

RH1 5772 – *Matzanu Mayim*
“We Found Water”

Shanah Tovah.

The Talmud states:

“Mi shelo ra’ah Yerushalayim b’tifarta lo ra’ah krakh nehmad mei’olam.

“One who has not seen Jerusalem in all her splendor, has never seen a delightful city in his life.

“Mi shelo ra’ah Beit Hamikdash b’vinyano, lo ra’ah binyan mifo’ar mei’olam.

“One who has not seen the *Beit Hamikdash* – the Holy Temple in its full construction, has not seen a glorious building in his life.” (Sukkah 52b)

Some four centuries after the destruction our Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, the Talmud paints a powerful portrait of the past. This is the idealized Temple, the idealized Jerusalem, the idealized Israel.

There are two Israel’s: the Idealized Israel with two capital I’s, the heavenly Jerusalem, the perfected state, the imagined or reimagined image of what Israel may have once been or what it could be.

For thousands of years, it has been the Idealized Israel that sustained our people; the image of a land “flowing with milk and honey,” lush with well-watered vegetation. We yearned for it, we dreamed about it, we longed for it from the corners of our exile in the darkest periods in our history, in human history – and we held out that vision of what could be.

And, at the same time, there is the real Israel, the actual land and place, filled with real people, problems and warts, challenges and difficulties – a place where at least a small number of Jews have lived continually for thousands of years, but it hasn’t always been a lush, fertile land.

It is important to understand that both of these ‘Israel’s have been competing for our attention and both serve valuable purposes.

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The real Israel is the one that my great-great-grandfather, Avraham Yitzhak Medalia, arrived at 130 years ago, a poor land filled with swamps and malaria, a land with some Arabs living on land that was owned by Arab landowners living in Damascus and Beirut, a land that Jews purchased and worked tirelessly to improve to create the modern State of Israel, certainly a blend of the ideal and real if ever there was one.

I had the pleasure of being in Israel this summer and taking a tour with 28 other members of my family, parents, children, uncles, aunts and cousins from Israel and from America, who all gathered in the town of *Rishon L'Tziyon* to see where my great-great-grandfather settled in 1884. Since my cousins are named Medalia – the same last name as one of the founders of the city – they opened their museum up especially for us! Ah, the power of a name!

Rishon L'Tziyon – First to Zion, was a dream, an idealized dream of what a place could be. The land that was bought was not of high quality, but the new inhabitants, pioneering people like my great-great-grandfather who had made *aliyah* from Lithuania to Jerusalem in 1882 only to realize that he could not build a future there, were told to go inhabit this new land and, most importantly, that there was water there.

But when they arrived, this Ideal Israel clashed with the real Israel since the water was a bug-ridden swamp, and the water non-potable, undrinkable.

These new inhabitants had to find drinking water in order to survive. It was a several-hour hike to the nearest neighboring town, an Arab village where a wealthy Arab landlord would sell them a jug of water for the equivalent of \$100. Schlepping back this exorbitantly over-priced water was clearly not a feasible long-term solution.

The community had to decide what to do, and they decided to dig a well. Unfortunately, they did not have enough engineers (had we known, we could have sent them some of ours, since we have an abundance!). So, they dug a well at the top of a hill, thinking that when they reached water, the water could then flow down to everyone's home and field. But, of course, digging at the top of a hill means that you have to dig that much farther down in order to strike water. The community in that first summer of 1884 was in a panic. They had dug and dug and they had not reached water. No-one was sure what to do or if they could survive.

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Over the last few months, and certainly in the last few weeks, we have seen most troubling developments for the modern State of Israel. Besieged by foes, challenged both internally and externally, Israel has found itself under pressure from former allies with whom they had at least, a cold peace.

Turkey, a lukewarm ally that just a few years ago held joint military exercises with Israel, has embarked on a dangerous new path, breaking this alliance and recently, even threatening war against Israel.

Egypt, which admittedly had only a cold peace with Israel, has changed course dramatically as well. The “Arab Spring” has brought with it winter chills; what was once a bedrock of Israel's strategic plan has had its foundation shaken to the core. With their economy in shambles, the Sinai a training area for terrorists like Al Qaeda, who knows what will transpire next...

Even Syria, which is experiencing tumult as it tries to overthrow its murderous dictator, has created a new dynamic, and now what had once been a stable border is no longer stable.

But the greatest political challenge has been the campaign to malign and destroy Israel in the eyes of the world: most recently, the attempt of the Palestinians to bring about statehood through the United Nations over the last weeks.

The Palestinian Foreign Minister said that their proposed state will have no Jews in it.

This Judenrein plan for a state has not even been challenged in the world and frighteningly, we hear only acquiescence from the European Union. Given the European attempt at Judenrein 70 years ago, this is a most sad reflection on them and their values.

In fact, it was exactly on this day – today and tomorrow actually, seventy years ago that Babi Yar occurred, the single most horrific and infamous mass murder during the Holocaust.

Prime Minister Netanyahu said last Friday at the UN, “the Jewish State of Israel will always protect the rights of all its minorities, including the more than one million Arab citizens of Israel. I wish I could say the same thing about a future Palestinian state. For as Palestinian officials made clear the other day, (...they said) the Palestinian State won’t allow any Jews in it. They’ll be ‘Jew-free,’ Judenrein.”

Netanyahu also said that “the Palestinians should first make peace with Israel. And then get their state.” It seems kind of obvious, but since they have never stopped inciting hate and have the Gaza Strip controlled by a terrorist organization, it bears repeating.

This, my friends, is the real Israel. One that finds itself challenged as never before.

Israel is a country singled out by all others in UN – discriminated against throughout the Arab world. Although the UN occasionally criticizes others countries, it criticizes Israel more than all the other countries combined.

Let’s realize, as Netanyahu pointed out, that the UN Security Council is led by Lebanon, which is controlled today by Hezbollah, a terrorist organization financed by Iran and sworn to Israel’s destruction. It’s really unbelievable!

I realize I have not even spoken to the fact that Iran is in the process of building nuclear weapons, already possesses missiles that can easily hit Israel, arms terrorist groups that have repeatedly attacked Israel from Gaza and Lebanon (and now Sinai), foments hate against Israel and Jews around the world, is ruled by a leader who seems to

be deranged, suggesting at the UN last week that the Holocaust and 9/11 were hoaxes and has stated explicitly that they will destroy Israel...

It's so frightening that it almost seems absurd...
But it's not.

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The real Israel is messy. As President Obama said to the UN last Tuesday, "Let us be honest with ourselves: Israel is surrounded by neighbors that have waged repeated wars against it. Israel's citizens have been killed by rockets fired at their houses and suicide bombs on their buses. Israel's children come of age knowing that throughout the region, other children are taught to hate them. Israel, a small country of less than eight million people, looks out at a world where leaders of much larger nations threaten to wipe it off of the map. The Jewish people carry the burden of centuries of exile and persecution, and fresh memories of knowing that six million people were killed simply because of who they are. Those are facts. They cannot be denied.

The Jewish people have forged a successful state in their historic homeland. Israel deserves recognition. It deserves normal relations with its neighbors. And friends of the Palestinians do them no favors by ignoring this truth, just as friends of Israel must recognize the need to pursue a two-state solution with a secure Israel next to an independent Palestine."

Benny Morris, an Israeli historian, recently wrote that "Israel is under assault as the Palestinians plan to go to the United Nations [and this] could lead to more violence."

"As we saw, with the Egyptians storming the Israeli Embassy, it was only thanks to Netanyahu's calling Obama that Egypt rescued six [Israeli] Jews who would have been lynched and murdered." And I just read that they were actually paid to attack the embassy...

Let us not overlook other challenges including the scarcity of water, the disparity of wealth and real estate prices which led to massive rallies in Israel this summer (really quite remarkable and unparalleled in the world – the largest rally in Israel would have been something like 17 million people here), a Haredi/Ultra-Orthodox population that lives off the government, neither serves in the military nor supports the economy except by providing over one third of the children...

These kids are enrolled in their community's own schools without any government supervision but a great deal of government money. These are unique schools for the 21st Century; the children receive no modern education in subjects like math. They do get an education in one subject: intolerance of us, non-Orthodox Jews.

More and more Israelis are leaving Israel for work elsewhere, as we see in the Boston area, creating a serious "brain drain." My cousin Ohad Medalia, a prominent

scientist for whose research Ben Gurion University built a multi-million dollar lab a few years ago, has moved to Zurich where he finds better working and living conditions.

The Israeli Arab situation is becoming more and more challenging as that population identifies more with their Palestinian cousins than with their status as citizens of the democratic State of Israel.

On our shul trip to Israel this summer, we heard from Khaled Abu Toameh, a Palestinian journalist who is an Israeli citizen. He spoke of the difficulties caused by the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, and others. But he also spoke about the fact that Israel needs to do a better job of protecting the rights of its Arab minority.

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Now, for the good news. Israel's overall economy and GDP continue to grow. It is by all accounts a high-tech, biotech, economic success. It is producing new technologies that benefit all of humankind in science, medicine, computers and cell phones. Israeli innovation is simply everywhere.

Last month, Standard and Poor's upgraded Israel to an A+ rating, tourism is up 26% over and Israelis are actively taking hold of their country, as demonstrated by the aforementioned rallies and "tent-cities" that sprang up this summer.

Israel is a robust democracy, the only one of its kind in its neighborhood. While some may feel alienated within its borders, overall they do have a vote and can participate in a much more profound way than other populations in the area.

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So, we look at Israel with bifocals. When we look up close, we see the warts, we see the challenges, we see its faults and its dire situation. We see the "political tsunami," as more countries isolate it.

But, when we take a step back, we should realize that Israel is a most unbelievable, incredible achievement, a country resurrected in its land after thousands of years, a dream fulfilled.

Israel is a remarkable place. Our sisters and brothers speak a language that was reborn after thousands of years of being used only liturgically and by scholars. There is simply no parallel in human history.

Israel is only 63 years old, and sometimes it is helpful to put that in perspective. Given its age, it is an unparalleled success, despite its challenges.

We must be able, as sophisticated people, as American Jews, to hold both of those visions: the vision of an Ideal Israel, as well as, the real Israel that is full of challenges, imperfections and great successes.

In the words of the non-Jewish prophet of the Torah, *Bilaam*, recorded in the book of Numbers: Israel is an “*am levadad yishkon, bagoyim lo yithashav* – a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations.” (Numbers 23:9) What *Bilaam* said in praise of the Israelites’ unique qualities has come back to haunt us. Israel is isolated from the world in a way that is frightening.

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One thing Israel lacks is leadership.

After we landed this June in Israel, our group immediately went to Independence Hall, a small, modest building where the State of Israel was declared on May 14, 1948, or the 5th of Iyar 5708.

We sat in the chairs that others had sat in 63 years earlier, and we heard David Ben Gurion’s famous speech declaring the birth of a new state. Coming out of the shadows of the Holocaust, his words were a beacon of light and hope to the Jewish people and signaled to the world the beginning of a new reality after the devastation of the Shoah.

Every time I hear that speech, I am simply overcome with emotion and tears. Out of curiosity, how many of you remember listening to that speech on the radio? What was that experience like for you?

Ben Gurion held a vision of a country that would be a social democracy with a progressive income tax, child benefits, affordable subsidized housing, and socialized national healthcare, all elements that Israel was able to bring about, although they under attack today.

But Ben Gurion’s achievements were not simply words; he walked the talk. He was a man who lived modestly. He owned almost nothing and after he retired, lived the rest of his days in a simple dwelling in the Negev desert.

Does any of our leaders inspire us like Ben Gurion?

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So, that’s the picture: not enough leadership for a country that we need to look at with bifocals.

Now, the question for all of us, given this complex picture – not to mention this discrimination we face in Israel as non-Orthodox Jews, is why should we care about Israel?

Some American Jews don't.

More and more people are challenging Israel's legitimacy. What if there were a world without Israel? What would it be like for us?

Let me suggest to you that if there were no Israel, the entire Middle East would be profoundly changed for the worse, and I believe that not only would it be a terrible loss for the Jewish people, but America's security throughout the world and in this country would be jeopardized as well.

But beyond the simple security and survival of the Jewish people and the US, Israel is our spiritual home. It has been so for thousands of years. Israel is a place that we must care about, as difficult as it may be. The loss of Israel would mean the end of a dynamic religious life that has the ability to transform our tradition – keeping it as vibrant as it possibly can be.

For us as American Jews, the loss of Israel would be profound. Whether we realize it or not, after the Holocaust, Israel plays a significant role in our psyches. It gave us hope, gave us pride when hope and even pride were lost. While we may have lived without a *State* of Israel for close to 2,000 years, today we could not.

After the Shoah, losing Israel would put us in a coma, if not kill us. We would not recover again and our tradition and the gifts it has brought the world would cease.

As the boundaries between Judaism and other traditions and civilizations break down, as cultures mix in a way that has never occurred before in human history, we are simply unable as Jews to survive politically or spiritually without the State of Israel.

After the Shoah, our identity as Jews is wrapped up with the fate and the experience of the State of Israel.

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On the second Shabbat on our trip, we went to the Jewish quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem to welcome Shabbat. There is a beautiful spot where you can have a perfectly balanced experience of Jerusalem. It is an overlook where you can see the Kotel, the Western Wall, but since it is hundreds of yards above and away from the Kotel, it is separate and you can organize an egalitarian *davening* experience.

If you get there first!

As we approached the spot, we passed a group of Israeli women soldiers with their automatic weapons. An officer was explaining to these non-religious women the significance of Shabbat in Jerusalem.

We stood, overlooking the Kotel, next to where our *Beit Hamikdash*, our Holy Temple stood thousands of years ago. It is a profoundly stirring experience. We welcomed Shabbat and sang the traditional melodies. We began to dance as we sang a Shlomo Carlebach tune.

Soon the soldiers drew near, curious, interested to see the view and interested in our experience: men and women singing and dancing together to greet Shabbat. They spoke to our youth guide and others in our group and asked us what we were doing.

Then they asked if they could join in. And suddenly, there we were – our multi-generational group of American Jews with a group of young Israeli women soldiers singing and dancing, celebrating Shabbat and the Jewish people.

It was a profoundly moving moment, and a reminder of why we care so much about Israel and our people.

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Let me take you back to *Rishon L'Tziyon*, to 1884.

While the community was on the verge of collapse due to the lack of water, they sent a representative to speak to Edmond James de Rothschild in France to ask him for funds to purchase a larger drill to bore through the rock in the new location where they were drilling for water.

He was moved by their plight, their perseverance and his commitment to his fellow Jews; he gave them the money for the drill. They drilled and then they found water, screaming with joy “*Matzanu mayim, matzanu mayim* – we found water, we found water!

It was a miraculous moment – the realization that their community could survive. Rothschild would continue to invest in *Rishon L'Tziyon*, building what would become the Carmel Winery, and my great-great-grandfather was able to survive as well. He built a house right in the center of town, and generations of my family have lived in Israel ever since. And unbelievably, today, *Rishon L'Tziyon* has 230,000 people!

The phrase that they shouted: “*matzanu mayim* – we found water,” appears as the logo of the city of *Rishon L'Tziyon*, as a reminder of the struggle and travail that the Jewish people have endured for generations and continue to experience and endure today.

But more importantly, it serves as a beacon of hope – a reminder that one person can make a difference in the world, though it is the power of a community working as one that bore though solid rock.

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The Ideal Israel is the inspiration for the real Israel and we must never give up pushing the real Israel closer and closer to the ideal.

That hope, that inspiration is what Israel needs right now. As Ehud Olmert wrote in the NY Times last Thursday,

“The time for true leadership has come. Leadership is tested not by one’s capacity to survive politically but by the ability to make tough decisions in trying times. [...]

Now is the time. There will be no better one. I hope that Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Abbas will meet the challenge.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/22/opinion/Olmert-peace-now-or-never.html>)

As we embark on this year 5772, with incredible challenges that face the Jewish people and Israel, let us be inspired by the narrative of the State of Israel, by the Israeli women soldiers who joined with us, by its leaders like Ben Gurion and by its ability to find water in a dry place.

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May this year bring blessing to Israel and to all of us and let us all say, Amen.