

Shanah Tovah.

This summer I lived out a decade-long dream to take my family to Israel and have my kids fall in love with the country – its people and places – and have them really feel part of our Jewish family there.

I also wanted my kids to have the opportunity to deeply connect with their Israeli cousins, something that my parents made sure to do for us with trips to Israel when we were kids.

Well, I have to be honest – it was not all smooth sailing. Three young kids in a new country all adjusting to the new time zones with different sleep patterns made us tired; the weak dollar hurt our wallets; a broken refrigerator on the first Shabbat after we bought a lot food was stressful and dealing with rude cab drivers was not fun.

After a few days of settling into our rented apartment in Southern Jerusalem and learning more than I ever knew about the various Israeli yogurts and washing machines, Sharon and I were putting the kids to bed. Our middle child, Ari, who is four, was having a tough time with this new experience. That night, he turned to me and asked, “Abba, when are we going home?”

Oy. This is not going the way I had hoped....

I explained to him that we weren't going home so soon – this was not like a trip to New York to see family for the weekend, but a month that we were going to stay in this new apartment. Since he is only four, I am not sure that Ari could fathom what that amount of time meant. When it was clear to him that we were not going home soon, he said, “Abba, I miss home.”

His feelings reminded me of some of my earliest childhood memories. My parents took a sabbatical and we spent four months in Jerusalem. The truth is, like Ari, I had a tough time living in Israel as a child. My parents enrolled me in an Israeli school where the kids' and teachers' rapid-fire Hebrew overwhelmed my senses. I got homesick and just plain old sick a few times – maybe it was the water, my over-indulging in chocolate, the Hebrew, the drivers on old, narrow roads, the milk in those confounded plastic bags they used to use, or the dearth of cereal.

But one wonderful memory stands out. It's of thousands of people waving Israeli and American flags in a stadium singing our national anthems. It was July 4th 1976 and Israel had a great birthday party for her friend's 200th. The feeling was incredible – here I was in Jerusalem feeling part of America and Israel at the same time. The celebration became even more euphoric as the country learned

that Operation Entebbe had been successful and almost all the Jews (Israeli, American and French) who were taken hostage in Uganda had been saved by Israeli commandoes. While I was a young boy at the time, I saw the tears fill my parents' eyes, as they did everyone's eyes that day; I knew that something miraculous had happened to our people.

But are we in fact a people? Or are we a religion? Or a civilization, as Mordechai Kaplan claimed?

And if we are a people, what does this mean? Are there limits to this sense of peoplehood? Do I feel close to *Haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) Jews who oppose my approach to Judaism? In an era when people change their religion and we are all concerned about all humanity, is the notion of a distinct Jewish people still relevant?

Spending some of this summer in Israel with its particular intensity, joy and challenges sharpened these questions.

The intolerance and power of the Ultra-Orthodox was on display as we arrived in the city in late June. As part of Jerusalem's light rail building project, the city built a large sculpture that functions as the support for a bridge near the entrance to the city; its design soars to the heavens and, at least in my mind, is reminiscent of our Zakim Bridge. A dance troupe of young girls was scheduled to perform at the dedication of this monument, but the Ultra-Orthodox mayor of Jerusalem forced these girls to cover every inch of their bodies, adding sweatpants and wool hats to their costumes in the middle of the summer, concerned that their traditional Israeli dresses were not deemed modest enough.

The Israeli public overall was not amused. Their feelings of fondness for *Haredi* Jews are minimal to say the least. They resent that the *Haredim* do not serve in the military, nor do most of them contribute to the Israeli economy as they do not work; in many ways, this group lives off the state and is a drain on the country.

There are also tensions due to the lack of religious rights for non-Orthodox Jews and the discrimination faced by disenfranchised Jewish groups like Jews from Russian, Ethiopia and other new immigrants. And then there is the shameful behavior of radical West-Bank settlers who just last week attacked Arabs, creating divisiveness that could even spark a Jewish civil war.

But, the most intense moment of the summer came on July 16 when the bodies of two Israel soldiers, Udi Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, were returned to Israel in exchange for many living terrorists who were imprisoned in Israeli jails.

I felt a strange closeness to these two soldiers whom I had never met. I remember when they were taken captive during the 2006 Lebanon War. Two

men, not much younger than I – one who was married by a Conservative rabbi – moved me to act for them and their families.

Here at Temple Emunah, we added their names and that of Gilad Shalit, another soldier kidnapped by Hamas who tragically remains in captivity in Gaza, to our *tefillot*, our prayers and each morning and evening we prayed for their release with the traditional prayer that encourages us to redeem captives.

A couple of weeks before the release, Prime Minister Olmert announced that the soldiers were no longer alive, the rabbi of a liberal shul outside Jerusalem explained that they could no longer pray for the redemption of captives who are dead. But this change was not an easy one for his community to accept. Some members of the shul objected and a lively debate ensued during the Torah service. It became quite passionate with some arguing that just because Olmert had declared them dead, it does not necessarily mean that is 100% true! To bolster their claim, they reminded the community that the terrorists, in their endless cruelty and inhumanity, would not even share one piece of information about their status. Perhaps they were still alive. ...

The argument escalated until the rabbi said that he would pray for the return of their bodies along with the hopefully alive Gilad Shalit – he recited the prayer and everyone began to cry.

This was not just a philosophical issue about praying for something that is impossible, but it was about family.

These Jews in shul were not relatives of Udi and Eldad, but in Israel, there is a sense of closeness that one feels that is hard to explain. It's as if these family bonds have been building over the four thousand years of Jewish history.

The day of the exchange was a day of national mourning. The President of the country, Shimon Peres, lit two yartzeit candles representing the mood of the country. There was sadness and loss on people's faces and the radio stations played sad songs as they did for the week of mourning that followed the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin when I was living in Israel in 1995.

I found the prisoner swap upsetting. As many of you know, the prisoners released by Israel included some of the most violent terrorists in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. How could Israel free such people – who, by the way, were welcomed back to Lebanon this summer as heroes? How can we free savage murderers? And does this not encourage the taking of more Israeli hostages – be they alive or dead?

Sadly, kidnapping Jews is not a new phenomenon; for thousands of years it has taken place and sources from the Mishnah and the Talmud to the medieval codes to modern rabbinic responsa all discuss it. *Pidyon Shvuyim* – redeeming

captives – is “an exceedingly great mitzvah” according to the Talmud (BT Bava Batra 8b). For what could be worse than losing one’s freedom and living in a state of constant fear in captivity? Maimonides explained that when we redeem a captive we fulfill several biblical commandments including: “Do not harden your heart ... against your needy kinsman; “do not stand idly by your neighbor;” and “rescue those who are close to death.”

We also know from Jewish history that Jews were often saved. My own ancestor Rabbi Yom Tov Lippman Heller, the chief rabbi of Cracow in the 17th century, was ransomed by a group of Jews after he was imprisoned for life on false charges. There is no debate about this value, but there is a question about how far a community should go to release a prisoner. Maimonides warns us not to pay an exorbitant ransom, lest kidnappers be encouraged to take more prisoners. One rule of thumb that evolved is that a community should not do so much that it would hinder its ability to care for the rest of the people or that it would put others in grave danger.

Only two decades ago in the 1980s, this subject was debated in Israel. Former Israeli Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren, famous for sounding the shofar at the Kotel when Jews returned to the Old City in June of 1967, claimed that Israel should not negotiate prisoner swaps since it encourages the taking of more prisoners. But Rabbi Haim David Halevy, the chief rabbi of Tel Aviv disagreed, claiming that terrorists would always try to kidnap, no matter what Israel did or did not do.

But here, these two soldiers were no longer alive! Why should Israel release savage murderers in exchange for dead bodies? The Israel newspapers commented on this and explained that when soldiers enter the Israeli army they are promised that if they are injured or killed, Israel will do everything it can to bring them home – alive or dead. Israel was simply making good on its promise.

I still did not like it – I felt as Rabbi Goren did, this would only encourage more terrorism. I appreciated America’s more clear approach – not to negotiate with terrorists.

That week I saw my cousin Alon, who served in an elite combat unit in the Israeli army, and asked him the same question about why Israel would do all this for these soldiers’ bodies. He said, “Dave (my Israeli cousins call me Dave – long story), it’s different here in Israel. Every 18-year-old boy goes to the army and is expected to put his life on the line for the country. This is what he expects in return. Oh, and we’re all family here – how could we not get their bodies back? Wouldn’t you do that for me?”

* * *

It's true – we are all family. We American Jews also have a particularly strong sense of this. Since the Jews of this country have come from different places at different times, we have looked after each other, creating organizations to help each other and new immigrants like the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS).

This has been at the core of the North American Jewish experience. David Suissa (Jewels of Elul IV) sums this up nicely when he writes:

I was introduced to the concept of Jewish solidarity when I was eight years old, thanks to a red winter hat. Actually, many red winter hats.

We had just moved from the delicious climate of Casablanca and were now ensconced in the frigid world of [the] long Canadian winters. As we huddled in our little apartment one night, my father announced, "School starts in a week. You will all be going to Bedford School."

Bedford School is where I first noticed the red winter hats. You see, we were not the only Moroccan Jews in the neighborhood. Several other families who had fled Casablanca moved at about the same time. And for some reason, all the Moroccan kids in our school wore the same red winter hats.

I remember seeing all this new stuff appear in our apartment: dishes, furniture, clothes, food... red winter hats. So I kept asking my mother, "Where's all this coming from?" And she would always say: "The Jias." The Jias? What's a Jias, I often wondered.

Well, one day, I learned what the Jias was: It was a Jewish organization (whose real name is HIAS) that helped Jewish refugees settle in new lands - taking care of things like plane tickets, apartments, furniture, food, and, when needed... winter hats. It was an organization where the givers were virtually 100% Ashkenazi Jews, helping Jewish refugees who were virtually 100% Sephardi.

It didn't matter that we spoke Arabic, not Yiddish, or that we had dark skin. All that mattered was that we were Jews, and we needed help.

That was my first lesson in Jewish solidarity: Jews named Schwartz helping Jews named Suissa, with blind love that was clearly visible in little red winter hats.

* * *

That's the extent of this family bond. As the Talmud (BT Shavuot 39a) states; "*Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh B'zeh* – all of Israel are responsible for each other." But the Hebrew is so much deeper than the English translation. The

Hebrew word *areivim* is related to *airavon* – a pledge – we are sureties, pledges, we are collateral for each other. Our covenant with God creates an unbelievable bond among us.

Or maybe the Jerusalem Talmud (Hagigah 79d) said it better: “*Kol Yisrael haveirim* – all of Israel are friends.”

* * *

That feeling is evident today on Rosh Hashanah, as we gather here today. Beyond the liturgy of this day of awe and judgment, we feel strengthened by each other. It’s a time to catch up with friends – to see each other and feel’s each other’s presence. There is a power to being in a large group and feeling this strong community coming together.

The rabbis made sure that on this universal day of Rosh Hashanah, we would remember the importance of our Jewish family. While the tradition teaches that on this day, the universe was created and humanity born, the rabbis did not choose a Torah reading about the creation, but rather readings about our ancestor Isaac – his birth and his binding. These carry a somewhat more particularistic thrust.

Today is a day when we recall our unique history as a people and our distinct experience of the world. While all people are called to judgment on this day, we are supported by being among the members of our community.

In Israel you do not even need Rosh Hashanah to feel our strength in numbers – simply go to the mall. You can feel it as you order kosher hot dogs in Hebrew on the boardwalk in Tel-Aviv – the hot dog vendor wanted to know about my shul and Jewish life in Lexington. I felt it eating dinner with rabbis from different denominations at the Shalom Hartman Institute where I studied. And I felt it as I was surrounded by Jews from so many ethnicities – from Ethiopia, India, the Former Soviet Union, France, America, England, South Africa and South America speaking many languages right in the park next to our apartment. (Little plug – this coming Israel trip will have special visits with Jews from all over the globe!)

So back to my original question: What are we? A religion? A people? A civilization?

It became clear to me this summer that we are all of these things and also more – we are a family. A family that is spread out, but still feels connected. What brings us all together and makes us a family?

Our Torah and its practices and rituals.
Our unique way of viewing the world.

Our calendar of sacred time.
Our homeland.
Our narratives and stories.

The midrash says it perfectly – every Jew was at Sinai – past, present and future – those yet to be born and those who will convert to Judaism in the future. Sinai binds us together – a common history, a unique practice, and a hopeful future – one spiritual family that seems to share one united soul.

While there are many pieces and maybe even some relatives in the family that are tough to deal with (who does not have that in their own family?), it's still our family. I feel a bond with the *Hareidim*, even as I have real problems with them. After all, each Shabbat we all read from the same portions of the same Torah.

We have always been one people, with many parts – some have fallen away, but the core of the Jewish people has remained for millennia.

This is more challenging than ever before. In the 20th century, American Jews could coast on their Jewish identity to a certain extent, but in the 21st century, that simply does not work. Now, it takes serious effort, if you want it. For us to remain a people in America, we must deepen our bonds with the Jewish people. Since we do not all live in one neighborhood, we need to strengthen our connection with each other, with our shul and with Jews around the globe. We have to work twice as hard to be a Jew in America to create the same feelings of peoplehood.

It's like resolving to call your aunt in Florida more often – family has to mean something extra. Staying close as a family requires time and phone calls and emails and trips – but the benefits are worth it. So, too, with the Jewish people.

Sadly, our bond to Israel which can anchor us and strengthen our identity as Jews is waning. This is the year you should visit Israel – did I mention we have 12 slots left on our trip, first come, first served! Or since our financial markets are having issues, I'll suggest an easy Israel connection that pays you money! Buying an Israel bond! (Besides, it's probably safer than a US security or a bank!)

* * *

This summer, we had the pleasure of spending an evening with our founding member, Lillian Garber, who was visiting her daughter and son-in-law, Linda and Menahem Sagiv, in Israel – all of whom were here in Lexington for Rosh Hashanah. They invited our family to go on a sunset sailing excursion. It was a magical evening as we sailed on the Mediterranean from Herziliya – we

were surrounding by awesome sights. Before us, the sunset, next to us the burgeoning city of Tel-Aviv and behind us the moon rising over the marina. It was quite mesmerizing.

Menahem had invited another skipper to help with the boat – he was a Reform rabbi who made aliyah after serving a congregation in England and now, worked part-time for a Masorti/Conservative shul in Israel. His family was impacted severely by the Holocaust. As he pointed to the modern skyline of Tel-Aviv, he asked: “Could our grandparents have even dreamt of this? Imagine if all this existed 70 years ago....”

We all got a bit choked up, but the feeling of connection was so deep: out of the Holocaust to England, America and Israel – from different places, from different generations all together on the same boat – literally and metaphorically. We are a family like no other. Like the values of our Torah, we transcend time and space – all of our souls were at Sinai together and while we may practice differently, we are all linked. We take care of each other, going to Uganda to rescue each other, even getting our brothers’ remains at a high price. That’s simply what family does.

After the sailing trip, my Ari said to me: “Abba, I like Israel and I like home.”

I knew it was worth the shlep.

May the bonds of our spiritual family and our spiritual home only grow deeper in the year ahead. *Am Yisrael Hai* – May the people of Israel continue to live and thrive. *Amen*.

Shanah tovah.