

A poem, "Molad," by Yossi Hutler.

In the evening sky
I caught sight of an arcing of moon;
I hung my hopes on that
Thin white ledge clinging to
A larger dark circle I could discern
Only in outline.
Having lost track of our time,
I wondered: had the month just begun
Or just ended
And in the coming nights
Would I see more of you
Or would you disappear entirely from me?

The rabbis tell us that the Jewish people are like the moon: that our fortunes wax and wane. We are told to never give up hope for one day the moon will remain full and shine forth like the sun. This past summer was another dark moonless night for our people. Today is Rosh HaShanah, it is also Rosh Hodesh, it is the very beginning of the moon waxing bright again.

We distribute prayer booklets to everyone on our Adath Israel trips to Israel. On the cover is a quote by Zionist poet David Shimoni: "From each Jewish heart an invisible path leads to the Land of Israel." Only the Jewish people have the special relationship with Israel that we do. Our prayers are filled with images of and hopes for Zion, our seders begin with Israel and end with Jerusalem, Yom Kippur ends with Jerusalem, we break glasses at our weddings for Jerusalem, we face Jerusalem when we pray; and we have been doing all of this and much more for thousands of years.

Zionism began in the sixth century BCE when our ancestors wept with Ezekiel by the rivers of Babylon yearning to return to their homeland. Modern Zionism began in the late 19th century with Herzl and others. It was Herzl who proclaimed in 1896 that we have one way of saving ourselves: a return to our own people and a return to our own land." Jews, to survive, must feel deeply connected both to our historical homeland and the Jewish people.

This is why being affiliated with the Jewish community wherever we live is so critically important. This is why our support of Israel needs to include physically being there as often as possible. This is why we worry that 70% or more of American Jews have never been to Israel and of those who have most will not visit again. Rabbi Richard Hirsch has described a Zionist as a Jew who may never move to Israel but who would rejoice if a child or grandchild did. Even by this most liberal definition of Zionism only handfuls of American Jews are Zionists.

Ben Yehudah wrote in 1879: “We are duty bound to create something which may serve as a center for our entire people, like the heart in an organism, from which the blood will stream into all the arteries of the national body and fill it with life.” From Israel today comes a living Hebrew language that literally—unlike other classical and ancient languages—connects us to our origins. From Israel today flows forth poetry, theatre, music and art; philosophy, law, literature and science; history, technology, archeology and medicine. Everything from drip irrigation systems to body imaging machines benefit not just Israel but the world. Even with 58 years of violence, threat and war, Israel has still contributed so much.

Justice Brandeis wrote in 1916: “We must have a land where Jewish life may be naturally led, the Jewish language spoken and the Jewish spirit prevail. The idea is for us to be a nation like other nations in determining our own destiny but also to be uniquely Jewish.” Some Zionists lobbied for German or English to be the language of the new state. Of course, Hebrew was chosen. Today, however, Arabic and English are also official languages and Israel includes them on all signage and documents. How much can and should Americans learn from this? Israel welcomes and accepts immigrants from all over the world whether they ever learn Hebrew or not.

Brandeis was also speaking about being uniquely Jewish in terms of the values of Israeli society and the principles that would guide the governance of the country. Martin Buber envisioned that a truly Jewish commonwealth can be none other than one in which the precepts of Moses and the appeals of the Prophets for social justice are translated into reality.” This is to be Israel’s uniqueness as a nation. Israel is to pursue justice and equality for all because the soul of the Jewish people is saturated with the commandments and teachings of thousands of years to do so. This is why there is such concern among Israelis—regrettably not understood and/or shared by many American Jews—with issues of social justice: for Ethiopian Jews, Arab Israelis, Bedouins, Reform and Conservative Jews, chained women (the *agunot*) and for Palestinians.

Brandeis and Buber understood as do the majority of Israelis today that the Torah commanded us not to simply enter and take possession of the land. The Torah commanded our ancestors, and through them commanded us, to build a just society, protecting the strangers, widows, orphans and poor, and to live in the land as a holy people, as a nation of priests; not simply to conquer and possess the land. That may be what others do but not what G-d commanded us to do. Others may dehumanize us because of our beliefs and ways but we are commanded never to do that to anyone even our enemies.

Yehuda Leib Gordon wrote in 1888 that before, or at least along with, the redemption of the soil there also must be redemption of the soul. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook emphasized that as we live physically in our homeland, we must breathe in its air so that we will fill the space of Israel with holiness. Where do you think the notion in Hebrew known as *taharat neshek*, the ethical use of our weapons, comes from? Or, the fact that even with all the violence, terrorism and the murder of innocent civilians including so

many children, that Israel does not use the death penalty? Or, why the Keneset has Israeli Communists and Arabs as members but not Jewish racists like the Kach Party who are outlawed in Israel? Where do you think the many organizations in Israel trying to bridge the distance between Jews and Muslims, between Israelis and Palestinians—the children’s camps, hospitals, schools, human rights groups, the ongoing efforts at cooperative working and living, the meetings between clergy and scholars—where do these come from if not from Jewish values of thousands of years?

All of these efforts that many American Jews know so little about go on simultaneously as Israelis uncompromisingly and heroically defend their homes and homeland? If it is not thousands of years of commandments, prophetic teaching, rabbinic ethics, then from where do these values come? And without these values, who are we then? If we are not chosen for this purpose—to be a holy people and a nation of priests, to establish an ethical and humanistic society for everyone--what are we chosen for?

The Talmud (Shevuot 30a) tells us to judge our friends justly meaning we must always give another person the benefit of the doubt and judge this person favorably. Rabbi David Foreman wrote to Americans in general including Jews that before we criticize Israel in this past war, first we have to meet the enemy as Israelis have and fight them as Israelis have fought them. Israelis do not need others to tell them to critique their behavior; they do it on their own. For example, throughout the Israeli media the disturbing disclosure and ensuing debate over Israel’s use of cluster bombs in Lebanon is taking place as do so many debates of conscience in Israel.

Israelis are able to honestly and at times painfully deal with falling short of being a holy people and a nation of priests. It is pretty much common knowledge that a good and strong person can be self-critical. How much the more so, a country; the rest of the world should only be more like Israel. Jewish wisdom teaches that a soul searched, as Israelis search theirs, is a soul nourished. As Americans we will remember that Israelis are not fighting thousands of miles from their borders and homes; they are literally fighting on their borders and in their homes. If Israelis can search their souls certainly Americans should be searching more deeply than we are our souls.

As Jews we are charged to not forgive ourselves for what we condemn in others; and not to blame others for what we forgive in ourselves. Jews need to be confident enough to accept legitimate criticism of Israel. We cannot cry anti-Semitism every time Israel is criticized. We cannot label every Jew who criticizes Israel’s policies a self-hating Jew. If this were true then countless numbers of Israelis alone would be self-hating Jews including many rabbis, judges, Keneset members, soldiers and even high ranking officers.

We cannot turn Israel into an idol where G-d’s command to live in Israel and build a just society evaporates into an atmosphere of militarism and the equivalent of empty flag waving; the overwhelming majority of Israelis will never allow this to happen. Our love for and support of Israel needs to be grounded in our historical sense of being

commanded not only to live in the land of Israel but to build a just, compassionate and ethical society in Israel.

During the Lebanon War in 1982, Leonard Fein, the founder of Moment magazine, Mazon and a passionate Zionist, wrote that there are two kinds of Jews. One wants an Israel that is militarily capable of defending itself and strong enough to defeat any enemy, an Israel tough enough to do what has to be done for survival. The other Jew wants an Israel which is a beacon of justice and righteousness, which affirms the humanity of all, friend and enemy, which prides itself in its civility and its compassion. In 1982, Fein concludes by saying every Jew is really both of these Jews. Now, Fein laments that in 2006 this one Jew is indeed becoming two different and separate Jews: the one who does not care what Israel must do to survive and the other who does.

Israel the country is named after Israel the patriarch whose name was Jacob. He became Israel only when the sun came up after struggling alone through the night. Jacob continued to wrestle for the rest of his life. All of us are children of Israel meaning we are wrestlers through the night; Jews become who we truly are through the darkness of night that turns into the morning light. We like Jacob must struggle throughout our lives. These are not struggles for fame and fortune, nor for conquest and superiority. These struggles are what we call G-d wrestling. Being both kinds of Jews at the same time given all the threats to Israel and all of Israel's enemies—who want a strong Israel and a moral Israel--is one of the most difficult struggles we have faced.

Rabbi Shmuel Boteach wrote that Israel will forever wrestle with its G-dly spirit and human conscience. Israel will question itself constantly and wonder whether it is doing the right thing. Israel will root out killers in Qana and sadly and accidentally bomb children. Israel will loathe in its own soul that it is forced to fight criminals who launch rockets from preschools. But even then, the Jewish state will not give up the struggle to try to fight wickedness in not a wicked way. Even in war we are commanded to be a holy people, a nation of priests. Perhaps more difficult than G-d giving us a land without oil, is G-d commanding us that we must treat all others humanely—even our enemies.

Leonard Fein writing recently in the Forward shared each of our prayers—except perhaps for those of us who glory in military might and brute Jewish force for its own sake. “We pray that Jewish genius, courage and determination should one day be dedicated 100% to curing the ills of our world, healing the sick, feeding the hungry and saving our planet.” Is this not our mission? Is this not what we are chosen for?

Here is a prayer of an Israeli pilot: “O G-d, I pray that these bombs I drop land on their intended targets and not harm any innocent person, especially children. O G-d I pray that I will not have to drop any more bombs ever again.” When will Israel's existence be accepted? Will Israel and the Jewish people ever be truly embraced? When will our enemies allow for this pilot's prayer to be answered? Will our enemies ever allow themselves not be our enemies?

Rabbi David Gordis who made aliyah and recently wrote “Coming Together, Coming Apart: A Memoir of Heartbreak and Promise in Israel,” observes how Jews have always figured out how to survive. He comments that there is something eternal about our people that defies explanation, but nonetheless is real, no less real than any of the challenges Israel and the Jewish people face. When I read this after the cease fire last month, I recalled what I wrote to all of you this past July: “Israel is our homeland forever. The Romans celebrated our disappearance 2000 years ago and but sixty years ago the Nazis were preparing to do the same. When will the world understand that we are an eternal people who desire only to live in peace on a very small parcel of land in G-d’s world?”

Rabbi Gordis writes that the price we pay for staying in Israel, and the toll we exact from our children, is huge. The pain is sometimes unbearable. He asks of us in the Diaspora, who do not live and fight in Israel if we give enough, speak out enough, care enough, visit Israel often enough. Rabbi Gordis asks if Israel’s survival were dependent on our level of commitment, would Israel be here for the next generation? Rabbi David Foreman asks whether we, whom he calls “safe Jews for Israel,” namely, we who give our support, friendship, advise and criticism from our safe and comfortable homes here, have any idea what is really going on in Israel, what is it really like living in Israel and raising our families there? We do not live in Israel. Considering this reality should be a humbling experience for all of us.

Last Kol Nidrei I taught about our broken hearts and our faith that G-d will heal them and bring well being and peace to Jerusalem. Last Kol Nidrei I taught that life truly begins only with what we do after the tears of our lives. Yossi Klein Halevi wrote that Israel’s heart is broken. He said our heart is broken by our failure to uproot the jihadist threat and by the economic devastation of the Galilee and of a neighboring land we did not want to attack. Israel’s heart is broken by the heroism of our soldiers and by the buried and crippled soldiers and innocent civilians on all sides. Israel’s heart is broken by foreign journalists who can’t tell the difference between good and evil and by European leaders who equate an army that tries to avoid civilian casualties with a terrorist group that revels in them. Israel’s heart is broken by the United Nations that questions Israel’s right to defend itself and by growing voices on the left who question Israel’s right to exist at all.

With thankfulness Halevi affirms that Israel’s heart is already being mended by what has emerged: a sense of unity, an even stronger resolve, an honesty to question what went wrong and to question what did we do wrong. Israel’s heart is being mended by our people’s courage to continue living in our homeland no matter what it demands. Israel’s heart is being mended with a faith that what is right will prevail and the Jewish people, being an eternal people, will survive.

You know not one of our dozen or so kids who were in Israel this past summer came home. You know that just a few weeks ago three of our high school graduates went to spend a year in Israel. You know that right now our second young member in a year will be making aliyah. You know that Kathy and I leave in January for Jerusalem for sabbatical.

I conclude with a prayer by Rabbi Gordis: “Grant us, we pray, a glimpse of time perfected, of peace and of a Jewish people gazing proudly and confidently into the future. Our challenge is to remember that we have been through dark days before, and each time we’ve emerged into the light. We have suffered extraordinary losses in the past, and we’ve regrouped to rebuild. We’ve known despondency in the past, but we have always found our way back to hope. This time, and this year, this Rosh Hashanah, may it be no different.”

Indeed, may it not only be the same but may it be, G-d willing, the very last time the Jewish people and Israel will ever have to emerge from darkness, regroup from losses or find hope after despondency. Given that this is not very likely today or tomorrow, may we continue to be blessed with the strength, courage and faith not only to survive but to thrive as we truly endeavor to be a holy people and a nation of priests: strong, secure, protected and a light unto the nations. May our beloved Israel finally know peace and through this peace in the Land of Israel for the people of Israel, may all G-d’s world be blessed with peace.

SHABBAT SHALOM AND SHANAH TOVAH.