

YOM KIPPUR 5774
AUSCHWITZ OR SINAI?
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On October 6, 1973, I was in London, Ontario. I was a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary and was spending the High Holy Days in London helping a colleague lead High Holy Day services. It was Yom Kippur and that afternoon we heard a murmur in the congregation concerning something that was happening halfway around the world, in the State of Israel. It was not until Yom Kippur ended when we had our break fast meal and put on the radio that we began to understand what had happened. On Yom Kippur day, 1973, 40 years ago, Syria and Egypt pulled a surprise attack on Israel and as the day unfolded Israel reservists and soldiers were called back from their Yom Kippur experience to the Golan Heights and the Sinai desert. It was a few days later that we learned the severity of the situation.

We returned to classes at the Jewish Theological Seminary, but I must admit that in the two weeks that followed our minds were not really there. They were overseas as we watched television, listened to the radio, and attempted to amass as much information as we possibly could. After the cease fire was called, we learned how close Israel was to total disaster and how brilliant was the Israel's army's recovery ending the war with the Israel Defense Forces just a few miles from Damascus and having forded the Suez Canal into Egypt proper. Ambassador Michael Oren, the current Israeli Ambassador to the United States, has stated that the Israeli army maneuvers in the Yom Kippur war have been studied at West Point as training for the United States army. The plan and the execution of the counter attack was considered to be in its day, and even in our day, as something remarkable. For Israel, he suggested, though it was victorious in the end, the war was seen as a catastrophe. For the Arab nations, though vanquished by the end of the war, it was seen as a victory. There is no doubt that it did lead to the visit of Anwar Sadat to Jerusalem and, eventually, the Camp David Accords and peace with Egypt, which even under the most extraordinary circumstances of the last two years, still is in effect.

This is a most crucial time in the Middle East, 40 years after the Yom Kippur war. The same borders, Syria and Egypt, are not peaceful as, this time, the countries themselves are in great turmoil. Two years ago, the Egyptians overthrew Hosni Mubarak and elected Mohamed Morsi, of the Muslim Brotherhood. He was not successful in establishing a democratic country and only a couple of months ago was overthrown by the people of Egypt and its army. It is difficult to know what the future holds for Egypt.

In Syria, even less is known of the eventual outcome. Over 120,000 people are dead in the civil war, over 200,000 have been wounded. As many as 20% of its 22.5 million people have been displaced inside the country or are living outside it as refugees. Perhaps 600,000 have found their way into Jordan with the danger of destabilizing the Hashemite kingdom. Hezbollah has moved many of its forces from Lebanon to Syria fighting on behalf of the Syrian dictator. Jihadists have entered Syria and are fighting with the rebels. Chemical weapons have been used, there is a threat of U.S. retaliation on the Syrian perpetrators, and the eventual outcome of the battle is still uncertain. Two years ago, there was some hope in what was known as the Arab Spring. No one is calling it a spring anymore. They are not sure if it is a thaw or a winter.

Behind it all is Iran which continues on a march towards obtaining a nuclear bomb. This is a threat not merely to the State of Israel, not merely to the Gulf States, but to much of the Western world. We know only too well that if nuclear arms are in the possession of the Iranian regime, it is a game changer in the Middle East. They are now not afraid, and most assuredly would not be afraid in the future, should they gain the bomb, of exporting their terrorism across the region and across the world.

In addition to all of this, talks have started once more between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Under the direction of the American administration both sides have met in Washington and Jerusalem. It is very difficult, I believe, to forecast a time of peace at this particular time. Perhaps, the best we can hope for is a period of quiet.

How do we react to all of this in our day and age? As we celebrate Israel's 65th anniversary, as we are but a generation removed from the Shoah, as the Jewish world has challenges before it that sometimes seem almost insurmountable what should our attitude be?

This past February my teacher, Professor David Hartman, passed away in Jerusalem. I am privileged to serve as a senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, having studied in an intensive 3-year program and with its scholars. I have continued to return to the Hartman Institute, as I did this summer, to learn from its wonderful teachers and the scholarship that they produce. David Hartman, the founder of the Institute, was a brilliant Jewish philosopher whose works will be studied for many years to come. A New York born Orthodox rabbi, he spent many years in Montreal as a pulpit rabbi before making Aliyah to Israel where he hoped to live the Zionist dream and have an effect upon Israeli society.

In 1982, David Hartman wrote an essay entitled "Auschwitz or Sinai?" in which he attempted to delineate the challenge of our generation. Upon what narrative should we base Jewish existence in our day and age? In 1982, he was less than 40 years after the Shoah, 15 years after the 6 Day War, and only 9 years after the Yom Kippur War. Each of these events had an enormous impact upon his thought and upon his vision of modern Jewish existence.

He sees Auschwitz as carrying with it a litany of victimhood. He writes, "In the 20th century we have again become a traumatized nation. The ugly demonic forces of anti-Semitism have horrified our sensibilities. We can never forget the destruction of millions of Jews in WWII. Many, therefore, justify and interpret the significance of our rebirth in terms of Jewish suffering and persecution." He continues, "While I respect and share in the anguish expressed in these sentiments, I believe it is destructive to make the Holocaust the dominant organizing category of modern Jewish history and of our national renewal and rebirth. It is both politically and morally dangerous for our nation to perceive itself essentially as the suffering remnant of the Holocaust."

Instead, Hartman believes, it is the model of Sinai which should be the motivating factor of Jewish life in our time. He writes, "The model of Sinai awakens the Jewish people to the awesome responsibility of becoming a holy people. At Sinai, we discover the absolute demand

of G-d; we discover who we are by what we do. Sinai calls us to action, to moral awakening, to living constantly with challenges of building a moral and just society which mirrors the kingdom of G-d in history.”

Thirty-one years after the essay was written by Hartman the challenges still remain. How do we define ourselves? What will be the motivating factor that brings the Jewish people together? What can we impress upon the younger generation as the motivation to maintain Jewish life in the Diaspora and a vibrant and secure State of Israel?

There is no doubt that the specter of Auschwitz continues to remain over us. While we are now two generations removed from those horrible events, the stories of those who lived through it, and those who did not, continue to stir our souls. Recently a new book has appeared entitled *Out of Chaos – Hidden Children Remember the Holocaust* edited by Elaine Saphier Fox. The book details the true stories of hidden children remembering their Holocaust experiences. Three of our own members, Amos Turner, Edith Turner and Nicole Terry tell their stories. While I knew the background of their lives, to read their stories, as edited in the book, was a chilling reminder of the strength of character, and sometimes the good luck, that all three of them and so many others possessed. On October 3, our Gray Cultural & Learning Center will highlight the book and our three members will be present to tell their stories. I encourage you to come, listen to their stories and remember all those who did not live to tell theirs.

David Hartman suggests that the stories of the Shoah and its meaning for the Jewish community can never be forgotten. However, it would be a mistake to make that our defining model. He suggests that Sinai is the “antithesis of the moral narcissism that can result from suffering and from viewing oneself as a victim.” We cannot see ourselves as victims all the time, we must work to create a brighter future.

This past summer, the Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency for Israel met in Kiev, Ukraine. Bryna joined me in our trip there and in a visit to Odessa. When one visits Kiev one must spend some time at Babi Yar, a ravine just outside the city limits, where in two days, on September 29 and 30, 1941, 33,771 Jews were shot and buried. It was the single most massive massacre in the Holocaust. As one peers down into the ravine, which can be as calm as one in Highland Park, it is impossible to envision what occurred on those two horrible days. Jews were marched to the outskirts of the city, told to give up their luggage, then their coats, shoes and over-garments, and also their underwear. They had to leave their valuables in a designated place. There was a special pile for each article of clothing. According to one eye witness “It all happened very quickly and anyone who hesitated was kicked or pushed by the Ukrainians to keep them moving.” After doing this they were simply driven down a corridor of soldiers, in groups of ten, and then shot. As far as we know there were 29 known survivors and their stories form the record of the massacre of Babi Yar in the most gruesome detail.

After many years of Soviet occupation and the lack of recognition of this site as one where Jews were singled out to be killed, there is today a Jewish memorial where we stood and remembered the victims. It was indeed most moving to hear Natan Sharansky, the Chairman of the Executive of the Jewish Agency for Israel, a past prisoner of Zion and one of the heroes of

our people, talk of his memories growing up in the Soviet Union and learning nothing of the massacre. Now he was returning as a proud representative of the State of Israel.

If we had ended our visit there, we would have wallowed in the past sensing what Salo Baron entitled “a lachrymose theory of Jewish history.” We needed to make a visit to modern-day Jewish Kiev as well.

The last stop of our tour was a Jewish Agency summer camp. There we saw youngsters from all over the Ukraine, but especially from the Kiev region, learning Hebrew, experiencing scenes of modern Israel, and having fun being Jewish. The counselors were individuals who had grown up in the Ukraine, learned about Jewish life sometimes in the State of Israel, and were now training the next generation. This is only one of a number of camps, including one from our own Conservative/Masorti Movement, which gives our young people a hopeful view of a Jewish future, whether they remain in Kiev or make Aliyah to the State of Israel. In many cases, they teach their parents who grew up under the authoritative oppressive regime of the Soviet Union where teaching about Judaism was forbidden.

As I left Kiev that day, I understood Hartman’s dilemma. Shall we remain mired in the memories of Babi Yar or do we have the strength, courage and foresight to formulate a vision motivated by the model of Sinai extolling the vibrancy of Jewish life and the vitality of a Jewish state?

When Bilaam was asked by Balak, King of Moab, to curse the Israelites, he could not do so. Instead, he blessed them. However, in one of his orations there is a phrase which can be interpreted either one of two ways. As he gazes upon the Israelite encampment from the heights he states: “There is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations.” There are those who have seen this phrase as a paradigm of Jewish existence whereby we have not been accepted by any nation, but have been outcasts, exiled, persecuted and oppressed throughout the ages. Others see this phrase as a challenge to be a nation different than any other, one that is to live up to a higher calling, to be witnesses to the G-d of Israel, to create a legacy of service to G-d and humanity. Which definition should be the guiding one for our day and age?

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks in his final essay as Chief Rabbi of England, entitled “A Judaism Engaged with the World” writes, “Jewish history bears witness to the world that a nation need not be large to be great, nor powerful to be influential. The Jewish people is proof that you can suffer centuries of persecution and exile and still survive and flourish, recovering from every defeat and turning every setback into a matrix of renewal. You can be written off by the world and prove time and again that the world is wrong. Inspired by high ideals and a respect for human dignity, you can outlast any empire. You can suffer and yet sing, walk through the valley of the shadow of death and emerge, limping but undefeated, into the light of new life. Time and again Jews have shown how you can defeat probability by the power of possibility.”

He tells us that times have changed. “For the first time in 4,000 years, Jews have sovereignty and independence in Israel, freedom and equality in the Diaspora.” This reality should have an effect on how we live our lives as Jews and how we teach our message to the

next generation. Both Hartman and Sacks believe that we should not teach the message of victimhood, but instead the challenge of living a Jewish life, either in the Diaspora or in Israel, which is exciting and promising. Sacks tells us that the next generation of young Jews are not inspired by a Judaism that speaks constantly of anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, the isolation of Israel and the politics of fear. Nor are they inspired by a Judaism that asks them to look down on and sever all contacts with the world. We must energize the next generation by using Jewish texts, sustain them with a meaningful Jewish life, infuse in them a pride in the Jewish future, and instill in them a love for the State of Israel and the Jewish people.

We live in a most remarkable time of human history. Who would have thought that but a few years after the survivors left the concentration camps that the Jewish people would once more have its own sovereign land? Who would have thought that 65 years later the State of Israel would be a strong and democratic island in the Middle East? Who would have thought, as Michael Oren has said, that the State of Israel would have more Nobel prizes than Olympic medals and more than all the Arab countries combined? Who would have thought that Israel's Jewish population today is as large as that of the United States and will be much larger in the next few years? Who would have thought that Israel would be called the start-up nation, would have found gas reserves in the Mediterranean Sea, would produce Jewish scholarship at the highest of levels, and would be the laboratory for entrepreneurs in the tech industry, in the sciences, as well as in agriculture and industry? We live in a remarkable period and while we can never forget what happened but 70 years ago, we dare not define Jewish experience by that period alone.

And who would have thought that in this country Jewish life would be as vibrant as it currently is with Jewish studies on campus, day schools and Yeshivot around the country, Jewish summer camps teaching the importance of living a vibrant Jewish life, all leading to the depth of Jewish knowledge and observance of many youngsters far surpassing that of their parents and grandparents? Yes, there are many challenges: from assimilation and intermarriage, to ignorance and indifference. There is some distancing of the younger generation from the State of Israel. And there is still concern that since it is so easy to be a Jew in America, it is not difficult to blend into the melting pot and forget your distinctive ethnic, cultural and religious identity.

But, the opportunity to envision a vibrant Jewish future is there if we are willing to grasp it. Louis Brandeis was a student at Harvard Law School at a time when there were explicit limits on what Jews could hope to achieve. Quotas were in effect and many law offices were completely closed to Jewish attorneys. When Brandeis was in school, his colleagues would say, "Brandeis, you're brilliant. If you weren't a Jew, you could end up on the Supreme Court. Why don't you convert? Then all of your problems would be solved." Brandeis did not respond to such comments, but on the occasion of his official introduction to an exclusive honor society at this law school, Brandeis took the podium and announced, "I am sorry I was born a Jew." His words were greeted with enthusiastic applause, shouts, and cheers. But when the noise died down he continued, "I'm sorry I was born a Jew, but only because I wish I had the privilege of choosing Judaism on my own." The initial response of stunned silence slowly gave way to awed applause. Ultimately, his anti-Semitic peers rose and gave him a standing ovation. As you well know, in 1916, Louis Brandeis became the first Jew appointed to the United States Supreme Court.

And so, my friends, we all have a choice to make. Some say that in this open society, in this global village, we Jews are all Jews by choice. To some extent that is true. The question is: How will we deal with our Jewish identity? What will we teach our children and grandchildren? What do we see as very *raison d'être* of Jewish life? We must articulate a Judaism which brings pride and joy to us and our families, a sense of service to our community, a positive identification with our people in the State of Israel, and a common mission with all good people to create communities of peace and security for all.

David Hartman suggests: "Because of Sinai, Jewish suffering did not create self-pity but moral sensitivity: 'And you shall love the stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.' Auschwitz, like all Jewish suffering of the past, must be absorbed and understood within the normative framework of Sinai. We will mourn forever because of the memory of Auschwitz. We will build a healthy new society because of the memory of Sinai." That, ultimately, is the challenge of the present generation, whether it be for those of us living in the Diaspora or for those members of our people who live in Israel. We must create healthy Jewish societies based upon Jewish knowledge, a strong Jewish identity, a passion for Jewish living, and a love for the Jewish people. Our time demands nothing less. We are all Jews by choice and if we so choose we can create a bright Jewish future for all.

On this Yom Kippur 5774, 40 years after the commencement of the Yom Kippur War of 1973, let us be proud, faithful, identified and passionate Jews. Let us assume the challenges that are before us and be confident in our successful ability to surmount them as we create a vibrant, vital, and exciting Jewish world with peace and security for Israel and a strong Jewish people.