

Yom Kippur Sermon for 5768  
By Rabbi Ethan Seidel

As you know, it's my custom at this time of year to avoid talking about Israeli politics. Actually, this is my custom also during the rest of the year. It's not that Israeli politics isn't an important topic. It's a topic of great concern to me and many other American Jews; alas, it's not my area of expertise. We do have in our community those much more expert than me who can speak about the Middle East with some authority. This fall in particular, we have scheduled a fascinating eight session course here at TI on the subject. This class will be cover what are called the "parallel narratives", I might even call them the parallel universes, that the Israelis and the Palestinians tend to inhabit. So you'll have plenty of chances coming up to learn and debate the topic. But not now.

Somehow, I feel that today should be about more personal issues. At the same time, having just been to Israel, I'm bursting with stories I want to tell you. So, today I will try to combine the personal with the Israeli in a mixture that I hope will help you build a more personal connection to the country and its people.

As you may know, my connection to Israel, both to the land and to the people of Israel, has always been an awkward one. Part of it is the language barrier - I don't think you can get a full sense of a culture unless you are really fluent in the language, and I'm just not there yet. Part of my unease is also just lack of exposure - I've been to Israel only 5 times, and only the first time, in Rabbinical School, was I there for any *length* of time. And even then, I spent most of my time studying in the library of the seminary.

I must say, however, that during this last visit, while leading our congregational trip, things felt different for me. I felt close to Israel in a way I never had before. So I can't help but think that if I share with you a few of my highlights of the trip, it might help bring you close as well.

I will start with my experience at the Western Wall. Now, first, I must tell you, I'm not one to idolize the wall. In fact, you know me - I'm not one to idolize much of anything. It was kind of a running joke during the TI Israel trip last month. The guide would point out the window and so something moving about the scenery - a little about the history of the place, for instance, and I would then grab the microphone and say: "Well, actually, scholars today aren't sure that event ever happened, and if it *did* happen, it surely wouldn't have happened in that way." It got to the point that the joke was going around the bus: "The next thing the Rabbi is going to tell us is that we're not *really* in Israel at all." So I can be a bit of a wet blanket, a doubter, a killjoy.

But back to the Western wall. It was built by Herod the "Great" around 2000 years ago, as an enormous retaining wall, so that he could enlarge the Temple Mount. No questions about it - even *I* will admit that the wall is an amazing architectural feat. It is composed of some incredibly big, and enormously heavy cut stones. No one knows how Herod's engineers were able to lift and place those stones without cracking them, *or* how they were able to position the stones so precisely. However, even with all its magnificence and longevity, the Western wall still doesn't guarantee any sort of automatic religious experience, at least not for me. I've never even been tempted to put little pieces of paper in the wall. I remember my very first visit there - I was completely unmoved. Resolutely unaffected.

Last month, our tour arrived at the wall in the middle of the afternoon on our first full day in Israel. Most of us were tired, between having spent the morning following our guides around

the old city, and the jet lag. Still, it was striking to come out of the densely packed Jewish Quarter, and see in front of us so suddenly, the grand plaza and the immense wall. Since it was the middle of a weekday, the Wall and the plaza in front of it were not at all crowded. I did what I usually do - I went right up to the wall and davened. I had not planned to dwell there - mincha is not a long service, after all, but I found myself overwhelmed.

The moment I started davening, I had an arresting sense of God's presence. It's so hard to describe - maybe I should say I had a sense of God's concerns. A question flashed vividly in my mind: "What is it that you are doing for My people?"

As that question formed in my mind, I realized that I had sensed this same question once before, at the wall. I'm not sure when that would have been - maybe during Rabbinical school, perhaps towards the end of that year of study. I realized that back when I'd first sensed this question, the feeling of it was much different: the question was the same, but the *tone* had been very different. Much harsher, impatient, even indignant. Many years ago, the question had sounded more like: "So nu, what *is* it that you are going to do for my people??" I remembered it as frightening. And I remember thinking to myself: "Well, I'm trying to become a Rabbi - isn't that good enough?"

This time around, the question felt arresting and overwhelming, but oddly enough, not so scary. It felt like an important question that maybe I was forgetting to ask myself, in the day-to-day rush of my life. What is it I'm doing for God's people? Am I making the best use of my abilities, or maybe there are different things I could be doing? I felt commanded, as I had the first time, but not threatened as I had the first time. And I immediately began, calmly, to imagine how I might better serve God.

As we all came back from our individual experiences at the wall, and our TI group reformed in a little patch of shade at the back of the plaza, I had another insight. I realized that my two similar, but very different encounters might not reflect a change in God's call, so much as a change in me. Maybe my conception of God is not what it used to be. Nowadays, I realized, I tend to imagine God as a more sympathetic and less condemning entity than I used to. Perhaps I've seen more of life, and the more I see, the less judgmental I feel. And I imagine that God, who sees everything, must be even more understanding about our limitations as mere mortals. Not that we don't deserve judgment and punishment; it's just that we also deserve a break now and again, given what we're up against, given how we've been created. I still feel with all my being that God commands us; I no longer have the same need to see God as so unappeasably wrathful.

Of course, it's not just *my* experience of God that is conditioned by my expectations, and biases, and experiences. Everyone's religious experience, is very much conditioned by their milieu, their cultural expectations. If you expect God to speak to you in discreet words, that's what you will hear. If you, like me, don't expect words - that would be just too weird, given that the age of prophecy is over - then you'll have to be content with ambiguous feelings, which you will have to put into words as best you can. And, if you think that anyone who has a God experience is crazy, or at the very least, shouldn't be talking about it in front of hundreds of people, then you will probably never have an experience like I described.

I'm reminded of a bumper sticker I saw this summer in Silver Spring, not far from Takoma Park. Actually, it was one of those cars that had about eight bumper stickers on its rear end, 7 of which said things like: "Love Thy Neighbor", "Tolerate difference", "Rainbow Coalition". We were stuck behind this car at a red light, so I got to read all the stickers. Including the eighth sticker, on the lower left, which said something like: "Religion is for small

people with narrow minds who don't like to think." When we were stopped at the next red light, I was tempted to walk up to the driver and start a conversation. But that's hard to do in a car. Had I been on my bike, I don't think I could've resisted the temptation to say something. Anyway, part of the moral of this story is that as crucial as tolerance is for a healthy society, it's a darn sight harder to be tolerant than most people realize.

But there's another lesson I take from that bumper sticker. That bumper sticker reminded me how we still live in an age when it's not fashionable to be both intellectual and religious. Or to be left-wing, and religious. Or even, dare I say it, to be Jewish, and religious. I'm not criticizing you sitting here today - I don't honestly know where you stand on this subject. I'm just noting what your up against: a cultural expectation that *you will have no direct experience of the divine*.

Well, that's a little harsh. You *are* allowed to experience the divine in *nature*. What you are *not* permitted is a *personal* experience, especially a *commanding* personal experience. You are allowed to thank God for the color purple, but you may *not* experience a God who calls you to act in God's service. Ok, I apologize, I'm careening off into harshness again. I should be more tolerant of secular dogma. All I really wanted to say was this: you don't have to accept the secularist assertion that we cannot experience God's call. You don't have to be an agnostic if you don't want to.

Back to our Israel trip. We saw the wall on Thursday. The next day in our trip was Friday - I spoke about that Friday a little bit in one of my Rosh HaShanah sermons. We got up very early and went down to the Dead Sea and Masada and Ein Gedi on a beastly hot day. By the time we got back to our hotel in Jerusalem we were completely exhausted, and we had just an hour to get ready for Shabbat. Of course, when you don't have to prepare Shabbat dinner, getting ready for Shabbat is a little easier. We went to Friday night services not far from the hotel, at a well-known minyan called Shira Hadasha, which means "A New Song". This minyan is on the left-most fringe of Orthodoxy - men and women sit separately, but both men and women are allowed to lead services. Mincha right before Shabbat was led by a man, but the Friday night service was led by a woman - a woman whom I couldn't see, because she was on the other side of the mechitza. It was a Carlebach style service, much like we have here at TI once a month. Except that instead of the 40-80 people we get, they had at least 200.

The singing was overwhelming, even for me, who has been to services like this one before. I don't know why it affected me so. There were a lot of happy thoughts inside me. I was still reverberating from the experience at the wall the previous day. And the joy of Shabbat in Jerusalem was just completely permeating my soul. And I was thrilled to have brought some TI'ers to such a lovely service. And I was enjoying sitting in shul with my good friend, Rabbi Jonah Layman who happened to be in Israel at the time. There we were in shul together, and neither of us had to work. Whatever it was, and it was probably all of the above: I was in tears throughout the service. I could only mouth the words. And I wasn't the only one: others in our group told me afterwards that they were similarly affected.

After the service, we walked back to the hotel. Now, the hotel had given our guides a bit of a hard time - I'd told the guides to tell the hotel that we wouldn't be back for dinner until 8:30. The hotel said: 8:30 is the absolute latest you can come back and expect dinner. I was nervous the whole walk back, trying to hurry people along. We *just* made it back in time, with not a minute to spare. It might even have been 8:31 when we made it to one of the three dining rooms.

Needless to say, I'd been worrying for no good reason: not a single person had yet sat

down to dinner. There were what looked to be four separate good-sized groups that were just getting to the dining room at the same time we were. All had gone to daven somewhere, and all were descending on the hotel's dining room at the same moment. Our group were ushered to our seats, I led a kiddush for our group, and then we TI'ers all washed before motzie. But alas, there was no hallah to be had. Well, actually, there *was* hallah to be had: there *were* small tantalizing rolls in a basket near our table. But when someone, started to reach for the basket, the waiter, impossibly overburdened with the four groups all arriving at once, said we couldn't have the bread yet. *He* had to serve it with his little tongs on individual little plates for each of us. Which he didn't have time to do just then. But of course we had just washed, and you're really not supposed to talk between washing and saying the motzie. So we were stuck.

Well, when the waiter stepped into another of the three dining rooms for a second, I just went and took a few rolls from the basekt, said the motzie, and passed little pieces to everyone in our group. The waiter came back just in time to see me completing the crime. He was hopping mad, but he didn't come after me. He went after Ya'el, one of our guides, and gave her a tongue lashing in Hebrew. I felt very bad, and I apologized to Ya'el after the waiter was done yelling at *her* for *my* misdeed. At which point Ya'el said to me with a surprised look on her face: "Eitan, he wasn't so upset."

I'd forgotten: yelling in Israel doesn't mean the same thing as it does here. And I suddenly felt, somehow, more comfortable, more at home in Israel. The bubble of pretend politeness, in which we Americans frequently live, and which takes so much energy to keep inflated, had been dispensed with. I felt a little more like an Israeli. Perhaps I would have felt even *more* like an Israeli had the waiter yelled *directly* at me. With any luck, maybe on my next trip!

Anyway, the preliminaries thus accomplished, we tucked into an incredible meal - a buffet filled with a seriously unreasonable amount of food. We kept discovering parts of the buffet ... But perhaps today is not the day to dwell on it.

After the meal, we decided to sing some z'mirot, songs customarily sung after dinner on Shabbat. We struck up a song. Or maybe it was another of the groups that was dining in our room that started the first song. Anyway, they sang a song, and we joined in. We sang a song and they joined in. They were a mixed group - some black-hat orthodox, some more modern, and some didn't look observant at all - all coming to a relative's wedding, was my guess. For a little while there, as we traded tunes back and forth I sensed a unity of our people that I had never felt.

Which, of course, is more than a bit ironical: nowhere in the world do we Jews fight with each other more than we do in Israel. But maybe that's a key part of our culture - it's precisely the heated arguments that remind us of our connections to each other. Maybe it is precisely through those arguments that we form our connections to each other. We show our closeness through our comfort in being angry with each other. And the place in which we can have those arguments most freely, is our homeland.

The service we went to the next morning was also wonderful - Moreshet Avraham, our sister shul in Jerusalem. There was a lovely aufruf; during the misheberach the groom broke down in tears. And after the Torah reading, *both* parents gave heartfelt speeches to the groom. The bride was not present, the couple was apparently observing the custom of keeping separate from each other the week before the wedding. It was all good, but my favorite part may well have been the announcements at the end of the service: the announcements were given by the president of this congregation, former TI'er John Young, *and* they were given in Hebrew. I was

very impressed.

Another reason I love going to Moreshet Avraham is because a number of old classmates of mine from Rabbinical school have made Moreshet Avraham their home shul, and I get a chance to visit with them at the kiddush. I had a fascinating talk with an old friend, now a doctor in Israel. She was comparing health care systems in the US, and Canada, and Israel; and she told interesting tales of her experiences doctoring American kids who come to Israel on programs. But that's a subject for another talk.

Our trip to Israel was wonderful, and I loved the touring, and all the sights we saw, but I enjoyed our two Shabbats in Israel the best. Perhaps because it was on Shabbat that we stopped touring, and did things regular Israelis do, and we did those things with the Israelis themselves. I won't claim we got more than the briefest, most incomplete glimpse of Israeli life, but I'm feeling very thankful for that glimpse.

We got a very different kind of view of Israeli life on that second Shabbat during our tour. Our second Shabbat was right before we left to return to America; we spent that Shabbat in Tel Aviv. It was the last day of great 4 days in Tel Aviv - there was lots to see and learn. Shabbat in Tel Aviv, however, wasn't so easy. Tel Aviv is not a terribly religious city - many - maybe even *most* of its restaurants are not kosher, and there is no counterpart to the lovely Shira Hahashah Friday night service we'd attended in Jerusalem.

However, I did have a contact that told me about a small, informal non-Orthodox Friday night service, not too far from our hotel. So, a week beforehand, I called up the contact and left a message: would you mind if our group came to your services. I called them up on a Thursday. The following Tuesday, I'd still not heard back from them. So I called again - I didn't really have any other options that I could find within walking distance from our Hotel. This time I connected, my contact apologized for not getting back to me, and we arranged the visit.

Once again, I got a sense of Israeli society - they are every bit as busy as we are. In fact, I think that Israelis often live an even *more* frenetic life style than *we* do, which is really sad. Calls don't always get returned, just like in America. Anyway, my contact said that services started at 7 but it was really 7PM *Israeli* time, so 7:15 was probably the more realistic start time. Also, I was warned that with so many of their regulars away on vacation in August, there might be more of us TI'ers than there were regulars. Fine.

I think it was about 8 of us ended up going to this minyan. We arrived a little after 7PM, to find maybe 30 chairs set up, and only 2 other people in the room. We said "Gut Shabbes" to each other, but then the 2 regulars fell silent, so the eight of us chatted among ourselves. 7:15 came and went without another soul coming into the room. And *then*, one of the 2 *regulars* left the room. And then the other left as well. At which point Mark Berch said: "This is *not* going in a good direction." It was now 7:20. I said, let's just start singing "Y'did Nefesh", that medieval piyyut with which all such Friday night services seem to begin nowadays. We began singing, and sure enough, they began filing in. Not there was ever a big crowd - we were probably no more than 20 at most, all told. About 10 minutes or so into the service, just before Barchu, the person I'd talked to on the phone stood up and very graciously welcomed our group.

But once again, I felt that it was not the gracious welcome, but the initial tension that had broken the ice, at least for me anyway. Our starting the singing, their wandering in a little sheepishly and joining in to the familiar tune. Their being, at least ultimately, hospitable. I felt the symbolism was perfect - American Jews and Israeli Jews are not perfectly in synch, nor should we expect to be. We live in different worlds. Sometimes each of us has a little chip on our shoulder about the other. "Hey", we American Jews think - "why don't those Israelis

appreciate all we American Jews do for them. If Israel didn't have America behind it, and if we American Jews didn't help influence American policy, where would Israel be?? We should be welcomed to their country with trumpets blazing and genuflection whenever we deign to visit!" To which the Israeli Jew can easily respond: "You guys have it easy. We're living on the front lines right here, with all the pain and heartache, and danger, not to mention a lower standard of living. You guys really want to help? So come live here, already." You know, I think I've grown less afraid of this tension-filled conversation. I don't feel the need to resolve the tension, and I don't mind if it's out in the open now and again.

In the end I was very glad we had gone to the Tel Aviv havurah service on Friday night. I didn't have anything like the spiritual experience I had at Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem the week before. But I *did* get to see a different side of the Israeli experience - an everyday Shabbat - not ecstatic, or especially powerful - a little sh'vach, actually. But real. In a way it was a perfect complement to the week before.

You know, you could be a help to the cause of Conservative Judaism in Israel. Masorti congregations need your support. Most of them are small and struggling. On Shabbat morning in Tel Aviv, we attended a Masorti shul that was maybe twice as big as a typical American living room and dining room. One tiny corner at the front was walled off by a temporary partition - you could see a chair and a little copier and a small table. That was the synagogue office and the Rabbi's office, combined. Please consider supporting the Masorti movement in Israel. If you want to support pluralism in Israel, the Masorti Movement is a good way to go.

Ahh, Israel. I guess it's because I'm not there so often, but when I go, I'm always affected. Speaking to you only as a religious philosopher, I would insist to you that God is not present in Israel anymore that anywhere else in the world. However, I must confess that my experience does not match my philosophy. If you haven't been to Israel, you really should. By the way, this winter, in late December and early January, there is a birthright trip for folks ages 18 to 26 sponsored by Ko'ach, an arm of the Conservative Movement. And I hope it won't be too long before we do another TI trip.

I think there's another reason Israel moves me in a way no other place can. My tradition tells me that an experience of God is never merely on an individual plane - it's always connected in some way with the communal. My culture would have me believe that calls from God are never about going to live in isolation, as a monk in some desolate place. I cannot know the God of Israel without some familiarity with the people of Israel. I might feel called by God at the wall, called to help His people, but if that call is not matched by increased *knowledge* of His people, well what good is the call? The call always requires some new level of understanding in order to be fulfilled - a new understanding of myself, and of others as well. I cannot get closer to God without getting closer also to his creation, humankind. I cannot fully move forward in my understanding of the God of Israel without an understanding of Israel herself.

I think I made some progress in that understanding this summer. Next time, maybe we'll travel that road together.