

Israel

Rosh Hashanah Day 2, September 11, 2018

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Last April, a social media phenomenon in Israel called Koolulam gathered 12,000 Israelis at an arena in Tel Aviv to sing “Al Kol Eleh” in advance of Israel’s 70th Anniversary. They sang with the Jerusalem Street Orchestra, and Shlomi Shabat, one of the hosts of *The Voice Israel*. The 12,000 people didn’t know each other, nor did they come from any single group within Israeli society. The pop-up chorus was made up of young, old; secular, religious; white people, people of color; lgbtq people, the unknown and the President of The State of Israel – Reuven Rivlin. Koolulam was founded in 2017 by three artists who saw the power of Jews praying together at the Kotel on Yom Kippur – and wanted to create something that would unite Israelis. Co-founder Michal Shahaf Shneiderman said she wanted to bring people of all backgrounds together, regardless of their political views or affiliations. “The gist of it is,” she said, “that we should all be happy together.”

The video is beautiful – and has been watched over 1.5 million times in the last five months. If you have not seen it yet, I encourage you to watch it after Rosh Hashanah this evening. In my opinion, it is a perfect vehicle in which to celebrate 70 years of the Jewish People having a homeland. A classic Israeli song by Naomi Shemer, translated to be current and diverse and sung as one. It is the embodiment of what we want Israel to be.

I love this Israel, and the video gave me goosebumps as it made me tear up – this video and the intention behind it encapsulates the miracle that is our homeland.

Israel has been a central part of my life for as long as I can remember. As a child I was taught to love the country, and by the time I was eight, I was a little envious of my classmates from Jewish Day School who had already traveled there. I visited Israel for the first time when I was eleven, and even as a kid, I knew that that was just the first trip of many.

Over the years, I was able to let go of my expectations. That wasn’t easy at first, Israel the country didn’t always live up to the Israel of my dreams. But once I realized that not everything was going to make sense to my American mind, and that not every aspect of Israel can be reconciled – some things live in an eternal paradox, I was able to appreciate the natural beauty of the land, to be in awe of the history, to be amazed by the human ingenuity, and to come to value what it means to live life fully while under the constant threat of attack.

I have traveled to Israel many times over the years, and when I wait too long in between trips, I yearn for it. I have been there during times of war and I have there during periods of relative peace. I have been in the cold and wet of winter and in the heat of summer. I have gone for short trips – just 3 or 4 days, and for more extended periods of time. Each time I go, I have a renewed sense of what it means to come home.

Israel is home. There is nothing put on about it. No one rolls out a red carpet for you, but everyone is happy to see you. There are very few pleasantries exchanged before people you have never met before get in your business. I have been asked more personal questions in the

back of taxis than I care to recount – everything from: what do you think of your president – I’ve been asked that about every president since Clinton, to what do you mean you’re a rabbi? One time the taxi driver was so surprised he called his 11-year-old daughter and put her on his cell with me so that she could talk to a woman rabbi.

About ten years ago, Danny and I took our first trip to Israel together. One night, we went to a seaside restaurant in Tel Aviv, and as we ordered our meal, our server said, “no, you don’t want that.” We ordered something else. She said, “no, you don’t want that either. Wait, I’ll just bring you what’s good. You’ll see. You’ll love it.” And we did.

On that same trip, we were fortunate enough to have a private tour of the JNF indoor playground in S’derot. It was just about to open, and I remember marveling at being part of a People who values life so highly, that quality of life is critical too. After years of incessant bombing in the southern border towns, it was time to build a safe place for kids to play, and to celebrate birthdays, and to have a fun spot to hang out with friends. I was impressed by the indoor soccer field that was also a safe room, so that kids wouldn’t have to stop playing during a *tzeva adom* – a red alert siren to signal that a rocket is just a few seconds away.

A little over five years ago, I traveled with Jewish Federations of North America on their last big mission to escort Ethiopian Jews to Israel. As participants on that trip, we met the 53 people about to make Aliyah in Gondar, and then flew together from Addis Ababa to Israel. We cheered in Ben Gurion Airport as the 53 became Israeli citizens and were welcomed home to their new home.

I was in Israel during Operation Protective Edge four summers ago. I learned first-hand what it means to run to a bomb shelter during a rocket attack. In the few seconds after hearing the *tzeva adom* warning, I felt fear, gratitude for the siren, and awe for the people who live so close to the Gaza border. I had the experience once – just once. That summer, they experienced it multiple times a day, every day. I spoke with teenager who was about to begin her senior year of high school. She was worried that school would be delayed and she would not have enough time to prepare for her exams, which she needed to pass in order to graduation. And she was exhausted from running to bomb shelters in the middle of the night.

The Israel I know is comforting, helpful, hopeful, spirited, creative, and occasionally a bit terrifying all at once. I love Israel. It is home. Unconditionally.

For the average American Jew who is under 35, however, Israel is a complicated topic at best. The media doesn’t show the Israel I’ve encountered. The media portrays Israel as an aggressor, an oppressor, an occupier, and it does so without providing context – Israel is located in a lousy neighborhood – surrounded by countries that would love to see her wiped off the map. Little attention is paid to why Israel’s security must continue to be a priority, because little attention is paid to the ongoing rockets and fire balloons being lobbed at Israel’s borders even during time of relative calm. Over 200 rockets in one day were launched from Gaza into S’derot this past July with barely a mention in the news.

Furthermore, the media portrays Zionism as racism. It calls Israel an apartheid state. All too often, this is the backdrop against which today's young people learn about Israel. They don't learn about Israel as a place of miracles, where thousands and thousands of Jews from all over the world have found safety from religious persecution. They don't learn about Israel as a land whose residents have literally made the desert bloom, or as the small and young country leading the world in high-tech and medical discoveries, or as a country that would think to build an indoor playground so that kids would have a safe place to run around and well, just be kids. Or even as a country that isn't perfect but that somehow manages to thrive despite being under the constant threat of attack.

As you may know, last February, the Federation in Northern California released a survey of Jews living in the Bay Area. Just 40 percent of those between the ages of 18 to 34 said they were comfortable with the idea of a Jewish state. Most older Jews, by contrast, said they were comfortable with the idea of a Jewish state and thought it was very important to have one. After only 70 years of existence, roughly two-thirds of young Bay Area Jews do not think a Jewish State is all that important. This is alarming, and this trend seems to be indicative of what is happening around the country. It is clear that we have a lot of work to do in order to instill a love of Israel in young people, and to teach about the significance of Israel, and what it means to have a homeland.

Frankly, I am concerned that as a larger American Jewish Community, we wait too long before we make Israel a priority. Birthright is a great trip. But if that is someone's *first* interaction with Israel, at 18 or 20 or 25 or now 32-years-old – it is often too late. We have to start sooner – because those who are looking to delegitimize Israel certainly are. BDS is still rampant on college campuses waging sophisticated campaigns, to which, Jewish students do not know how to respond. Many Jewish students are ambivalent toward Israel at best; it is uncomfortable for young people to identify with a country that has been stuck in a stalled peace process for their entire life span.

The Oslo Accords were signed 25 years ago this week, September 13th, 1993. 25 years have passed since the iconic moment on the White House lawn when Yitzhak Rabin and Yasar Arafat shook hands. For many of us in this room, we can remember where we were – it was a moment full of promise, a moment where the impossible seemed possible. We know what happened next, of course. Rabin was assassinated 2 years later, the second intifada happened, and there has been a steady stream of violence since.

A poll released last month showed that support among Israelis for a two-state solution is at its lowest point in 20 years. In addition to Israelis wondering what is next for their country, and whether or not a two-state solution is even viable, the American Jewish relationship with Israel is changing. Perhaps, in part because younger generations of Jews do not feel a special attachment, perhaps in part because Israel is 70 years-old. Yes, it is still a young country, but it is no longer in its infancy. It is time to redefine our relationship with Israel and it must go deeper than singing folk songs and putting loose change in a JNF blue box.

In August's Moment magazine, professors, scholars, rabbis, and politicians were asked to comment on the growing gap between Israel and American Jews. Yossi Klein Halevi, whose new book, "Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor" is a worthy read, wrote the following: "To a certain extent, a divide is inevitable because of geographic circumstances and opposite cultural makeup. Israelis live in the most dangerous and inhospitable neighborhood in the world; American Jews live in the most hospitable environment that Jews have ever lived in. Israelis have to be tough; American Jews have to be flexible..."

There is a disconnect between the two communities in terms of understanding each other's basic needs and circumstances. Too many Israeli Jews don't understand, or even think about, how Israel has been systematically insulting American Jews for the past seven decades by denying the legitimacy of the religious expressions of the majority of American Jewry. I find that appalling. I also find the inability of so many liberal American Jews to understand Israeli vulnerability equally appalling. Too many American Jews speak of ending the occupation as if Israel were an island in the South Pacific and not a miniscule country surrounded by some of the most lethal terrorist groups in the world. I don't understand how Israeli Jews can miss the deep offense that American Jews rightly feel for the way the State of Israel has disenfranchised entire denominations. And I don't understand how many American Jews can miss the acute sense of vulnerability Israelis live with as their daily reality...

Here is the essence of the problem: For many Israelis, American Jews sound hopelessly naïve, and for many American Jews, Israelis sound brutal. The danger here is that each community will perceive the other as betraying an essential element of Jewishness. For Israelis, the essential element is Jewish solidarity and self-protection. For American Jewish liberals, it's empathy for the other, especially the oppressed. We have deep structural misunderstandings. But even so, I believe in the future of the American Jewish relationship despite the minefields. I am optimistic about the relationship because we are the Jewish people. We are the joint custodians of the Jewish story: We have no choice but to get this right."

Israel is not perfect. It is flawed, but it is our homeland. It is part of our soul as a Jewish People. Rather than detach when we don't like something that is happening, we must engage more. And we must understand and we must help young people understand that Israel isn't Disneyland, it isn't Gan Eden, or paradise, it is a real country with real problems, and it is okay for us to acknowledge the problems and our frustration and to still love the country.

As Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the President Emeritus of the Union for Reform Judaism puts it, unconditional love is not the same as uncritical love. It is time to talk about difficult subjects – yes, about the stalled peace process, and also about Israeli domestic policies. It is time to create space for meaningful and respectful dialogue. We are not always going to agree. But, I believe that if we want to have a strong, Israel-supporting American Jewish community in the future, we need to start talking now.

We have to talk about how angry many of us were, myself included, when Rabbi Dov Haiyun, head of the Masorti synagogue in Haifa was arrested for officiating at a wedding outside the auspices of the Chief Rabbinate earlier this summer.

We have to talk about how profoundly disappointed many of us were when Prime Minister Netanyahu withdrew the plans to make the Kotel pluralistic. If Israel is going to be a homeland for all Jews, then religious law should not be solely determined by the Ultra-Orthodox. I have prayed with Women of the Wall, and I have led minyanim for mixed groups of people by Robinson's Arch. I do not feel at home when I am made to feel like a second-class citizen. When people yell and spit and try to drown out our voices. These things need to change. We need to talk about the Nation-State Law and the reduced status of the Arabic language, which has long been part of Israel's fabric. I am concerned about the potential blowback in the future and what that might mean for Israel's citizens of all backgrounds.

These issues demand our attention and our struggle. There are no easy answers, but I fear that if we do not begin talking with one another, if we do not begin engaging young people in serious conversation about Israel, we could permanently lose a generation of Israel supporters. Let me put it another way: Two thirds of 18-34 year-olds in the Bay Area do not believe Israel is important. The median age of American Conservative Synagogues is 55. If we wait to have these difficult conversations – it might be too late. Again, we won't agree on all the issues – but it is critical that we agree on one: Israel is our home.

I come back to Koolulam's video of "Al Kol Eleh" – this is the best of Israel. 12,000 people coming together to put aside differences, to sing in celebration of Israel's 70th birthday. It reminds us of who we aspire to be. And the choice of song is telling – *Al had'vash v'al ha-oketz, al ha-mar v'hamatok* - we praise the honey and the stinger, the bitter and the sweet – Israel encompasses it all, and Israel is here for us to wrestle with, to discuss, to support, and to love. I know it is not Beth David's tradition, but I invite you to please rise for the Prayer for the State of Israel, p. 117