Kol Nidrei 5775

One of Israel and the Jewish people’s great writers, was Shmuel Yosef Agnon, who we know as Shai Agnon. In 1966 he received the Nobel Prize for literature. When receiving his award from King Gustav 6th, King of Sweden, the King asked Agnon where he had been born. Agnon answered

‘Majesty, like all Jews I was born in Jerusalem, but then the Romans came and moved my cradle to Buczacz’

The love we have for Jerusalem, for Israel is something difficult to explain. Is it something like the embrace of loved ones together – a strong, intense love? And although Agnon singled out Jerusalem, in the 12th century, a writer called Yehuda HaLevi from Spain went further. One of his many poems, which is read on the 9th of Av, the day commemorating the destruction of the Temple, shows the pain of one who even considers himself a captive outside Israel –

‘**Zion! will you not ask if peace is with your captives  
That seeks your peace -- that are the remnant of your flocks?  
From west and east, from north and south -- the greeting  
"Peace" from far and near, you take from every side;  
And greeting from the captive of desire, giving his tears like dew   
Of Hermon, and longing to let them fall upon your hills.  
To wail for your affliction I am like the jackals; but when I dream  
Of the return of your captivity, I am a harp for your songs.  
My heart to Bethel and Peniel yearns sore,  
To Machanaim and to all the places where your pure ones have met.’**

Of course, the great Naomi Shemer could take the words of Yehuda HaLevi ‘ I am a harp for your songs’ and turn it into the chorus of her famous ‘Yerushalayim Shel Zahav’

Being in Israel this summer brought out these feelings of unexplained love. I lived in Israel for seven years, married in Israel, travelled in Israel. But going back this summer with Hodaya the excitement flooded back. To talk to people about the issues that matter, to see how Israel is developing so well as a country, and to behold that whatever baseless claims people are making of the State of Israel, and whatever people are doing to delegitimatise Israel – Israel exists, Israel is strong, Israel can be proud of the myriad of achievements over its not yet 70 year history. Every building, every road, every school, every hospital, every yeshiva, every moshav, is a success of our people, who were staring death in the face only 70 years ago.

Just read Ari Shavit’s book ‘My Promised Land’ – yes, there are two sides to Shavit’s book. But he is clear about the triumph of Zionism in the promised land, and how it combined a hard working spirit with ingenuity to allow what we have to exist, From the orange groves of the early 20th century, to the new developments of the early State years, Israel’s development was, Shavit explained just miraculous.

And so our State is clearly something to stand up for, to defend, to advocate – just as we would stand up for a family member in trouble.

And this summer we sensed the trouble. It was a horrible summer. There was nothing really positive that came out of the conflict with Hamas this summer. You cannot really be a victor in a conflict with a terrorist organization – and if victory means conquest of the land on which they are in Gaza, this would have meant much more death of Israeli soldiers, and of Palestinian non combatant citizens. The Palestinian world is angrier and less compromising than maybe ever before. Israeli society has become less trusting in the possibility of a two state solution and final status agreement with the Palestinian, and is being reminded constantly by its leaders of the apocalyptic nature of Iran’s quest for nuclear capability.

And we are faced outside Israel with an unprecedented wave of delegitmisation of Israel which brings with it a new wave of anti Semitism. We ourselves are becoming edgy because of this. We start thinking about whether we are welcome here and whether we will need to relocate to Israel ourselves. We point to France and Belgium, societies where the post modern ideal of multiculturalism is clearly foundering and are fearful that this is what is happening here. We start generalizing about the Muslim world – without knowing Muslims – and we start becoming more aggressive, angry and sensitive in our advocacy for Israel. Grass roots advocacy has its place, clearly – but as I mentioned in my second day Rosh Hashana sermon – it needs to be part of a more contextual understanding.

But there is an important point here – our connection with Israel is not just about flags, symbols, slogans, demonstrations and face book posts – it is much much deeper. Zionism surely connects to something deeper inside each and every one of us.

In fact our status as a nation goes back long before the creation of Zionism in the late 19th century to the Chovevei Zion. Zionism was really itself a revisionist Jewish concept and grew out of a belief that the diaspora had failed to grant jewish people true acceptance in greater society. In the late 1890’s, Herzl wrote that the only way that Jewish people could be accepted, would be the building of Jewish sovereignty. But Jewish nationhood was in effect granted when the Torah was given to the Jewish people. At that point Moses passes on the words of God to the people

‘You will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’

In scholarly works on national identity and conflict, there are categories of conflict built around religion and there are categories built around ethnic national identity. We combine the two – we are a religion due to the demands God placed on us through the Torah – but we are also a nation. But we were a nation when we did not have sovereignty over the land of Israel, and we are nation now with the existence of the State of Israel. Zionism did not make us into a nation, the covenant at Sinai did.

And a central idea of our national religious history is that when the nation would be ready for it, it would return to its land, a reunion of the people of the Torah with the land of the Torah.

Now there is a famous Talmudic saying that deals with this issue and that clearly is negative about returning to the land of Israel as a people before the appropriate allotted time.

The Talmudic piece quotes a verse from the Song of Songs, a love song between a man or woman, a song of not quite fulfilled love. Here the female lover asks for her love not to be awakened until an appropriate time.

***I make an oath with you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles, and by the hinds of the field, that you do not awaken, nor stir up love,[5](http://www.come-and-hear.com/kethuboth/kethuboth_111.html" \l "111a_5)  until it please***

**….That text is required for the opinion of R. Jose son of R. Hanina who said: 'What was the purpose of those three oaths?**[**10**](http://www.come-and-hear.com/kethuboth/kethuboth_111.html#111a_10)**— One, that Israel shall not go up [all together as if surrounded] by a wall;[8](http://www.come-and-hear.com/kethuboth/kethuboth_111.html" \l "111a_8)  the second, that whereby the Holy One, blessed be He, made an oath with Israel that they shall not rebel against the nations of the world; and the third is that whereby the Holy One, blessed be He, made an oath with gentiles that they shall not oppress Israel too much'**

This text of course gave religious leaders some thinking to do in order to accept the idea of statist Zionism, a Zionism whose goal was reestablishing sovereignty over the land of Israel. Surely this was not the right time – surely it was some sort of national transgression to conquer the land of Israel. Much has been written on this topic, and there are many ways to look at this text so as not to contradict Zionism. There is a Chassidic group, the Chassidim of Satmar, who stuck very firmly to this text as a warning against Zionism. Many of the Satmar Chassidim do not act on these feelings –some do, and are part of an extreme, poorly thought of movement called Neturei Karta.

But the fear of setting up a state in the land of Israel before the tight time was held not only by the far right of the religious world – on the other side of the spectrum, the cultural Zionists, led initially by Achad Haam or Asher Ginsberg and then by Chaim Weitzman, believed that there should be a sort of two step process. Firstly, Jews who were idealistically inclined and who could tolerate the hardship should move to Palestine – and once the cultural underpinnings of a Jewish society were built up, this new bottom up entity would be ready for sovereignty

Now you may rightly say – look, all this talk of early Zionism, of building society before a state, as all quite irrelevant. And to a large extent, I would agree with you. The Holocaust, such a deeply traumatic event in our recent history has been a game changer for us all. It heightens our sense of vulnerability and clearly makes us realize what dangers would exist for us were we not to have a State. It is not clear at all that anti Semitism is caused by the existence of the State of Israel and its relationship with its Arab natures; as if taking away the State would suddenly turn off the switch of anti Semitism – I do not believe that for a minute. I also don’t think that we should be apologetic for the trauma of the Holocaust one iota when we hear people claiming that the Jewish people should just get over the Holocaust. For people to so glibly and without hesitation use the Holocaust in describing Israel’s actions is deceitful, offensive and simply wrong. We can be absolutely clear and proud, that however painful our wars have been recently, and however pained we are at the death tolls on both sides; we are a million miles from anything remotely genocidal. Maybe peace will come if we are able to sense the pain of Palestinians who feel robbed of a state; and if Palestinians will consider what the Holocaust means to us as a people.

So we need our State. We need it desperately. I would add that from a religious perspective also, losing a State now we have one, would be a tremendous religious blow to Jews both in Israel and throughout the world. In the creation of Israel, to use another phrase from song of songs, we heard ‘the loved one knocking’ and felt the soft touch of Divine Providence.

But if our whole focus, our total energy is spent on defending the state – we will miss out another challenge which is even more important – the challenge of the society of Israel. And maybe that is a lesson we can learn from the early cultural Zionists.

This idea was laid out by our last Chief Rabbi, Lord Sacks, in his book ‘Future Tense’ where he talks about a New Zionism. Rabbi Sacks distinguishes between two ways in which a State can be maintained. One is through a contract. In this way, we all give up a certain amount of liberty and freedom, in order for the government to run and lead the country in an ordered way. Law limits what we can do – but this is good for most if not all of society. This is what is called a ‘social contract’ – without it, to paraphrase Thomas Hobbes – life would be a mess!

But Rabbi Sacks defines another way – a covenant. This is a relationship of trust between those who lead and the people, a bond of trust also between all who make up a nation. We are a people of the covenant. Our covenant bases itself on the phrase – ‘All Israel are responsible for each other’. It is the state that is the power behind the social contract – but it is the society that is required to buy into, and be part of a covenant. The social contract, the state ensures order – the covenant of society ensures a conscience and that life is not every man for himself.

And this is the challenge that we need to consider as Zionists. We have succeeded in building a state. But we still need to work on the society to prevent it from fragmenting . It is not enough for me that unity and solidarity is created because rockets are landing on our country. We need to think about our society when there will one day be a safer Middle East. Achad Haam wanted to build a jewish society first. We don’ t have that luxury now. We cannot live without a State. But we can expect and advocate for a society of quality in Israel.

And Rabbi Sacks has three suggestions for a better society, of which I will lay out one.

Rabbi Sacks feels that Israel needs a new narrative. A narrative that returns to the ethical Judaism of the prophets, and a narrative that is inclusive of the other religious minorities that live in Israel. And this is a massive challenge. We think of Israel as a Jewish state and a demographic state. So do we expect everyone living in Israel to swear allegiance to Israel as a Jewish state? How do we relate to Muslims and Christians? I am not sure if Israel is possibly one of the only, or the only religious based democratic country. But the conundrum is there – if we increase the democratic nature as we wish, do we need to reduce the Jewish nature of the country to truly be inclusive. If we on the other hand ramp up the Jewish nature of the country, how can we be serious in looking after our minorities and giving them equality?

I think there is an approach which I am starting to hear in modern orthodox circles in Israel and outside. We need to differentiate between the ritual side of Judaism and the ethical side of Judaism. Israel is and should continue to be a country which allows Jews to feel confident and able to be religious and expressing of tradition. But if we publically emphasise the prophetic side of our religious historic tradition, which starts all the way back with Abraham – then we can surely use this as a basis for serious integration of our Muslim and Christian cousins.

Our love for Israel also should lead us to learn about Zionist hitory, but also about the Arab history. When we visit Israel, as well as visiting Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Netanya – we should organize a trip to the Bedouin communities and see places such as Rahat and Hura. And as well has learning about the politics of Israel and its leaders, we need to be aware of the growing civil society work that is going on. Politics will not be able to knit society together alone – it will need civil society, grassroots, to do its work first.

And so our new national narrative, our new Zionist narrative, if you would like, Zionism phase 2, can be built on the more universalistic approaches of our religion while not compromising the rights of the Jewish population to worship in a traditional way.

This is not a vision that is about peace with our neighbours. This is not a vision for a solution to the need for a fully recognized Palestinian state. This is a vision for our country, our beloved country – it is a vision of hope for her, that her soul will remain intact and not be blemished by the cycle of wars that she has experienced so that it will instead shine a light of justice and compassion and that Israel will truly be a light unto other nations.

Then we will have a state to be proud of, and a society of true quality.

Then, it will be time for us all to return.