

ISRAEL: DREAM AND REALITY

Tomorrow afternoon we will read as our haftarah portion the book of Jonah. I have taught and spoken about this great piece of literature many times and from many different points of view, having described it variously: as an earnest tale conveying the message that God desires sinners to abandon their evil ways and return to a life of holiness; as a reminder that Jews are not the only ones responsive to God's call to live lives of righteousness; and as a satire designed to deflate in the waning moments of Yom Kippur any delusions of self-righteousness we might have developed during our period of fasting, confession, and prayer.

This year, as I reread Jonah, what I kept returning to was perhaps the most basic theme in the story: Jonah is running away. Yet, from what exactly is Jonah fleeing? Does he feel that the responsibility God has entrusted to him is too demanding? Is it because he, as a Hebrew, has no desire to help redeem pagans? The clue lies in his name and in the grievance he brings before God at the end of the story.

The text tells us that Jonah's full name is Jonah son of Ammitai, literally "Jonah son of My Truth." This is an enormous patrimony to sustain: to be the bearer of God's truth. It is the kind of mantle that can drive some into intolerant fanaticism and others into an abyss of ethical immobility and withdrawal. The former seek to impose on all those around them uncompassionate judgment. The latter short circuit in a failed attempt to translate an abstract ideal into living conduct.

Jonah strikes me as falling more into the second category. When the people of Nineveh promptly respond to Jonah's warning by repenting and turning to God, Jonah weeps in despair: "That's why I fled to Tarshish. Because I know You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please, God, take my life, for I would rather die than live!" Jonah has a rigid, abstract notion of truth and justice, which he either cannot or does not want to apply in the real world of human weakness. Better justice should remain in the pure realm of abstraction than be sullied in the dimension of human behavior.

Jewish tradition revisits over and over the tension between the ideal and the real, between dream and reality. The Torah itself is the narrative of a journey during which the Israelites gain instruction on how to create and sustain an ideal community thriving in a Promised Land. Yet the narrative ends on the threshold of that Promised Land. It is almost as if the sacred text knows how difficult will be that moment of crossing over into the daily reality of not cheating in business, of paying one's workers fairly, of leaving a portion of one's field unharvested for the hungry, of lifting the fallen load of one's enemy. The Five Books of Moses ends not with a resolution to the journey of generations but with a hesitation...better perhaps to gaze upon the dream across the river than to realize it and thereby coarsen its purity.

The fear of sullyng that which is holy by integrating it into everyday life also marks the history of the Hebrew language. For over 1,000 years Hebrew was both the spoken and written language of the Israelites. By the 3rd or 4th centuries of the Common Era, Aramaic replaced Hebrew as the spoken language. For the next 1,500 years Hebrew was utilized solely as the language of sacred text and prayer. At the end of the 19th century Eliezer Ben-Yehuda initiated a movement to make Hebrew the vernacular of the land of Israel. The religious community in Israel reacted largely with horror at the notion of using the holy tongue of Hebrew to talk about such mundane matters as collecting garbage, doing the laundry, and haggling over the price of food. Eventually, however, that which was considered the language of the heavens became the language of the streets as well, but not without much controversy and concern about the possible results.

Perhaps the most compelling drama involving the issue of whether it is better for an ideal to remain unrealized and therefore pure or actualized and consequently coarsened has been the establishment of the State of Israel. For thousands of years, the land of Israel has been for the Jewish people a dreamscape, a land of promise. As a band of former slaves wandering in the wilderness, it appeared before them as both a physical and a spiritual oasis, a land of milk and honey where justice and a sense of balance would prevail. As exiles living in captivity in Babylon and separated from their center of sustenance, the Israelites wept beside their captors' rivers. Their songs of love and longing for their beloved land froze in silent mourning on their lips.

When the Roman Empire finally crushed Jewish rebellion in the second century of the Common Era and scattered Jews across the world, the land of Israel was both an ache in their hearts and a vision of hope. A thousand years after the Jews had been expelled by Rome, the poet Judah Halevi looked longingly across the Mediterranean from Spain and wrote: "My heart is in the east, and I am in the farthest west. How can I find savor in food? How shall it be sweet to me? How shall I render my vows and my bonds, while Zion yet lies beneath the fetter of Edom?"

For another thousand years, Jews lived under the sufferance of others: sometimes exhausted of their labor by princes and kings; sometimes slaughtered in the violent fever of crazed intolerance. Throughout it all, from one generation to the next, parent to child whispered the vision of a magic place of holiness and redemption, a golden land where once again they could live in freedom and abundance. Some day the Messiah would lead them there. Some day a light would shine, proclaiming the time and pointing the way. Folk tales carried stories about hidden underground passageways cutting across continents and under seas that would one day be revealed as portals to this land of heavenly promise. And thus did a dream sustain a people in their misery and their suffering.

In the nineteenth century the whispered tales of the patiently devout were conscripted by secular modernists. Inflamed by resurgent anti-Semitism and inspired by the nationalist movements of that century, these organizers had only contempt for the notion of waiting for a Messiah to lead a return to Zion. They convened congresses, raised money, and founded a movement to purchase and settle land in Eretz Israel.

While much of the traditional religious community reacted in horror to this human acceleration of what was supposed to be a divine initiative, the Zionist movement enthusiastically embraced the notion of a Jewish state becoming like any other nation. For them, it was folly, or worse, self-destructive, to allow a return to Jewish sovereignty to remain an ideal, untarnished by the give and take of human political action. The secular Zionists appalled religious Jews by proclaiming, “We’ll know we’ll have achieved normalcy in the world when we have our own thieves and our own police.”

As shocking as such a statement might seem, it represented a counter to the Jonah impulse of running away from implementing an abstract ideal in the real world. It may be that much of the world would have preferred the Jewish people to have preserved the concept of a Jewish state in the realm of poetry, in the form of folk tales, in the dimension of whispered visions. However, the horror of the Holocaust and the existence of over 100,000 displaced Jews in Europe after World War II provided the context for the eventual creation of a Jewish state.

Thus in 1948 Jewish leadership claimed the establishment of a sovereign Jewish state for the first time in over 2,000 years. And it is, in the truest sense, a nation like every other nation in the world; that is, imperfect. That an ideal form of a nation would be birthed into the world as an imperfect reflection of divine intent was already anticipated by the Torah. In last week’s Torah portion, God tells Moses: “In the land they are about to enter, the people will go astray after the alien gods in their midst; they will forsake Me and break My covenant that I made with them.” The Torah is aware of our shortcomings, not only in our personal conduct but also in our conduct as a nation.

The issue for us is: How shall we respond in the face of the inevitable imperfection of a Jewish state? For too much of the world the answer seems to be one of unbalanced criticism, isolation, and virtual quarantine. One of the most recent examples of this fevered reaction occurred at the Toronto Film Festival last week. In response to the film festival’s new City to City program, which this year highlighted Tel Aviv, scores of actors and filmmakers circulated a letter which gathered over 1,000 signatures, protesting the selection of Tel Aviv and calling Israel an “apartheid state.”

This was but the latest step as part of a movement to boycott, divest from, and sanction Israel. Israeli academics, regardless of their personal views on the positions and actions of the Israeli government, are shunned and excluded from international conferences. Both Canadian and British trade unions have called for boycotting Israeli academic institutions. For the past four years “Israeli Apartheid Week” has been a regular annual event on Canadian university campuses.

One irony of this cinematic pile-on is that just the week before, the first-prize winner at the Venice Film Festival was the Israeli film “Lebanon,” which recounts Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon through the eyes of four soldiers in a tank. The Lebanon War was the first war fought by Israel for which a national consensus did not exist, and it eventually caused the resignation of Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Through his

movie “Lebanon,” filmmaker Samuel Maoz intended to portray the ambivalence and claustrophobia generated by the invasion. Upon accepting the award in Venice, Maoz said that he hoped that the film would help people “understand our country better, understand our society better, and the complexity of our society better.” But, as the events at Toronto the following week showed, complexity is often not what people seek to understand about others.

A second irony is that perhaps no other citizenry is as nationally self-reflective and constructively critical as that of Israel. Political discourse in Israel is rough and tumble, but it is regularly directed toward national self-correction rather than mere blame. This national dynamic results from a several thousand year old tradition of engaging in criticism for the purpose of communal rather than individual elevation. From its earliest days, Judaism has recognized the distinction between righteousness and self-righteousness.

Tomorrow afternoon we will read this verse from Leviticus: “You shall not hate your kinfolk; you shall surely rebuke your kinfolk.” The Torah ties criticizing another to improving relations between people. The rabbis in midrash and the Talmud expend considerable energy in trying to shape guidelines for a discourse of rebuking that results in a deepened relationship between people rather than one that is left shattered.

Nor are arguing and criticizing forms of behavior just between human beings. They also characterize a relationship between human beings and God. The notion of human beings challenging God’s ethical behavior is one of the most audacious contributions Judaism has made to human culture. And it has shaped our approach to life, our conduct, and our creative expressions accordingly.

During our Yizkor service tomorrow we recite the kaddish, at which time it assumes particular poignancy and pathos as we reflect on the losses in our lives. To capture the power and emotional complexity of that prayer, Leonard Bernstein composed his Symphony No. 3, the Kaddish Symphony. At the very center of the composition is a forthright dialogue between humanity and God. As the symphony unfolds, humanity is both furious with and humbling before God. As a result of the divine-human exchange, the bond between the two emerges stronger. Commenting on his composition, Bernstein said: “All our great Jewish personalities, including Abraham, the founder of Judaism, and Moses and the prophets, all argued with God. You know how the more you love someone, the more you get angry with them, and when you have a reconciliation, the closer than ever you become with them. Something like that happens in the course of this piece.”

This form of sacred argument is what should shape our critiques of the imperfections that inevitably flow from the implementation of an ideal vision in the real world. As regards the dream known as Israel, there may be times when we disagree with a specific policy, tactic, or initiative taken by a particular government of Israel; but always, always, our intent is to see the State of Israel emerge stronger.

Those of us who live outside the land of Israel have many opportunities both to engage in such sacred argument and to positively contribute to Israel's development. Here are some that are available to us at Temple Israel this year:

- Tonight you will have received a handout from Israel Bonds. State of Israel Bonds are both a historically sound personal investment and a major source of funds for the technological and social development of Israel. I urge you to review the flyer, read the information on the Israel Bonds website, and include Israel Bonds as an investment in your own personal future and in that of the State of Israel.
- You will also have received a flyer about ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America. ARZA is the representative of Reform Judaism in the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency for Israel. The interest in Reform Judaism is growing by great magnitude in Israel, and ARZA is a main source of support for this expansion. Additionally, ARZA is a strong voice for increased pluralism generally within Israel. For \$36 you can join ARZA and become part of a movement that is creating an ever more democratic religious and social environment in Israel.
- This past summer Temple Israel conducted a very exciting congregational trip to Israel. Twenty-seven people went on the trip, which was a whirlwind tour of must-see sites, presentations by world-class scholars, and direct exchanges with the people who live there. On October 21 members of the trip will conduct a presentation, including the unveiling of a major gift of art to the synagogue by the trip participants. Tonight I promise that, in view of the extraordinary success of this summer's trip, we will plan another one within the next couple of years. Please join us on October 21 for this very exciting event to see what not only happened but also what lies ahead.
- One of the most engaging and insightful speakers we heard from during our trip to Israel was Paul Liptz. Paul is one of Israel's outstanding social scientists and one of the most sought-after commentators on Israel's sociological and political landscape. On January 17 Paul Liptz will speak at Temple Israel on the culturally complex world that is the State of Israel. As everyone who was on this summer's trip will attest, Paul Liptz's presentation is one not to be missed.

Israel will forever remain both a dream and a reality. It retains a special place in the Jewish mythic consciousness even as it proceeds to evolve as a living sovereign reality. I invite you to join me in one or more the programs I have listed tonight. Doing so will enable us to better navigate back and forth across the threshold of the ideal and the real.