

“You shall count seven weeks of years – seven times seven years – so that the period of seven weeks of years gives you a total of forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the shofar loud; in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month – *b’Yom ha-Kippurim*, on the Day of Atonement – you shall have the shofar sounded throughout your land.” Leviticus chapter 25: the passage that gives us the command for *sh’nat ha-yovel*, the Jubilee year, the year of release that comes every fifty years: “You shall hallow the fiftieth year. And you shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants, each of you shall return to your holding and each of you shall return to your family.”

The Jubilee year – the word comes from the Hebrew *yovel* – was the law of the land in ancient Israel: for forty-nine years farmers were to go about their business, some having more successful years, some having less, some thriving and some going into debt. If a farmer’s debt became too severe he could sell a portion of his land, or could even sell himself into temporary bondage as an indentured servant so his family would be able to eat. Over the course of forty-nine years, personal and economic fortunes would wax and wane; most likely the rich would become richer and the poor would become poorer. Then in the fiftieth year, the shofar would sound on the tenth day of the seventh month, on Yom Kippur, and all debts and sales of person and property would be cancelled. Whatever land had been sold would be restored to its original owners, debts would be forgiven, the slate would be wiped clean, and life in the Land of Israel could begin anew.

Today, this very day, is the tenth day of the seventh month, the Day of Atonement. And this year, this is the fiftieth year – 2017, fifty years since the young Israeli state fended off an attack from five hostile neighboring nations, fifty years since the Six Day war which stunned the world and gave Israel security and control of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. Fifty years since Israel took possession of territories belonging at the time to the countries of Jordan, Egypt, and Syria – and with it, sovereignty over the lives of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and the lands their families had farmed for countless generations. Fifty years. “You shall hallow the fiftieth year. And [on Yom Kippur] you shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants, each of you shall return to your holding and each of you shall return to your family.”

Some context: when Israel took control of this territory with a military victory that seemed nothing short of miraculous, it was never the government’s desire or intention to hold on to this territory. With the exception of East Jerusalem – which included the Old City and the Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism, and from which Jews had been expelled by Jordan in 1948 – Israel laid no claims to these lands or their inhabitants. Instead, Israel’s government sought to return this territory to the countries from which it had captured them. In one of the great tragedies of recent history, the Arab nations agreed as a bloc that they would refuse to recognize Israel and enter into negotiations, even if it meant losing their territory and citizens. And so Israel has ended up, *de facto*, in control of millions of people it did not originally intend to claim. However, this newly acquired land held great strategic, historic, and religious significance and, over time, Jews started moving in and establishing settlements – in small numbers at first but, increasingly, in greater numbers as government policy first tacitly supported and then subsequently actively encouraged the expansion of Jewish settlements, particularly in the West Bank.

I want to be clear: I don’t know how to solve the situation in Israel as it currently exists. There is, understandably, deep mistrust and tension on both sides. On both sides there is fear and trauma that

are not easily cast aside. There are Jewish families who have lived in West Bank settlements for twenty, thirty, forty years, generations of Israelis who have known no other home. Israel has important and legitimate security concerns that need to be addressed as part of any creation of a Palestinian state. But I do know that, for all our sakes, the Torah is telling us that we must heed the shofar call – a blast designed to rouse us from slumber and complacency, and *wake up*, and give this intractable problem the urgent attention it demands.

Wake up: when our family was living in Israel in 2010-11, it was a wonderful year. After having lived in Israel twice before at times when the security situation was dire – in '95-'96, the year Yitzchak Rabin, *alav ha-shalom*, was assassinated, and in 2001-2, the year of the second intifada – after having lived in Israel when suicide bombers were inflicting massive casualties on a constant basis, when bus bombings were becoming not just common but *expected*, when restaurants started offering take-out service because so few people would risk sitting in them for a meal, it was a gift on our most recent stay to be in Israel at a time when Israelis did not live in fear – rode the buses, shopped at the markets, sat in cafés, were able to go about their lives without a constant sense of anxiety and dread. But there was a flip side to that feeling of normalcy, one that Aimée and I were keenly aware of because it was so different from what we had experienced when we had lived there before. Israelis, freed from the immediate worry about the threat posed by Palestinians, were blithely ignoring the ongoing reality of occupation – the mechanisms that went into keeping Jewish lives safe and the impact these were having on the Palestinian population. With terrorism out of sight, the Palestinians were out of mind – and with that, any sense of urgency to try to address the core underlying issues which had in no way disappeared or been resolved. While this lack of awareness was understandable at a human level, it was deeply disturbing at a political one, as the underlying issues that needed to be addressed were effectively being ignored, and very few people seemed inclined to work on a sustainable solution to the conflict.

Wake up: this is the message of Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur. As Maimonides wrote: “*Uru yeshenim mish'natchem* – Awake from your slumber and rouse yourselves from your lethargy.” Wake up: this is the message of the shofar blasts, meant to stir us out of our complacency. Wake up: this is the message of the Jubilee year, the fiftieth year, the year we have just begun – wake up and “proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants, each of you returning to your holding and each of you returning to your family.” The awakening the Jubilee year imagines – much, in fact, like Yom Kippur – is one of radical transformation, rooted in the twin ideas of release and return.

What is ‘release’? Well, given that we live right here in Philadelphia it certainly bears mention that the words from this very verse – “proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants” are inscribed on the Liberty Bell, and in fact give the bell its name, based on its King James translation: “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.” So release is related to liberty, but it is at root an even deeper, more profound concept. In the context of our verse, it is speaking about the release of slaves – as I mentioned, those who might have needed to sell themselves into bondage in order to pay off a debt they had incurred. The Torah and Jewish thought understand slavery as a degraded state: we are meant to be free, which is why God brought us out of slavery from Egypt. With the release of slaves, then, we are lifting people up from a degraded state, restoring and affirming their human dignity.

There are so many ways in which Palestinians suffer indignities on a routine basis because of the Israeli occupation, and so many ways in which their basic humanity and dignity is undercut, from checkpoints, to prejudice and chauvinism from many sectors of Israeli society, to abuse and routine mistreatment, to the separation barrier that cuts many families off from their fields. But the idea of affirming dignity through the release of slaves actually includes both the slave and the slave-owner. Writing on this passage, the P'nai Yehoshua, Rabbi Yaakov Yehoshua Falk, writes, "You shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants" – it does not say "for all its slaves" but "for all its inhabitants," for in a state where there is no freedom, even for a minority of its inhabitants, all its inhabitants are enslaved. We experience freedom only when there is no slavery at all in a state. Slavery is an affliction that damages slave and master as one." This point about release is radical: so long as we hold people in a degraded state, we too are degraded because we are implicated in a system that deprives some of us from enjoying our full, human dignity. Enabling the Palestinians to enjoy full and equal rights restores not only their dignity but ours, as we are released from a system that mistreats and oppresses another people. The release that the Yovel year envisions is one that allows both slave and master to become free; and we might consider how our need to hold on to certain pieces of land – as well as certain narratives and claims of victimization – also become things we try to *own*, things we hold so tightly, are so scared of letting go of, that they lay claim to us as much as we lay claim to them. As Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan wrote, "[T]he freedom we strive for means more than broken chains. It means liberation from all those enslavements that warp the spirit and blight the mind, that destroy the soul even though they leave the flesh alive."

The concept of renouncing ownership feeds into the second command of the Yovel year: return. The passage commanding the Yovel states: "Each of you shall return to your holding and each of you shall return to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee year for you: you shall not sow, neither shall you reap the aftergrowth or harvest the untrimmed vines. For it is a jubilee, it shall be holy to you: you may only eat the growth direct from the field. In this year of jubilee, each of you shall return to your holding." The Jubilee year is a year of literal return: people are supposed to go back to their original ancestral holdings. In modern-day Israel, of course, this is an impracticable command: how far back is the right distance to go to decide what qualifies as "original" and "ancestral"? I don't know, but this fifty-year mark invites us to reflect that for five decades Israel has been occupying land that had not previously belonged to it and which the state of Israel had never claimed. That land, of course, does have huge historical and religious significance for many Israelis, but the steps that are being taken to try to hold on to it at all costs underscore the extent to which the land might own us more than we own the land.

The Jubilee's command of return highlights the key principle that in fact we don't own the land at all: the land belongs to God. This is why we cannot claim it beyond a fifty year period, this is why we have to let the land lie fallow and only eat what produce naturally grows: the land is not ours to do with whatever we like. 'Return' isn't simply about restoring land to its original owners, it's about restoring a relationship to the land of stewardship and gratitude. Of realizing, as Deuteronomy asserts, that the land is a conditional grant, based on our faithfulness to God's tenets and upholding the ideals God gives us a covenant people. For make no mistake: the drive to hold on to the land has alienated us from the ideals that we are supposed to embrace. The Torah contains many commands about not oppressing the

stranger, about upholding equal rights for all people, about pursuing justice. And these ideals were also espoused at the founding of the State of Israel and enshrined in Israel's declaration of independence: "The State of Israel 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; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations." These are the words Ben Gurion spoke in proclaiming the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948 and they are still its foundational document. The 'return' that the Yovel year offers and demands is one that embraces returning to our core values – as a people and as a state – from which we have strayed over the course of – and *because* of – the past 50 years as we have sought to exert our control over another people. It is a difficult and painful lesson but, in keeping with the Jubilee year's demands, until the restoration of Palestinian lands and dignity has taken place, the Jewish people can never be free and whole.

What would such a restoration look like? To be honest, I don't really know. Israel cannot simply decide tomorrow to return all the land captured in 1967 – there are far too many security risks at present, hundreds of thousands of Israelis living in the West Bank, and too much conflict within Palestinian society about authority and governance to enable a functional Palestinian state on that territory. There's also the question of land captured by Israel in 1948 during the War of Independence, which is an equally passionate issue for many Palestinians who were driven from their homes when the State of Israel was founded. Many Palestinians want a 'right of return' for all displaced from 1948 forward, which would effectively mean the end of the State of Israel. There's the issue of Jerusalem – which is both logistically and symbolically incredibly difficult, and which I will be devoting a series of adult education classes to in December for those of you who would like to explore some of these issues further. But here's what I do know: these problems aren't going to solve themselves. And with current Israeli policies carving out a cynical and opportunistic path, the situation will only become worse. There are many who see a two-state solution as already being an impossibility; and there are those on both sides who would like the situation to deteriorate to the point that this impossibility becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, because they believe it serves their agendas. And I know that using the complexity of the details as an excuse to avoid difficult decisions, to putting off confronting the ideals and principles that underlie Jewish teaching about the land and release and justice, is dangerous. That American Jews and Israelis both need to *wake up* as the Torah and Yovel year demand, and stop either ignoring, making excuses for, or despairing about the current situation – all of which are different ways of convincing ourselves that there is no path forward.

Finding a path forward is no easy thing, but Yom Kippur is not an easy time, and we are required to confront difficult truths in ways that we hope are constructive and productive. On Rosh ha-Shanah, during the Torah service, we read about two shatterings, both of which seem to foreclose any possible way forward. On the first day, we read about Abraham banishing his young son Ishmael, sending him and his mother out to the desert with only some bread and a bottle of water, to an almost certain death. On the second day, we read about Abraham's near-sacrifice of his other son, Isaac, in the traumatic episode known as the *akedah*. In neither case does the Torah record either son having any further interaction with their father – and can you wonder? Abraham was so focused on obeying God's

instructions, eyes fixed on some distant point on the covenantal horizon, that he could not apprehend the human tragedy unfolding right before his eyes, the alienation and trauma in which he was fully complicit. Abraham, whose name means father of many nations, from whom come Isaac and Ishmael, Jews and Muslims, would seem to set his sons on a collision course – living in the same land, scarred rivals for their father’s affection.

This is far as we read on Rosh ha-Shanah – an important lesson for us about the damage we can inflict through our actions, and the importance of knowing how and when to turn from our course. But it is not where our story ends. For a few chapters later, quietly and without fanfare, we read about a vital and improbable moment of reconciliation. After Abraham dies, the Torah tells us that his two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, come together to bury him: “This was the total span of Abraham’s life: one hundred and seventy-five years. And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Tzochar the Hittite, facing Mamre, the field that Abraham had bought from the Hittites; there Abraham was buried, and Sarah his wife.” (Gen. 25:7-10) Two brothers, set against each other from birth, growing up in distinct clans and with every reason to hate each other, acknowledge their common ancestry, common history, and shared legitimacy. And what’s more, at the conclusion of the reading, the Torah tells us that Isaac settled near Beer Lachai Ro’i – the Well of the Living One Who Sees Me, the very well God opens for Ishmael and Hagar to nurture and sustain them when they are cast out in the desert, the place where brothers will recommit to shared purpose, grounded in the compassion and power of the Living One.

There is so much that is remarkable about this brief episode. Isaac and Ishmael – half-brothers who at this point had not seen each other in decades, who had grown up apart, likely each mistrustful of the other, leading their own separate lives... now finding a common ground rooted in their shared heritage. The story offers hope that Jews and Muslims in Israel – cousins who have grown apart, who, despite how near they live to one another, often encounter each other only as stereotypes, as other, in news stories, and not in real life – might find a way to acknowledge shared histories, shared interests, and shared destinies. That across difference, lack of interaction and trust, and even across trauma, reconciliation is possible if we remain open to the possibility.

What also strikes me about this episode in the Torah is how quiet it is, how understated. The banishment of Ishmael, the binding of Isaac – these are dramatic stories, shocking, disturbing: the stories that make headlines. Reconciliation isn’t loud, it isn’t flashy. It happens step by tentative step, as connections are made and relationships are slowly and painstakingly built. This work is actually happening in Israel at this very moment in ways that often fly under the radar, through organizations like Shorashim and Encounter that promote co-existence projects; through individuals such as Hanan Schlesinger and Ali Abu Awwad who bring Palestinians and settlers together for dialogue; through initiatives like Women Wage Peace, which next week will bring more than 50,000 Israelis and Palestinians together in an aspirational Peace Village near the Dead Sea. These efforts don’t generate as much coverage as attacks and conflict do, but they are just as powerful and, like the story of the reconciliation of Isaac and Ishmael, they are every bit as much a part of our Torah as their more sensational and startling counterparts.

Why don't we know this passage, why is it not part of our liturgy? Some years ago, Rabbi Arthur Waskow proposed reading these very verses as a *maftir*, an additional reading at the Holidays to compliment – and perhaps complete – the Rosh ha-Shanah passages that speak about Isaac and Ishmael's alienation. Today, on Yom Kippur, in this fiftieth year since the Six Day War – “in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month” – Marilyn Kass-Jarvis will in fact chant this passage for us, and I will be calling up for the aliyah anyone here this morning who has experienced some sort of reconciliation in their own lives or who are hoping for reconciliation in the world. Just as the Torah commands a shofar call in the fiftieth year proclaiming release, I pray this Torah reading will serve as *our* shofar call – waking us up to the urgent need to engage, with determination and hope, the challenges faced by Israel and the Palestinians, and inspired by the Torah's command to make the Jubilee year a time of release and return, of reflection and renewal, of reconciliation and reaffirming our living root in the values and ideals of justice, dignity, and concern for the other. And fifty years after a war that birthed a seemingly intractable reality of strife and conflict, of stretching ourselves to look for possibility and work toward hope on this holiest of days.