

Rabbi Marci N. Bellows
Temple B'nai Torah
Kol Nidre 5770

(Sing): *Kol Od Baleiva pnimah nefesh y'hudee homiyah*

“As long as the Jewish spirit is yearning deep in the heart,
With eyes looking toward the east, looking toward Zion,
Then our hope, the two-thousand year old hope,
Will not be lost:
To be a free people in our land,
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.”¹

The words of Israel’s national anthem, as well as its melody, resonate so deeply within so many of us. Hatikvah – the Hope, has sustained us since the founding of Israel. Some of us have been to Israel and have even sung this song on its holy soil. Some of us fought for the State to be established 61 years ago and took part in the founding of our homeland. Some of us turn our eyes to the East, having never been to Israel, but feel that yearning nonetheless. And, perhaps, some of us wonder – I’m in America - what does Israel have to do with me?

I had the incredible privilege of living in Israel from 1999-2000. All rabbinical students who study at Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion, our Reform Seminary, are required to spend their first year studying in Jerusalem. At the time, I had never been there – imagine my anxious excitement as I prepared to live for a year in a place that I had not only never before visited, but which had taken on a biblical and almost mythical

¹ <http://www.stateofisrael.com/anthem/>

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quality throughout my life. As I stepped off the plane, I indeed felt the urge to kiss the ground – I felt an incredible sense of homecoming. The air just seemed to vibrate with something different: a holiness, an energy that I had never experienced or expected. For all I knew, it was my imagination, but I felt it nonetheless.

Throughout that year in Israel, my class and I traveled around the entire country. The curriculum was designed to teach us about a historical moment, and then bring us to stand on the exact spot where it took place. Or, we would study a famous Hebrew poem, and then go visit the home of the poet to see the country through his or her eyes. Or, we would read a piece of Biblical or Talmudic text, then go to the actual place to which it referred, or maybe even to the location where it was written. Jewish history came alive for us all – we saw ourselves as the next link in the chain of Jewish tradition, the next generation of Jewish teachers and leaders.

For that year I lived in the extraordinarily beautiful Jerusalem neighborhood known as *Rechavia*. My apartment had three *mirpesot* – three balconies, which overlooked the city. You may have heard the song, “*Yerushalyim shel Zahav* (Jerusalem of Gold),” written by Naomi Shemer. When I woke up each morning, as the sun was just beginning to rise over the city, the vista was literally sparkling like a city made of the most precious gold. It was majestic, it was magical, and it was mine for an entire year.

I soon learned, through many interesting conversations with shopkeepers and taxi drivers,

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that being a woman rabbinical student was something which was pretty rare. These people would ask me, “What do you do? Are you a student?”

“Yes.”

“What do you study?”

“Jewish studies,” I would answer. “I am studying to be a rabbi.”

See, there is no word in Hebrew for a female rabbi, so I would say, “*Ani m'lamedet l'hiyot rav*” – “Rav,” is the masculine, and only word, for rabbi. This was always met with either an enthusiastic reply, stunned silence, or utter disbelief.

In the end, though, most of these conversations ended with a wish of “*B'hatzlachah - Good luck*,” and I knew that I had opened up someone’s eyes in a totally new way that day. At that time, even just ten years ago, many Jews and non-Jews within the land of Israel were still not familiar with the Reform or **Progressive** Movement – as it’s named in Israel – in the country. They were not aware that three out of the four major movements of Judaism ordain women rabbis, or that they allow women to be equal participants in most if not all aspects of synagogue life.

Not everyone I encountered, however, was as open-minded as I expected. There were certain school activities in which I could not fully participate – because I am a woman. We took a trip in the middle of the night to a Sephardic synagogue for the observance of Selichot – Ashkenazic congregations only observe it one night just before Rosh Hashanah, but Sephardic congregations celebrate it every night during the month preceding Rosh HaShanah. The synagogue was ultra-orthodox. My male classmates were

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warmly welcomed by the men of the shul, and they were fully involved in the worship experience. The women were sent up a separate stair case, via a separate, side entrance as though we had to be secretly escorted and not seen by the men. We were forced to sit behind a glass wall up in a balcony overlooking the sanctuary. As women who had chosen to be rabbis, Women who had chosen to be viewed as equally eligible for the role of Jewish leadership, this was a very challenging and upsetting experience, as well you might imagine.

On another class trip, we visited *Meah Shearim*, one of the most traditional and orthodox communities on the planet. I – along with my other female classmates – were all dressed completely modestly: covered in long-sleeve shirts and skirts that nearly reached the ground, no make-up, and our hair was left plain and unadorned. Nevertheless, upon entering this neighborhood, we were soon spat upon by those in the neighborhood, called names I cannot repeat on this bimah, and made to feel infinitely unwelcome. This by our own people. By our fellow Jews.

Please understand, these two experiences are minor compared to the hundreds of wonderful, warm memories I made throughout the year. Yet they are indicative of an ever-present issue: Ten years after I lived in Israel, and sixty-one years after the founding of the State of Israel, there is much still for the Jewish homeland to learn about Progressive Judaism.

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In Israel's Declaration of Independence, written in May 1948, the founders of the country proudly set forth that the State of Israel:

...will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions...²

Despite these words, the government does not work this way, especially with respect to the various movements of Judaism. Chaim Weizman, Israel's first president, had the incredible foresight to write, in 1947, "Religion should be relegated to the synagogue and the homes of those families who want it; it should occupy a special position in the schools; but it shall not control the ministries of the State."³

Over the decades of its existence, Israel has become increasingly controlled, on a political level, by the Jewish ultra-orthodox. Though Israel aims to be a democracy, controversies surrounding life-cycle events, issues of religious identity, and access to holy sites make this difficult.

²[http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace Process/Guide to the Peace Process/Declaration of Establishment of State of Israel](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace%20Process/Guide%20to%20the%20Peace%20Process/Declaration%20of%20Establishment%20of%20State%20of%20Israel)

³ Weizman, Chaim. *Trial and Error*. New York: Harper Bros., 1949. pp 568-9.

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Thank goodness for the Israel Religious Action Center, commonly known as IRAC. According to their website:

IRAC occupies a unique place in the social and religious landscape Israel, infusing social justice advocacy with the spiritual energy and humane worldview of Progressive Judaism. IRAC, the public and legal advocacy arm of the Reform Movement in Israel, was founded in 1987 with the goals of advancing pluralism in Israeli society and defending the freedoms of conscience, faith, and religion.

IRAC uses litigation, legislation, public policy and advocacy to advance civic equality. These activities have established IRAC as a leading Jewish organization working to strengthen the democratic character of Israeli society.⁴

Anat Hoffman, the Israel Religious Action Center's executive director, once described the relationship between Israel's government and the Progressive Movement as being quite tense.⁵ She went on to say that people were uncomfortable hearing her criticize Israel, as if any criticism was unjust or showed a lack of commitment to Zionism. On the contrary, Ms. Hoffman replied. Her desire to demand more of Israel demonstrated the deep love that she held for the country. Just as we might show a family member how they

⁴ <http://irac.org/AboutIRAC.aspx>

⁵ Heard by the writer during a talk at Temple Shaaray Tefila, NY, NY.

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may live better, we must help Israel be the country of righteousness and freedom that we know it can be. The Progressive Movement, as well as the *Masorti* community, what the Conservative Movement is named in Israel, push Israel to be a more inclusive, a more democratic, and a more just society.

Fundamental questions that the Israeli government needs to ask are: what do the Jewish Israeli citizens, themselves, want? What does the Jewish majority view as valid Judaism?

Currently the orthodox minority is the most vocal and therefore the most controlling of the Israeli government. Last Yom Kippur, according to a Gesher poll, more than half a million Israelis declared that they would pray in a Progressive or Conservative congregation throughout Israel.

In addition, the B'nai Brith World Organization sponsors a yearly poll of Israelis, looking specifically at Israel's views towards pluralism and World Jewry. The most recent poll's results, released in June, found some fascinating results:

KEEVOON poll⁶: 54% of those polled said they support that the Reform and Conservative streams and their Rabbis should receive equal status and funding in Israel to Orthodox streams and their rabbis. Only 36% expressed opposition to this proposition.

In addition, 44% support the State of Israel recognizing Reform and Conservative conversion while 49% insist that only conversions performed by the Chief Rabbinate should be recognized by the State.

⁶ <http://www.bicom.org.uk/context/opinion-polls/keevoon-poll--15-june-2009>

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When asked "Recently there have been attempts to define as "Jewish" someone with a Jewish father but not necessarily a Jewish mother as has been the tradition". 57% chose "A Jew is someone whose mother is Jewish" while 39% believe that "A Jew is someone whose mother OR father is Jewish."

Clearly, as Yizhar Hess wrote in a recent article in Israel's Yediot Achronot newspaper, "The myth of the orthodox-secular Jew, the one for whom the synagogue that he does not attend is orthodox, is slowly vanishing. In his place, a more open, different Israeli is rising, one who was to reacquire ownership of his Jewish identity." Hess concludes his article with the strong words: "We cannot continue to be the only place in the Western world in which there is no freedom of religious expression for Jews."

There are a number of current areas of concern that are being actively addressed by Israel Religious Action Center. For instance, Jewish weddings in Israel are only legal if an orthodox rabbi officiates. And, in order for an orthodox rabbi to officiate, The Jewish status of both partners must be verified. Thus, any conversions must be performed by an approved orthodox rabbi within the state, Or by an approved international body. Even those of us who take our Judaism and Jewish lineage for granted might find our status as a Jew questioned by these religious bodies. If you cannot prove that your mother and grandmother were Jewish, you might just be out of luck. What to do then? And, what if you want a Progressive or Conservative rabbi officiating at your wedding in Israel? More than 5000 couples each year are now choosing to hold a religious ceremony in Israel, with a Progressive or Conservative rabbi, understanding that it will hold no legal

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bearing. The couple then travels out of the country, most often to Cyprus, to obtain a marriage certificate.

Burials are also complicated. In 1996, an Alternative Burial Law established the right of any individual to be buried in a civil ceremony, and it required the establishment of 21 public, civil cemeteries. However twelve years later, according to a 2008 State department Report, only two had been created. Thus, if you cannot prove the Jewish status of a deceased loved one, yet you wish for him or her to be buried in Israel, you have only two cemeteries in the entire country to choose from.

The question of “Who is a Jew” is an enormous one, And it truly lends itself to another entire Kol Nidre sermon. However, the question of “Who is a rabbi?” is one that is near and dear both to my heart and this congregation’s. Temple B’nai Torah’s sister congregation in Israel, Birkat Shalom, in Kibbutz Gezer, is lead by Rabbi Miri Gold. Rabbi Gold has spoken from this very bimah in the past, and she has shared her valiant fight with you. There are 3000 rabbis in Israel whose salaries are paid by the government, yet not one of those 3000 is Progressive or Conservative. Therefore, communities that wish to identify as Progressive or Conservative essentially pay two separate times for their spiritual leaders: first in their taxes, which go to pay the orthodox rabbis, And second to pay the salaries of their own Progressive or Conservative rabbi. Rabbi Miri Gold has served her community for ten years – though she has never received a State salary because she is a Progressive rabbi. **Sixteen** other rabbis in her area receive a State salary – but they are orthodox.

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In 2005, the Israel Religious Action Center filed a petition demanding that the state fund the salary of Rabbi Gold. In 2007, after a two-year deferral, the Supreme Court finally recognized the need to budget for non-orthodox religious services. On June 17, 2009, a hearing resulted in a four-month extension to allow intensive negotiations to take place between the Israel Religious Action Center and State attorneys. As of a month ago negotiations were moving along. Hopefully, the IRAC will report back to us soon with an update.

During these Ten Days of Repentance, beginning with Rosh Hashanah, continuing over the past week, through tonight, tomorrow, and concluding tomorrow night with our *Ne'ilah* service, Jewish tradition encourages us to repent. We engage in this process of *Teshuvah*, of repentance and returning, to be the best selves we can be. Doesn't it seem only fair that we demand the same of the Israeli government? We should encourage them to undergo their own *teshuvah* process, their own examination into how they've treated the liberal Jewish community in Israel, and how they can improve relations with all streams of Judaism.

I wish I could tell you that weddings, conversions, burials, and spiritual leaders were the only issues currently under consideration by the Israel Religious Action Center. There are many others issues which need attention in Israel, And I encourage you to visit their website, IRAC.ORG, to learn more and to find out how to support their important work.

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They are currently fighting for an end to gender segregation that is enforced on over 100 public bus lines throughout the most orthodox neighborhoods. They are fighting for *Agunot*, For women who were cruelly not granted a *Get*, a religious divorce, from their husbands and are therefore not divorced in the eyes of the Jewish State. They are unable to marry again. They fight for women's rights to pray as they choose at the Western Wall which may include singing and the recitation of prayers, even the reading of Torah. This is currently not allowed. They fight for equal funding for liberal yeshivas, Progressive and Conservative conversion classes, And Progressive and Conservative *mikvaot*, ritual baths.

Now, please realize there have been many positive strides for the Progressive Movement in Israel. There are twenty-five Progressive congregations. There are dozens of Progressive Rabbis practicing in the country. They are our brothers and our sisters, And they deserve our love, support, and even our physical presence. I was honored to join hundreds of Reform and Progressive rabbis from all over the world at this past year's CCAR Convention in Jerusalem. On Shabbat, we had an opportunity to visit the Progressive congregation of our choice, So I visited family friends at Kehillat Yozma in Modi'in. It meant so much to the community, And to Progressive Jews all over the country, That we were there celebrating Shabbat and showing our commitment in person.

You, too, have this opportunity. Israel, and its inhabitants, need to know how important they are to us Diaspora Jewry. I am delighted to tell you about an exciting chance you will have to travel with me In October of 2010. With the help of a small, dedicated group of congregants, We are beginning to put together a trip to Eretz Yisrael, And we would

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like you to join us. We will stand on Mount Scopus and look out over all of Jerusalem, the city of gold. We will visit the mystical city of Tzfat, We will swim, or rather, float, in the Dead Sea, We will stroll the sandy beaches of Tel Aviv, We will visit our sister congregation, Birkat Shalom, And even have time to see Rabbi Miri Gold. We will meet with major players at the Israel Religious Action Center. And SO MUCH MORE is being planned. We will do this together, demonstrating our support for Israel, Strongly demonstrating our hope for Israel to truly be a democracy, As well as a Jewish state in which all Jews can feel welcome. Thus will we bring ourselves ever closer to a time when we will live out the words:

“To be a free people, in our land,
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.”

(SING): *L'hiyot Am Chofshi, b'artzeinu,*
Eretz tzion v'yirushalyim.

Ken Yhi Ratzon, May this be God's will.

Amen.