

Teaching Passion: Jews and Israel
(Genesis 15:1-21; Ps. 126)

Rising temperatures, rising tempers, rising conflict, rising fear, rising passions. The Middle East, always hot, is now scalding, with rockets and recriminations, exploding bombs and imploding hopes. Neither a political scientist nor a prophet, what I have is not wisdom but empathy--my heart breaks with each new escalation—the entrenchment of fear and vengeance, the innocent caught in the crossfire, the frightened, heading for boats and bomb shelters, the world watching with arms crossed, as the conflagration threatens to seal every exit to peace and reconciliation.

What can be said in such a time? What words can help or heal? When I proposed a sermon series on teaching passion this past Spring, long before the current emergency, I intended to reflect on some of the texts and traditions which reinforce strong religious thought and action. Amidst this week's tragic acceleration of violence, I debated whether to abandon that effort. But with religious traditions informing everything from the Middle East crisis to the stem cell debate, exploring passionate religious positions may be a worthwhile, if indirect response. Although I lack the experience to be in the shoes of the Muslims whose faith informs this conflict, I will try to convey something of what the State of Israel means to Jews, why for many Jews the protection of Israel is a life and death issue, and why for some Jews, settling the land of Israel is a matter of religious, indeed, messianic redemption.

Jewish practice is punctuated with promises of the return to Zion. Those promises reach up eagerly through the soil like new green shoots, at seasons of hope and celebration. The Passover Seder concludes with the pledge, "Next year in Jerusalem." The Sabbath table is graced with today's psalm of gratitude, describing a laughter-filled, dream-like homecoming from captivity. The Jewish wedding ceremony likens the couple's union to the ingathering of the exiles, greeting one another with delight, dance and song in Jerusalem. The return to the land of Israel is both metaphor and measure for utter rejoicing. If the exile from the land brought two thousand years of discrimination, persecution and degradation, then the return to the land promises self-determination, hope and safety. Israel, Zion is home and hearth, continuity and respite.

As HaTikvah, the Israeli national anthem recalls, "Still our hope is not lost, the hope of two thousand years-- to be a free people in our own land, in the land of Zion and Jerusalem."

For much of Jewish history, that hope was the stuff of ritual and yearning. Always a few intrepid Jewish adventurers made their way to Israel; many more were buried with a handful of soil from the land of Israel--the closest they would come to eternally resting in its earth. In the 1800s, Theodore Herzl taught, "If you will it, it is no dream." He sparked waves of pioneers, who committed themselves to immigrate to the

Holy Land, to make aliyah—literally—to ascend. But it was not until the Holocaust decimated the Jewish people, not until a time of darkness and despair so profound that it seemed as if humanity itself had died, that the world took notice of the dream and the modern State of Israel was founded.

In the aftermath of the creation of the State of Israel, when the singing and dancing in the streets had subsided, the theological questions took root. Is the creation of the state good fortune or a product of miraculous Divine intervention? Are the return of the Jews and the rebuilding of the Jewish homeland a function of Jewish determination to survive against all odds or a sign of the Messianic Era? What does God's promise to Abraham, revealed so long ago in Genesis-- that the land will belong to his seed--what does this promise that we just heard mean after so many years of exile?

Some extremely religious Jews turn their back on any meaning. For them, the founding of a political Zionist state is a violation of Torah and a profoundly anti-Jewish act, even a reason to mourn. It is up to God, not the United Nations, to determine the proper time for a return to Zion; for mere flesh and blood to initiate a state is to "force the [Messianic] end".ⁱ What's more, between the drafting of women into the army and the prominent role heretics and atheists play in governance, the values of the State of Israel collide with the values of Torah. Better to live in exile than to legitimize such a nation.

Other religious Jews, even those living within its borders, ignore the State. For them, modern Israel has nothing to do with ultimate redemption because the mechanisms of the state are disconnected from Torah". They ask, "Of what use are public institutions in Israel, if not for the purpose of promoting Torah observance and Torah study in the Holy Land?"ⁱⁱ At best, Israel is a neutral phenomenon existing within the secular realm. It is simply beside the point of Judaism.

But there are other, more widely shared, religious perspectives. Do you know the joke about the man whose boat capsized? He was thrashing around in the water when a rescue boat pulled up. -"Jump in, we'll save you" - they screamed. -"No" - cried the drowning man, - "God will save me". So another boat came by and offered, "Jump in, we'll save you." "No" repeated the drowning man, this time more emphatically. "God will save me." Then a helicopter hovered over the man and threw down a rope ladder. - "We came to rescue you" - yelled the pilot. -"I don't need you-- God will save me" – said the faithful man again. Finally, the man drowned. Face-to-face with God, he asked, "Why didn't you save me when I had such trust in you?" God sighed. "I sent you two boats, I sent you a helicopter...What were you waiting for?"

For the majority of Jews, of all denominations, the founding of the state of Israel was the equivalent of the boats and the helicopter. To be sure, God didn't announce the Divine Presence in a powerful baritone or dispense a calling card engraved with "I am the Eternal Your God." Nonetheless, most Jews believed that God's hand was involved in the miracle of the State of Israel. They did not hold that flesh and blood must be passive. They had a richer view of Israel than one in which the only value was to study and observe Torah. Particularly after the Holocaust, most Jews regarded the creation of Israel

as not merely an historical development, but as an event of monumental importance in the religious sphere. After losing so much and so many, embracing the possibilities of this fledgling, tiny country restored their faith.

The philosopher and Talmudic scholar known as “The Rav”, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, propounded this view. He interpreted God’s “reappearance” and intervention on behalf of the Jewish people in terms of the allegory found in the Song of Songs, in which the relationship between God and Israel parallels the love between a man and a woman. “I was asleep/but my heart was wakeful/Hark, my beloved knocks./ Let me in, my own,/my darling, my faultless dove” (Shir Hashirim 5:2) For The Rav, the darkness of the night is the Holocaust. The beloved who knocks is God. And behind the door of God’s beloved, are the Jewish people. As he interprets the text, Rav Soloveitchik detects the sound of God knocking in a variety of spheres.

- In the political arena, that Russia and the US, sworn enemies at the time, both voted in the United Nations for the resolution to create a state;
- On the battlefield, that the State survived the War of Independence;
- On the theological front, proving that the biblical promises regarding the Land of Israel still applied to the Jews
- In the hearts of Jewish youth, who found a renewed source of Jewish pride and reconsidered their assimilated pasts;
- In the eyes of the civilized world, reaffirming that Jewish blood is not free for the taking, that the honor of every community, resides in the ability to defend its existence;
- In the gates of the land, opening to welcome Jews who were persecuted elsewhere,ⁱⁱⁱ

Through this commentary on the Song of Songs, Rav Soloveitchik gives voice to the view that the founding of the State heralds a new relationship between God and the Jewish people. It is a relationship that is deepened by supporting Israel in any way possible--financially, politically, religiously, morally and spiritually as well as by making aliyah, ascending to settle in the land. Whether or not they were familiar with this particular text, Rav Soloveitchik helps us to recognize why for most Jews, wherever they live, standing in solidarity with Israel is an integral part of modern Judaism. It is a measure of closeness to God, an opening of the door to welcome the beloved who knocks.

If the beloved God knocking at the door is one pole of religious Zionism, the other pole stalks the streets hunting for a glimmer of Divine Glory. For some activist and radical devout Zionists, the State of Israel provides the basis for a uniquely Jewish brand of fundamentalism. This ideology, fueled by tribalism and a sense of siege, finds

justification in a selective reading of sacred Scripture, passing over sources that teach co-existence and brotherhood, zeroing in on those which tout triumphalism and entitlement.

On Independence Day, 1967, about three weeks before the outbreak of the Six-Day War, Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook was delivering a sermon when suddenly he emitted a sobbing scream, and cried the following words: “Where is our Hebron, Shechem, Jericho ... torn from the state in 1948, as we lay maimed and bleeding?”^{iv} A few short weeks later, the Israeli army occupied those very cities, which had previously been held by Arabs. Gaza, the West Bank, the Golan Heights and the city of Jerusalem -- much of the land promised in the covenant between God and Abraham in Genesis chapter 15. Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook’s disciples were convinced that he was a prophet.

For the first time in millennia, the sites sacred to Jewish memory were in Jewish hands. Jews could pray and weep at the Western Wall, the only standing ruin of the Ancient Holy Temple. As Karen Armstrong writes in *The Battle for God*, “A mood of exultation and near-mystical euphoria gripped the entire country. Many of the most diehard secularists experienced the war as a religious event, reminiscent of the crossing of the Red Sea.”^v

The surprising victory emboldened Rabbi Kook’s disciples. They believed that the war was not simply a religious event—it was proof of messianic redemption. They organized Gush Emunim, “the Bloc of the Faithful.” They captured the imagination of the media-- a band of young men sporting skullcaps and beards, with assault rifles on their shoulders and rabbinic texts in their hands. Harvard trained scholar Rabbi Moshe Halbertal, himself a young man at the time, understood their charismatic appeal—“Here was a new form of religious radicalism, drenched in ancient biblical and modern mystical texts, which demanded dedication and sacrifice, and which was animated not by the rejection of Zionism but by the intensification of its spiritual dimensions.”^{vi}

Like fundamentalists of all religious traditions, the passion of believing one has a monopoly on the truth, that one is living out a divinely ordained destiny reinforced by others who hold the same view, intoxicated—and blinded--these settlers. They protested and accused their government of betrayal when Israel withdrew from lands it had captured in exchange for peace—first in Yamit, in the Sinai Peninsula, and more recently, in Gaza. They accused Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin of being a traitor—until, impassioned by rhetoric and righteousness-- one of their number assassinated him.

Outspoken, insistent, full of certainty, new generations of settlers have been empowered by the rhetoric of Jewish fundamentalism concerning the land and the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. They claim that they are defenders of an ancient faith; However, like all fundamentalists, their interpretation of that faith is selective, partial, polemical and creative—in short, not traditional at all.^{vii} In the Jewish version of fundamentalism, by virtue of designating the land and the commandments dealing with the land as “fundamental” these radical Jews diminish the other elements of what was once an organic whole. Of the 613 commandments incumbent upon practicing Jews, 612 are subordinated to the one that concerns them—the injunction to settle the land.^{viii} Like

fundamentalists of all religious traditions, they contend that contemporary social forces threaten the survival of traditional values and beliefs; that only their interpretation of religion can halt the degeneration of society; that conflict can only be resolved by the triumph of religion over secularism, and that any compromise is tantamount to defeat.^{ix} They readily dispense with the virtues found in most religious traditions—including their own: compassion, social justice, pluralism, respect for one’s neighbor, the dream of a common humanity.

Jewish fundamentalists indeed teach passion for Israel. But like obsession, which crowds out all other possibilities, and deforms its object, this passion is explosive and can never be satisfied. In today’s cauldron of strong religions, where every religion has adherents who bring destruction in the name of faithfulness, it is essential for moderates to challenge fundamentalisms in all of their manifestations. It is essential for compromise to prevail over intransigence, for hope for the future to triumph over a concretized and selective reading of the past. Each of us, our own traditions, must challenge those who are steeped in certainty, as they in turn challenge us to find the seeds of openness and tolerance at the heart of each of our faiths. Let us plant these seeds in the fields we have been given. As the psalmist teaches, “Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. He who goes weeping on his way, bearing a bag of seed, shall come back with a joyful shout, carrying his sheaves.” (Ps. 126: 5-6) May the seeds of hope and humanity flourish in these troubled times. May their green shoots make their way up through the soil. May our broken hearts, may our weeping, yet yield sheaves of understanding and brotherhood, accompanied by the joyful shouts of shalom, of salaam, of pax, of peace. Ken yehi ratzon. So may this be God’s will.

ⁱ Yoel Teitelbaum, Ma’amar Shalosh Shevu’ot (Article on the Three Oaths), 76, 77, found in Melton Purposes of Jewish Living, “The Religious Significance of the State of Israel”, p. 517-540

ⁱⁱ Al haGe’ulah v’Al haTemurah (On Redemption and it’s Substitution), 7, 173, found in Melton Purposes of Jewish Living, “The Religious Significance of the State of Israel”, p. 517-540

ⁱⁱⁱ “Kol Dodi dofek” “The Sound of My Beloved Knocks”, found in Melton Purposes of Jewish Living, 519-523

^{iv} Karen Armstrong, The Battle for God, 2000, p. 263

^v Karen Armstrong, p. 263

^{vi} Moshe Halbertal, “When Gush Comes to Shove,” in *The New Republic*, 23 March 1992 p. 34, quoted in Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby, The Glory and The Power, Fundamentalist Challenge to the Modern World, 1992. p. 103

^{vii} Marty and Appleby, p. 116

^{viii} Marty and Appleby, p. 120

^{ix} Roger Stump, Boundaries of Faith: Geographical Perspectives on Religious Fundamentalism, 2000, p. 6-7