

“Home for the Holidays”

If someone is crying out, do you respond? Do you come to help? Or do you block it out? Do you pretend not to hear, because if you heard, you would have to help, and you are too busy to help, or too uninterested to help, even though you know that it would look terrible if you heard and did not help, so you pretend very convincingly that you never heard the cry?

Listen to this poem. It is tomorrow’s haftarah:

Kol b’ramah nishma, n’hi b’chi tam’rurim

Rachel m’vakah al baneha, me’anah l’hinachem

“A cry is heard in Ramah, wailing and bitter tears;

Rachel weeping for her children; refusing comfort for her children who are gone.”

Why is Mother Rachel crying? Because her children, the children of Israel, are marching off to exile, to “galus,” to Bavel, to a distant place that will in time become a distant CONCEPT, a place in the mind that is far enough away not to hear mother Rachel’s cries for their return.

The children of Israel are leaving home. They are going against their will, but soon enough they will learn how not to return even when they can. They will learn to long for the land, but not to long for actually being in the land. Bavel will become the near-

permanent mindset of the Jewish people: first the literal Bavel, Babylonia, then “Bavel” as a code name for a Diaspora that will stretch from Iraq to White Plains.

Bavel will be good for the Jews. Yes, Bavel will be the scene of our oppression and discrimination and humiliation; of the Crusaders’ slaughter and the Spanish expulsion and auto da fes, and of Khmelnitsky’s massacres and the Kishinev pogrom, and ultimately the Sho’ah.

But, having said all that, Bavel will be good for the Jews. In Bavel, we Jews will create the seed texts for what will become the final draft of the Torah. In Bavel, as the centuries of exile roll by, our liturgy and literature will flourish – in Bavel. Our legal system will become an unprecedented blending of logic and compassion, of justice and mercy. Our mystical tradition will fashion tools to peer into the human soul, and perhaps into the soul of God as well. Our concept of sacred community – *kehillah k’doshah* -- will become a model for all the world to emulate.

All of this in Bavel, in Galut, in Exile, *in absentia* from our home. But -- and here’s the “but” that tragically few contemporary Jews understand – but all of this religious and cultural creativity took place VIS A VIS the Land of Israel; VIS A VIS the fact of the Land, and the IDEA of the Land. All of our ancient and medieval Jewish leaders and teachers either moved to the Land of Israel, or went there to visit, or tried to go, or wanted to go but could not. In Talmudic times, the rabbis of the great Babylonian academies traveled to Israel regularly, and corresponded with their counterparts in Israel

constantly. Maybe someone in those days THOUGHT that the hope of rebuilding the Jewish state was passé and no longer worth pondering, but NO one ever had the chutzpah to say so. Most did not say so because they never thought it. “Im eshkech y’rushalayim, tishkach y’mini” – “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning” – was more than a verse to be woven sampler-style into a challah cover. It was operative. It was real. Maybe not for the rank-and-file Yid, who may have been happy to stay where he was. But for our teachers and leaders, it was real. *Hatikvah* was always real.

Rachel m’vakah al baneha, me’annah l’hinachem

Rachel weeping for her children; refusing comfort for her children who are gone.”

It’s no accident that we read this haftarah on Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah is the “day of memory,” *Yom Hazikaron*. It’s the day to remember that we spend most of our lives in exile from our true selves: our spiritual selves, our political selves. We allow ourselves to be exiled from our people, our national identity, our history, our odd and beautiful sacred practices, our ridiculously idealistic hopes for the redemption of the world. On Rosh Hashanah we’re reminded of where we live, and we’re begged to try coming home for awhile, at least for a visit.

In today’s Haftarah the heroine is Chanah, who breaks a new path toward spiritual homecoming. She sets the model for serious Jewish prayer and introspection. In the Midrash, though, it is the clueless Elkanah, her husband, who achieves notoriety. He

apparently realizes that most of his fellow Israelites have lost interest in the practice of going up to Shiloh for the pilgrimage festivals. So, he begins going there with his family on Rosh Hashanah, which is not an official time for making a pilgrimage. He’s able to stir up enough interest among the populace so that eventually he’s credited for single-handedly revitalizing the mitzvah of *aliyah l’regel*, of “going up to the Land.” So, according to this midrashic take, this is how Rosh Hashanah became the “annual meeting of the Jewish people,” the time we remind ourselves to go home, at least for a good visit, if not to stay forever. “Home” to Judaism, but also “home” to the Jewish land. “Home” in *time*, as Heschel would teach us, but also “home” in *space*.

Three months ago, in June 2007, much hoopla was made of the fortieth anniversary of the release of the Beatle’s path-breaking album, “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band.” My teenage sons, great aficionados of the Fab Four, eagerly asked me how I had reacted to that cataclysmic cultural event, knowing that I was their age when it happened. “I didn’t even notice it,” was my reply. “But Dad, you like the Beatles. How could you not notice it?” they demanded. “Because,” I told them, “In the first week of June 1967, Israel was about to be annihilated. The narrow borders of the 1949 armistice – the now-famous ‘Green Line’ – were about to be overrun. The Israeli army had already dug mass graves in Tel Aviv. And my kibbutznik cousin was in a tank on the Golan. So, I’m sorry, my dears. Our ears were indeed glued to the radio that week, but not to the strains of “I’ll Get By With A Little Help From My Friends.” Israel was about to get by with no help at

all from its friends, save for us, the Jews of the world who could still hear Mother Rachel crying from Ramah, *Rachel m'vakah al baneha.*”

We all know the story of the last forty years. The victory led to exultation. Exultation led to pride. Pride led to pridefulness, then to chutzpah. Military occupation, which is required by international law, led to civilian outposts, and then to settlements, and then to vast suburbs on territory which Israel may indeed have some legal and historical claim to – or may not – but which international law demands that it not take place without negotiation. Then came the “three no’s” from the Arab world: No negotiation, no recognition, no peace. Then the de facto response: more expansion from Israel’s side, more terror from the Arab side. Then more defense, then more international outcry, then more humiliation to mix with Israel’s shrinking pride. Then, a vast restive Palestinian population squeezed between Israel’s military government and expanding civilian presence on the one side, and a callously corrupt Palestinian leadership that squandered their every hope for remediation, much less their dream of self-determination.

And, of course, the Yom Kippur War, and Camp David, and peace with Egypt, and the Lebanon War, and the Intifada, and Oslo, and peace with Jordan, and Iraqi scuds raining on Tel Aviv, and the second Intifada and the era of the suicide bomber, and Israel’s unilateral withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza, and the fiasco against Hizballah in 2006. And, of course, the security fence, snaking its way across the biblical landscape.

And, lest we forget, the absorption of a million Soviet Jews who knew next to nothing about Judaism or religious culture; and the absorption of thousands of Ethiopian Jews who knew nothing about modernity or secular culture.

And, yes, the shrinking of the famed social service net that once was newborn Israel's pride and joy; and the widening of the gap between haves and have-nots; and between an increasingly hard-lined religious community and an increasingly alienated secular community.

And, too, an Israel that somehow, through all of this sturm and drang, continued to develop the world's most innovative tools to fight disease, and the world's most creative solutions to technological impasses. An Israel that persisted in sending its experts in medicine and agriculture and disaster relief to every far-flung part of this wretched world, to every tsunami and explosion and earthquake and drought, despite the lack of acknowledgment the world would show in return.

And now, an Israel that is more impregnable and yet more vulnerable than ever; an Israel that needs no friends to help it defend itself, but an Israel that nonetheless cries FOR itself as it searches deep within for solutions to its impasse: How to rid itself of responsibility for a million non-citizens under its jurisdiction; how to govern those non-citizens in the meantime in accordance with some approximation of the Jewish values upon which the dream of modern Israel is based in the first place; how to recognize statehood for a neighbor population that, by and large, does not want its recognizer to

exist at all; how to pare down its borders and still feel “safe;” how to fuse modern democratic principles with ancient and beloved Jewish ideals; in short, how – and WHY -- to continue the great project of recreating the Jewish state in our pivotal historical time.

Too much to bear? Does it make you want to change the subject? We can, you know. We can make THE central question of our Jewish life our anxiety over the mortgage our community took on when we rebuilt our lovely shul, here in this very special corner of Bavel, after the fire of four years and four days ago. Or, we can make THE central question of our Jewish life the negotiating of our children’s already minimal Jewish education with their soccer schedules.

For those who tend more toward a maximalist approach to Jewish life, and I believe that describes the majority of our membership, each of us could do just fine as a Jew by intensifying our study of Hebrew, of sources, of commentary, of literature, of history, of liturgy, of the skills and techniques of prayer. We could turn outward toward the suffering in our local environment, devoting ourselves to alleviating poverty and hunger and homelessness and racism and sexism and homophobia in our midst. We could turn our Judaism into *tikkun olam*, to borrow a phrase from the Kabbalists, to “global repair,” by advocating tirelessly against the genocide in Darfur and the destruction of the ecosystem.

We not only “can” do these things, but we “should” do them. We MUST do them if we are to continue calling ourselves Jews. But we could easily do them and pretend that the

burdensome questions of Israel don't concern us. Or don't exist. Or don't matter. Or that they matter, but that they don't impinge upon our own Jewish life, whether it's a Jewish life of profound Torah study and *tikkun olam*, or whether it's a Jewish life of mortgages and carpools.

All of us loved the little Israel of our nostalgia. That was the Israel of kibbutzniks in kova tembels dancing a hora around the bonfire, baking potatoes and playing the accordion, going off on gallant Palmach raids and smuggling Holocaust victims in under the British blockade. That was the Israel proclaimed a state by a fearless Ben Gurion late on a Friday afternoon, while a million Arab soldiers were poised to swoop down and drown the Tikvah, the hope, in a river of blood. *That* Israel is turning sixty in the Jewish year we begin today. That is an important milestone to mark: Sixty years since the birth of little Israel.

But the Israel of today – the REAL Israel – is forty years old, not sixty. The real Israel is the Israel of gargantuan accomplishments and equally gargantuan problems. It is no longer the old Israel that tugs at our heart strings and our memory. It is, however, the Israel that makes possible every aspect of the Jewish renaissance we experience every day, here at the farthest corners of Bavel, even when we pay no attention to Israel at all.

Look, without question, the creative models of Jewish life we're developing here – especially RIGHT here – are crucial to the health of Jewish life all over the world, including Jewish life in Israel. Israel continues to learn from our work in the areas of

Jewish liturgical change, feminism, gender issues, democratic principles, and a general openness to constructive influences from the wider world. Israel probably cannot go much farther as a Jewish state without our ideas and contributions. And as the interchange between Jews there and Jews here becomes more of a shared venture, Israel will be the better and stronger for it.

But it's time to realize – or realize anew -- that most of what we treasure about our Jewish lives here, as well as what we treasure about the GENERAL lives we lead with none of the historical limitations and encumbrances our grandparents experienced on account of their Jewish identity, all rests on the *fact* of Israel. And by the “fact of Israel,” I mean the Israel that is forty and not just sixty. I mean the Israel *of today* that continues to dare itself and the world to find a way to realize the *tikvah* first declaimed by Ben Gurion in the *Megillat Haatzma'ut*, the Scroll of Independence, on that fateful day.

The revival of Hebrew; the flourishing of Jewish art; the monumental achievements in Jewish academic, historical, and literary research; the blossoming of a post-War poetic idiom that permeates all of our contemporary Jewish liturgy; the political “cover” Israel provides for Jews around the world as we interface with governments and polities; and the sense of pride in our people being able to survive and thrive as Jews -- even after the Crusades and the Expulsion and the Pogroms and the Sho'ah – to thrive AS JEWS and not in spite of the fact of our “Mosaic persuasion” – The modern Jewish State of Israel makes all of this possible.

There is a phrase in the morning blessing that precedes the Sh'ma, and it's picked up almost as a throwaway line in the blessing after the meal, Birkat Hamazon. It reads *v'tolicheynu kom'miyut l'artzenu*, usually translated as “and lead us upright into our land.” For a long time I've been re-translating that word “upright” in my head.

Kom'miyut has to mean “with dignity and pride.” Lead us WITH DIGNITY AND PRIDE back to our land.

In other words, cause us to love Israel so deeply and devotedly that we never stop working to help it become the place of justice and dignity and enlightenment that we will all be proud of. And cause us to love it so deeply that we feel proud to associate ourselves with Israel, and to visit it often, and to support its struggle, even BEFORE it becomes the Messianic place we would all like it to be. Cause us to love the ancient idea of Israel, AND the dream of Israel reborn, AND the feisty little Israel that is turning sixty, AND most especially the Israel that has just turned forty and that struggles to do what no other modern country cares to try: to defend itself AND to elevate itself. To take care of its bodily needs, AND to strive for an ideal that transcends the physical laws of history.

I am not proud of everything Israel does or has done. In fact, I'm a vocal critic of much of what it does, even and especially when I am traveling its towns and highways. But I am not ashamed of Israel, even when I detest what it does. I am never ashamed, because I am at my most *kom'miyut* when I am thinking about Israel, and when I go there, and when I bring my children there, and when I bring my congregants there, and when I

speaking a broken version of the Hebrew that flourishes only there, and when I turn in the direction of the Land and State of Israel to recite my deepest prayers. My prayers are to God; but my mantra is the Land, and my homing device is Mother Rachel’s tearful cry.

In the Midrash on Eycha, the Book of Lamentations that marks the beginning of our first destruction and exile, God is explaining to Jewish protesters why the exile was deserved and justified; why Israel, through its irresponsible and immoral behavior, brought this judgment upon themselves. Abraham and Moses take Israel’s side as defense attorneys. A trial is staged. One letter of the Torah after another is placed on the witness stand to support God’s case. Each time a Hebrew letter comes forward, Abraham or Moses square off against the letter. To the Aleph: “Don’t you remember the day the Holy One appeared on Mount Sinai and began the commandments with you: Anokhi, I am the Eternal your God? No nation or tongue would have you, save only my children, yet you are here to testify against my children?” At once the Alef steps back and refuses to testify against the Jewish people.

And likewise with Bet, who is asked how she can allow herself to begin the Torah, which no one but Israel would accept, and then turn against her people. She, too, relents, and the other letters of the Aleph-Bet follow suit.

But God will not give up. Israel is guilty, justice must be served, exile is called for. Finally, Mother Rachel bursts forward and takes the stand. “Listen,” she tells God. “When my wedding night arrived, my father switched me with my sister. Yet I did not

expose her or shame her. Now if I, who am only flesh and blood and dust and ashes, showed no jealousy toward my sister, then you who are Avinu Malkenu, the sovereign ruler and parent of the universe, shouldn't you not be jealous of the silly idols your people worshipped? How could you banish your people to exile? I'm sitting by the side of the road all these centuries, crying my eyes out for them. Avinu Malkenu, *you* let them come home.

At once God is filled with mercy. “All right. For your sake, O Rachel, I will restore Israel to their rightful place – *v'shavu vanim lig'vulam.*”

And thus, on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Hazikaron, the day of remembering that we are in exile, and that we need to find our way home, we read Jeremiah's words:

“A cry was heard in Ramah, wailing and bitter tears;
Rachel weeping for her children, refusing comfort for her children who are gone.”

And then these closing words:

“Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears;
For there is a reward for your labor, hope for your future – *tikvah l'acharitech.*
V'shavu vanim lig'vulam – Your children shall return to their borders.”
They shall return *kom'miyut* – with dignity and pride – *l'artzenu* – to our home.
With their hearts and with their feet, they shall all come home.

