

THE SOUL OF ISRAEL  
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5778 / 2017  
Temple Emanu-El, Marblehead, MA

Growing up, I was never part of the Boy Scouts. But back in the summer of 1980, I became a scout leader in Israel. Here's how it happened.

I had recently arrived in Jerusalem for the year-long Hebrew immersion studies required for rabbinic students beginning our studies at the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. The rabbi of nearby Har-El Synagogue, the first Reform congregation in Jerusalem, came to see me. He had heard that I play guitar and could lead singing, so he asked me to join a weekend with some kids as part of a new scout troop he was starting through the congregation. As the weeks went on, I found myself joining other such groups in Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Beersheba, only later realizing (probably because my Hebrew speaking and comprehension were improving), that they were all connected as part of a fledgling branch of the national scouting organization. Affiliated through the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism, the name by which Reform Judaism is expressed in Israel, and also a rather young organization almost 40 years ago, these were the first gatherings of Tzofei Telem – the scouts of the Progressive Youth Movement.

In Israel, the scout program is organized differently than the model with which we're more familiar. In Israel, boys and girls go through scouting together, sharing in all the activities, with *machanot*, camps, or as we would term them, troops divided by age, not gender. So I came to know many dozens of kids from 5th Grade through High School, and participated with them in their camp outs, night time hikes, and meetings. My job was to bring the music, and in addition to the kind of folk songs many of you know from our Religious School or Jewish summer camps, there was something especially pleasing to hear the Israeli kids singing full-voice "I'm Goin' to Kansas City" or "Doing that crazy hand-jive"!

Perhaps my most enduring memory of all those scouting adventures was of a week-long *Course Hadracha*, a leadership training experience for 9<sup>th</sup> Graders in the Carmel Mountains, where the Tzofei Telem, for the very first time, joined with other scouting groups from around the country, representing various political and social philosophies and roots. There were numerous activities each day that week, but the primary task was actually a competition, as each

contingent was challenged to construct a tower, a migdal, using only tree branches found in the forest and lengths of rope. The migdal judged to be the best, strongest and most innovative of the towers would bring significant honor to the troop which constructed it. Most of the daylight hours then were devoted to gathering, designing and building what would amount to more than a dozen such structures around the camp ground, from early morning until dusk.

Over at our site, however, our Tzofei Telem scouts began the day quite differently than the other scouts, because we began every morning with tefillah, with a prayer service, replete with NFTY and camp-style music. It took only about ½ hour each morning, plus a song session after most dinners, but the heads of the national scouting leadership took our madrichim aside, telling us that we were being unfair to the kids, and that we were giving the other troops too much of an advantage and head-start. Plus, they were confused – this gathering was for secular scout troops, not Dati'im, not the Religious sort. We weren't of the ultra-Orthodox, yet still we prayed every morning. Undeterred, we stuck with our program, and soon, something amazing began to happen. There was a lot of curiosity among the other groups about what we were doing – praying with guitar? Modern melodies? Boys and girls praying together? These were completely foreign ideas to nearly all of the kids at the event, so slowly but surely, and with our explicit invitation, every day, our numbers grew as both the kids and their leaders from the other machanot came to check us out, to join in, and had a great time doing so.

On the last night of the week, each of the scout troops would unveil their tower, and choose a couple of songs to sing while celebrating their accomplishment. Our scouts wanted to sing two songs, melodies that anyone who has attended our Religious School over the past 25 years knows well: The first – Debbie Friedman's popular "Not by Might and Not By Power", and second, the prayer/song, Shecheyanu. Turned out that our kids, mind you in their first year participating in the *Course Hadracha*, won second place in the competition, and I should tell you that their tower certainly stood out, because they built it as a pyramid – upside down! They should've won first place. I'm not bitter.

Let's now jump ahead. The summer of 2017 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Six-Day War, the week in June of 1967 that changed Israel and world Jewry forever. When the very existence of the young, Jewish state stood very much in the balance, Israeli forces convincingly defeated the combined armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria. As these Arab states, bent on the

destruction of Israel, prepared for a coordinated surprise attack, Israel struck preemptively. By doing so, countless Jewish lives were saved, and in all likelihood, the Jewish State itself.

Israel's victory during the Six Day War marked a turning point for both Medinat Yisrael, the State of Israel, and Am Yisrael – the Jewish people. When the fighting passed, the geographical and political contours of the modern Middle East were changed forever. Israel's military success in 1967 resulted in the reunification of Jerusalem, and enabled Jews to access, for the first time in nineteen years, the Old City of Jerusalem: its Jewish Quarter, its ancient synagogues, and Judaism's holiest site, the Western Wall. Israel also was able to seize the West Bank from Jordan, the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, and the Golan Heights from Syria, thereby tripling the land area under its control.

Israel's military victory dramatically enhanced Israeli self-confidence, morale, and its international prestige, as well as Jewish pride around the globe. Many Jews were inspired to make Aliyah and become Israeli citizens under the Law of Return. Many others made pilgrimage to the Land for the first time. In the wake of this burst of self-confidence, Jewish studies and Hebrew language programs were introduced for the first time into the curricula of many American universities, synagogues, and Jewish community centers. Many of the more than three million Jews living behind the Iron Curtain were inspired to study the Hebrew language and to apply to immigrate to Israel, although they had been refused that right for many years.

Unfortunately, the euphoria that gripped the world-wide Jewish people fifty years ago was short-lived. The hoped-for peace with her Arab neighbors through the return of captured land was never reached. Rather, the Arab nations were content to allow the Palestinians uprooted from land captured by Israel, to languish in refugee camps as human pawns. They maintained their policy of "Three No's": no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel's legitimacy, and no negotiations with Israel. Instead, Egypt commenced a War of Attrition, and Syria and Egypt prepared for the next, larger war, launched on Yom Kippur, 1973.

After the victory of 50 years ago, both Israelis and Jews around the world exhaled for a moment, freed from worry about the existential future of the Jewish State. But even that confidence would soon be eroded by the Yom Kippur War, the unceasing buildup of arms by terror groups such as Hizbollah and Hamas, the unresolved problem of the Occupation of the West Bank, and the rise of rogue nations such as Iran, who have declared boldly and without hesitation their aim of destroying Israel, and their pursuit of nuclear weapons to bring them

closer to that heinous goal. And so, to this day, assuring the physical survival of Israel remains an ongoing imperative.

But just as we pray on behalf of loved ones in need of healing, for *refuat ha-guf*, physical health and healing, so, too we pray for *refuat ha-nefesh*, the healthy well-being of spirit, so it is that today, very soul of Israel likewise remains a concern for all who love her. For those who have visited Israel, you have seen first-hand the bitter division within Israeli life and culture between the ultra-Orthodox, the *hareidim*, and the rest of Israel's population, most being secular, not having until recently any other religious option available. As part of the coalition government for every administration since the State's founding, the *hareidim* wield power and influence well beyond their actual numbers in relation to the rest of Israel's population. Without their inclusion in coalition-building, the government, including Netanyahu's administration, would not stand, and so the nuances of the Israeli electoral system have created an intractable situation. The ultra-Orthodox vice-grip on the religious life, the spiritual foundation of the nation serves not only to divide the Israeli populace, but is also causing increasing resentment and bitterness among Jews around the world. As the problems have worsened under an increasingly right-wing Israeli government, a heart-rending consequence has been the distancing of many, especially younger Jews, from support for their own, our only, Jewish State.

In recent days, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Shlomo Amar, a political appointee to a position notorious for corruption, declared that Reform Jews are worse than Holocaust Deniers. The Israeli Rabbinate, again – an entirely political construct, has created black-lists of American Rabbis whose weddings are not recognized, whose conversions are not accepted, whose authority is not acknowledged. These black-listed rabbis come from every stream of American Judaism, including Modern Orthodox. For the ultra-Orthodox leadership in Israel has declared that even Modern Orthodox Judaism is simply another kind of Reform – a term which they use with extreme vitriol and hatred.

This past week, the ultra-Orthodox staged violent rallies throughout Israel protesting that the Supreme Court has upheld their obligation to serve in the Israel Defense Force – something that every other Israeli youth has done as part of being a contributing citizen of the country. The *Haredim* have to this point been exempt from national service, claiming that their daily study of Torah is sufficient for defending the Jewish State. Their exemption has fomented decades of

resentment among the rest of the population, who have served, contributed, and died for the well-being of Israel.

The ultra-Orthodox control over the religious life in Israel finds expression even at the holiest site in Jewish life, the Western Wall, the Kotel. What should be a unifying place of historic memory for all Jews is a place where only the ultra-Orthodox are allowed to worship freely. Many of you know of the courageous work of Anat Hoffman and the Women of the Wall, who seek simply to worship, even in the tiny Woman's area, to read Torah and celebrate Rosh Hodesh with joy at the spiritual heart of the Jewish world. A few weeks ago, at the beginning of the month of Elul, four women students from Hebrew Union College seeking to enter the Western Wall plaza were subjected to strip searches, intended to shame them into leaving, under the pretext of making sure they weren't trying to sneak in a Torah scroll or other such contraband. Busloads of ultra-Orthodox women are now being brought to the Kotel on Rosh Hodesh, armed with noisemakers and whistles, with the sole purpose of disrupting the worship.

During my biennial congregational trips to Israel, I enjoy giving our groups the chance to welcome Shabbat on Friday evening at the Kotel, there to offer prayers on behalf of our dear ones, or to leave small notes between the stones as has long been the custom. I've found a small, hidden away courtyard area where we can light Shabbat candles, share in Kiddush, and offer a couple of songs to welcome the Holy Day. But then I always have to remind everyone that they should not be intimidated by the ultra-Orthodox groups when approaching the Wall. The Kotel does not belong to them, or to the men, or to the Israelis alone – it is part of the heritage of every Jew, a rightful possession which we should freely and proudly claim.

Last January, under the leadership of Jewish Agency Chairman, Natan Sharansky, an agreement was brokered in Knesset to establish a location for pluralistic worship near the Western Wall plaza. The idea was to establish three areas for worship: a men's area, a women's area, and Ezrat K'lal Yisrael, an area for mixed and pluralistic prayers. However, just last month, after dragging their feet for months, the Netanyahu government announced that the agreed-upon compromise would not be implemented; they were cancelling the agreement due to pressure from the coalition's extremist, ultra-Orthodox parties.

Reaction around the world was bitter and swift, with calls to boycott anything having to do with support for Israel and her government. Even AIPAC, an organization with a

mission focused on bi-partisan efforts on behalf of the American/Israeli strategic partnership, sent a high-level delegation to give its assessment to the Netanyahu administration of the potential damage that the ongoing corruption and undue influence of the ultra-Orthodox can have on the American Jewish support for Israel. In the opinion of many, one which I share, the situation creates an existential threat to the Jewish State.

But the good news that I want to share with you this morning is that a vibrant Reform movement in Israel has been growing rapidly, and is changing the dynamic of religious life in Israel. Forty years ago, the Progressive Movement was widely seen as nothing more than an import from the West; an American expression of Judaism being grafted onto the Israeli population. But such is no longer the case. Thinking back to the young scouts with whom I camped, worked and prayed so many years ago - those kids and their children are now part of an Israeli Reform movement that has become a native, distinctly Israel expression of progressive Judaism. In fact, despite all odds, and despite the roadblocks and obstructions presented, Reform Judaism in Israel is flourishing as an alternative path to meaningful, Jewish spiritual and ethical expression.

This year, the 100th Israeli Reform Rabbi will be ordained from our Seminary in Jerusalem. There are now some forty-seven Reform synagogues flourishing throughout the nation, and our rabbinic colleagues are overwhelmed by the requests for weddings, bar and bat mitzvah's, and other services, filling the synagogues to the brim on a consistent basis. Israelis are voting with their feet! One can go on a Friday night to the Port in Tel Aviv, or the Tachanah, the re-built train station in Jerusalem, to welcome Shabbat with hundreds of Israelis, singing, swaying and praying together, with musical instruments and modern sensitivities.

Repeated opinion polls point to widespread and growing support in Israel for Reform Judaism. In many ways, but on a much larger scale, it is reminiscent of my week with the young Tzofei Telem, when so many came to join us in our morning prayers, intrigued and inspired by an expression of Jewish meaning and beauty, an alternative to the ultra-Orthodox brand their families had long rejected. One of my colleagues recently pointed out quite accurately that, from a purely historical perspective, we understand that Reform Judaism of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was a Central European expression. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Reform bore the hallmarks of the American Jewish experience. And it's fair to predict that in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Reform will find a new manifestation in Israel, forged by that unique cultural setting and milieu.

I know that many Israel advocates in the US, particularly those from the liberal streams, are calling for financially boycotting any institutions that support or are supported by the current Israeli government, until such a time as full equal rights are afforded to all Jews. Personally, I reject such a strategy as being ultimately, counter-productive and even dangerous. We should continue to contribute to our local federations, invest in Israel bonds, buy trees for the Jewish National Fund forests, send our kids on Y2I and Birthright, and call upon Congress to continue assuring that Israel maintains a qualitative military edge to safeguard her security in relation to her enemies.

Rather, we should recognize that by virtue of their numbers and monolithic voting patterns, the ultra-Orthodox bloc will continue to be courted by the current and future governments. Our best response lies in increasing our support of and connection to the institutions of progressive Jewish life in Israel. The work of ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America is especially worthy of our backing, and the synagogues in Israel affiliated with the World Union for Progressive Judaism are deserving of our patronage. We need to strengthen our coalition efforts with the Conservative and Modern Orthodox leadership, for the concern for the soul of Israel is one in which we have a shared stake. ARZA is embarking on a wider, public awareness campaign in Israel to counter the slurs of the ultra-Orthodox rabbinate, and to help provide for the advocacy and legal expenses that are often required for our rabbis, members and congregations to function freely. I invite you to join me by joining ARZA in the coming year.

Thinking back to those early days of the progressive youth movement, to those days of Tzofei Telem, the progressive scouting movement camping in the in the forest of Northern Israel, what we didn't realize was that we were actually in the process of creating the means to preserve and protect the Jewish State far into the future with the same impact as Iron Dome batteries, F-35 fighter jets, and other advanced, military weaponry. We were, in fact, laying the groundwork for preserving the very soul of Israel, without which, the body of Israel, her physical safety would and will always remain at risk.

Remember that when we express hopes for dear ones in need of health, well-being, healing or recovery, we pray for two-fold healing – renewal of spirit and renewal of body. But *refuat ha-nefesh*, health of spirit, always precedes *refuat ha-guf* – health of body, perhaps because without wellness of the soul, healing of the body can never be preserved or guaranteed.

Even from our place here in North America, we will never stop working for the physical safety and well-being of our brothers and sisters in Israel, even as have so much to offer to enhance the very soul of our homeland and people. After all, there is more than one way of being Jewish - just as there is more than one way to build a tower – while still reaching upwards towards our highest hopes, our best possibilities.