

Shabbat Message
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“Our Children and Israel’s Future”

During my rabbinic studies, I wrote my thesis on the history of American Hebraist educators. They were Zionists who believed in the power of modern Hebrew as the language for the new land and the modern Jew. Even before the state was a reality in 1948, but after Eliezer ben Yehuda, the father of Modern Hebrew who began to redevelop the language single-handedly, Hebraist educators were hard at work adding language to the long list of ingredients that would give shape to the Jewish homeland.

In America, young Jewish students in cheder (חדר), in Hebrew school, were learning their prayers by rote, and how to use modern Hebrew language. You might remember early Hebrew language books. Hebrew primers were filled with Hebrew letters and vocabulary, but also modern Jewish and Zionist lessons.

For example, in one Hebrew primer, a Jewish family was the theme for ten lessons in the book. There was father, mother, brother and sister, like “Father’s Knows Best,” but more like “Abba Knows Better.” Hebrew letters and words were taught through lessons filled with Jewish values. In one lesson, a Sabbath meal was prepared, blessed, and enjoyed. In another lesson, the children learned the value of “tzedakah,” and the importance of putting coins in the blue and white box for contributions to the new Land. In a final lesson, the Hebrew vocabulary words came together to teach an enduring lesson to every student. In Hebrew, it said (kol echad tzarikh livnot et ha-aretz), “כל אחד צריך לבנות את הארץ,” literally, everyone needs to build the land; or, we might say, “Everyone needs to participate in building the Land of Israel.” When we say, “הארץ,” (ha’aretz) the land, it’s a short way of saying the Land of Israel.

Hebrew primers were not trivial. They were like seeds planted for a future that would produce bountiful harvests of lovers of Israel, builders of the land, innovators of technology, and global leaders of industry. From swamps to cultivated orchards, from arid deserts to irrigated farmlands, and from sandy beaches to major cities and towns, it was as the Psalmist said, “Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like watercourses in the Negev. They who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy” (Psalm 126).

Primers were for the children who would be the sustainers of Israel. It follows that if we don’t have our children then we don’t have a future. In Judaism, our children are our greatest blessings because they are our future. In a wedding ceremony, the seventh blessing in the Sheva Berachot, says, “Praised are You, God, Who causes bride and groom to rejoice together.” “Together” is a euphemism; it means that now that you’re married we expect children, grandchildren! But what about our children, today? Is it any wonder that our

stomachs turn with fears for the children who were killed and torn away from their families. As the war in Israel persists, these are priorities that come before all else.

First and foremost, the hostages must be returned. No cease-fire, no halting a ground war, and no talks until every hostage, Israeli, American, Thai, Holocaust survivor, and our **children**, must be returned to the arms of those who love them.

Second, there's another difficult reality we must face. Many of our young Jewish high school and college students are already missing in action. What do I mean by this? With respect to these young people, their hopefulness for parity, equality, and proportionality in war are valid and important. And they are also flawed.

Beginning with the Book of Joshua, the Bible describes the power vested in the Israelite people to conquer and possess the Land of Canaan, promised by God, who was earlier called "אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה" (Ish milchamah), a warrior, in the Song of the Sea, after the Israelites were freed from Egypt. This same God, our God, laid out the promise and the rules of warfare. And the Jewish people has been on both sides of wars. We perished in large numbers long before the Holocaust took 6 million more Jewish souls. But the long history of the Jewish people never extinguished the hope --- actually, "hope" is not a strong enough word --- the Jewish people's **faith** that our Covenant with God was our calling, our ministry, and our mission. Calling, ministry, and mission, are unusual words in Judaism, but they resonate in us. What else would compel a people to believe with all their heart, and soul, and might, to cherish and defend God's word despite everything? We exist by means of God's word in Torah, and the unique relationship we have with God moves us to observe mitzvot, commandments. Yes, they are our calling, our ministry, and our mission. Though others claim their own faith in God, we don't deny them what their faith calls on them to be; but we have a claim, too; to live peaceably as Jews in Israel and at home.

So when young Jews post on social media, "Free Palestine," they are telling only half the story, because they're missing the full narrative. The other half of it should be "And free Israel" from war, intifada, missiles, and terror. Recently, when college students were asked, "What does it mean when you shout, "From the river to the sea," which is a war charge to rid Israel of Jews from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, some college students replied that they didn't know, and others said, "Is it from the Tigris to the Black Sea?"

They couldn't possibly know how many times Israel has extended an olive branch to Palestinian leaders only to be rebuffed. In 1978, Anwar Sadat, president of Egypt, made peace with Israel's Menachem Begin, with support from U.S. President Jimmy Carter. In 1981, Sadat was assassinated by fundamentalists in Egypt.

In 1992, Yitzhak Rabin was re-elected as prime minister of Israel. His platform was the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. In 1994, he signed historic agreements with Palestinian leadership as part of the Oslo Accords. In 1995, Rabin was assassinated by a fundamentalist Israeli. The Oslo Accords failed in their goals.

Arafat was once offered nearly 98% of all the land he demanded, but he couldn't return to his people and be remembered as the Palestinian leader who made peace with Israel and the Jews. President Clinton was incensed by his stubbornness and the failure to know greater peace. The peacemakers stood on one side and the fundamentalists stood on the other.

If Jewish young people could see between them in the middle, they would find that Israel is a sovereign nation that has every right to exist. They would find that the vast majority of Israelis and Jews around the world want peace for Palestinians and leaders who will use resources not for guns, terror tunnels and missiles, but for schools, hospitals, and commerce.

The efforts to destroy Israel by other Arab nations had almost ended when the Abraham Accords breathed new oxygen into conversations about economic prosperity in the region and a united front against a common enemy --- not the Jews, but the Supreme Leader in Iran. But again, the possibility of peace with Israel, including Saudi Arabia, was more than the Supreme Leader and his proxies in Gaza and Lebanon, Hamas and Hezbollah, respectively, could tolerate. While Israel wasted time focused on extreme judicial reform and raised the political temperature between Israel and the West Bank, the terrorists made their move.

Israeli children, families, women, Holocaust survivors, young people, and those who were not Jewish or Israeli were slaughtered and others were taken away. Now war looms. And so our future depends on this generation and the next generations. But we need them to learn, to understand, and to know Jewish history, and while their hopefulness for parity, equity, and proportionality are valid, it isn't enough. The world isn't that orderly. It never was. The history of the region is well above their current understanding and well beyond their simplified conclusions. The future of the Jewish people and its neighbors is complicated but it can be made secure.

Golda Meir put it well, because she knew, as a mother and as a Jew from Milwaukee who became Prime Minister of Israel, "If the Palestinians laid down their guns, there would be peace; and if Israeli laid down their guns there would be no Israel."

I'd like to take a moment and share a poem from an Israeli mother. It was recently published online. I thank Rabbi Daniel Gordis for posting it online, and David Scott for bringing it to my attention. By Tamary Lia Baz, "Birth and Becoming":

Seventh month, my little boy
This is not how I thought it would look

I imagined us in nature and streams
That your coming birth would fill our lives
We were wrapped in excitement and comfort anticipating your arrival

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arranging, dreaming, nesting

I didn't imagine that that pastoral imagine, little boy, would be replaced by
sirens, missiles and shelters
by sorrow that has spread like a blanket over the days and nights
Endless concern for family and loved ones
And an earth that trembles from its encounter with a brutal evil
that we didn't want to believe existed

My womb hurts from the horrors, my little boy
Do you feel it, too?
I'm trying to take a deep breath for you
"You must rest, let go"
But how do you let go of grief, explain to me
When children are dying every day
And children of another mother are in the hands of animals?

This week I asked you, my little boy
if you are sure
This is where you want to come.
To this world, to this earth
I told you that you have time to change your mind
And I will completely understand you, and I will have no complaints

And then I felt you—you smiled at me
And you explained it to me well
that you do know where you have chosen to come
that you have no misgivings, and that there is no mistake in the address
You're coming to this land.

I understood at that moment, my brave soul
whatever you need from me
It's not inventing a perfect world for you
nor a womb that does not shrink in the face of horrors
Or a body and heart that are not overwhelmed by sorrow, anger, and pain

You need me to trust you
and me
that you know to where you are coming

And that it won't always be easy here
 That you have insight, a plan and intent
 that my role in your life
 is to be by your side, but to let you experience
 And not to push humanity into a corner
 which includes sorrow, pain, disappointment and oversight

So I promise you today and always, my child
 Not that when you grow up there won't be more wars...
 Only that I will always be here for you
 To embrace, contain, soften and nurse
 and to pour love and light into every crack and fracture
 When you're in pain, when the tears come
 When reality tempts you to get tough
 And your senses will seek to submit and become numb

Mom is here with you
 all the way
 And in whatever path you choose to walk.
 This world isn't perfect, child
 And neither are we
 And I can't really guarantee you that we will succeed
 in creating a different, better reality here

But I promise you with all my heart,
 That we will never stop trying.

In 1957, Golda Meir said, "We can forgive [them] for killing our children, we cannot forgive them for forcing us to kill their children. We will only have peace with [them] when they love their children more than they hate us." It's all about the children, isn't it? What will our children's generation believe and understand when they turn their hearts to the east? I hope they will have learned Hebrew and history well enough to recite these words from Psalm 137:5:

אִם-אֶשְׁכַּחךְ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי:

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,
 Let my right hand wither;
 Let my tongue stick to my palate.

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If I cease to think of you,
If I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour.

May God help us in this hour of great concern. May God redeem those who are held in captivity, and may we all know greater peace. Amen.