

Ellen Faces Her Fears and Talks about Israel

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah 5767

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On the day the ceasefire began, Kolot Chayeinu had a discussion about the fighting between Israel and Gaza and Lebanon. We spoke in small groups about how the fighting had affected each of us and what we hoped would happen there next. When the groups reported back, one spokesperson noted that many in his group had talked of their confusion, not knowing quite what to think. This surprised someone from another group who asked, “What are they confused about?!?” I sat quietly then, but inwardly was shocked at the surprise. How could they not be confused? I sure was! And I know many of you were confused then too, finding your long-held positions shaken, your certainty a little less certain. One Kolot person, for example, a long-time far-leftist, found herself defending Israel to a group of Muslim friends. You never know.

Some people who came to that evening’s discussions were afraid, especially if they held opinions usually seen as further to the right, because they felt that Kolot is generally more left-leaning and their opinions might be dismissed or shouted down. It wasn’t that way that night – even with our range of opinions we had really respectful conversations. But I understand their fear as I prepare to talk to you about Israel after this summer’s fighting. I too am a little afraid to speak to this gathered Kolot community, so much so that the first drafts of this sermon were shaped as a letter to a third party, allowing me to escape from speaking to you directly. But of course there is no escape, for me as your rabbi and for any of us from confronting the situation and our responses.

Before I say more, I want to take note of this community tonight. Among you here are those who supported Israel in its fighting this summer and wish it had been able to continue. Here are people who saw Israel as the aggressor from the get-go and still do. Here too are people who supported Israel initially and then became convinced that the way Israel was fighting was wrong, unwinning strategy. Here are those who became convinced that Israel’s killing of so many civilians was immoral, whether Hezbollah helped engineer it or not. Here are those who have friends in Lebanon and who worried about them as many others here worried about Israelis in danger. And here are Israelis with family who had to move to stay safe and others with family in the Israeli army. Here sit American Jews who have lived in Israel, others who travel there often, many who have never been. In our community are artists and writers who connect to writers and artists in Israel; activists who spend precious time working with Palestinians in the West Bank; activists who work and teach in Israel; Jews who fear the results for them of Israel’s tarnished reputation in the world; and here are some who rarely think about any of this at all.

There are people in this community who have lost a child and whose hearts reach out to those in Israel, Gaza and Lebanon who lost theirs this summer. Here are some who wonder if they could watch their children go into army service and others who wish all the Israeli soldiers would refuse to fight – or at least refuse to serve in the occupied territories.

Even the staff of Kolot spans the poles, with an Israeli Jew now on staff who leans more to the right and an American Jew who used to live in Lebanon and spent a lot of the summer worrying about friends there.

I stand tonight in the center of this span of experience and opinion. To the leftists here, I am a frequent disappointment: Why didn’t I condemn Israel in no uncertain terms when I returned from vacation in early August?!? How can I say I love Israel when it behaves so abominably? How can I ever praise it?

To those further to the right, I am a frequent disappointment: Why don't I state clearly my love for Israel? Why am I all the time criticizing it? Why do I spend so much time on the rights of Palestinians when I should be concerned with Israeli victims of suicide bombings? Why don't I ever praise it?

And those in the center fear they have no voice and wish I would raise my voice with their point of view. They too are frequently disappointed.

Tonight, standing here before all of you, I raise my own voice, which leans a little to the left, a little to the right, and often stops at Kolot's center. I feel sort of like the kid who caught the ball and now has to run with it. I have established that you are all going to be disappointed, so relax, sit back and listen.

I supported Israel's response to Hezbollah at first, fearing and hating Hezbollah as I do and agreeing that they couldn't just cross the border to kill and kidnap without a strong response. I still believed in Israel's military strength and its vaunted intelligence and thought the response would be swift and clear and right.

Soon, I watched in horror as that reasonable response turned unreasonable, too focused on air strikes and bombs, too murderous of civilians. And, from where I stand, it also didn't work: Israel did not get back its kidnapped soldiers in Lebanon or Gaza, it did not defeat Hezbollah. It didn't even seem to know, with that famous Israeli intelligence, the extent of Hezbollah's strength.

Hamas is looking a little more defeated in Gaza, due to lack of funds, and may even enter a unity government with the PLO, though that is iffy. And they too still have their kidnapped Israeli soldier. The Palestinian people are the biggest losers, I think – so many of those killed in Israel were Arabs, there is less attention given to them now, they are suffering more, and it is not clear when there may be any kind of agreement between their leaders and Israel's.

Later this summer, I began to think and then read enough to feel confirmed that Israel had allowed itself to be used as what one Kolot member called the United States' cats-paw and what writer Seymour Hersh called its stalking horse, Israel and Hezbollah stand-ins for the US and Iran. Now Hezbollah is the darling of those who wish to defeat Israel, and probably has a slew of new recruits to its murderous ways. It also has huge supplies of funds and weapons from Iran and Syria, no real opposition in Lebanon and great cache in the Middle East and beyond. And the United States government seems to be thinking about attacking Iran, in spite of the failure of its stalking horse expedition. Here, though, there are questions being raised about the arms we send to Israel, notably cluster bombs whose use or misuse some in Congress are questioning.

That is where my head is. My heart weeps for the loss of life, for the children everywhere caught in a fight not of their making. On Monday, August 14, the same day we had our discussion at Kolot, we learned that 20 year-old Israeli soldier Uri Grossman, son of well-known and often controversial writer David Grossman, had been killed in action a few days before that day's ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah. I wept when I read it. I have no family members in Israel to worry about and David Grossman became my family that day in a way I would never have expected. I cried for his loss of a son, the sacrifice even this left-leaning writer ended up making. It was David Grossman who let so many Israeli and American Jews – including this one -- hear the voices of Palestinians in his books **Yellow Wind** and **Sleeping on a Wire**. He is solidly against the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian lands and sparked controversy and discussion in Israel with his words.

So it was David Grossman, among others, that I watched in July and August to see how he would respond when Hezbollah attacked an Israeli Army patrol and began raining rockets down on civilians in the north. He supported Israel's retaliation. By mid August, Grossman and fellow writers Amos Oz and A.B.

Yehoshua held a press conference to call for a ceasefire and to denounce the Israeli plan to inflict a more devastating blow to Hezbollah and thus even more death and pain to Lebanese civilians. In that press conference, David Grossman said, "Now we must look three steps ahead and not to the regular direction, not to the familiar, instinctive reaction of the Israeli way of fighting – that is, what doesn't work with force will work with much more force. Force, in this case, will fan the flames of hatred to Israel in the region and the entire world, and may even, heaven forbid, create the situation that will...push the Middle East to an all-out, regional war."

Two days later his son was killed. My colleague Rabbi Maya Leibovich officiated at the funeral. Another rabbi said to me, "Maya Leibovich is sort of like the Ellen Lippmann of Israel (meaning mostly that she began her own congregation), and now she has had to do this hard thing." I tried to imagine being an Israeli rabbi and doing all those hard funerals for 20 year-olds.

I weep for these deaths and I mourn other losses: The "we can't even pretend any more" loss of the early Zionist dream that Israel would act according to the best of Jewish values, would in fact become a light to the nations. The loss of Israel's feisty independence, as we realized what a strong role the United States had in this summer's fighting. The final loss of the image of the strong, beautiful Israeli soldier – those strong, beautiful soldiers have spent too much time stopping Palestinians at check-points so, for a moment, fighting against Hezbollah looked like a right and moral war, an antidote to the years of upholding oppression. But only for a moment.

On Rosh HaShanah, when we will read the Akkeda, the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac, I wonder about sons and sacrifices. The late great Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai once wrote, "A child is a missile into the coming generations. I launched him: I'm still trembling." In this summer of missiles, how could the Israelis, the Lebanese, the Palestinians launch their sons and daughters?

I weep as I hear more and more people wondering about Israel's own survival. Many, like me, were afraid this summer that somehow this fight showed that Israel might not survive. And now there is another kind of talk, a questioning of whether Israel should exist or, in an odd replay of the early Zionist arguments, whether Israel should exist **there**. Maybe Argentina looks good, someone said to me – Argentina! Where early Zionists thought of putting their new state and where bombs apparently orchestrated by Hezbollah ripped apart a Jewish Community Center in 1992 and 1994. Part of me is angry at these questions: Sudan kills hundreds of thousands of its people and no one suggests Sudan should cease to exist, or move somewhere else. The United States right now is doing several things that I find wrong or even abhorrent, yet no one speaks of the US not existing. What internal and external anti-Semitism raises the questions so quickly about Israel?

These questions are not asked by crackpots, but by reasonable people who are showing their fear. Here in New York, here at Kolot Chayeinu as the new year begins, it looks like Israel's actions – maybe even its existence — makes it harder to be safe as a Jew elsewhere. How ironic, that the place created as a haven for Jews facing pogroms and regular discrimination, has come to be seen as a creator of insecurity and fear.

We here know that fear. We also know the joys of living in the biggest Jewish city in the world mostly without fear. I always say that God did not know America yet when instructing Moses to take us Hebrew slaves out of Egypt and move us toward the land of promise. In 1987 I came up out of Egypt and arrived back in Jerusalem in time for the Passover seder, at the end of which I said with gusto, "Next year in New York!" This city is my Jewish home.

But something stirs in me when I arrive in Jerusalem, something born of ancient longing and recent experience, of evening light on marble walls and breathing desert air. How can I not love the place that

inspires Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua and David Grossman to write as they do? How can I not love the place that – major threats and cancelled parade and all – hosted World Gay and Lesbian Pride this summer? How can I not love the place that thrives on loud, vehement, passionate public debate, perhaps never more so than now?

I asked a few people what they would say if they were speaking about Israel tonight. A carpenter and home repair contractor – a Jewish Red Diaper baby – said he *would remind us all that the damage done by the Holocaust is still very much alive*. A rabbi friend who doesn't work in a congregation said, *I would say that we have a choice, we have chosen to pretend that we don't have a partner for peace. We have always had a partner for peace and we do now*. A friend, a secular Jew who studies history, said, *I thought we were chosen to be the moral conscience of the countries we lived in and we lost that role when we got our own country ... We were much better off when we did not have an Israel. But we do and it is. There is no going back...*

Right now, I love **and** hate Israel, feel betrayed by it, rage at the gaps between its people, gaps imposed by leaders a little drunk on fear and power. Do you know that in the midst of all the fighting this summer Jerusalem's mayor decided to demolish again the home of the Dari family that I went to rebuild last November after its first demolition? Why is that necessary, if not just as a show of power? And this is mild compared to what else Israel does to Palestinians.

But I love and hate Israel the way one loves and hates family. Should Israel exist and exist there?! It has to. Not only because it remains a haven for Jews when they need it – I think of fleeing there if need be, but I also think of fleeing to Canada. No, Israel must exist because it is in so many ways the focus of Jewish yearning and passion and confusion. Without it, how would we focus? Where turn our hopes and fears and doubts and rage?

I am not someone who thinks all Jews have to live in Israel, though I hope many will visit and use those visits to help shape thinking. But I do think we can't be fully Jews unless we are grappling with Israel. It is Israel that makes us question, "What does it mean to be a Jew?" It is Israel that makes us cringe or sigh at the sight of a Jewish army. It is Israel that helps us hone our values, too often in the breach. And it is Israel that shows that Jews, having founded a nation like other nations, acts a lot like other nations. Amichai wrote, "What are we doing in this dark land with its yellow shadows that pierce the eyes?...Spilled blood is not the roots of trees but it's the closest thing to roots we have."

I am tired of an Israel whose roots grow too much in spilled blood. I am tired of knowing that Israel has to defend itself, but doesn't know when to stop. I am tired of wishing that someone would take up the hope David Grossman expressed two days before his son was killed, his wish for leaders to talk before killing more sons. Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that despair is a great sin. I am trying not to despair.

I wish that Israel and the Palestinians would arrive at a real plan, would become two states that can live peacefully with one another. I wish they would talk to each other –and I wish the United States would intervene to help make that happen – as David Grossman once said to Bill Moyers, "There is a proverb in Hebrew, 'the prisoner cannot set himself free from prison.' We need someone from the outside to bring us out of this prison, because we are prisoners of our history, of our trauma, of our psychology." God, I pray that the Israelis and the Palestinians can be set free from the prison in which they are locked together, and can create states of peace. First of all because it is right and second of all because perhaps without the issue

of the Palestinians to use as distraction, other nations who could truly care less about them would be forced to look inward and help their own people in need.

I wish that Israel's neighborhood was not as tough as it is and that Israel did not contribute to its toughness. I wish that instead, true peace could be achieved between Israel and all its neighbors, and that the region could become a beacon of hope – truly ha-tikvah - for the world, rather than a model of militaristic misery.

I wish that sacrificing sons and daughters were not the modus operandi of the region and that suicide bombing, missile launching, cluster bombing and every other sort of way to kill children would cease in favor of education, jobs, home-building, and the overcoming of despair with hope.

I wish that the land could be quiet for 40 years, as it says over and over again in the book of Judges, every time a new leader takes over. I used to think this was low expectation. Now I wish for it: Imagine! Quiet for 40 years.

I wish for new leaders to create that quiet, a quiet of justice and right. Where are the strong leaders we need here and in Jerusalem and Ramallah and Gaza and Beirut, leaders who do not turn to violence and war at any offense, but who are able to move past that impulse to higher achievement?

And I wish that the American Jewish community, whose loudest voices often brook no criticism of Israel, would take a good look at Kolot's Values Statement: "*We believe that Jews have an obligation to grapple with the many issues and emotions connected to our historic attachment to Israel and the current political situation in Israel and Palestine. While we join Jews everywhere in facing Jerusalem while we pray, we have no consensus on political solutions nor their philosophical underpinnings.*" I love that we have no consensus, because the issues are so big and so complex and so scary that we are right to be confused, to hold off, to argue. It shows our strength.

When we first formed Kolot Chayeinu, with our dream of a café that could hold prayer and art and learning and discussion, an early model was the great New York Jewish cafeterias. My strongest memory of sitting in the old Garden cafeteria on East Broadway is of the intense arguments that went on between sips of soup or tea, arguments over literature, over politics, and certainly, though I was less aware of it then, over Israel. The Garden cafeteria and its arguments is still much on my mind when I think about Kolot's future. Such arguments do not divide; rather, they strengthen connection. They are at the heart of Kolot's non-consensus about Israel and here too, they need not divide but rather help clarify, create new bonds, forge real keshet – connection.

My hope lies in the strength of arguments and connections. **Ha Tikvah** says, *Od lo avda tikvateinu – our hope is not yet lost*. Much of the time it is hard to hold onto that hope, to know how to change with it. In a recent New Yorker article, Bill Clinton quotes Seamus Heaney's poem "The Cure at Troy" in honor of Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu. I leave you with his hope:

*History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.*