

The Family of Israel

Of all the many things I have read this year, one sticks out the most: A weekly blog from Jerusalem, on June 28, written by eminent Rabbi and scholar, Rabbi Dr Daniel Gordis:

“Zechariah Baumel was one of several Israeli soldiers taken prisoner when their unit was attacked in the battle of Sultan Yakub in June, 1982. For years, Israel knew virtually nothing about his fate. Baumel’s father, Yona, devoted the rest of his life to pressing Israel to do more to get information, and as part of this many-years-long campaign, he ended up speaking to the middle school class of one of our sons.

Our son came home, and over dinner, told us about Baumel’s presentation. During the Q&A portion, he told us, one of his classmates asked Baumel if he worried that Zechariah was still being tortured. I grimaced; middle school kids don’t yet know what you don’t ask. But I didn’t say anything, and our son continued. “No, Yona Baumel told the kids, ‘I don’t worry that they’re torturing him. I just worry that he’s cold at night...’”

בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתְּבוּן, וּבְיוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִחְתְּמוּן. כַּמָּה יַעֲבִירוּן, וְכַמָּה יִבְרָאוּן, מִי יָחִיָּהּ, וּמִי יָמוּת

On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed -

How many shall pass away and how many shall be born?

Who shall live and who shall die?

Who by water and who by fire, who by sword and who by wild beast?

Who by famine and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague....

For the past 1,000+ years, we Jews have recited these words in the *Unetanneh Tokef piyyut* at the heart of our Rosh Hashanah prayer service.

How real do these words feel today?

What is our plague?

Covid. Covid deaths so far: 7,000 in Israel; 18,000 in Massachusetts; 660,000 in the United States; 4.5 million in the world. A local, national, and global plague.

Sadly, we confront not one plague, but multiple interconnected plagues.

Loneliness. Even before Covid, we have been confronting a pandemic of loneliness in America. Especially among people under the age of 30. In a study conducted just before Covid, 25% of people under 30 said they have NO friends. In a recent study, right in the midst of Covid, 36% of Americans reported feeling lonely. Among people 18-26, this number jumped to 57%. Almost 6 in 10 young Americans are lonely.

And in the midst of these plagues of Covid and loneliness.....How do we respond?

Polarization, Division, Politicization. We keep dividing and dividing ourselves. So many of us see different Americas, not one United States of America. According to one study, 41% of Democrats consider Republicans the enemy. 57% of Republicans consider Democrats the enemy. Twice as many Jews say it is important to marry someone of the same political party than to marry someone Jewish.

Thank G-d, we have vaccines, masks and social distancing to help confront Covid.

And thank G-d, we Jews have Judaism and *Ahavat Israel*, love of Israel, to confront loneliness and polarization.

Years ago, when I worked at Staples, I was given the assignment to build a global sourcing operation. As part of this work I had to travel to Surabaya, a port city on the Indonesian Island of Java. There had recently been unrest and some terrorism on the Island and since I'm a nervous Jew, I was nervous. Ron Sargent, the CEO of Staples, had heard of my upcoming trip, requested my itinerary and called me into his office. Now I would not characterize Ron as nervous—and certainly not Jewish. Ron had one thing to say to me: "I know about your upcoming trip and I want you to know, no matter what happens and whatever you need, we are here for you." I can't tell you how much these few words meant to me. And they obviously have stuck with me, for 16 years.

Back to Gordis' blog....

"A decade ago, perhaps a bit more, I dropped by our local grocery store early in the morning. They stack the newspapers for sale outside the front door, so you can't help taking a look at the headlines as you head in.

That morning, the lead story was about Ron Arad, the Air Force navigator shot down over Lebanon and taken prisoner in 1986 and about whose fate Israel has never gotten any solid information. A new source had surfaced, according to whom Arad had tried to escape in 1988, had been re-captured and tortured to death. There were some hints at what might have been done to him, all too gruesome to repeat...

I grabbed what I needed and headed to the cash register, which happens to be adjacent to the door. As I waited, I heard the strangest sound, and looked outside. There was a woman standing there, her hand to her face, covering what was now a visible gasp. Her face was wracked with horror. She had obviously read the article, too.

The image of that woman has stayed with me all these years. I hadn't thought of her in a long time. Until earlier this week, when Israeli news reported that Gilad Shalit (the Israeli soldier captured by Hamas in a 2006 cross-border raid and then held in captivity for five years) had just gotten married, some ten years after his release.

Gilad Shalit's getting married might not seem like an event worth noting; it is, though, because of how the country reacted, and what that reaction tells us about this place. The headline about Shalit's having gotten married was classic Israeli. *Ha-yeled shel kulanu*, it read, "The child of all of us". Then it continues: "Gilad Shalit married Nitzan Shabbat." *Ha-yeled shel kulanu* was what got me to remember that woman with the gasp outside the market. Ron Arad, Gilad Shalit, and too many others—this is a place where you actually have kids you've never met.

The prisoner exchange that Israel made for Gilad Shalit (who was born six weeks before Ron Arad was shot down) was highly controversial in Israel. Israel traded 1,027 prisoners for Shalit, many of them "with blood on their hands." The hard core terrorists among them, vehement critics of the deal said, would kill Israelis again, and sure enough, some did.

I was personally in favor of the deal. I understood my friends who thought it was a terrible mistake, but I disagreed with them. What makes Israel into Israel, I believed then and still do, is that we get those boys home, no matter what.

[The helicopter pilot who brought Gilad Shalit home was the son of Yishai Aviram, the pilot of the plane in which Ron Arad had been the navigator when they were shot down; Aviram was rescued by an Israeli helicopter a few hours after they were shot down and escaped by clinging to its landing skids while under heavy enemy fire, but Arad was captured by Lebanese terrorists. Aviram's son insisted that he be the one to bring Shalit back home.]

What makes Israeli society what it is, is that there was no one in Israel who did not know who Gilad Shalit was. There was no one who did not think about him.
That's not only *who* we are, it's *why* we are."

* * *

"The child of all of us."

"We are here for you."

"We get those boys home, no matter what."

This is the antidote to loneliness and polarization.

Imagine how it feels to wake up in the morning, Labor or Likud, Democrat or Republican, Left-wing or Right-wing, Secular or Religious, knowing that your community, your country, your people, will get you home, no matter what.

On Yom Kippur morning, we recall the holiest moment of the year when the Temple still stood, the High Priest emerged from the Holy of Holies in the presence of myriads of Jews who ascended to the Temple—the "good" Jews and the "bad" Jews— and even sinners of every possible kind....

And in an ever widening circle, The High Priest atoned for his own sins, the sins of his fellow priests, the Cohanim, and finally the sins of "Your nation, the family of Israel.' And at that moment, the people heard the Ineffable Name coming from the High Priest's mouth, knelt down, fell upon their faces and said, 'Blessed be the Name of G-d's glorious Kingdom for all eternity.'"

Surely we Jews have plenty of differences and disputes. We often are critical of each other and disagree. At times, perhaps often, it can feel polarizing and divisive. Both here and in Israel. But when we live our tradition, our values, and our Torah, we are all included, we are not alone and we are never left behind.

In the coming year, may you each feel connected and cared for, may you feel part of the Family of Israel, and know that you are each *Ha-yeled shel kulanu*, the child of each of us.

Shana Tova,

שָׁנָה טוֹבָה וּמְתוּקָה
תִּכְתְּבוּ וְתִחַתְּמוּ

גִּמְר חֲתִימָה טוֹבָה