

Rabbi Joshua M. Davidson  
Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York  
Yom Kippur 5774

*Standing On Our Own Doorstep*

Dear Friends,

On Rosh Hashanah, I opened with the story of Franz Rosenzweig. On Yom Kippur, I begin with his friend and colleague Martin Buber. Buber believed deeply in the sanctity of human relationships and their possibilities for profound meaning. In our most significant encounters, which he called “I-Thou,” partners are fully present for one another, concerned with one another’s needs, hopes and fears but never subsumed by one another. Their identities remain distinct.

A “Thou” could be any important “other” in our lives: as individual as a child or a spouse, as inclusive as the family of humanity. “I” is each of us.

The identity of “I” is complex. Each of us is the sum of nature and nurture, individual experiences and communal narratives that shape not just our personal relationships but also our understanding of the “Thou” of the wider world and our sense of duty to it. For the Jewish “I,” this Yom Kippur recalls a defining moment in the history we share.

On Yom Kippur 1973, 40 years ago, Syria and Egypt launched a coordinated attack on Israel. On the Golan Heights, 180 Israeli tanks confronted 1,400 Syrian tanks. Along the Suez Canal, an Israeli force of 500 with only three tanks faced an onslaught of 600,000 Egyptians supported by 2,000 tanks and 550 warplanes. At least nine other Arab states joined in the assault.<sup>1</sup>

Stunned and frightened, Jews the world over gathered for the Holy Day. No doubt many of you remember the fear and uncertainty. “We at Emanu-El shared the anxiety that all Jews were experiencing,” Rabbi Sobel recalled.

And here we are, 40 years later—again gathered for Holy Day worship, again stunned at Syria’s aggression this time against its own people. Again we should be deeply concerned for Israel’s security...but most American Jews are not. *K’lal Yisrael*—commitment to our people and our land—fails to resonate as it once did.

Every Yom Kippur calls us to examine our Jewish selves (our “I”), to affirm in our own lives the last testament Daniel Pearl uttered before his execution and Mayor Koch willed for his headstone: the declaration, “I am Jewish.” This 40th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, and this moment of international crisis, remind us that *Eretz Yisrael*, “the Land of Israel” and *Am Yisrael*, “Jewish peoplehood” are core components of what that means. Tomorrow night/tonight we will return to being citizens of the world. Tonight/today let us embrace who we are as members of a people.

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org).

## *Am Yisrael: The Jewish People*

The great entertainer George Burns once recalled an episode from his childhood here in the city:

*When I was seven years old...I was singing with three other Jewish kids from the neighborhood....Now, there was a big department store...that threw an annual picnic, and the highlight was an amateur contest with talent representing all the churches in New York. Right around the corner from where we lived was a little Presbyterian church....They had no one to enter in the contest, so the minister asked us four kids to represent the church. We jumped at the chance...and won first prize. The church got a purple velvet altar cloth, and each of us kids got a...watch...worth about eighty-five cents....I was so excited I ran all the way home to tell my mother. When I got there she was on the roof hanging out the wash. I rushed up to her and said, "Mama, I don't want to be a Jew anymore!"...She just looked at me and calmly said, "Do you mind me asking why?" I said, "Well, I've been a Jew for seven years and never got anything. I was a Presbyterian for one day and I got a watch."...She glanced at [the watch on my wrist] and said, "First help me hang up the wash, then you can be a Presbyterian." While I was hanging up the wash some water ran down my arm and got inside the watch. It stopped running, so I became a Jew again.<sup>2</sup>*

When the watch stops, we are Jews, part of *Am Yisrael*, a people united by history, strengthened by community. That is why Jews join synagogues. That is why we care about the fate of Jews in other lands. That is why we care about Israel and defend her when she comes under attack. We are one people. *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba'zeh*. We depend on one another.

Tragically, though, identification with the Jewish people has waned in relevance for many American Jews. Studies show that Jews in their 30s and 40s feel less connected to and less responsible for the wellbeing of world Jewry than their parents, a trend reflected in their charitable giving. A recent analysis found that Jews under 40 are significantly less inclined to support Jewish federations than older Jews.<sup>3</sup> And for all ages, commitment to Israel has decreased.<sup>4</sup> "Jews today think less collectively and more personally," explains sociologist Steven Cohen. "The rhetoric of discourse has shifted to the individual."<sup>5</sup>

Why? There are myriad factors. But perhaps most significantly, the external forces that once united us no longer do. In America, how we identify is our choice. Having achieved in every walk of life, and gained acceptance in every field of endeavor, we can choose whatever group associations we want, or none at all.

---

<sup>2</sup> George Burns, "Four Jewish Boys in the Presbyterian Choir" in *Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul*, p.88.

<sup>3</sup> *The Jewish Week*, 9/4/2013.

<sup>4</sup> Steven M. Cohen, *A Tale of Two Jewries: The "Inconvenient Truth" for American Jews*, HUC-JIR.

<sup>5</sup> *The Jewish Week*, 9/4/2013.

Many of my generation believe anti-Semitism as a threat remains only in history books. They consider the Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars ancient history and believe Israel doesn't need them.

They are wrong. Anti-Semitism exists, and not just in history books. Pulitzer Prize-winner Alice Walker recently published *The Cushion in the Road*, filled with anti-Semitic and anti-Israel vitriol. And across Europe, popular polls measure 40 percent of citizens over age 16 harboring anti-Israel, if not outright anti-Semitic, sentiments.<sup>6</sup>

### *Eretz Yisrael: The Land of Israel*

And Israel does need us.

There are many grave threats facing Israel today: perilous risks to its security, insidious challenges to its legitimacy.

One hopes the current crisis has crystalized for those who had not yet grasped it: the acute danger posed by the axis of Syria, Hezbollah and their patron Iran, still in the grip of the ayatollah. Many consider America's response to Assad's atrocities a test case for how we would answer should Iran come within reach of the bomb. Should Assad not relinquish his chemical arsenal, and should we not intervene, many fear that Iran, sensing a weakening of American resolve, will advance with impunity its nuclear ambitions—placing Israel in existential jeopardy. But if we do strike, both Iran and Syria have threatened to retaliate against Israel and have Hezbollah on Israel's northern border prepared to attack. And the balance of considerations doesn't end there: Israel remains deeply concerned about so destabilizing Syria that rebel Islamist extremists gain the upper hand. The situation is so fraught with danger, that Hamas in Gaza and unrest in Egypt, looming menaces, seem somehow insignificant.

And there are additional threats to Israel, less violent perhaps but no less pernicious: a historical deconstructionism, rampant within the United Nations General Assembly but also prevalent on many college campuses and occasionally manifest in some Mainline Protestant denominations, which views conflicts isolated from their historical context; and a historical revisionism that denies Israel's claim to its Land. We need to remind those who forget, that our roots there stretch back 3,000 years; and that after two millennia of exile, our parents, our grandparents and many of us redeemed the Land with coins in little blue boxes on our kitchen tables; that in 1948 we settled for just a portion of it to be able to live in peace with our Arab neighbors who instead attacked; and that in 1967 when Golda Meir wanted to return to them, for a negotiated peace, the territory taken in the defensive Six Day War, they answered with the three famous no's of the Arab Summit in Khartoum: no recognition, no negotiation, no peace. And again at Camp David and Taba in 2000 and 2001. No, no, no.

With people who understand these facts of history we can talk about how Israel has not always behaved in its own best interest: how its short-sighted support of settlements and construction in East Jerusalem has created a present reality the current

---

<sup>6</sup> Manfred Gerstenfeld, Austrian-born Israeli environmentalist, economist and author, and former chair of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

Israeli government or any Israeli government might find difficult to negotiate. And we can talk about how Israeli society still tolerates too many fundamental human rights abuses: the lack of recognition of liberal Jewish movements and women's rights; and how Israelis of Arab descent, though legal citizens, still lag far behind in education and social services.

But let us always be honest. Israel did not start the Mideast conflict. And as the landscape of the Middle East continues to shift, with threats defined less by tanks and more by long-range missiles, nuclear arsenals and historical revisionism, it will be easy to think that Israel isn't in imminent danger—that Syria, punished or not for its horrific violence against its own, will return to its sectarian conflict and Israel will be just fine. That would be a disastrous miscalculation. Israel needs our support, especially now, as again it reaches out for peace.

And we need Israel. The largest Jewish community in the world lives there. And the Land remains the spiritual home of the Jewish people wherever we live. Our sacred narratives grew in its soil. In every exile we longed to return. “It was the song of Israel which kept us in existence,” wrote Haim Nahman Bialik. It “gave us vision and comfort...during two thousand years of our march through the wilderness.”

As that march was nearing its end, and the dream of the Jewish people living again in its ancient homeland was coming true, Emanu-El's leaders stepped to the fore. In August 1897, when Theodore Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, the most prominent American rabbi to attend was our own Gustav Gottheil, founder of the Federation of American Zionists, precursor to the ZOA. Rabbi Judah Magnes, before going on to build the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, invited Henrietta Szold to an Emanu-El women's study group, which in 1913 birthed Hadassah, whose first mission, underwritten by our member Nathan Straus, was to provide for the medical needs of the early *chalutzim*. Rabbi Julius Mark was an ardent Zionist. And one of the galvanizing forces in world Jewry's support of the *Yeshuv* was Emanu-El's president Louis Marshall, founding Chairman of the Jewish Agency.

This is our history, our legacy. Support for *Am Yisrael* and *Eretz Yisrael* have been a hallmark here; so they must remain.

### *I and Thou: The Universal Out of the Particular*

Alan Dershowitz recently commented that the Yom Kippur War might be the last time the Jewish community was truly united behind Israel. And, David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, recalled that while there was a time when Israel was the darling of the liberal world, “Israel today, increasingly, has become cast as an ‘illiberal’ cause. And those who regard themselves as quintessential liberals, including many Jews, have a hard time associating themselves with or defending her actions.... Its shortcomings are many, but...the United States, a far more mature democracy, also suffers from...shortcomings...yet it does not prompt us to turn away from our country.”

So how do we respond to those countless American Jews who view *K'lal Yisrael*, identification with Israel and the wider Jewish world, as inconsequential to their

Jewishness? Who ask not callously but earnestly: If we Jews are a people historically strengthened by enculturation into the communities where we've lived, which we are; and if we consider our relationships with the non-Jewish world of value, which we do; then why such focus on Jewish peoplehood? And if we Jews are a people who have thrived in many parts of the world, which we have; and whose concerns for justice transcend national boundaries, which they do; then why such focus on Israel? They even quote Hillel: *Uchshe'ani le'atzmi ma'ani*, "If we care only about ourselves, what kind of a people are we?" We, who are universalists, too, how do we respond?

We answer first by recalling that Hillel's admonition began this way: *Im ain ani li mi li*, "If we do not look out for our own interests, who will?" Buber's wisdom that a healthy "I" maintains its sense of self applies here, too. In our devotion to the needs of the wider world, we cannot ignore our own.

We answer next by demonstrating that our particular Jewish concerns and our universal Jewish commitments do not conflict. As Rabbi Harold Schulweis notes, "Like charity, compassion begins at home, but it does not end there."<sup>7</sup> Szold and Straus built Hadassah to aid not just Palestine's Jews but its Christians and Muslims, too. Our philanthropic appeal will benefit all people, regardless of age, race, gender or creed.

And, we answer finally by warning that universalism without particularism rests on shaky foundations. Elie Wiesel cautions: "The Jew who repudiates himself, claiming to do so for the sake of humanity, will inevitably repudiate humanity in the end." Rabbi Sobel elucidates: "When we throw a pebble into a body of water, the concentric circles proceed outward from the center, becoming larger and larger. Our values should have ripple effects on everything we touch. But there must be that center; otherwise there can be no ripples. True universalism grows only out of a loving particularism." And the same can be said for any faith community. Each has its own sacred story impelling it to do God's work in the world.

*Am Yisrael* and *Eretz Yisrael* lie at the center of our story. The Torah's call for compassion and the Prophets' cry for justice, the heroism of Hannah Senesh and Abraham Joshua Heschel and Leo Baeck—these did not emerge out of a vacuum. As Jews, we come to our universal commitments through our own very particular experiences: the Exodus, the Exile, the Expulsion, the Holocaust. We view the horrors in Syria with such urgency because we have been to the gas chambers. The Jewish "I" weeps for the broken "Thou" of this world and extends its hand to redeem it.

Now, I would never suggest that the nonreligious cannot also be morally outraged by the tragedies of our time; far from it. But when universal ethics are anchored in religious identity, our engagement becomes not a matter of personal choice but rather the fulfilment of a spiritual obligation and even the response to a divine command.

---

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Harold Schulweis in *I Am Jewish: Personal Reflections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl*, Eds. Judea Pearl and Ruth Pearl, p.179.

*“I Stand on My Own Doorstep”*

Martin Buber once was asked why he always taught his “I-Thou” philosophy, so universal in its reach, through the very particular lore of the Eastern European Chasidim. “I speak to the world,” he answered. “But I stand on my own doorstep.”

On Yom Kippur, we return to our own doorstep. We recall who we would hope to be as individuals. And we recall who we are as a people. For we Jews believe, not sanctimoniously but earnestly, that we have a story to tell and from it a set of values to share with the rest of humanity. And we believe that if we live out that story and live by those values, then we can have a positive bearing on the future of God’s creation.

Cynthia Ozick tells of a Jew who asked his rabbi why the *shofar* is blown through the narrow end and not the wide end. The rabbi answered, “If you blow into the wide end, no sound will be heard. But if you blow through the narrow end, its sound will reach to the outer limits.”

On Yom Kippur, we begin at the narrow end. We examine in the recesses of our hearts the small, seemingly insignificant moments of our every day and see that with every kind word, every generous act, we can begin to repaint the canvas of our lives and our relationships with those we love.

And this Yom Kippur we begin at the *shofar*’s narrow end to recommit ourselves to our people and our Land. They need us. And if we are true to ourselves, and to what it means to be members of *Am Yisrael* and lovers of *Eretz Yisrael*, then we will embrace the challenges of our time with even greater vigor and intention. And out of the *shofar*’s wide end, the world will hear our universal call for justice and peace.

Now, from our own doorsteps, may we begin our journeys into a New Year: those we walk toward individually...lives of fulfillment and blessing, and the one we walk together as members of the Jewish people. And may Israel be ever in our prayers.

Amen.