

Rosh Hashanah 5777: Jews in the Global Village

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This summer, we had a beautiful apartment in Rechavia, in West Jerusalem. Nothing fancy, but it had a balcony looking out onto a street full of trees and grapevines and flowers; air-conditioning for which I thanked God and the landlord on a regular basis; and a short walk to camp for my daughters and the Hartman Institute for me, where I went every day to study with rabbinic colleagues from across denominations and around the world.ⁱ It was a little piece of heaven on earth.

Two weeks in, we decided to venture forth. I had a wedding to go to in Beer Sheva, and a meeting with the nascent Reform community there.ⁱⁱ The easiest way to get there was to rent a car, and so I did, thinking to myself: What could go wrong?

Now, because I was travelling with children, our first stop was a pit stop. This involved a poorly-marked gas station, a U-turn in an abandoned parking lot, and slow hiss of air out of my tire as I realized I had run over a row of spikes. That was the bad news. The good news was: we were near a gas station. Some sugar and caffeine from an Aroma coffee shop, a spare tire put on by a helpful attendant, and we were back on our way.

Beer Sheva. Montreal's twin city, as hot in summer as we are cold in winter. Someone had a sense of humour with that choice. But the connection is a real one: we went for the wedding of the brother of Amal elSana, Executive Director of ICAN here in Montreal. Amal is a friend of our community, and a friend of mine – and there was no way I was missing the opportunity to experience a Bedouin wedding. There was only one problem: We had had a glitch in communications, Amal and I, and I knew the name of the village – Lakiya – but had no other directions.

Off we went, the GPS set for Lakiya. After all: What could go wrong? I had hoped for signs at the entrance of the village pointing the way to the wedding, but alas, there were none. So we tried the old-fashioned approach: we asked, repeating the Hebrew words for wedding, and Amal's family name. One woman shooed her teenage son into our car, telling him to direct us. We wove our way off-road and through the streets, following groups of women dressed for a celebration. We reached a wedding. There were only two small problems. One, we were on the men's side of the Bedouin equivalent of a mechitza. Two: we were at the wrong wedding. Back in the car. More helpful strangers. Eventually, we got there, to one of the most hospitable experiences of my life. Abundant food. Joyous dancing. Women of all ages, curious and conversational, welcoming and warm. We climbed to the rooftop, saw the moon over the minarets, shared a laugh with an older woman shaking her fist at the children scampering on top of parked cars. It was a night of connection, of shared humanity, of feeling the global village in the most embracing way.

Soon enough, it was Saturday night, and we were back on the road to Jerusalem. As we wound through the hills surrounding the city, the sun was beginning to set. I remembered how, whenever I bring tour groups to Jerusalem, we first see the city from the lookout on Mount

Scopus: The Western Wall, the shining Dome. What a great opportunity, I thought, to show it to the girls. GPS again. It took us to a lookout. The wrong one, but it was beautiful: a view of the Judean desert, looking towards the Dead Sea. But I wanted to find the other lookout. We tried again. And again. To no avail. Resigned, we set the GPS for our apartment in West Jerusalem. At this point, what could go wrong? We followed the instructions. Turn right. Sharp left. Suddenly we were driving down a steep hill through what seemed to be people's back yards. We definitely weren't in Rechavia. The sun had set, and there were no streetlights. People were throwing looks at our car, a rental car with Israeli plates; we were very out of place. I became acutely aware of my daughters in the back, and the risk I had taken in hopes of a good view. I found myself wondering which side of the security wall we were on – or more precisely, if we were on the wrong side. As much as I knew in my head that there is no wrong side, that there should be no wrong side, I desperately wanted to be on the right side of that wall. I wanted to be in our apartment, a few miles and worlds away. There was no familiar name I could say, and no shared language. In that moment, the global village wasn't something to embrace. It was something to be escaped, and fast.

We made it back safely, in the end. My tire was not the only thing which was permeable, that weekend. The world felt permeable. Within the course of twenty-four hours, I went from celebrating the lack of boundaries to wishing for them dearly. And this I knew for certain: GPS is woefully insufficient for telling us where we need to go.

Fear, Rabbi Donniel Hartman teaches, is a vision modifier. It moves our primary sphere of concern from the other to the self. It leads us to demonize the other, and even affects how we see ourselves. Tal Becker, an Israeli peace negotiator and high-level advisor, argues that the fact that both Israelis and Palestinians see themselves as the victims, faced with intractable villains, is a serious disincentive for negotiations. Any conversation becomes betrayal of one's own tribe – whether on the ground in Jerusalem, or on campuses across North America, including here in Montreal. We move into “us” and “them” – the “us” we need to protect, and the “them” about whom we don't have the luxury of caring. We want to be on the right side of the wall.

This dynamic is not only with Israel, of course. We see it clearly south of the border, God help us, as the American election looms near. There too there has been talk of walls. And much though we may take recourse in our quietly Canadian sense of superiority, and much though we joke about a potential wave of American immigrants, we know very well that what happens in that election will shape our reality in profoundly significant ways. Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau said it best, at the Press Club in Washington, D.C. back in 1969: “Être votre voisin, c'est comme dormir avec un éléphant; quelque douce et placide que soit la bête, on subit chacun de ses mouvements et de ses grognements.” “Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, if I can call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.” There are many twitches and grunts, this season. We feel the permeability of our borders; there is no wall we can build.

And we see it, still, in Syria. Last year, I called on our community to sponsor a Syrian refugee family, and you responded magnificently. Thanks to you, we raised enough funds to sponsor two families, and a dedicated group at Temple has been working ever since to prepare

for their arrival. The process is not a quick one, but we hope to be able to welcome them over the coming months. We know that for them, that will just be the beginning, as they navigate new lives in a new home. On our own bima just two weeks ago, we heard from Myriam Keyloun, wearing secular clothes, passionately defended the choices of women who wear the hijab; it is a trace of the familiar, she said, in a world where everything is new. There may be complicated issues, but there are real human beings at their core.

Last year, it was the image of Alan Kurdi, drowned on the Turkish shore, that moved us to action. This year, it was Omran Daqneesh, the five-year-old boy sitting on the back of the ambulance after an airstrike, covered in dust, wiping blood off his hands, and unable to utter a sound. In the past week alone, over one hundred children have died in the bombing of Aleppo. We can choose to be afraid of Omran Daqneesh or Myriam Keyloun, to shut the permeable borders of our consciousness by assiduously averting our eyes. It can be done as political rhetoric, fomenting fears and appealing to our basest instincts, or in polite and whispered ways. But it is hard to look a person in the eye and not see the humanity that we share. There is no wall in the world that can keep that reality out.

All these migrations, all these permeable boundaries. These and so many more. A gay Jewish family coming here from France, saying that the air there has become unbreathable – *irrespirable*. All those pushed out of their homes by current events and by climate change, by politics and by poverty, by fears and by hopes. They come here in search of safety – yet all their stories attest to the insecurity of our world. On the taxi ride back to Ben Gurion airport at the end of the summer, the driver and I were reflecting on how strange it felt to have had a peaceful summer in Jerusalem while there was violence in the rest of the world. “Maybe now they will understand what we are dealing with,” he said. But the question remains: How do we respond?

Tal Becker tells a joke about a Brit, a Frenchman, a German and a Jew, all stranded in the desert. The Brit says, “I’m so thirsty, I must have tea.” The Frenchman says, “I’m so thirsty, I must have wine.” The German says, “I’m so thirsty, I must have beer.” And the Jew says, “I’m so thirsty, I must have diabetes.”

Every people has their perspective. The Jewish story, I would argue, is uniquely equipped for a complex, permeable world.

Yossi Klein Halevi says that we live by two core commands: One: Remember Amalek – or, as he puts it, if someone says they want to kill you, take them seriously. And two: Remember the stranger, for we were strangers in a foreign land.

In the tension between universalism and particularism, Judaism seeks a middle ground. When faced with the either/or of caring for ourselves or caring about others, we adamantly choose the both/and. In Tal Becker’s words: Our Judaism is the vehicle for empathy and moral citizenship. Being a better Jew helps us to become better citizens of the world.

On Rosh Hashanah morning, we read the akeda: the timeless, terrifying story of Abraham called by God to sacrifice his son. But Rabbi Donniel Hartman suggests that we would do better to read a different story about Abraham today: the story of Abraham and Sodom.

“Am I going to hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” God asks. “Abraham will surely become a great, powerful nation; all the nations of the earth will be blessed in him. For I have chosen him to teach his children and his posterity to follow the path of the Eternal, to do what is just and right...”ⁱⁱⁱ So God tells Abraham of the outcry against the sinful cities of Sodom and Gemora, an outcry so loud it reaches up to heaven, and demands a divine response. Talk about permeable boundaries.

We know that Sodom was sinful. But we don’t talk enough about its central sin – and no, it’s not sodomy. The central sin of Sodom was inhospitality. As our great teacher Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, said, “they saw in every stranger an enemy to be vanquished and robbed of his fortune and his hope.”^{iv} If an outsider came to visit, he would be made to fit on a bed. If he was too short, his limbs would be stretched on a rack; too tall, and his limbs would be lopped off. If you came to the town in need of sustenance, no one would help you; people gave coins with their own initials marked, so they could reclaim them when you died of starvation, because no one would sell you bread.^v Getting to Sodom was itself near-impossible; in a midrash which resonates all too clearly today, they flooded all the roads, to keep strangers from coming in. The streets of Sodom were made of gold, we are told, and the Sodomites didn’t want to share. Lot, Abraham’s nephew, seems to be the best person in town – and he’s the one willing to throw his daughters to the crowd. Wiesel characterizes them as follows: “What was the Sodomite society guilty of? It condemned itself by rejecting and humiliating and oppressing the poor, the stranger, the refugee – who more than anyone need compassion and generosity. The story of Sodom is the story of a warning to each of us for all time.”^{vi} May we make Wiesel’s memory a blessing by taking these words to heart.

Abraham, famously, calls God to account. What if Sodom contains righteous people, he asks: “Shall not the judge of all the earth act justly?”^{vii} Ultimately, there are not enough righteous people in Sodom for the city to be saved. Speaking up never guarantees success. But Abraham speaks up; and as his ancestors, so must we. That, the Torah tells us, is what it means to follow the path of God.

What would happen if this were the story we returned to, at the beginning of each New Year? What would change if we read not about akeda, but about Abraham’s God-given responsibility, as a Jew, to engage with the problems of the world?

Rashi, the classic medieval Torah commentator, looks closely at the episode of the spies, when Israelite scouts are sent from the wilderness to check out the Promised Land. “What kind of country is it?” Moses asks. “Are the people who live in it strong or weak... are the towns they live in open or with walls?”^{viii} “If they lived in unwalled towns,” Rashi comments, “[that shows] they were strong... but if they lived in cities with walls, they were weak.” What would change if we saw our openness as a manifestation of our strength?

Let me close with an example. I’ve been asked to be the rabbi of a trip for Jews in their 20s and 30s, organized by the Israeli consulate and Federation. Here’s the surprise: we aren’t going to Israel. Instead, we are going to Senegal, to see development projects Israel is sponsoring. Senegal is a country which is 95% Muslim, and with which Israel has full diplomatic relations. We will learn about the cooperation between these two countries, and we will take

part in ground-breaking dialogue between Muslims and Jews. I have no doubt that these efforts will help support Israel's political and security needs; I also have no doubt that they are part of Israel's unique vision, to use our Jewish values for good.

Honestly? I'm a little scared. It is possible, after all, that something could go wrong. We joked at one of the planning meetings that the Jewish General Hospital doesn't have a travel clinic, because it would just be staffed by Jewish mothers saying, "What are you thinking? Don't go!" But I want to be a different kind of Jewish mother. Because I want to help make a different world.

Safety is one of our deepest human desires; it is also one of our greatest illusions. Our world is permeable and our world is complex, full of possibility and fraught with danger. As Jews, our sacred task is to reject the dichotomies: either/or, victim or villain, us or them. Abraham's decision to try to save Sodom, mattered. Our decision to sponsor Syrian families, matters. We use our GPS, yes, to figure out which way to go; but may we also use our Jewish moral compass as we navigate this world.

ⁱ The teachings of Rabbi Donniel Hartman, Tal Becker, and Yossi Klein Halevi which are cited in this sermon all came from the Hartman Rabbinic Leadership Institute in Jerusalem, July 2016.

ⁱⁱ We were accompanied on this adventure by Taylor Baruchel, Temple's rabbinic student who is studying at Hebrew Union College in Israel for the year. She is developing an ongoing connection with Ramot Shalom, the Reform community in Beer Sheva, and its leader, Naomi Efrat.

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 18:17-19.

^{iv} Elie Wiesel, *Wise Men and Their Tales* (New York, 2003), p.26.

^v *Ibid.*, pp.26-27, and H.N. Bialik and Y.H. Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends* (New York, 1992), pp. 36-37.

^{vi} Wiesel, pp.37-38.

^{vii} Genesis 18:25.

^{viii} Numbers 13:18-19, and Rashi *ad loc.*