

SHABBAT HOL HAMOED SUKKOT SERMON
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In an editorial in the Israeli newspaper *Yisrael Hayom* on the eve of the holiday of Sukkot the author notes: “On Sukkot, we are commanded to rejoice, but the custom is also to read Ecclesiastes, which instills one with a sense of despair. This paradox reflects the complex nature of life in general, in Jewish life in particular. We cannot paint everything in black and white.” This morning I would suggest to you that life is lived in various shades of gray.

The holiday of Sukkot bears a number of contrasts: It is the season of our rejoicing yet we read the rather cynical book of Ecclesiastes; we express our gratitude for nature’s gifts by using the lulav and etrog yet our flimsy list is dependent upon the compliance of good weather; we celebrate a holiday of pure joy in Shemini Atzeret and yet we recite the Prayer for Rain and Yizkor on that day. Life is not lived in black and white, in total joy or total despair; we live in the complex nature of gray all the time.

I have been privileged over the last few years to study with Professor David Hartman in Israel. David Hartman is one of the leading Jewish philosophers of our age and has established in memory of his father, the Shalom Hartman Institute where I have been studying and am currently a Senior Rabbinic Fellow. He looks at the Jewish world through philosophical and Halachic eyes and sometimes sees the congruence of both in a controversial manner. He has recently issued a new book entitled “*The God Who Hates Lies: Confronting and Rethinking Jewish Tradition.*” It is a challenging book in which he encounters a number of complex Jewish issues and expresses a most profound inner religious conflict. He attempts to come to grips with the nature of Jewish law in the modern world as it confronts among others feminism, Jewish identity and the State of Israel.

David Hartman was born in New York City and received a rigorous Yeshiva education. It is only after he went to Yeshiva University, and later was exposed at Fordham University to modern philosophy, that he broadened his outlook from the Yeshiva world to the modern world of Jewish philosophy and beyond. He spent many years in Montreal as a pulpit rabbi at an Orthodox congregation and eventually decided to make Aliyah with his family. In 1971, he came to Israel and had great hopes of having an impact upon Israeli society. While he has been able to do so through the educational programs established by the Shalom Hartman Institute, he has been somewhat frustrated by the fact that his vision of molding life in the state has not come to fruition.

He writes in his book: “In the time leading up to my Aliyah my intention had become increasingly focused on the possibilities for a national Jewish renaissance presented by the still new reality of the Jewish state, with what I vividly imagined as its wide-open field of new spiritual and moral possibilities.” He is disappointed that there is a large gap between the ultra-religious and the secular, between the dictates of the past

and living in the modern world. Where he expects Jewish law to be updated to modern times, he is disappointed that does not always seem to be the case.

He tells the story that he spent the majority of a taxi ride discussing the Sabbatical year and haranguing the driver with his disgust for the small-minded way in which Torah principles were being assimilated into the national religious consciousness. That was not his vision of how it should be. When he had finished, the taxi driver turned to him and said he had only one question. “Of course,” Hartman said, “I am eager to hear it.” He spoke in Hebrew: “What planet are you from?” Hartman immediately knew what he was saying. The complex nature of Israel did not give easy solutions; the modern nation state and Jewish law were sometimes in confrontation even as they were sometimes in total symmetry. It is a constant ongoing battle of the ancient, medieval and modern world all coming together at one time.

As I study with David Hartman, I have seen the challenges that he presents not only in Israel, but in modern life in the Diaspora as well. I recognized, too, this time as a Conservative Rabbi, that the complexity of living in the world as a modern observant Jew will constantly call forth difficult decisions and challenges.

Rabbi Louis Jacobs in his book *“God Torah Israel”* informs us that the sixteenth-century teacher, the Maharal of Prague, noted that the benediction recited before studying the Torah is: “Who has sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us to busy ourselves with words of Torah.” Why, asks the Maharal, this cumbersome expression? Why not say simply: “To study the Torah?” His reply is that in the process of study one cannot always be sure that one has got it right. Error is always possible in the study of any difficult subject, even more so in the attempt to discover what it is that God would have us do. Hence, the form “to busy ourselves with words of Torah.”

Life is not lived in black and white. It is always about complex situations which call forth difficult decisions. That is one of the reasons that I am proud to be a Conservative Jew and a Conservative Rabbi. We live in the modern world even as we base our lives on Jewish law. We don’t know whether all our decisions are ultimately the correct ones, we are prepared to challenge our world with the responses of Judaism to it.

As Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, the Dean of Ziegler Rabbinical School, our Conservative Seminary in Los Angeles has written: “It is precisely this traditional approach – which combines fidelity to our inherited tradition and the courage to integrate necessary change, which motivates Conservative Judaism today.” I am pleased to be part of a denomination that is challenged by the modern world and yet looks for responses in its received heritage.

There has been this same complexity of issues with regard to the release of Gilad Shalit. As this Congregation knows well, this has been a major concern of ours, and we have raised the issue each Shabbat and holiday of Gilad’s five year stay in captivity. Having met with his parents, Noam and Aviva, I promised them that we would keep mentioning Gilad’s name in our services for as long as he was in prison. When word was

broadcast that a deal had been made and that he would soon be released, I received phone calls and e-mails from a number of people in the Congregation. As Bryna said to me: "We all felt he was part of our family and look forward to rejoicing with him."

While Gilad's freedom is something that every Israeli wanted, it has not been an easy decision to create the template for his release. Hamas, which has held him for so long, is a terrorist organization with no scruples whatsoever. For five years he lived without a visit from the Red Cross or any independent observer. Hamas demanded the release of terrorists with blood on their hands in return for Gilad's freedom and this has not been an easy issue for government leaders to deal with over the last five years. Even those Rabbinic authorities who have discussed the prisoner exchange have been divided in their attitude to its advisability. But, as difficult as the decision was, as Ehud Barak, Israel's Defense Minister has stated: "It is the right decision at this time."

However, the complexity of the decision is not something that we can just dismiss. Gilad will be exchanged for 1,027 prisoners. From an Israeli security perspective it is not simple to release the 280 murderers that were demanded by Hamas, a terrorist organization still committed to the destruction of the State of Israel. Many of them are being released to their homes in the West Bank, in Jerusalem and in the Gaza strip. Even six Israeli Arabs are being released as part of the deal. Those who lost members of their family through terrorist's actions have mixed reactions to it all. On the one hand, they, too, want Gilad home with his family. On the other hand, they want no measure of compassion for these terrorists who murdered their family members cold blood. We can rejoice with Gilad's family on his release, even as we empathize with all those who have lost family members and friends killed by these ruthless murderers who are not being set free. Life is complex; there are no black and white answers.

We only hope that Gilad is well physically, emotionally and psychologically and that the security of Israel and its citizens has not been compromised. I recall the last prisoner exchange when Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev were returned in black boxes. During the week of Shiva I visited with the families and conveyed our condolences.

The lesson is taught to us well by the holiday of Sukkot as we recite Ecclesiastes, a most challenging book. Life is not simple. Whether it is the conflicts felt by David Hartman of an ancient heritage in conflict with the modern world or the case of Gilad Shalit, the answers are not black and white, we are confronted and challenged on an ongoing basis. Such is the great challenge of living as a human being and a Jew in the modern world. I wouldn't have it any other way and I think neither would you.

May our decisions be the correct ones which will create a period of healing and comfort for the Shalit family and an era of peace and security for the Jewish people throughout the world.