

PARSHAT KI TISA
MARCH 3, 2018
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

Two weeks ago, one of my teachers and mentors passed away in Israel. Rabbi, Hazzan, Dr. Avraham, Herbert, Feder, passed away at the age of 87 in Jerusalem. In the late 1960's and 1970's, Rabbi Feder was the Rabbi of Beth Tikvah Congregation in Toronto. I served as his Youth Director for two years while I was a student at York University. Bryna also served as an advisor at that time. I spent a great deal of time with Rabbi Feder, both in the synagogue and on Shabbatot in the Feder home. He had graduated as a Hazzan from the Jewish Theological Seminary, served a pulpit and later returned to JTS to gain his rabbinic ordination. In Toronto he earned a doctorate in English literature at the University of Toronto. In 1981, he made Aliyah to Israel and served for a number of years as the Rabbi of Moreshet Yisrael Congregation at the Agron Center in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Feder was a passionate Jew, a lover of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. In his passion he could be deeply critical of the conduct of members of his congregation and their unwillingness to live up to the highest ideals of Judaism. He was extremely devoted to the State of Israel and told me many times when we met in Israel of his love for the country and its people. When he sang as a Hazzan, his voice was powerful and his song entered your soul. And when he spoke you had to listen very carefully for his ideas were visionary and sometimes difficult to follow.

Those two years that I served with him were important ones in my life. I was debating concerning my future path during my latter years at York University and was thinking about the rabbinate. I watched him, learned from him, and we had many discussions. After I graduated I went to study in Israel for a year and there decided that I would pursue the rabbinate. I entered the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1972.

Rabbi Feder wrote a number of books, including Torah Through a Zionist Vision in which he comments on the Torah portions utilizing his scholarship and his love of Zion to expand upon his ideas.

When he comments on our portion of this morning he extolls Moses as the true believer in Ahavat Yisrael – the love for Israel. Moses had witnessed the sin of the golden calf as he prepared to bring the Ten Commandments down from the top of Mount Sinai. Angry at his brother Aaron, disgusted with his people, he went back up the mountain to plead with G-d who wished to destroy the entire nation. According to Rabbi Feder Moses used three debating tactics in order to save the Jewish people from G-d's wrath, "the trivialization of the sin, the reminder that G-d's commitment to the is unconditional, and the self-effacement of Moses in the tempting moment of self-aggrandizement if it

involves abandoning Israel.” He writes, “What then is the underlying value-concept generating these debating tactics? – Ahavat Yisrael – the love for Israel.”

Moses grew up in the palace of Pharaoh and thus the love of his people had been an acquired love. It was not easy to love Israel for he saw them stray from G-d’s commandments and be ungrateful for the many gifts that were presented to them throughout the desert experience. His love for his people is not based on a blind acceptance of their spiritual and moral weaknesses. He knows that Israel has sinned and cannot be totally exonerated. “Yet,” Rabbi Feder suggests, “Moses feels increasingly like a parent whose children have erred, have sinned, and have failed. As a loving parent, he is prepared to either take the blame, or to claim that whatever merits he the parent may have, it should be accounted instead to the children.” Moses refuses to entertain the possibility of living without Israel. It was this thought that swayed G-d not to destroy the entire people.

I just returned this week from Israel where I attended the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations annual mission and the meetings of the Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency. These are critical times both for the Jewish people and the State of Israel. On our agenda were the many challenges that face the State of Israel, in particular on its northern border. We heard military and political briefings, and traveled to an army base in the north to get a better understanding of how Israel is preparing for what many deem will be an eventual war stemming from Assad’s victory, the battle-readiness of Hezbollah, and the ascendancy of Iran in the region. But no matter the forum we were told that Israel is strong militarily and economically, and now has better relations with moderate Arab states and countries in Africa than ever before.

Yet, present underneath the optimism were the sentiments of a disconnect between American Jews and Israel. In a review of the conference in *The Jerusalem Post* by Doron Krakow, the CEO of the Jewish Community Center Association of North America, he noted the divisive nature of discussing Israel within Jewish life: “In my observations, 95% of the time in which we deal with Israel in organized Jewish life, we do so on two issues -Jewish geopolitics and the Orthodox/non-Orthodox issues – and both of those issues tend to make people angry. To be in the same room as lots of other Jews, somebody’s going to say something that’s going to make someone’s blood boil, and it becomes a contentious environment. Most Jewish institutional settings prefer to avoid contentious environments, and as a result they have defaulted to a place where they begin to see Israel as a divisive subject and it is avoided. That’s the opposite of what leadership responsibility is.”

Unfortunately, Krakow is correct. The State of Israel and its policies have become a divisive issue not only for North American Jewry, but for Jewry around the world and it is very sad. As we approach the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel, we need to acknowledge the miraculous time in which we live. We may disagree

with policies of the State and its present government, and I do in a number of cases, but we must begin with an understanding that Israel and the state of the Jews is not only an ongoing miracle, but an opportunity to experience a full life embraced by Jewish and democratic values as administered by a nation state. Though Israel may fall short sometimes and needs to strive for higher standards, let us never forget that without the State of Israel our people endured the most horrible calamity that has ever befallen the Jewish nation. We need to start with Ahavat Yisrael as the foundational story of our people. In many of his sermons Rabbi Feder extolled the love of the State of Israel, its Zionist vision, and the great opportunity with which it presents us.

We need to feel, and most importantly, we need to teach the next generation, that Ahavat Yisrael is an integral part of our responsibilities towards the State of Israel. Yes, you may disagree with policies of the State and governmental decisions, but it must come out of love and concern. As one commentator at the Jewish Agency meetings said: “We live in the time of both apathy and ignorance. The most common phrases are: ‘I don’t know and I don’t care.’” We must set a standard of caring for our fellow Jews in the State of Israel and their future.

While Moses never lived to see his people in the land, he did teach us of the importance of Ahavat Yisrael as it relates to the Jewish people. Today, it is more important than ever. We heard of the increase of anti-Semitism in Europe and the difficulties of some Jewish communities of coping with it. One of the guests at the Jewish Agency meetings in Zichron Yaacov, was Rabbi Michael Schudrich, the Chief Rabbi of Poland. He expressed great concern about the new Polish law declaring that anyone who mentions the term Polish death camps will be subject to punishment by the judicial system. He thought they made a tremendous mistake and he is part of the negotiating team that is working between Poland and the State of Israel. Yet, he believes that raw anti-Semitism has not increased among the Polish population. He encouraged us to stay in contact with the Jews of Poland who number today somewhere between 5,000 to 10,000, depending on how you count them. I will be leading a trip of the “March of the Living” to Poland and Israel just after Pesach and he encouraged us to continue our journey. In fact, on his schedule is a meeting with us in Warsaw.

It is critical that we remain concerned about the Jewish people around the world. We have a common story and whether we like it or not we have a common future. While there are many divisions amongst our people that have been highlighted the last number of years, much more unites us than can ever divide us. Our concern must emanate from the concept of Avahat Yisrael, a love for our brothers and sisters as family members and as part of our circle of concern.

Two days ago, we read the story of Purim and we acknowledged the hatred of Haman for our people as he wished to wipe them out throughout the Persian Empire. It was Sinat Chinam, an idle hatred stemming from what it seemed to be an individual protest to his

decree, but was really the extended hatred of Amalek, the ancestor of Haman. In this day and age we must remember what Rabbi Avraham Isaac Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine taught us. We must portray Ahavat Chinam, a causeless love for our people and our land.

I came back from Israel concerned about the future of Israel both the people and the land, yet confident that we will survive and indeed thrive. In order to do so we must continually recognize our ongoing responsibilities stemming from a love and respect for one another and for the well-being of the State of Israel.

Rabbi Feder taught me about the importance of both of those responsibilities and I pray that his teachings will continue to motivate me. May his memory be for a blessing and may the love of Israel strengthen each and every one of us so that our people and our land will thrive well into the future.