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Yom Kippur Day 5778: She's Just Not That into You

Over the last several years, we have witnessed increasing tension between American Jews and Israel. For the most part it has been fomented on our end by a small, but growing percentage of American Jews who have challenged the legitimacy of Israel's security decisions. This year, however, the Israeli government took the lead when it made two decisions that were damaging to our relationship.

The first was to freeze an agreement to build an egalitarian prayer space alongside the Kotel, where we would be free to pray in the same fashion as we do here. This agreement was painstakingly negotiated over the course of three years by Natan Sharansky, at the request of Prime Minister Netanyahu. It was then brought to the Knesset in 2016, where it was approved by the government.

To understand how this decision was perceived, here's what [Jerusalem Post](#) journalist, Herb Keinon wrote about it back in July:

"Coming as it did just a week after the government decided to freeze a plan to create an enlarged egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall, Prime Minister Netanyahu's remarks last Thursday night at the opening of the 20th Maccabiah Games struck some as hollow.

'Remember one thing,' he told the thousands of Jewish athletes from 80 countries

around the world. 'You are proud citizens of *your* countries, but remember *this* is your land, too. Welcome to your homeland, welcome to Israel, welcome to Jerusalem, our eternal capital.'

These words came amid a sea of commentary both in Israel and abroad that Netanyahu's decision to give in to the demands of the *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) parties in his coalition and freeze the Western Wall plan he favored and passed through the government was nothing less than his government's way of dissing Diaspora Jews. The feeling was that he was telling them that they cannot pray as they wish at one of Judaism's most holy sites; letting them know that Israel does not really care that much about what they think.

In other words, to some, Netanyahu's handling of the Western Wall issue renders his words: 'this is your land' as nothing more than empty rhetoric."

On the very same day that the government froze the Western Wall agreement, they doubled down, appointing the *haredi* rabbinate, as the sole arbiter on questions of Jewish identity. This means that if a person wishes to convert, or has already converted, but does not observe an ultra-Orthodox lifestyle, their status as a Jew is in doubt. It also means that individuals whose family backgrounds cannot be clearly traced, can have their Jewish status revoked.

Days after this ruling, Israel's news media uncovered a black list of American rabbis: Reform, Conservative and Orthodox, whose conversions will not be accepted in Israel. In

essence, this governmental decision deems every branch of Judaism, other than ultra-Orthodox, as suspect at best.

As you can imagine, these decisions have not gone over very well in America, not with our religious movements, our Federations, or with other Jewish organizations, especially those who count Reform and Conservative Jews among their biggest supporters. It even led to an unprecedented letter to the Prime Minister, signed by all seven sitting Jewish Senators, urging him to protect religious pluralism in Israel.

In response, Netanyahu ordered a six-month suspension on granting the ultra-Orthodox sole control over matters of personal status; an order that will expire in a couple of months. The government's decision to freeze the Western Wall agreement remains unchanged, and overall, tensions with American Jewry remain high.

Now I could spend the next twenty minutes ranting, railing, and calling for protests, but I would rather take the time to understand how this situation came to be, so we can have a clearer perspective on the most effective way to respond.

The truth is, the seeds of this dispute go back quite some time. They can be traced to the days of Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism. Born in 1860, Herzl was a secular Jew, raised in an assimilated Austro-Hungarian family, and grew up feeling completely at home in Europe. It was not until he was sent to France to report on the trial of a man, very much like himself, that his interest in a Jewish homeland began to emerge.

France had been the first country to grant emancipation – full citizenship – to its Jews. And Alfred Dreyfus could have been the “poster child” for that policy. He was a true patriot, an

assimilated Jew who became a Captain in the army, and was proudly serving his country, when he was framed for spying and accused of treason.

Over the course of his trial, the institutionalized anti-Semitism of the French military was plain to see. But it was unknown if the courts were similarly infected. When the verdict came in, it erased all doubt. Dreyfus was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment on Devil's Island.

For Herzl, the trial and scandal which followed exposed the extent to which, not just France, but all of Europe was plagued by anti-Semitism. Herzl described the situation in his pamphlet, The Jewish State, where he wrote, (and I'm paraphrasing): "The Jewish question persists wherever Jews live in large numbers. This is the case even in highly civilized countries like France, and will persist as long as the Jewish question is not solved on the political level."

Having identified the problem, (anti-Semitism,) Herzl proposed a solution. He wrote (paraphrasing again): "I believe that a wondrous generation of Jews will spring into existence... *These Jews who wish for a State*, will have it. We shall live at last, freely, on our own soil, and die peacefully in our own homes."

This was the vision that came to Herzl after the Dreyfus verdict. He saw that Jewish life in Europe was not sustainable. It would come to an end, and the clock was ticking. However, he also saw that there could be a new beginning for our people in a Jewish State; a new beginning, at least for those who wished for it.

Today, it's hard to believe that there was ever a time when Jews might not have wished for a State. Yet back in 1897 that was precisely the case. For just as Herzl and Dreyfus were

assimilated Jews, Zionism was a secular movement which was strongly opposed by the leaders of both Reform and Orthodox Judaism.

The Reform movement was uncomfortable with the premise of Herzl's Zionism, that Jews needed a land of our own to feel safe and secure. For them, America was that safe place where Jews could practice their religion. What's more, the particularism of Zionism, that Jews *should* live in a State of our own, ran counter to the Reform belief that Judaism was a universal religion whose values spoke to all people. Finally, Herzl's Zionism caused many American Jews to fear that their patriotism would be challenged, as they could be suspect of having dual loyalties. Thus, prior to the Holocaust, a great many Reform leaders stood in opposition to the aims of the Zionist movement. And they were not alone.

Orthodox Judaism was also strongly opposed to Zionism. Their reasons? First and foremost, the majority of Zionists were non-religious Jews, whose practices and beliefs were an affront to tradition. Instead of following the ways of their ancestors, the youth who were making Aliyah wanted to create a *new* kind of a Jew. They had no use for prayer or Torah study; instead, "re-claiming the land" became their religion. Their efforts to revive Hebrew were seen by the Orthodox as a desecration of a holy language. They scoffed at Judaism's traditional roles for men and women, building *kibbutzim* where they lived and worked together. Finally, rather than accept that, when the time was right, God who would bring us back to Zion, these non-believers took matters into their own hands. Who did these Zionists think they were? In short, Orthodoxy also viewed Zionism as a threat to Jewish life.

Thus, in the beginning, Zionism was a secular movement, established by non-religious Jews, and opposed by Reform and Orthodox. How long did this last? For the Orthodox, seeds of

change had been planted at the very beginning. Just as Herzl represented Zionism, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who made Aliyah in 1904 came to represent Orthodox Judaism. Rav Kook was a spiritual giant who believed that the messianic age was just around the corner, and saw those who came to settle the land, whether they were religious or secular, as doing holy work by preparing the soil for the flowering of redemption.

As years passed and the State became a reality, Rav Kook's theology became the foundation of the Religious Zionist movement, and it's easy to see why. One doesn't have to be Orthodox to see God's hand in Israel's miraculous survival during the War of Independence. And when the Arab world swore to drive us into the sea in '67, and six days later Israel emerged from battle with the Golan Heights, the Sinai, the West Bank and all of Jerusalem, well even the agnostics among us began to believe.

Israel's victories in battle, and accomplishments on the ground, like making the desert bloom, were powerful enough to convince Orthodox Jews that they really were witnessing the dawn of redemption. Not only did they become Zionists, they began making Aliyah, speaking modern Hebrew, settling the land, and following in the footsteps of those secular *khalutzim* – those pioneers from the days of Herzl on.

Meanwhile, after the Holocaust it became impossible for the Reform movement to deny the need for a Jewish State. But that didn't mean that we should live there. Support Israel? Sure. But uproot our families to live in a dangerous country with a lower standard of living, when America treats us so well? For most, it just wasn't a convincing argument. So, while Orthodox Judaism became part of the fabric of Israeli society, Reform and Conservative Judaism remained distant cousins. And to a large extent, this is how things remain.

In Israel today, some forty percent of Jews continue to view themselves like Herzl did, as *khe-lone-e-e*, as secular. That said, they speak Hebrew, learn some Jewish texts in school, have Shabbat dinner with family and friends, celebrate national holidays like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, understand kashrut – even if they don't keep it, and defend their country. But they're not religious. This they know for a fact, because they see Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews who wear kippot, pray every day, observe the holidays, practice kashrut, and who love the land as much as they do; people who are their neighbors. Those are the *dati'im* – those are the religious ones they say, not me.

And us, when do they see us Reform Jews? Every once in a while, when we visit. Oh sure, just like out-of-town relatives, we send them presents. But it's not the same thing as living next door. So, when an Israeli politician needs to find a partner to form a government, and an Orthodox Jew, his neighbor, says to him: "I'll work with you, if you'll work with me," what should you expect him to do? And when we protest, what do you expect him to say?

"Would it be different if we were neighbors?" you ask. "Of course, it would," he says. "But right now, you live half a world away, and I need to live with the neighbors I've got. And besides, I don't see you putting your house on the market, or packing your bags any time soon." Would throwing a tantrum do us any good? How about threatening not to send them any more presents? I don't think so (either).

So where does that leave us? First of all, if we're unhappy with what's happening in Israel, then it's time for us to visit. And from the response I got last week when I asked how many of us had traveled to Israel over the past five years, well we've got some work to do.

Because the truth is, it's much easier to remain blissfully ignorant about the feelings of people you rarely see, than it is to close your eyes to a *friend* who's hurting.

If American Jews are upset right now after being told by the Israeli government that our religion is illegitimate, then we should be traveling to Israel in droves, visiting with our Israeli cousins, letting them know how we feel. And while we're there, we should take a couple of minutes to ask them to tell us what's on their mind. Perhaps there are some things that we can work on together.

Now here's the deal: I already know what's bothering them. I've read their polls. Our issue, creating a space for egalitarian prayer at the Kotel, it's pretty much at the bottom of their priority list. What's at the top? Oh, things like the cost of living, social issues, security, same as they are for us.

That said, recent surveys show that the issue of religious coercion *is* on their minds and climbing on their priority list. Some sixty-seven percent of Israeli Jews support state recognition of non-Orthodox marriage. Sixty-eight percent support a form of separation of religion and State. Seventy-three percent oppose the government's new conversion bill that makes the ultra-Orthodox the arbiters of Who is a Jew.

They have other issues they're concerned with too. They're angry that the ultra-Orthodox halt repair work on train tracks across the country on Shabbat, wreaking havoc on the workday commutes of tens of thousands of people. They don't like that the *haredim* are trying to enforce religious law in secular areas of Israeli life, like the army, for instance.

In short, most Israelis want their homeland to be the place that was promised in the Declaration of Independence, a country that ensures “complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; that guarantees freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture, and safeguards the Holy Places of all religions.”

What most Israelis want, is to find a way to respect and maintain the Jewish identity of the State, while protecting themselves from religious coercion. And right now, their government is working against them. What they *could* use is an organization that loves Judaism, and protects an individual’s right to decide for themselves how they wish to practice it. What they want is an organization like IRAC – Israel’s Religious Action Center, which for thirty years has been the pre-eminent civil and human rights organization, addressing issues of religion and state. It’s sponsored by Israel’s Movement for Progressive Judaism – Israel’s home-grown Reform Movement, and brings a Reform Jewish presence to Israelis on issues that truly matter in their lives.

Friends, when it comes to Israel, we can love her, we can be angry with her, but we can’t divorce her. So, when there are issues, we’ve got to look for ways to make things right. Israel has some work to do on its end, but we Reform Jews have some obligations as well. Honestly, we haven’t stepped up our game very much in over 100 years. At the very least we need to be traveling to Israel. (Debbie and I are leading a temple trip in April, you should join us.)

In the coming year, we need to continue to support her. Israel faces many security challenges from Hamas, Syria, Hezbollah and Iran, who is not only working on their missile

program, but is preparing to have troops stationed on the Golan Heights. We need to keep sending Israel those gifts. But do me a favor, do a little research before you write your checks. This would be the right time to make sure that your contributions are supporting the work of the Reform Movement in Israel. Organizations like IRAC – the Israel Religious Action Center, ARZA – the American Reform Zionist Association – which is our movement’s political arm in Israel, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, who in the next few years will be ordaining over 100 new Israeli Reform rabbis. There’s no better way to establish ourselves than by building up like-minded congregations in Israel.

I must also say that our own Jewish Federation has been outspoken on this issue. It was a leading voice this summer when Israel broke her promise, and has worked hard over the years to make Chicago a model of what a pluralistic Jewish community should look like.

Finally, I have to admit that when I’m angry, it’s always easier to blame the other party than it is to see if there are things I could have done differently. Yom Kippur, is a time for us to look at our lives, look into our souls, and reflect on the state of our relationships with those who are near and those who are far. Instead of waiting for others to change, let’s be proactive and model the behavior we want to see in others. Let’s accept responsibility for the things we’ve done, or failed to do. Let’s make a commitment to change. As Theodore Herzl famously said: “If you will it, it is no dream.”

May this be a year of strength and growth for the relationship between Israel and Reform Jews. Let’s make sure we do our part. It’s in our hands.

Gemar Chatimah Tovah, May we be inscribed and sealed for a good year. Amen.