

## YOM KIPPUR DAY 5769

### ISRAEL: A STORY WRITTEN BY US

Judaism teaches us that fantastic tales make great sacred literature. This afternoon we will read about a man swallowed by a whale, in which he lives for three days and three nights. He is finally spit up on dry ground, where he finds respite from the burning sun under a giant gourd plant that has grown to tree height over night. This man, a prophet of God, brings thousands of pagans over to God with the utterance of barely a single sentence or two; yet he celebrates his record achievements in God's service by moaning: "Kill me, God. I'd rather die than live to see all these people turning to you."

The rest of the cast includes a boatload of pagan sailors who spontaneously sing out Adonai's praises while God's own prophet is below decks moaning in self-pity and sea sickness in the middle of a storm. And on land, in the largest and wickedest city of ancient civilization, pagan Nineveh with a population of over 120,000 people, everyone responds to the Jewish prophet's message of doom by dressing in mourning clothes and ashes. I mean everyone: the king, nobles, peasants. Even beasts of burden put on sackcloth and cry out in repentance to God, braying for forgiveness for their sins.

I can just envision the editorial meeting about the submission of the manuscript "Jonah" for inclusion in the Bible. "It's great!" pitches one of the rabbis. "The lead has deep internal conflicts over his mission to save the world. He thinks, 'Why should everyone get off so easily? Let 'em suffer a little!' And remember how everyone liked hearing that story in Numbers where the prophet Balaam's donkey started talking? We've got talking animals here, too. And a giant whale. There wasn't anything like that even in the Noah story."

Another rabbi who's been moving index cards around on a board says, "I've got a great slot for it! We'll put it right before Amos...he's *so* seriously preachy, railing about foreclosures, high interest rates, and bribery among the priests; lucky for him he came up with that line about swords and plowshares and spears and pruning hooks, otherwise who'd want to read about some backwoods shepherd from Moresheth who never made it in Jerusalem...and we'll put it right after Obadiah, whose numbers in previews are not so hot. People think he's pretty much a lightweight. He turned in

only one chapter of material after all.” A third rabbi, who’d been staring off into space, mumbled, “I like that pairing: Obadiah-Jonah. Obadiah was a contemporary of King Ahab, and I’m getting the feeling that some time in the future some writer is going to do something big with Obadiah’s Ahab and Jonah’s whale.”

What is it about Judaism and stories? At its most profound level the Torah itself is not a compendium of laws or even an historical account of a people’s origins. It presents its wisdom to us through narrative: people live and die, stumble through life, lie, complain, marry, have children, graze their herds, harvest their crops, commit shameful acts of cowardice and surprising feats of heroism.

Yet, it is through the telling and retelling of these stories that each generation reestablishes for itself a sense of community, affirms identity, and clarifies a purpose for living. In this sense the telling of sacred stories is more than a form of entertainment. It is a religious act. Sacred story telling sustains a relationship with God. Towards the end of the book of the final prophet, Malachi, we read these words: “Those who are in awe of God talk with one another, and God listens.” The early rabbis interpreted this verse to mean that God is present and attentive when people share stories.

Each of the great religious renewal movements in Jewish history had at its core a revival of story telling: the early rabbis with their midrashim; the kabbalists with the mystic tales of the Zohar; and the Chassidim with their stories of wonder and the fantastic. Each of these movements reacted to an historical environment where tradition had become incapable of responding to new issues, and thus unable to provide meaning. Story telling reinvigorates the community. Through its very creativity it opens up the tradition by presenting new ways of thinking. And new ways of thinking become the bases for new ways of living.

How sustaining story telling is of sacred living, is conveyed in this Chassidic tale:

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jewish people, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and a miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezeritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: “Master of the Universe, Listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayers.” And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: “I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient.” And indeed it was sufficient, and the miracle was achieved.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: “I am unable to light the fire, and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and that must be sufficient.” And it was.

Of all the subjects of Jewish story telling none has generated more tales with more fantastic embellishments than the land of Israel. In these stories it is variously: a place of promise; a land lost; a kingdom regained, and lost again. It remained throughout Jewish history a spiritual beacon, the center of our universe.

Here is one of the earliest stories outside the Bible about Israel. It begins by embarking on a flight of fancy from the opening verse of the Torah:

“In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth.” God made them in the manner of the making of a human embryo. Just as the human embryo begins its process of creation and growth from a single spot, its navel, and, drawing its nourishment through the umbilical cord, it multiplies and generates veins, arteries, sinews, skin, cartilage, and bone, until it finally achieves human form. So too the World was begun from a central spot, an axial speck in the vastness of space, the cosmic navel. And this is Jerusalem. Through this point it drew upon its forces of creation, and all around it all matter generated growing outwards, spreading in all directions. It was the center of and the source of creation. And even as the World

continued to evolve, growing in ever-widening circles, the point of its emergence remained at all times its center. All things evolved from it and revolved around it, like ripples upon the face of the water. Dry land appeared. Waters were separated from one another. Mountain ranges emerged out of the seas. In the middle of the earth lay the Land of Israel. And when the first light, which was of unbelievable brilliance, was created, the first dazzling shaft issued from this spot, piercing the Holy Land, and illuminating the whole World.

That tale, first told by Rabbi Abba Saul in about the year 140 C.E., is but one of thousands of wildly imaginative stories our tradition has told about the land of Israel. [Pause.] Yet is it any more fantastic than the one told by Theodore Herzl when in 1897 he founded the Zionist movement and proclaimed: “We will have a Jewish state within fifty years”? Does the audacity of Rabbi Saul’s story exceed that of Eliezer Ben-Yehudah, who in 1881 determined to revive Hebrew as an everyday spoken language, a language which had been dead for 2,000 years? In 1882 there were three people in the world who conversed in Hebrew: Ben-Yehudah, his wife, and their son. Within 100 years over 5 million people were speaking Hebrew. Never before in human history had such a feat been achieved.

Is Rabbi Saul’s story any more extraordinary than that of the 1948 War of Independence, which tiny Israel fought to victory against the seven nations of the Arab League? If it had been describing an event that had taken place 2,000 years ago rather than a mere 40 years ago, might not the story of the six-day war have caused us to marvel at what fertile imagination had crafted such a tale of miraculous triumph?

The land of Israel has been for 3,000 years a source of inspiration for our psalmists, poets, and songwriters. Yet, of all the many subjects in our tradition’s treasure house of sacred tales, there is one aspect that makes it unique: We have the power to help write the next chapter.

We are not the only ones, however, seeking authorship of the next episode in that epic tale. Throughout the world there are many who are trying to write that next chapter, though with darker conclusions than we would compose. Hamas would like to put an end to the story of Israel entirely. Members of the Fatah movement of Palestinian President Abbas are, at this moment, working on a rough draft which would turn Israel into a binational state

instead of further developing the storyline of the last 30 years of a two-state solution. And academics across Europe have taken out their red pens to excise from their journals and conferences any presence of Israeli scholars.

Shall we leave it to others to write the next episode in the 3,000-year old story that is Israel? Or shall we pick up where our poets and pioneers, our kabbalists and kibbutzniks, our songwriters and soldiers left off?

What can we do to compose a chapter in which the prophetic vision of an Israel restored is strengthened? Here are a few ways each of us here can contribute to such a narrative:

- First, visit Israel. Every time you walk upon its soil, talk with those who live there, eat in its cafes, swim in its waters, tour its ancient sites, and touch its rocks and trees and flowers, you diminish the power of its enemies and increase the hope and confidence of those committed to a Jewish homeland. This summer we will be taking a 10-day congregational trip to Israel. We are going to meet some extraordinary people, explore a rich past and encounter a dynamic future that is unfolding there like nowhere else. Please consider joining us on this very special trip. Take home with you today a copy of our brochure explaining the details of our trip and please look at the Israel Trip 2009 information on the Temple Israel website. It contains a wealth of information, including photographs of sites we will visit, links to the hotels where we will stay, and a registration form for the trip.
- Second, invest in Israel. The establishment of the State of Israel has been a project of Jews worldwide from the very beginning. Jews from dozens of countries flocked to Israel's shores to fight for its independence, to reclaim arable land from swamps and deserts, and to build cities, universities, and cultural institutions. Essential to this massive project of building a nation has been Israel Bonds. Since it was first instituted by David Ben-Gurion in 1951, Israel Bonds has raised \$1.10 billion for economic development and assistance projects.

This year Israel Bonds is focusing on three major areas: the development of new communities and industrial centers in the Negev, designed especially for former residents of Gaza; the expansion of facilities at the

ports of Haifa, Ashdod, and Eilat, which will vastly increase the nation's export capabilities; and the extension of a national rail network to meet the goal of having all towns with a population over 50,000 be connected by rail by 2012. Please take the time to review the Israel Bonds tab card that is available to you today and consider investing in the future of Israel.

- Third, support the dynamic growth of the Reform Movement in Israel. A profound shift in the religious life of Israelis has occurred over the past twenty years. At the founding of the State of Israel, the Orthodox rabbinate was given exclusive legal authority over all issues related to Jewish personal status. Religious life was equated with that as defined by the Orthodox rabbinate. Thirty years ago a Reform movement, born within the particular culture and customs of Israel, began to grow. This movement, known as the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, presented Israelis with a Judaism that emphasizes pluralism, democratic values, and a dynamic engagement with modern life.

The response has been nothing less than astounding. In a recent survey, 34% of Israelis polled said that the Jewish movement with which they most identified is the Reform movement. That contrasted with 23% for the Orthodox movement. There are now over two dozen congregations and kibbutzim that are members of the Israeli Reform movement. And this year a revolutionary event occurred. One of those Reform congregations, Congregation Yozma in the city of Modi'in, became the first non-Orthodox congregation to receive state funding for the construction of a synagogue. Since that time three additional Reform congregations have received state support for the construction of synagogue buildings.

We will visit Congregation Yozma on our trip to Israel this year. You can contribute to this extraordinary growth of the Reform movement in Israel and to education about Israel within the United States by becoming a member of ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America. Membership information is included in your Israel handouts today.

- Fourth, study about Israel. This year our Joys of Jewish Learning Committee has adopted Israel as a focus of study. We will have five spotlight classes, each addressing a different aspect of Israeli society

and history. Sabrina Bahir, a graduate of Hebrew Union College's School of Education, will conduct a class on the evolving relationship between American Jews and Israel. Temple Israel member and third-year rabbinic student Miriam Phillips will lead a discussion on the many different kinds of people who live in Israel. Sharon Amster Brown will teach a class on the Progressive Movement in Israel. Professor Adam Rubin from Hebrew Union College will engage us in a very stimulating discussion about new approaches being taken by Israeli historians as they reflect on the birth and development of the founding of the State of Israel. And I will teach a class on the city of Safed and the world of the mystics. A handout listing all of those classes is also included in today's Israel materials.

The story of Israel is indeed a fantastic tale and, as a source of inspiration to live a life based on freedom and justice, it is, in the most profound sense, a sacred story. The power to write its next chapter lies within our hands, and within the hands of all who take up her cause. The divine promise has become a human responsibility, the dream the miracle of our times. If we commit ourselves to its ongoing fulfillment, we shall be able to sing as the ancient psalmists wrote in their song of yearning:

As God restores the fortunes of Zion,  
we see it as in a dream;  
our mouths filled with laughter,  
our tongues with songs of joy.

May the words that we write for the future of Israel match the yearnings of our ancestors' hearts – a land that sparkles brightly golden with the light of hope and righteousness and peace. May our tongues be filled with songs of joy about the dream become reality: Israel a home of hope for us all.