

## Ahavat Hinam

Second Day Rosh Hashanah 5770

September 20, 2009

Rabbi Daniel Pressman

The Empire's legions methodically secured the country against the rebellion—grim, implacable, confident. Inside the walls of the capital, five separate factions battled. Rebel elements overthrew the traditional leadership of the city, pillaging and killing. Then they turned against each other, Balkanizing the city. As the conqueror's noose tightened around the city walls, those who tried to flee were killed by their countrymen. Hunger mounted, because rival factions had burned stores of grain in the course of their battles. As the siege worsened, rebels tortured the wealthy to reveal their hidden food supplies. The conquerors understood that the battling factions were doing their work for them, so they took their time, pacifying the rest of the country. Finally, starving, divided Jerusalem fell, the Temple was destroyed, and 2000 years of Exile began.

That's a part of our history we seldom tell: that the Jewish people were divided over whether to revolt, and that ideological conflicts and factional hatred left them weakened and fractured.

The Rabbis drew a sharp lesson from the self-destructive factionalism that doomed the Second Commonwealth. We learn from Yoma 9b: "Why was the First Temple destroyed? Because of three evil things that prevailed there: idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed.... But, why was the Second Temple destroyed, seeing that in its time the people were engaged in the study of Torah, the practice of mitzvot and acts of benevolence? Because during the time it stood *sinat hinam*— causeless hatred prevailed. This teaches that *sinat hinam* is equal in gravity to the three sins of idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed together."

*Sinat hinam* can refer to many human failings. In the case of the fall of Jerusalem, it was uncompromising factionalism and internal conflict—each group convinced that it alone held the truth, and that the others were traitors. That doomed the Jewish people to destruction. This frightens me as I look out at a landscape of division and rancor within the Jewish people. Differences of opinion over Israel and Middle East politics are not the threat. It is the lack of civil discourse. It is the demonizing of the other.

I can't tell you how many people have said to me, "I have some friends that I just can't talk with about Israel. If I express criticism about something Israel did, they tell me I'm a self-hating Jew." Or they say, "If I back some military action by Israel, someone will attack me, 'How can you support Israel's disproportionate attack?'" In Israel, too, the temperature is very high, and factionalism abounds.

I recently heard Rabbi Donniel Hartman of the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem speak on this topic. I hope that everyone will take to heart something that he said, "I assume, because I live in Israel, that love and loyalty are not the same as agreeing. You do a great disservice to Israel (or any relationship) to assume that love equals agreement.... You probably can't be a lover of Israel and not disagree. If you always agree with someone, you're probably not really in a relationship with them!"

He also reminded us that whenever you say anything about a particular policy or action by Israel, whether criticism or support, you are disagreeing with half of Israeli society.

The danger of being quick to attack someone as anti-Israel, of assuming that only those who agree with you really love Israel, that unless everyone agrees with you Israel is doomed, is that you force people out of engagement. Let's take the hot issue of settlements. If I say to someone who supports a settlement freeze, "You don't really love Israel, you're a self-hating Jew," or if I say to someone who opposes a settlement freeze, "You don't really love Israel, you're an enemy of peace," what have I accomplished? I've closed off discussion of a complicated and fraught issue, and I've essentially banished that person from the discussion. To attack someone's character, or loyalty, rather than engage with their ideas, is an *ad hominem* argument. If you look up that term, you will find that it is a logical *fallacy*!

But what if I say, "We both love Israel. Let's try to understand where we differ, even if we don't end up resolving the issue. And then let's talk about other issues facing Israel. Maybe we can find common ground."

Israel faces many challenges, both internal and external. Israel is ringed by enemies, funded by a triumphalist Iran that is reaching for the nuclear button. Our hopes for peace have been dashed repeatedly, most recently by the violent and self-defeating response of the Palestinians to Israel's painful withdrawal from Gaza. There is an international campaign to delegitimize Israel. Israel's governance has become increasingly dysfunctional, to the point that basic needs, like education and water provision, are failing. Every year brings a new story of political corruption. None of these problems can be addressed through flame wars. Vitriol and name-calling are inimical to dialogue and problem-solving.

I have learned a useful way to look at some of the differences among us. This comes from work that Eryn Kalish has done within synagogue communities on fostering civil dialogue about Israel. She discerns three subcultures in tension: Guardians, Modernists, and Prophets. Guardians' main concern is the safety and security of the Jewish people and Israel. Modernists are rational and pragmatic, caring about Israel and its role in the world, as well as its importance to the Jewish people. For example, I believe that a Modernist would favor a two-state solution not because of humanitarian concerns, but out of demographic concerns and the implications for Israel's identity as a Jewish state. Prophets focus on resistance to injustice and on inclusiveness. All three groups love Israel, but look at its challenges in very different ways.

She also points out some inherent weaknesses in each position. Guardians can over-do concerns for their own group, and be seen by the prophets as lacking empathy for "the other." Modernists can disrespect the religious impulse that motivates many in their connection to Israel, alienating the guardians, and seem too "realpolitik" oriented to the prophets. Prophets can yield to moral equivalence arguments, missing important differences between Israel and its adversaries, alienating both guardians and modernists, who see them as naïve and self-negating.

It's important to realize that many of us carry around in our heads more than one of these views in tension. Also, all of these are positions of those who love and support Israel. There *are* clear boundaries for legitimate discussion. There are some Jews who call Israel an apartheid state or colonialist, who support boycotts and divestment. This is another way of saying that Israel is illegitimate and should not exist. And on the right, the small minority of religious nationalists in Israel who say things like "the state

does not exist for me,” putting their understanding of God’s law above that of the government, have also crossed the line. As Hartman puts it, they have left the room.

Within the circle of those who love Israel, Kalish says, we are challenged “to listen to all of the views, make moral distinctions about what aspects of each view will serve life, to critique each view appropriately while maintaining respect for the people who hold that view.”

Each view holds a part of the truth. Israel’s security *is* at risk in a dangerous world. Israel *is* a country that behaves in the world like other countries and has to make pragmatic political decisions. Yes, we *do* have idealistic, prophetic expectations and dreams for Israel. We *do* hold it to a high standard.

One more word about dialogue: it has to be face-to-face, and definitely not by e-mail. E-mail is the enemy of serious dialogue. It magnifies disagreements and raises the temperature. So if I say something today that you don’t like, *don’t* send me an angry e-mail. I will delete it. But if you call me, and say, “I really disagree with something you said, can we talk about it—I will be happy to do so.”

There is too much at stake for dialogue not to happen. Daniel Gordis, in his important new book *Saving Israel*, reminds us that Israel represents far more than the elemental *raison d’être* of providing a safe haven for Jews. He found an amazing quote from Jean Jacques Rousseau in 1762: “I shall never believe I have heard the arguments of the Jews until they have a free state. Only then will we know what they have to say.”<sup>1</sup>

Having a Jewish state means that Jewish ideas and ideals are tested in unique ways that can’t happen in Diaspora. Gordis cites a moving example: In 2004, two bombs in the Gaza strip destroyed two military vehicles. Munitions in the vehicles blew up, scattering bits of flesh. Gordis writes:

...Israel was thrust into an agonizing debate. How could Israeli commanders reasonably endanger more troops by having them go ... and, on their hands and knees, sift through the sand and the rocks seeking something to bring home so that the parents of the dead soldiers would have something to bury? On the one hand, the desire to have a burial was deep, and thoroughly understandable. Giving those soldiers some form of a burial reflected a deeply held Jewish value.... Given this pervasive Jewish attitude to burial, how could Israel choose not to do everything conceivable or possible to bring something back? But that value conflicted with another Jewish value, the desire to protect life at all cost, and to reduce risk to human life to an absolute minimum. What should Israel do here? Send more soldiers in, only to have them risk their lives with Palestinian snipers still in the area? Or tell the parents that sadly, nothing could be done?<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, soldiers were sent in to recover pieces of the bodies, and no one else was hurt. This discussion, which was carried out not only by officials but also in the media, could only happen in a Jewish state. As Gordis says, this is “the great triumph of Jewish statehood: Jews, making Jewish decisions, with reference to the complexity and even internal contradictions in the Jewish people.”

---

<sup>1</sup> *Saving Israel*, p. 44, quoting *Emile*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

He writes that this agonizing decision, involving Jewish law and values, military strategy, and human suffering, “offered us a glimpse of what the Jewish return to history could mean.”<sup>3</sup>

I love telling stories about the refined sensitivities of the Mussar teachers, but let’s be honest. It is relatively easy to live at a high level in a yeshiva or even in the shtetl market compared with the complexities of running a country, especially a country at war. That’s why these discussions are so vital.

There’s something else in the balance when we consider Israel’s security, identity, and values: it has become central to world Jewry. Gordis challenges us to consider the impact if Israel, God forbid, were to be destroyed. He suggests that

It is highly likely that the American Judaism that remained a generation or two after that loss would be but a faint reflection of what American Jews have created and now enjoy...At stake in Israel's survival, then, is the Jewish belief in the possibility of the future...Could the Jewish people survive without the anchor that Israel represents? There’s almost no chance.<sup>4</sup>

This blunt statement challenged me. I didn’t want to accept it. But as I thought about it, I realized that the thought of losing Israel was just devastating. It is true that many of us have had our Jewish commitments strengthened by the experience of being in a Jewish country. It’s true that Israel’s victories strengthened the identity and pride of Jews the world over. The loss of Israel would be a terrible blow, not to mention the fact that so many of us have family and friends there. The stakes are high, and none of Israel’s problems will be addressed by venomous contests over who loves Israel more or who is more loyal.

I began with the chastening reminder that the last Jewish commonwealth ended because of *sinat hinam*, causeless hatred and bitter factionalism. Rabbi Yitzchak Blau of Yeshivat Hamivtar points out that the Talmud also says, “The [First Temple era’s] sin was revealed and the end of their exile was also revealed. The [Second Temple era’s] sin was not revealed and the end of their exile was also not revealed.”

What was hidden about *sinat hinam*? He quotes Talmud commentator Ben Yehoyada, “who suggests that people were up front about their enmity but did not treat it as a serious crime. What was hidden was the understanding of *sinat hinam* as a major transgression. People understand that murder and adultery are seriously wrong but often make light of a little communal discord.”

Communal discord isn’t trivial. It doomed the Jewish people two thousand years ago, and has plagued many communities and congregations since. Joking about two Jews, three opinions doesn’t help us.

Rabbi Blau then shares a penetrating insight from R. Moshe Feinstein. “The hatred was clear to all but not the groundless quality of that hatred. Both sides of a conflict tend to think their dislike of the other to be fully justified. No one repents from *sinat hinam* because no one thinks that their *sinah* is truly *hinam*.”<sup>5</sup>

We justify our position and we demonize the other. We are the true patriots and the others are naïve, or parochial, or cold-blooded, or fanatical, whatever we have to say to justify our own righteousness and ignore their piece of the picture. There is an

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.yhol.org.il/features/aggadot/aggadot15.htm>

unbearable irony about this. Israel was supposed to be, and was for a time, a unifying force for the Jewish people. It was easy after the Six-Day war. We stood as one, because the near-death experience made it clear how precious Israel was to us. Israel is still at risk, and facing many problems and issues. We can only address them if Jews in Israel and here learn how to talk to one another.

In his poem 'The Jews', the poet Yehuda Amichai addresses a beautiful woman whose grandfather performed Amichai's circumcision long before she was born: "You don't know me and I don't know you but we are the Jewish People, your dead grandfather and I the circumcised and you the beautiful granddaughter with golden hair: We are the Jewish People."

We are the Jewish people, American and Israeli, religious and secular, left and right, Guardians, Modernists and Prophets. We have been given a great gift and a great responsibility. We dare not shirk it. We dare not let angry rhetoric obscure our common love for Israel. We all know the motto "Masada shall not fall again." We must place alongside it, "*Sinat hinam* shall not destroy us again."

There is an often-told story about Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who was the Chief Rabbi of Mandatory Palestine. As Rabbi Simha Kling tells it :

Once, ...of Rabbi Kook's pious followers asked him how he could befriend the irreligious [*halutzim*, the] pioneers. "The Torah tells us to love your neighbors as yourselves," the man continued. "I interpret the word *kamokha*, 'as yourself,' to mean one who is like you — pious, and scholarly. But if he scorns religion and does not practice it, you are not obligated to love him." Rabbi Kook replied: "I cannot accept your interpretation to love my neighbor only if he is like me. The true meaning is; 'Love your neighbor as yourself'. But if I love someone who is not like myself, then my love is *ahavat hinam*, a love without reservation, without cause. The Temple, we are told was destroyed because of *sinat hinam*, causeless hatred. Due to *sinat hinam* we were exiled. However, with *ahavat hinam* we may be worthy of redemption. For this reason we should love the *halutzim*, and all the people, even though they do not share our views. *Only when we come to love our neighbor without reservation, shall we bring about the redemption of Israel and all mankind.*"<sup>6</sup>

During these Days of Repentance, let us search our hearts for reservoirs of *ahavat hinam*. Let us look for common ground with our fellow Jews and lovers of Israel, even when we differ in ideology or outlook. And let us talk about our differences with civility and mutual respect. There is too much at stake — there are real threats to the Israel we love.

The oldest inscription in Jerusalem is the one found at Hezekiah's tunnel south of the Temple Mount. It is now in the Museum of the Ancient Orient in Istanbul. It dates back to the seventh century BCE.

*And this is the way that the tunnel was cut through: Each man toward his fellow, and while there were still three cubits to be cut through, there was heard the sound of a man calling to his fellow, and there was an overlap in the rock on the right and on the left. And when the tunnel was driven through, the quarrymen hewed the rock, each man toward his fellow, axe against axe, and the water flowed from the spring*

---

<sup>6</sup> *The People and Its Land*, By Simha Kling, p.89.

*toward the reservoir ...<sup>7</sup>*

We who love Israel must cut through the rock from our separate tunnels, because Israel needs us, all of us. We must carve our way through angry rhetoric and ideological posturing to true dialogue. We must call out to each other with words of reason and concern, seeking common ground. May this be a year of peace and blessing for the State of Israel and all Jews everywhere, and may each of us contribute to that peace through our words and deeds. Amen.

---

<sup>7</sup> Thank you to Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin for this text.