

## Thanksgiving, Ferguson and Israel

This has been a strange week – joyous, celebratory, and yet troubling and challenging. We experienced one of the most enriching events of the year – the interfaith Thanksgiving service where hundreds came together from dozens of communities to worship and appreciate all the blessings we have, while helping others. I was proud that so many Emunah-ites joined in at Hancock Church that night.



At the same time, we witnessed the difficult grand jury decision in Ferguson – which many felt denied the African-American community a measure of justice and led some to behave atrociously, looting and vandalizing properties.

Many of us then experienced the joy of family coming together to share turkey or Tofurkey, as the case may be, on what is the most inclusive American federal holiday – one in which we, as Jews, can participate fully.



And we learned of laws that are being proposed in Israel that endanger Israel's democracy, further alienating its Arab citizens.

It was a range of emotions and experiences.

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Let me begin with Ferguson. It is clear that this is an awful tragedy for the family of Michael Brown and the entire community of Ferguson.

It is also clear that the African-American community feels disenfranchised and discriminated against.

Analyzing what I could glean from the autopsy reports and some of the information from the grand jury, it seems that Officer Wilson was justified in much of his response. He was attacked by someone who tried to take his gun and he defended himself. There were opportunities for him to retreat from this altercation that, unfortunately, he did not take. That was a tragic error in judgment. And from what I read, perhaps the final, deadly shot he took may not have been justified.

That said, the reaction of the community was appalling: violence, rioting, vandalism, arson – burning down businesses in their own community. Not smart.

But this is about much more than one incident and the inappropriate reaction. It is about a larger segment of the population that does not feel supported; African-Americans do not trust the larger community, especially the largely white force that polices many black communities. And the police officers on the whole do not have good relations with the people whom they are supposed to police. On the whole, it seems that they do not trust the black community.

There are also larger systemic problems:

- For example, a black male born in 1991 has a 29% chance of spending time in prison at some point in his life.<sup>[5]</sup>
- Nearly one in three African American males aged 20–29 is under some form of criminal justice supervision whether imprisoned, jailed, on parole or probation.
- One out of nine African American men will be incarcerated between the ages of 20 and 34.

Those are staggering statistics. They speak to a total breakdown in education, opportunities and hope for black males. And I would add that there are problematic cultural priorities and a high degree of family disintegration that only aggravate the situation. Let's not forget poverty – we, as a society, are becoming more polarized between rich and poor.

If we were not to think of these issues in terms of justice and Jewish values, which we should, then consider their impact on our own pocket. It is far less expensive to educate people so they have jobs than pay for their incarceration. How sad that we, as a country, cannot get that right.

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And now let me move on to Israel and the Jewish community. This week saw Rabbi Steven Pruzansky, leader of an 800-member modern Orthodox synagogue in Teaneck, N.J., (where I grew up and where my parents still live) publish a post Friday on his blog, “Dealing with Savages,” that focused on last week’s murders at a Jerusalem synagogue.



Pruzansky wrote: “The slaughter of Jews is incentivized in Arab society. Yet much of Israeli society clings to the illusion that ‘peace’ is possible for these savages.”

Fortunately, most of the Jewish world and much of the modern Orthodox world roundly condemned him. But it speaks to the total breakdown in trust between Arabs and Jews and the intolerance and hate that is growing in the Jewish community, in addition to its pervasive forms where it has already existed in the Arab world.

This breakdown, this fear, led to a bill that Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu wants to bring before Knesset.



“[This week] the Israeli cabinet approved contentious draft legislation that emphasizes Israel’s Jewish character above its democratic nature in a move that some said could undermine the fragile relationship with the country’s Arab minority at a time of heightened tensions.

“The promotion of a so-called nationality law has long stirred fierce debate inside Israel, where opponents fear that any legislation that gives pre-eminence to Israel’s Jewishness could lead to an internal rift as well as damage Israel’s relations with Jews in other countries and with the country’s international allies.

“The vote on Sunday also highlighted political fissures within the governing coalition amid increasing talk of early elections. The bill, a proposal for a basic law titled ‘Israel, the Nation-State of the Jewish People,’ passed 14 to 6, with two centrist coalition parties opposing it. Parliament still has to approve the bill for it to become law.” (*New York Times*)

No matter what happens now, the fact that there is so much support for this bill is frightening and sad. Israel was created as BOTH a Jewish and a democratic state.

As some of us have been exploring in the Hartman Institute’s Israel iEngage 2.0 course, “Jewish and democratic” is not a simple definition. That

means that Israel is supposed to be a haven for Jews (the only one in a world that has 22 Arab countries and 49 Muslim majority countries) and, at the same time, that it must be a democracy for all its people, including the 21% who are not Jewish, among them the Arab minorities of Muslims, Christians and Druze. Incidentally, Druze make up a good part of the security forces including the Israeli Druze police officer who saved Jewish lives last week – may his memory be for a blessing.

Israel has no constitution – some say its constitution is all of the classic Jewish legal texts throughout history – but it has a beautiful Declaration of Independence that was approved on Israel's birth on May 14, 1948.



I will share the relevant section, but it is worth reading it all:

“THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.”

That, my friends, is under attack today. As I try to lead and support Israel – as I mentioned earlier, we hope to have our largest contingent at the AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington in March – my efforts are stymied by these actions that are quite dangerous to Israel’s survival as both a Jewish and democratic country.

As Daniel Sokatch, CEO of the New Israel Fund, wrote this week: “True, Israel is not alone in wrestling with issues of nationality, minority rights and identity. But, given its growing isolation and military rule over millions of non-citizens, it is far more vulnerable to a major mistake than are liberal democracies that do not confront long-term existential crises. Israel cannot afford to get this wrong. We can only hope that the sane and rational voices will be strong enough to overcome those determined to make a fatal mistake – for Israel, for the Jewish people, and for all who care about equality and justice.” (<http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/israel-cant-afford-to-get-it-wrong/#ixzz3KNmrzZMJ>)



These speak to a greater breakdown in trust between communities,  
between people.

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Our *parashah* also includes a breakdown in trust. Jacob trusts Lavan who deceives him by switching his daughters at the wedding. And Lavan uses his leverage to keep Jacob in his employ for twenty years. Not that Jacob is the only one being deceived – Jacob, who deceived his father in last week's *parashah*, devises a clever system to *finagle* many sheep from his father-in-law's flocks.



There are more breakdowns in trust as Rachel steals her father's idols and Jacob takes off with his wives, children and flocks without even a goodbye. This does not seem like the right way to behave.

This is a *parashah* in which the main theme is Jacob getting deceived – the one who tricked his brother out of his birthright and deceived his father, the one whose name means “heel” or the “crooked one,” now gets a dose of his own medicine. We see that Jacob is on a journey to becoming a better person which will culminate in next week's *parashah* where Jacob will wrestle with a mysterious assailant and receive his new name: *Yisrael* or Israel.

But we are also offered a way out of this cycle of mistrust and we find it in the opening scene of our *parashah*. Jacob is alone and afraid – he has run away

from his parents' home, away from Esau, his twin who wants to kill him. He is on a long, perilous journey back to the land of his mother.



He goes to sleep on a stone, where he has his famous dream of a stairway with angels ascending and descending. Suddenly, he finds himself in the Presence of God and when he wakes up, he acknowledges this: “*Akhein yeish Adonai Ba’Makom hazeh, V’Anokhi Lo Yada’ti* – Wow (that’s my own translation), God is surely in this place and I did not know it!”

The opening words of this scene are instructive. The Torah states: *vayifga BaMakom* – and Jacob came upon a certain place.”

The rabbis claim that this phrase – *vayifga baMakom* – he came upon – is not simply stumbling into a place, but Jacob was engaged in an act of prayer there. Why?

Because *Makom* is not only a place – it is a name for God, meaning ‘The Place, the One Who is in all places.’

Thus, we are reminded of something so basic and yet so vital. God is with us in all places. God is not just with us when we gather as different faiths in interfaith prayer, nor merely at the joyous festival we enjoyed on Thanksgiving, but God is with us in challenging times.

In fact, it can be most uplifting to see God's transformative power most active in the times of trouble.

Out of Jacob's fear came a deeper connection to God.

Out of difficulty comes renewed hope.

Similarly, as we consider the tensions in our own great country, let us both pray and act to help hope overcome fear.

As this coming week's *New Yorker* cover so aptly describes, there is a divide between black and white in America, but we can build bridges and arches to reconnect them.

And in Israel, Israeli Arabs and Jews need to find it in their hearts to trust one another, to stop the cycle of vengeance killings and violence – and



we Jews in the rest of the world need to do the same. Everyone should move away from a reactive place that will only perpetuate the hate and ugliness that is

so ever-present. We must pray and work towards a more just Israel one that allows hope to exist for Jews and Arabs.

As Jacob learned: surely even in dark times, challenging moments, God is with us.

Thanksgiving is a time to build bridges among communities, sharing hope with those who need it – that is what America and Israel both need.

