

Rabbi Jeremy Barras
Temple Beth El
Yom Kippur Morning

If I Forget Thee, O Jerusalem...

Tisha B'Av – 1998. I was a first year rabbinic student living in Jerusalem. Our class met on the campus at King David St. in the early evening before walking about a mile and a half down through the Valley of Hinnom, and back up the hill into the Old City through the Jaffa Gate - then down towards the Western Wall. There we would join with thousands of other Jews who had come to pray and mourn the destruction of the Two Holy Temples on the ancient anniversary of Jerusalem's capture.

But when I arrived at the campus of the Hebrew Union College, something appeared rather odd. There were a dozen armed policemen there to escort us for the evening. My original thought was that they were there to shield us from the Arabs in East Jerusalem. But after inquiring from one of my professors, I learned that the armed guards were there to protect us from orthodox Jews who opposed gatherings of men and women praying together.

When we arrived at the Western Wall plaza we secluded ourselves behind a barricaded balcony so that we could pray together in peace, and we were not harassed. But our Conservative colleagues were a little more daring. They even made the newspaper the next day because they decided to pray openly, men and women together, in the Western Wall plaza – even though they were behind the barriers separating men from women, and they were in a location where it was permissible for men and women to co-mingle. But just as their *minyan* commenced, they were attacked. Rocks and paint were thrown at them. Some of them were punched and kicked. A huge commotion

ensued. The police though arrived quickly – no one was arrested, the attackers were let go, but our conservative friends were thrown out of the old city and treated like criminals by the authorities. This was my introduction to the struggle liberal Jews face in the State of Israel.

During the rest of my time in Israel that year I had many encounters with traditional Jews who at their best challenged the tenets of Reform Judaism, and at their worst ridiculed them. We were often told that we were heretics responsible for diluting Judaism and leading our adherents astray, and we were looked at with disdain by others who had no conception about who we are and what we stand for.

But these minor inconveniences we could deal with. These were not the issues that caused us true concern, and continue to worry us today. Today we are not concerned with childish and ignorant taunts, but rather with grave injustices imposed upon liberal Jews by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which is controlled by the orthodox rabbinate. Today we are alarmed that Jews whose conversion is performed by non-orthodox rabbis and their children are not considered Jewish by the Israeli government, that non-orthodox synagogues are not funded by the government even though orthodox synagogues are, that women cannot serve as legitimate rabbis in Israel, that life cycle ceremonies performed by Reform and Conservative rabbis in Israel are not legitimized by the Ministry of Interior and thus are essentially nullified, that the reform and conservative movements in Israel are consistently vilified and scorned by a large segment of the Israeli population who have no true understanding of what our liberal movements are all about.

And so we face an uphill battle as we plead for recognition in what is our spiritual homeland too. But as we delve into our movement's current legal and societal dilemmas,

we must first come to terms with our own history vis-a-vis Israel, those innovations we are proud of and those decisions that we may regret.

In 1894, when Theodore Herzl had concluded that the Jewish people would always be treated as a parasitic entity with no homeland of its own, when Jews in so many parts of the world were despised and persecuted and living in deplorable poverty, he took extraordinary measures to galvanize world Jewry in his efforts to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. There were those who supported him and those that did not. There were orthodox elements that resisted citing theological grounds – they believed that someday the Jewish people needed to be gathered from the four corners of the earth and be returned to the Land of Israel. But they believed that such a return could only be led by the coming of the messiah as asserted in the Talmud.

By August of 1897 Herzl had gathered enough support to call his First Zionist Congress which was to be convened in Basle, Switzerland. Just like all other major Jewish organizations in the world, the Reform Movement was invited to participate and was urged to send representation to the Congress. The reaction from our movement may have been different than you might have expected. As Reform Historian Michael Meyer writes, “in anticipation the [reform rabbi’s union] adopted a resolution condemning Zionism as a mischievous misconception of Jewish destiny. One month before the historic Congress was to begin, the reform rabbis union officially resolved: We totally disapprove of any attempt for the establishment of a Jewish state. Such attempts show a misunderstanding of Israel’s mission....We reaffirm that the object of Judaism is not political nor national, but spiritual, and addresses itself to the continuous growth of peace,

justice and love in the human race, to a messianic time when all men will recognize that they form “one great brotherhood” for the establishment of G-d’s kingdom on earth.

Several months later the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, today known as our URJ, followed suit, and issued the following: We are unalterably opposed to political Zionism. The Jews are not a nation, but a religious community. Zion was a precious possession of the past, the early home of our faith...As such it is a holy memory, but it is not our hope of the future. America is our Zion.

It was only with the rise of Nazi Germany in the mid-1930’s that our Movement began to change its tune and recognize that while Jewry might be secure in North America, the threat to Jews worldwide would never cease, and that it was finally time to support a Jewish homeland in Israel for those Jews who could no longer live securely in countries where anti-Semitism was part and parcel of everyday life. The Reform movement’s support for a Jewish homeland intensified as the devastating and tragic events of the Holocaust unfolded and the Jewish population in the Holy Land increased.

But the truth is that when David Ben-Gurion and his colleagues were creating a new government and infrastructure on which to base the fledgling Jewish state, we were not there. There weren’t any reform or conservative organizations with offices in Jerusalem. There were no political lobbyists representing our interests – there was no one on the ground who could warn Ben-Gurion that the decisions he was making would affect the fate of liberal Judaism in Israel for decades to come.

On the other hand, many of the European and Middle Eastern Jews that would build the new state were dedicated to *halakhic*, or traditional, Judaism. And the ones who were not observant still had no knowledge and no true understanding of the tenets of the

liberal movements. Thus when Ben-Gurion was rallying various political groups to help him create his Labor-led coalition, the orthodox parties became an important partner in his government. Their price for their support was orthodox control of Jewish religious life in the new state along with financial support for their institutions. In their view, the State might remain democratic in theory but it needed to be Jewish in nature. Ben-Gurion gave them the authority that he likely never considered would become so controversial and divisive for so long.

As far as Ben-Gurion was concerned, it must have made sense to give religious authority to the rabbis – and the only rabbis that happened to be there were orthodox rabbis. While Ben-Gurion was a visionary, he never could have imagined each and every issue that would face the Jewish people as they endeavored to create the first Jewish state in 2000 years.

He never could have imagined the case of Yael, a woman who moved to Israel and converted to Judaism in 1992. After living there for 15 years, getting married and having children there, she and her husband eventually decided to divorce. When they went to the local rabbi to effectuate the divorce, he had some questions for them. When he decided that she was not living a quality orthodox lifestyle, he retroactively nullified her conversion, and declared as well that her children were not Jewish.

Likewise, Ben-Gurion, as a secular Jew himself, never would have imagined that the Israeli government would fund and subsidize orthodox synagogues and pay the salaries of their rabbis, while non-orthodox synagogues receive absolutely nothing. Currently there is a case in Israel that has gone all the way to the Supreme Court. In the small town of Gezer in the center of the country, there is a reform congregation known as

Birkat Shalom, and there rabbi is a woman named Miri Gold. There are many people who attend her services and consider her their rabbi. She counsels them when they are troubled and she inspires them with her spirituality. She teaches their children the lessons of the Torah and she facilitates their holiday and ritual observance. She is someone who has committed her entire life to service of the Jewish people. Yet, when one of her congregants wants to get married, in order for their marriage to be considered official by the government, she cannot perform the ceremony or sign their *ketubah*. Instead the couple needs to seek out the regional orthodox rabbi whom they have never met. Instead of having a meaningful ceremony with their rabbi who they love and who shares in all meaningful religious aspects of their lives, to be recognized as a married couple by the State of Israel, they must endure a cold and disheartening ceremony with a rabbi to whom they have no connection or affection. This is not Judaism that befits our Holy Land. It is neither rational nor spiritual, and if Israel is truly going to be the homeland that it needs to be for all of the Jewish people, then the orthodox monopoly on Jewish religious life must be terminated.

It is true that we were latecomers on the scene. Our movement did not share the vision of the early Zionists who sacrificed to establish and defend the land of Israel on behalf of the Jewish people. We recognize that. But the time has come for Israeli textbooks, educators and media to stop portraying the Reform movement as Anti-Zionist, as somehow not legitimate. Today the Reform Movement is unabashedly Zionist. We have our own Zionist organization, known as ARZA (Association of Reform Zionists of America). Our declaration of principles actually encourages *aliyah* for any of our members who desire to live in a Jewish state. Most of the congregations of the URJ

conduct periodic trips to Israel. All of our rabbis are required to spend at least one year studying in Jerusalem. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the URJ, has stated, “for Reform Jews the stakes are especially high. If we fail to establish a significant presence on Israeli soil and do not become a powerful force in the next generation, we will have consigned ourselves to the margins of Jewish history. While Reform successes in Israel give me confidence that this will not happen, it is for this reason that our support of Reform Judaism in Israel is so vitally important.”

The masses of Israelis are not orthodox. While they might have affection for the traditions and customs of our faith, they are not *shomer shabbes*, they do not observe the laws of kashrut or family purity, and they do not *doven* three times a day. Plain and simple, they are not orthodox in observance. If they lived here, they would best be described as Reform or maybe Conservative, but if you asked them if they believed that to be the case, many would tell you that they would never join a *goyeshe* movement like ours. In essence, they don't know who we are, they don't know how dedicated we are to our Jewish faith, and they don't understand that their beliefs are almost entirely in sync with ours. They don't know who we are because we haven't been effective enough in telling them – we have not made our case as clearly and as widespread as it needs to be.

Rabbi Yoffie knows how vital it is. He knows that if liberal Judaism is going to flourish in Israel, then we must be active in communicating with secular Israelis that they have a lot in common with us. Our argument is not with the orthodox – they will never accept our pleas because they cannot. They will never deviate from their religious doctrine. The discussion we need to have is with secular Israelis who do not subscribe to

orthodox religious ritual and who make up the majority of the Israeli population. For these Israelis, simply living in Israel is all is necessary to maintain their Jewish identity.

Today in Israel there are 24 functioning reform congregations. We need to support them, both spiritually and financially. Today there a cadre of outstanding local leaders, both lay and clergy, who are developing solutions to the problems that face our movement. We need to encourage them and provide them with assistance and support. Our social action wing, the Israel Religious Action Center, [as ARZA explains] “occupies a unique place in the social and religious landscape of Israel, infusing social justice advocacy with the spiritual energy and humane worldview of Progressive Judaism.” Their cause is our cause and we need to add the stir of our voices to theirs. Our Rabbinic seminary occupies a profound base of operation for our movement and its programs and agenda. All of our rabbinic students are studying and living in Jerusalem for portions of the training. We also need to go to Israel and show that we can speak with our presence as well as with our financial support.

The steps that have been taken by our movement so far are promising. But we have not yet won over the secular Israelis who view Jewish ritual and custom as we do, but have no knowledge of the theology and philosophy of the Reform or Conservative movements. We have not used our mass numbers in North America to influence non-traditional Jews over there. And because we have not, there has been no ground swell from the Israeli population to support the rights of all Jews in the State of Israel.

This is a problem that will not be resolved without our active engagement. It will be up to our generation to make our message clear: we will not tolerate members of our movement not being recognized as Jews by the State of Israel. We are Jews. Our rabbis

are rabbis. Our movement is Torah based. And if we want those facts to become reality on the ground, then we must acknowledge that we are ready to roll up our sleeves and fight for our rights.

As the Talmud instructs, “kol Yisrael aravim ze bazeh – All of Israel is responsible one for the other.”

Kein Yehi Ratzon – May this be G-d’s will.

Amen.