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“Love Is Stronger Than Death”

It was a flight I’ll surely never forget. I have flown out of Ben Gurion Airport too many times to count, but never before had I felt the strange collision of emotions that overtook me as Tel Aviv grew smaller and smaller outside the window of my plane this past July.

From the very beginning of my studies in Israel this summer, war had been beckoning. We all knew it was coming. So when the rockets started flying into Israel from Gaza, nobody was surprised. But when air raid sirens sounded in Jerusalem... somehow, that did catch me off guard, even if it really shouldn’t have. It is a strange sensation for us as Americans – to run for the nearest bomb shelter, knowing that someone is actively trying to kill you. Most of us, blessedly, have no frame of reference for assimilating that reality. Israelis, of course, have no frame of reference for living without that reality – perhaps the greatest reason why we can sometimes see things so differently from one another.

With rockets flying everywhere, there was no guarantee that I’d be able to leave Israel as scheduled. Flights were being canceled. The airport itself was a target. Even the drive to get there carried risk and required preparation. So I got myself to Ben Gurion eight hours before my flight, which is the only reason I was able to leave that day... my flight through Paris had, in fact, been canceled, and I got the last remaining seat on a flight through Amsterdam that I could only hope would actually depart.

As the wheels pulled up, and I looked down upon the growing Israeli horizon from the air, I felt at once relieved and ashamed. On the one hand, there was this Argo-esque exhale... I had really made it out. The war was safely sequestered below me. But at the same time, I felt this queasy sensation of being a deserter... taking comfort in stealing away to America, where my loved ones were already rejoicing at my having fled harm’s way. Soon, I would be home, where all of the punditry about this latest outbreak of violence would be flying instead of rockets. But I would be unable to escape my vision of the tense eyes still staring back at me from Israel. For there would be no flight to safety for them. And if I were to ask, they would tell me that they stayed essentially because they knew I wouldn’t. Some of us have to stay, or there would be nothing left to discuss.

So yes, it was a flight I’ll surely never forget – because it was only the first of many moments that signaled something different in the air with this war and the circumstances surrounding it. Sure, I felt the familiar

insecurity of watching thousands upon thousands of innocent Palestinian and Israeli civilians suffering and wanting so badly for it to stop. But I also felt an unfamiliar insecurity that I know many of you felt as well – the unfamiliar insecurity of watching many of my longest-held assumptions about this conflict crumble before new realities that I couldn't simply ignore or strangle into compliance with what I had always believed.

For instance, my long-held assumption, drawn from every Israeli war for at least the last thirty years, has been that “Israelis like me” – the ones who have worked the hardest for a Palestine alongside Israel... the ones who have always pushed for renewed peace talks and against settlement in the West Bank – “Israelis like me” may support a war against Hamas or Hizbollah for a week or two, but not longer. Once the carnage is just too awful to look at, and once too many Israeli soldiers have died, “Israelis like me” start demonstrating by the tens of thousands for an end to the violence. Only this time, “Israelis like me” didn't. Even after dozens of soldiers and many hundreds of Palestinians had lost their lives, polling in favor of continuing the war until Hamas' tunnels could be destroyed remained astonishingly high – somewhere north of 85%. You can't get 85% of Israelis to agree that you're Jews or that I'm a rabbi, or that hummus is better than babaganoush, but they agreed that this horrifying war had to continue until Israelis no longer had to fear Hamas killers popping out of the ground and showing up at their bedroom door.

I remember wondering, “If support for the war is that high, it has to include most of the leading voices on the left, not just the center and the right. Can that possibly be true?” My closest Israeli friends and teachers surely weren't enthusiastic about the war, but that doesn't mean they didn't support it. Most lamented their government's failure to negotiate more earnestly with the more moderate Palestinian Authority, but few if any thought war with Hamas should or even could be stopped. And none felt it was acceptable to live with the tunnels, which could only be removed by force.

This was true even of Israel's progressive luminaries. Perhaps you may have seen it – on July 30, when the war was already three dreadful weeks old, German media outlet Deutsche Welle conducted an interview with the renowned Israeli author and peace activist Amos Oz. Oz's leadership in the peace movement is the stuff of legend. When most of the Jewish world was celebrating after the Six Day War, Oz immediately became one of the first Israelis to oppose the occupation and call for a two-state solution. He was one of the founders of Peace Now. During the second intifada, Oz campaigned for the Meretz Party – Labor wasn't far left enough for him. And as recently as 2011, Oz sent one of his books to Marwan Barghouti, who is serving multiple life terms in an Israeli prison for masterminding suicide bombings. The note attached said, “This story is our story, I hope you read it and understand us as we understand you, hoping to see you outside and in peace, yours, Amos Oz.” He lost a few speaking engagements in Israel over that one.

So the interviewer at Deutsche Welle was probably caught off guard when Oz opened by saying, “I would like to begin the interview in a very unusual way: by presenting one or two questions to your readers and listeners. May I do that?”

“Go ahead!” said the interviewer.

“Question 1: What would you do if your neighbor across the street sits down on the balcony, puts his little boy on his lap and starts shooting machine gun fire into your nursery?”

“Question 2: What would you do if your neighbor across the street digs a tunnel from his nursery to your nursery in order to blow up your home or... kidnap your family?”

“With these two questions I pass the interview to you.”

Replied the interviewer, “Of course now we are already in the middle in the interview.”

Later, Oz was asked point blank if he stood with Israel’s 85% on the war. He responded soberly: “I never believed the ultimate evil in the world is war. In my view the ultimate evil in the world is aggression, and the only way to repel aggression is unfortunately by force. That is where the difference lies between a European pacifist and an Israeli peacenik like myself.”

And so went my long-held assumption about the tolerance for war among “Israelis like me.” But that wasn’t the only assumption that was turned on its head this summer. After teaching throughout my entire rabbinic career that Palestinians consistently poll in favor of two states for two peoples, this summer revealed a startling change. A survey conducted by a leading Palestinian pollster and commissioned by the non-partisan Washington Institute demonstrated that Hamas and armed resistance in general remain unpopular among Palestinians, but that “nearly two-thirds said ‘resistance should continue until all of historic Palestine is liberated.’” The five-year goal articulated by nearly two-thirds of respondents is a world without Israel. “Only a third said that ‘it might be necessary to give up some of (their) claims so that (their) people and (their) children can have a better life.’” It’s the first time I can recall any credible poll suggesting such things... and the poll was taken just *before* this summer’s war. I can only imagine what the numbers were after it.

So both peoples appear to be hardening simultaneously. My long-held assumption in such a climate was that the Arab nations would unite, as they always do, behind the Palestinians when hardened attitudes gave way to war. But for the first time in Israel’s history, that’s not what we saw. Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, among others, proved to be unlikely Israeli allies in a Middle East where opposition to a Jewish state now seems to take a back seat to the fast-growing concern over Islamic extremism in Iran, Iraq and Syria. Moderate Muslims know that Hamas harbors its own dreams of establishing a new caliphate, just as the terrorists of the Islamic State yearn to do – and after a summer of ruthless murder of Yazidis, Christians, American and British hostages, we’ve now seen a small glimpse of what most of the Middle East is desperate to repel.

So this summer brought the unprecedented optics of moderate Muslim nations tacitly hoping that Israel would do its part in beating back the scourge of fundamentalism. But if you assumed that this might result in a reduction in anti-Semitic backlash against the world’s Jews, you assumed wrong. As we all know, this past summer saw the worst outbreak of anti-Jewish incidents in recent memory. Sadly, it wasn’t all that surprising when French mobs waged a pogrom in Paris, crying “Death to the Jews!” while burning shops and attacking worshipers huddled inside a synagogue. But to see the foreign ministers of Germany, Italy and France feel

compelled to issue a joint appeal against the widespread surge in anti-Semitism... to see Newsweek publish a cover picture of a young Belgian Jewish woman carrying a suitcase, with the title, "Exodus: Why Europe's Jews Are Fleeing Once Again" – this was as alarming as it was heartbreaking. As most of you know, I have not spoken much about anti-Semitism from this bima – largely because, to our good fortune, there hasn't usually been much to speak of. But it would be irresponsible for any rabbi to ignore the anti-Jewish fervor of these recent months.

I don't know about you, but there came a point this summer when I almost couldn't bring myself to read or watch or listen anymore. I felt a little like Henny Youngman, who used to say, "When I read about the evils of drinking, I gave up reading." But that's when I was paid a visit by my dear friend and partner in pursuing peace and justice, Rev. Ed Bacon from All Saints Church in Pasadena. He wanted to hear what I was thinking about all of this, and I most definitely wanted to hear what he was thinking. I told him, "Ed, these are scary, scary times. And not just because of all the violence – the rockets and the crying children, the beheadings and the bewilderment – but scary also because so many of our long-held assumptions are being turned on their head." I confided, "I feel like I'm being forced to stare my own ideological orthodoxy in the eye and admit that maybe I haven't had this all figured out – and it's very hard for anyone to surrender the safety they derive from believing they're right." Ed nodded knowingly.

I said, "Amos Oz has done more in his life to advance the cause of a two-state solution than everyone in our two congregations put together... I can't just dismiss what he's saying because it's an uncomfortable fit for my soul. And now, with this chapter in the Hamas war over, and with Gaza a giant mess, and with the Islamic State terrorizing the entire region, how can we have any confidence about what to advocate for next? I mean, a strong moral case can actually be made that the right thing for Israel to do for the beleaguered residents of Gaza is to reoccupy them, so as to ensure that the humanitarian supplies there go into buildings, not tunnels and bombs. But am I ready to call for occupation? Or how about the moral case being made by a growing number of reasoned analysts – that the worst thing possible for *Palestinians* would be for Israel to withdraw from the West Bank right now... leaving them to a fledgling government of their own, with ISIL couched right along the Syrian border? Is now the wrong time for a two-state solution? Could there ever *be* a wrong time?"

"The reality," I told Ed, "is that I just don't know. And *that* is scary... feeling like I really don't know. What I do know," I said, "is that anyone – left, center or right... including us – anyone who meets this moment by just spooling out their same worn refrain about who's to blame, what's the cause, how to fix it... they're addicted to their own orthodoxy, too afraid to open their eyes and see what doesn't fit, destined to miss the message that time and truth are going to reveal."

Here I paused and waited to see if I still had a friend in Ed Bacon. And with his characteristic measured wisdom, Ed said, "It does seem that we're dealing with something new here... that the drama in Israel and Gaza is just a part of some larger narrative that we don't yet know how to assemble. So this is a time for watching and studying and preparing to become a part of progress. And yes, it's discomfiting to feel so unsure of what to do, of what to ask others to do. It's scary to see this rising tide of violence in the world and have so little

understanding about it. But,” said Ed, with his gentle smile, “You and I teach faith traditions that are built for such moments. Everything we need – the wisdom, the patience, the reason to hope – it’s all there.”

That got a gentle smile out of me. Because I knew he was right.

You see, we rabbis and pastors and priests and imams usually give the sermon that we most need to hear. It’s our best way of guessing what some of you might need as well. And if there’s anyone whose ideological orthodoxy has taken a beating in these recent months, it would be me. It’s no secret that I have given over an enormous portion of my heart, energy and time over the past several years to the belief that pushing the leaders of the Israelis and Palestinians together and haranguing them to make a deal could produce peace. And in my own admittedly small way, I have certainly tried my best to move the needle a little bit. I met with Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in Ramallah and wrote about the opportunity that he embodied in the Los Angeles Times. I created a rabbinic mission that brought colleagues from across North America to apply direct pressure to senior cabinet ministers in Israel and the Palestinian Authority. And again and again, I asked you to join me in advocacy efforts that would make our longings clear. And so it hurts to say it – but unless I just choose not to pay attention, it seems I’ve got a fair amount invested in a narrative that’s just not happening at this moment in time. The leaders of the Israelis and Palestinians are not going to make a peace deal right now – no matter how much we push for it... no matter how much we criticize either side or both sides – because right now, neither of their peoples wants it. Neither of their peoples trusts it, and neither has much reason to trust it. And so if we want to help, we’re going to have to work on changing the conditions, instead of demanding an end to the occupation or demanding an end to terror, because the current conditions will not produce our aims.

Those words are a bitter pill for most of us to swallow. But better to swallow a bitter pill while telling the truth, than to avoid the bitterness by sticking with a well-intentioned, but imaginary vision of what is. My teacher, Rabbi Donniel Hartman, with whom we’ll have the opportunity to study in person when he visits L.A. in November, recently wrote that being a “peaceaholic” requires us “to work to change the reality within which (we) find (ourselves), not to misread this reality or to be naive about it.”

And this is where our charge in this moment transcends the geopolitical and reaches into every corner of our lives, as these High Holydays are intended to do. Our mission in life – our mechanism for growing as human beings – is *teshuvah*... the Hebrew word most frequently mistranslated as repentance... the word which means “turning.” We’re supposed to spend our whole lives learning how to turn – resisting being stuck, even though there is so much intoxicating comfort in clinging relentlessly to our familiar refrains about ourselves, our people, and our world. If we truly want our world to change, we must be brave enough ourselves to change.

The legendary 20th century rabbi, Abraham Isaac Kook, in teaching about *teshuvah*, wrote that “the stubborn determination to remain with the same opinion and to invoke it in support of a sinful disposition to which one has become habituated... is a sickness resulting from a grievous enslavement that does not permit the light of penitence to shine in full strength.” Or to put it as the great French philosopher Alain once did: “Nothing is more dangerous than an idea when it’s the only one you have.”

These days are to be the shofar call directly into our souls, urging us to show the courage to change the story, when the story needs changing. Our old refrains won't do that. They may protect our egos. They may protect our emotional security. But they won't protect our souls – or our future.

The problem is that it's agonizingly hard to abandon our old refrains. They keep us from having to admit defeat or ignorance. They permit us to think better of ourselves than we should. And most of all, trusting in our old refrains creates within us a precious illusion of order – the sense that we know why things are as they are... that we know what's coming next, and what to do about it.

We are awfully resistant to surrendering that illusion of order in our personal lives – because it provides a welcome defense for why *we* should be allowed to stay the way *we* are. We get to feign at being in control and confidently construct a reality where it's everything but us that needs to change. But when it comes to worldly matters – such as our desperation for peace between Israelis and Palestinians, our anxieties about surging anti-Semitism, or our very real fears about what comes next for the entire world with the Islamic State – it is nearly impossible to get us to relinquish our illusion of order, because to do so is to cast our very lives out onto a stormy sea, and to admit that the oars we thought we had don't really work.

I know this is all depressing to hear – maybe even infuriating – regardless of which political orthodoxy is yours. I know your anxious souls hunger for a more immediately assuring message. Mine too. But what are these days about, if not the truth? These are scary, uncertain times. And if we don't have the illusion of order from our old refrains to protect us and comfort us, what can?

The answer, of course, is what we all came here for tonight. We come to seek strength in each other's presence – the strength we need to face the deepest and most frightening challenges of our lives. And my dear friend Rev. Bacon is right. Our tradition is ready and waiting.

*Aza ch'mavet ahava* – love is stronger than death. So says the Song of Songs, one of Judaism's oldest, most sacred books. And throughout Jewish history, in times and circumstances much bleaker than our own, our greatest sages have shown their belief in that incredible premise by uttering words of hope just when hope was hardest to find.

"As long as there is life, there is hope." So taught Rabbi Yochanan, one of the early Talmudic masters, who buried ten sons in his lifetime.

"There is no hope unmingled with fear, and no fear unmingled with hope." So taught Baruch Spinoza, the giant of 17th century philosophy who survived excommunication and physical attack due to his controversial views.

"Hope is like peace. It is not a gift from God. It is a gift only we can give one another." So taught Elie Wiesel, who had stared into the abyss of the darkest night.

If they could believe that hope would someday conquer fear... if they could trust that love possesses a power to overwhelm death... can't we find the courage to do so, as well?

Ancient biblical "pie in the sky," you say? Tell that to Ali Abu Awad and Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger. Maybe you read about them at the Israeli news site, *Haaretz*. Ali is a Palestinian activist who has served two terms in Israeli prisons and whose brother was killed by an Israeli soldier during the second intifada. Rabbi Schlesinger is a long-bearded Orthodox rabbi in the West Bank settlement of Alon Shvut. This summer, as the rockets were flying all around them, they forged a historic new coexistence initiative. Israeli settlers and Palestinian activists bringing together adults and children from both sides for the first time... in the middle of the war. They told each other of their fears. They wept. They turned... made *teshuvah*. Said the settler rabbi, "We believe... that it's right and proper that (the Jewish people) are here. But at the same time... we're coming to realize that other people are here also, and we have to balance those conflicting truths."

On Friday morning – two mornings from now... 2<sup>d</sup> Day Rosh Hashanah – at 9:00 am, Ali Abu Awad is coming to Leo Baeck Temple, and I hope you'll come to meet him. Regrettably, Rabbi Schlesinger is unable to join him – something about this being a tough time for the rabbi to get away. But Ali will be here, and he will tell us their story – and the stories they are creating in the lives of others. You need and deserve the burst of hope that Ali will bring us. We need to become partners with those who are changing the conditions so that two states can be. For two states *will* be. Not tomorrow, but it will be. So be with us Friday morning for a certain reminder that love is stronger than death.

You see, the ancient rabbis of the *midrash* had it right when they said with absolute confidence that "he who is twisted can be made straight." We *can* turn. And so can this twisted world. It always does. It always has. And it will again.

Let us trust in love.