

Rabbi Joshua Waxman  
 Or Hadash: A Reconstructionist Congregation  
 Rosh ha-Shanah 5772

Caffit is a neighborhood institution. It's a kosher dairy restaurant on Emek Refaim, the main commercial street that runs through the German Colony and Baka, the neighborhood of Jerusalem where our family lived last year while I was on sabbatical. It's known for its *kafe hafuch* – basically a cappuccino (and the Israeli national drink) – and its *oreganato*, a signature hot/cold salad with slices of warm zucchini and toasted nuts served over chopped vegetables that our kids loved and which makes me hungry just thinking about it. It's also the sort of place where you will run into five different people you know just making your way from the front entrance through the crowded restaurant to your table. And there are always crowds there, even at two in the morning when the night manager starts trying to kick people out.

The fact that Caffit is crowded at *any* time was wondrous to me because the last time I lived in Israel for an extended period, from 2001 to 2002, there were no crowds. It was the height of the second intifada. Bombings and *pigu'im* – terrorist attacks – were rampant. Even Israelis, normally stoic in the face of the unimaginable, were scared by the outburst of violence and every day we would find a take-out menu from a different neighborhood restaurant advertising its brand new delivery service: fewer and fewer people wanted to take a chance on being a sitting duck at a restaurant. Like all the other restaurants on Emek Refaim, Caffit started delivering and hired a *shomer*, a security guard to stand at the door. It proved a wise investment; on March 7, 2002, six months into our stay, a suicide bomber tried to make his way into the restaurant but was stopped by the alert *shomer* who managed to tackle him until other patrons could run over and pin him down until the police arrived. We were, we felt, well justified in avoiding any cafés or restaurants, in staying away from crowded pedestrian areas like the *shuk* and Ben Yehudah Street, and in not taking any buses, ever.

And now, nine years later, Caffit was hopping, humming with life at all hours, and we could sit in their outdoor seating area, right on the street, with hardly a misgiving. We took buses everywhere – one of the many joys of the sabbatical was not owning a car for a year – and the *shuk*, Machaneh Yehudah Market, was perhaps our favorite place in all of Israel, especially on Friday morning when it was mobbed with people shopping for Shabbat. There really is nothing like the *shuk* on a Friday: crowds of people pushed together in a stunningly tight space, trying to make their way to the stalls piled high with fruits and vegetables, shopkeepers bellowing that *they* have the freshest, the best produce in honor of Shabbat, while tourists snap photographs and young boys push through enormous wagons to cart away empty produce cartons. I love the *shuk*: the sounds, the smells, the physicality, the immediacy. I love that on Friday afternoons as we set out our purchases and cleaned the apartment, the kids would watch Zoe from Sesame Street – known in Israel as 'Avigayil' – sing a song about how wonderful Shabbat is and the TV would wish us Shabbat Shalom. I love that Tzvi and Yael's school was full of children whose families had come from all over the world to be in Israel – that in the hallways you might hear a mother from Argentina, a father from Russia, and a mother from France all speaking together in Hebrew, a language that barely existed a hundred years ago. I love the way teenage boys dote so unself-consciously on little kids, coming up to Adir and his classmates, stroking their cheeks and murmuring, "*eizeh chamud*" – "what a sweetie!" I love that the stores in our neighborhood would close one by one on Friday afternoon until Emek Refaim, so recently full of life, would be like a ghost town as families came together for Shabbat meals, and that later in the evening groups of teens still dressed for synagogue would hang out peacefully in the parks and sing songs. I loved moving to Jewish rhythms – the six-day work week, the sukkahs that spring up behind restaurants at Sukkot, the ceremonial siren that brings the entire country to a halt for two minutes on Yom ha-Zikaron and Yom ha-Shoah... And I

was profoundly grateful for the blessed calm, the relative peace and quiet that made it possible for our family to experience all this so fully, to move within the modern miracle that is Israel.

And yet, perhaps because the previous times we'd lived there had been marked by such constant and terrifying violence – besides 2001-2, Aimée and I had lived in Israel 1995-6, the year of Rabin's assassination and constant terrorist attacks designed to derail the Oslo Accords which were supposed to be his lasting legacy – we were also achingly aware that Israel is a country that faces grave dangers from surrounding nations who range from merely antagonistic to overtly hostile. It is a country ever-more isolated diplomatically, a country wracked by internal divisions between Orthodox and secular, between those who believe that the entire Land of Israel was given to the Jewish people by God and any territorial compromise is a heretical betrayal, and those who take a less theological and more pragmatic approach to Israel's long-term security and viability. And most importantly, it is a country that is occupying territory where more than 4,000,000 Palestinians live – in addition to hundreds of thousands of Jewish settlers – and which has taken unprecedented security steps to protect itself from them, as well as from the 1.5 million Arab-Israelis who live as citizens in Israel proper, steps that have earned it condemnation throughout much of the world and from many within Israel itself.

It's funny, in a way, because we've had ample reminders in the past weeks of all these issues – from the saber rattling and recent withdrawal of Turkey's ambassador, to the attacks on Israel's embassies in Egypt and Jordan and now, of course, the Palestinian bid at the U.N. for inclusion as a full member nation – a step, by the way, which *no one* knows how it will turn out and what will come next. In other words, these issues are front and center right now for those of us who are engaged with Israel and care deeply about what happens there. But for most of the time our family was in Israel they were not even on the radar screen of the vast majority of people we dealt with day in, day out. This fact is largely attributable to the relative calm I mentioned – you can bet that people were talking constantly about the Palestinians and how to improve the *matzav*, the security situation, when bombs were going off on a regular basis – but that's not the whole story, either. What I noticed in Israel was a completely understandable and yet nonetheless distressing complacency, a tendency to imagine the grave issues facing Israel didn't exist, weren't relevant, because they weren't affecting the daily lives of average Jewish Israelis.

Because beneath the surface calm and quiet – a circumstance for which, by the way, I am more profoundly grateful than I can say – there were signs everywhere of the fundamental problems Israel is facing. And I want to acknowledge how painful it is for me share what I am going to tell you, and also that some of it may be uncomfortable to hear or difficult to accept given the love and attachment that we all feel for Israel. I share that love profoundly, now more than ever after the gift of this year living there, and I offer these observations from a deep belief that Israel must do a better job of living up to its highest values and ideals if it is ever to live secure, side by side in peace with its neighbors, as we pray will happen.

What did I see beneath the surface? There was the disparity in infrastructure between Jewish West Jerusalem and Arab East Jerusalem where the municipality has not built schools to keep pace with the population despite a court order they do so, so Arab children go to school in shifts and spend much of the day sitting idle, a circumstance, by the way, that makes them even more susceptible to extremist propaganda. There was the checkpoint whenever we crossed in and out of the *shtachim* – the Israeli term for the territories – where we would see Arab cars pulled over for lengthy inspections by nineteen year-old soldiers while we zoomed through with a quick wave and, if it was a Friday, a 'Shabbat Shalom' as we were sent on our way. There was our neighborhood post office, a branch patronized by both Jews and Arabs, where none of the employees knew any Arabic to help customers who couldn't speak Hebrew, even though Arabic is one of the official languages of Israel. And there was the security barrier curving its concrete way around the edges of Jerusalem, dividing East Jerusalem, annexed by Israel in

1967 following the Six-Day War, from the rest of the West Bank and separating families from one another and farmers from their fields, all a few minutes' drive from our home in Jerusalem. In fact, signs of exactly how distorted life in Israel is were all over the place. It's just that without the reminder of regular attacks, you had to look a little harder to see them.

Most Israelis, however, didn't want to look. As Nava, one of my classmates at Beit Midrash Elul put it, "This is what life is like here. This is the reality here and after a while it's no big deal." This doesn't make Nava a bad person – after all, how often do we pay attention to the face of poverty or the state of race relations in America except in those moments when a particular story jars the issue, wrenchingly and fleetingly, to our attention? And nevertheless, as I would talk with Israelis about the need to move back to negotiations, take advantage of precisely this moment of quiet when many Palestinians seemed to have lost their appetite for violence to engage from a position of strength, I was met with a regular weariness or fatalism. Chaim, who owned the neighborhood *makolet* – the local convenience store where you would run out to buy eggs, milk, and pita when you didn't want to go to the supermarket – spoke for many Israelis when he said, "The security measures are necessary. That's the reason things are calm right now. If you let up on them they'll take advantage of you, like that." Chaim, by the way, may be right that the wall and other security measures are the reason for the reduction in violence in recent years – although there are good reasons to think otherwise – but what was disturbing was the casual acceptance of these measures, intended as a short-term step, in lieu of looking for a long-term solution. As Rabbi Donniel Hartman – president of the highly regarded Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and no bleeding heart – put it to me, "You can build a wall to protect yourself and that's legitimate. But when you *use* the wall so you don't see the people on the other side or pay attention to their needs or suffering, use it to shield yourself not just physically but also emotionally, then that is a misuse."

It was precisely this misuse – this shortsighted refusal to acknowledge that there were problems were in urgent need of solutions because violence was not a daily threat – that I found so distressing. And yet there were people I met who were not content to settle for throwing up their hands and shrugging their shoulders. These are people like Arik Ascherman, who for so many years led the Israeli organization Rabbis for Human Rights, which mobilizes rabbis to stand against abuses in the name of our Jewish values. I accompanied Arik to the village of Jit in the West Bank west of Nablus to assist Palestinian farmers who have been repeatedly harassed by Jewish settlers while attempting to harvest their olives and was impressed by the workers' perseverance and quiet dignity. These are people like Yuval Yavneh, a friend who works for the New Israel Fund a remarkable organization that promotes human rights and social justice for all Israelis, including Bedouins and other Arab Israelis. NIF helps with infrastructure and development in Arab communities and calls Israel to live up to the ideals voiced in its Declaration of Independence to guarantee equal rights for all minorities within Israel – stances, by the way, for which NIF has been attacked by members of the governing coalition and labeled 'traitorous.' There are people like our friend and author Yvette Messinas who uses poetry to build trust and understanding between Palestinians and Israelis and is involved with Joint Venture for Peace, an organization that builds business and social ties between Israeli and Palestinian women. And there are people like our friends Tamar and Yehuda, a young Orthodox couple who are sending their son, Chananya, to an Arab preschool in Beit Safafa because they feel he should learn Arabic and actually get to know the people who already share his country.

And there are people like Ilana Sumka, Yonah Shem-Tov, and Rebecca Polivy, who are concerned about the lack of understanding and connection between Jews and Palestinians and work for a six-year old organization called Encounter that is dedicated to bringing Palestinians together with Jews from across the political and religious spectrum to expand personal and political understanding. I was privileged to participate in one of Encounter's trips to the West Bank where I had the opportunity to

hear from Palestinian community leaders and activists and, even more significantly, sit down with average Palestinians to hear about their lives and talk about our shared hopes and visions for the region. I spoke with Daniel, a Palestinian Christian from Bethlehem, about his involvement in peace groups that bring Palestinians and Israelis together for dialogue and his efforts to promote non-violent resistance. I spoke with Hamed, a Palestinian Muslim from Beit Jala about the difficulties of getting a permit to visit relatives in the Galilee. I heard from Sheerin Al-Araj, a community leader in the village of Al-Walaja, located just next to Jerusalem but a world away. She spoke of the indignities her community regularly undergoes as village land is divided by the separation barrier and deeded to settlements, and yet spoke of her commitment to non-violent resistance and her belief that the two peoples could live peacefully side by side in separate states. I was deeply impressed by the dedication of the Encounter team and their belief that peace can never come as long as each side knows the other only through newspaper articles and through the collected weight of decades of assumptions and fear. By bringing American and Israeli Jews face to face with Palestinians, Ilana, Yonah, and Rebecca refused to be trapped by the paralysis and entrenched positions that define much of the Israeli-Palestinian debate and have recognized the vital and potentially transformative importance of simple human connections.

All of this is cause for hope on a number of levels. Distressing as the indifference or even outright hostility to Palestinian hardship is in some sectors of Israeli society, the efforts of those who are trying to bridge the gap seems even that more inspiring. These are people who love Israel and are deeply committed to its future. They know that Israel is often unjustly criticized for its actions, either because of skewed media coverage, institutionalized anti-Semitism, or an eagerness to condemn Israel for actions that often pass without comment in other countries. They also know that many of Israel's policies are morally wrong and that there are many who wish to smother any legitimate criticism as a naïve response that gives aid and comfort to Israel's enemies. And they know that Israel is in an untenable position both morally and politically, and that calling on the country to live up to its highest ideals is the only sustainable path forward.

During this coming year, we will all have opportunities – and perhaps the uncomfortable obligation – to take a stand when it comes to Israel. The rapidly changing political and diplomatic landscape in the Middle East means that the status quo is no longer an option. Our Israel committee, chaired by Elley Rosenberg, is working to bring programming representing a range of voices and opinions to Or Hadash and I encourage you to be in touch with her if you have ideas or wish to get involved. Our Dickstein scholar-in-residence, journalist and commentator Peter Beinart, will be with us in April and will challenge our ideas about the alliances that drive Israel policy and why American Jews must get involved for Israel's sake. I will be offering a series of adult education classes in December designed to ask how Zionism accords with the values of progressive Jews and how and why we must build a strong relationship with Israel on a foundation of Jewish values. I will challenge all of us to recognize that what happens in Israel matters profoundly to us as Americans and Jews and that we do not have the luxury of viewing what happens there as somebody else's problem. And I want to take this opportunity as well to mention that we strongly encourage you to support Israel financially, as we do every year, through the purchase of Israel Bonds, which provide the country with crucial resources, and through a donation to the New Israel Fund which helps build the just and open society that we all wish Israel to be. You all received pledge cards as you entered the sanctuary and I encourage you to take this message of engagement to heart and support both organizations as generously as you are able.

Earlier this morning we chanted the *Unetaneh Tokef*, the awesome and momentous prayer that declares, "On Rosh ha-Shanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: who shall live and who shall die, who will dwell in peace and who will be uprooted, who shall be humbled and who shall be raised up." The point, driven home with stark clarity, is that none of us knows what the future holds in store. And yet rather than enter the New Year in a state of despair or fatalism, we are reassured that

*“teshuvah, utefilah, utzedakah ma’avirim et ro’a ha-gezera”* – “repentance, prayer, and charity can avert the harsh decree.” In other words, even in the face of the overwhelming unknown, our actions matter and can influence our outcomes for good. Let us resolve as we enter this New Year not to despair, not to equivocate, not to condemn, not to remain indifferent about Israel but instead to engage with open hearts and open minds, deepening our relationship with Israel and connection to its people, that she may be written for goodness and peace in this New Year, and all the New Years to come.