thousands and millions of people to

action and created the State we have today. Zionism is a multi layered fabric weaving together many different strands not the least of which is a potent ethical demand.

The great Zionist thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries all realized that the creation of Israel was going to bring with it a special moral challenge. I like to think that Israel as a democracy is one strong example of Jewish values. We take Israel's being a democracy for granted, but I am not familiar with any other country in history that lives in a totally undemocratic neighborhood, surrounded by enemies, with such a strong need for a military as part of the national structure that maintains the thriving democracy that is Israel.

Sometimes we lose the vision of how that moral vision has fared.

One recent example, cited by my friend Rabbi Ed Feinstein will suffice. Over the course of the last two years, thousands of refugees from the Sudan and Ethiopia had trekked across Egypt, through the Sinai Desert and into Israel. Some were placed in detention centers. Some found refuge in villages and kibbutzim in the South of Israel. By the beginning of summer, the government began deliberations on their fate. Several hundred of the refugees from Darfur, staged a march on Jerusalem, and camped out in front of the Interior Ministry. And many hundreds of Israelis joined them. The debate raged across the country—what to do with these refugees?

One side argues that there are 2.5 million refugees from the conflict in Darfur. There are some millions of refugees remaining from the instability in Ethiopia, the civil war in the Congo, and the chaos of Nigeria. All tolled, Africa has some ten or fifteen million refugees. We're a country of 7.2 million people. And we're at war. Is it reasonable to open our borders to Africa's refugees?

This argument elicits a vehement response as the human rights groups counter. Why did we start this country to begin with, if not to give shelter to those running for their lives? Have you forgotten that you're a Jew and this is a Jewish State?

And of course the response comes—how long will we remain a Jewish State if we throw open the doors to everyone who seeks asylum? And who pays for all of this?

And it gets personal. What if we had closed the doors when your parents or grandparents came knocking? Where would you have been then?

This debate was not, is not really about Darfur refugees—although it is that also. It's about the fundamental question that is debated endlessly in Israel: What does it mean to have a Jewish state? What is a Jewish state? It is an old conversation. It is Zionism come to life.

Ultimately, Israel decided to admit all of those refugees into the country and make them eligible for citizenship and appealed to surrounding countries to do the same.

As I come to a conclusion this evening, there are certainly some of you asking yourselves: why is it worth our time discussing our dreams and hopes for Israel while there are so many Arabs, and Ahmedinajhad who want simply to put an end to her existence? Aren't we being a little blind to reality by having this discussion at all? Whether Israel is in our eyes "good", "bad", a "light to the nations", etc. is of no importance to this existential threat to Israel. The response is what I have just repeated here about the refugees, but go to Israel and see it and hear it and experience it for yourselves. You will discover how so many Israelis fuss about these questions all the time, because they directly affect the quality of life there and their own self image. These questions consume Israeli society.

David Grossman once again:

“Israel was founded...out of a great insult ...the insult of a people rejected... the insult is etched to this day in the individual and collective memory... (Grossman continues) Some time ago, for a radio station, I participated in an encounter between Israeli Army officers and Holocaust survivors. Two (survivors) sat on the stage—brothers. As children they had lived in Vilna at the time of the Nazi invasion. One day, while they were playing soccer with their Christian friends, the Nazis began rounding up Jews. The brothers were kidnapped from the playing field and put on a train that took them to a death camp. Through the cracks in the sides of the train, they could see their friends continuing the game... The two brothers told their story in quiet voices, and the officers began crying. Some ran out of the room. I especially remember one of them, little

more than a boy, with a wiry body and curly hair. I cannot forget the way he kept banging his forehead, over and over again, on the barrel of his M-16.”

Israel, you see, is about memories and nightmares and dreams and healing and fighting to turn all of this into a new beautiful reality for the Jewish people. Israel is an ongoing argument about present, painful challenges rooted in the experience of Jewish history. It doesn't all get resolved in one day or one week or even sixty years.

David Grossman once more:

“I write all of these things as someone who considers himself lucky to live in Israel—not because I think it is Utopia but because Israel is the only place in which a Jewish person can live with the vital ingredients of the history and culture and mental life of all the generation of Jews that have preceded him, and realize them in the creation of a new and modern reality. This is also the place in which a Jewish person can implement the values and ideals that his culture has crystallized, and it is the only place in which he can do this for himself in the language in which his identity was created over many generations— ...living in Israel is, for me, a still a spiritual adventure... My children play and love and fight in a language that no one spoke for two thousand years but for them is full of life and is taken for granted. Were Abraham, the patriarch (who would now be 4000 years old) ... to sit down for supper at my house, he would understand the greater part of the Hebrew spoken by my five year old daughter. What a wonder that is....”

Can you see what I am trying to impart here? Israel the country, the homeland of the Jewish people, as described by David Grossman, as the physical embodiment of the Zionist and humanist idea, transcends any particular government, no matter how outrageous you find a particular government to be. Do we dare to judge Israel on a different standard than we judge our own United States? Just consider our own country through the prism of its sixty-first year in 1837 and how far we have come.

Returning to the land of the patriarchs means returning to their dreams. "If you will it, it is no dream." "You will be a blessing," God promised Abraham. "And in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

This is our Israel— now in her 60's.

This year—find a way to renew our vow to our people. Talk to our shaliach Tal—invite him for a cup of coffee. Tie a thick knot. Help keep our dream alive.

Shannah Tovah!

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Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel

Temple Micah

Washington, DC