

Suite 117

Yom Kippur 5778

By: Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

It was thrilling, exhilarating, even spiritual.

My wife and I were in Europe this summer, just wandering around. We were so lost in time that two days before our return to the States we found ourselves 400 miles from Frankfurt, our final destination. Not wanting to drive that distance in one day, we picked a halfway point for an overnight stopover. We could have chosen many cities, towns or villages in several different countries. But since we had never been to Basle, we thought, “why not?”

Except for the major tourist destinations, European city hotels always have room in summer. It is their slow season. In fact, they usually give summer discounts. So we uploaded the address of what looked like a good hotel in Basle – Les Trois Roi - and GPS drove us there. We arrived mid-afternoon. Of course they had vacancies. They even upgraded us and offered a summer discount, inviting us to have a drink on the balcony as they prepared our room.

Les Trois Rois is one of the oldest of the Swiss hotels, established in 1681. It sits on the Rhine. Relaxing on the verandah, I mentioned to Alison: “Theodor Herzl was here somewhere.” The famous picture of him with that far-away gaze overlooking the river was shot somewhere around where we were sitting. The view was similar.

I looked up and down the banks of the Rhine, trying to fathom the precise location. I couldn’t visit Basle and ignore the great prophet of Israel, the visionary founder of the Zionist movement, who so influenced my life, many millions of other lives, and history itself.

I googled the picture and was stunned: It was shot at Les Trois Rois Hotel, from the balcony of Suite 117 – where Herzl stayed during the First Zionist Congress! A wave of emotion crashed on me. After we settled into our room, I asked the receptionist whether I could see Suite 117. She said she had to check whether the room was occupied.

“What!” “You mean, it is just another room in the hotel, and anyone can stay there,” I asked. “Yes, of course,” the woman responded. “You mean I could have reserved that room?” “Of course” – she said, “but we upgraded you to a better room.” I have never been so deflated by an upgrade. That upgrade dragged me down. For me, Suite 117 was the most elevated room in the hotel; in the entire city.

It was unoccupied. The receptionist took us up. My excitement was indescribable. She opened the door. My knees buckled; my eyes moistened. The great man spent several days in this room in late August 1897. I could sense him. I could feel him. I went out to the balcony and did something uncharacteristic. Alison took a cheesy picture of me posing as Herzl that I sent to our staff in New York. The receptionist, seeing my altered emotional state – so different from what she observed five minutes before - must have concluded that I was a history buff because she then said, “You know, Napoleon stayed at the hotel too.” Napoleon? Who cares about Napoleon – that minor historical footnote! I was in Theodor Herzl’s room!

The Rhine starts in the Swiss Alps near the Austrian border. There, it is just a puddle formed by melting snow. By the time it reaches Basle, it is at full flow, wide, deep and strong of current.

Looking at the mighty river from the balcony of Suite 117, as Herzl did 120 years ago almost to the day – I thought what he must have thought on the eve of the First Zionist Congress: The Rhine symbolized the mysterious and ineluctable flow of time. He was hoping that those three days would relaunch our listless, demoralized and persecuted people onto the mighty currents of history – connecting us to the source – the very headwaters of Jewish life – the Land of Israel.

The obstacles were enormous. Zionism was just a trickle. Most Jews were indifferent or opposed, including the Reform movement. At many points along the way, Herzl voiced despair.

“I must frankly admit to myself: I am demoralized,” he wrote in his diary. “I feel that I am growing exhausted. Oftener than ever I believe that my movement is at an end. While I am still absolutely convinced of its feasibility, I cannot overcome the initial difficulties.”

But on that day – August 29, 1897, he was filled with optimism, even rapture: the secular prophet summoned to a kind of religious calling. Receiving a euphoric fifteen-minute standing ovation from the two hundred delegates to the First Zionist Congress, Herzl proclaimed: “We want to lay the foundation stone for the house which will become the refuge of the Jewish nation.”

Herzl would be dead seven years after staying in Suite 117, felled at the age of 44 by a torn heart. But the movement that most Jews rejected on that August week in Basle has become the foundation stone for the Jewish nation.

Even ma'assu ha-bonim hayta le'rosh pina – the psalmist wrote: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

The trickle in Basel has become a mighty torrent. Herzl identified our deepest yearning and gave it political form. “Smooth runs the water where the brook is deep.” Herzl must have sensed the possibilities from the balcony of Suite 117. The day after his inaugural speech, he recorded in his diary: “I no longer need to write the history of yesterday: it is already being written by others.”

“Zionism is the return to Judaism even before the return to the Land of Israel,” he assured the delegates. It was an astonishing insight, a prophecy we now know to be true. Our founding rabbi, Stephen Wise, attended the Second Zionist Congress in Basle in 1898, and described his own life-altering epiphany:

“I was a Jew by faith up to the day of the Congress...and little more,” Wise wrote. “In Basle, I became a Jew in every sense of that term...If I use the term rebirth it is not too strong...for the overwhelming experience that befell me. For the first time in my life I got a glimpse of world Jewry...I came to know my people at their best...I caught a glimpse of the power and the pride and the nobleness of the Jewish people, which my American upbringing and even service to New York Jewry had not in any degree given me. I was a Jew by faith up to the day of the Congress in Basle and little more. At Basle...Judaism ceased to be a type of religious worship. The Jewish people became my own.”

These are the principles of Zionism; the living spirit of the most profound and most successful national movement to emerge from the rapacious rapids of the 20th century.

In so many ways, Israel has lived up to the dreams of the pioneers. Were they to return today they would not believe what they see: The Jewish state has exceeded their wildest expectations.

I have spoken of this with you often. Many hundreds of us have traveled together and you have seen it for yourselves. To step foot in Israel is to connect with emotions you never even knew you had. There will be two Israel missions in 2018 – March and December. Join. You will not regret it.

You will be awe-struck by the vigor and vitality, the ingeniousness and ingenuity; the robustness and resolve of the Israeli people – our people. Israel has more institutions of higher learning per capita, more scholars, more researchers, more engineers, more orchestras, more books published – than practically any place on earth. Israeli innovation is part of our cell phones, computers security systems, medical equipment and agricultural machinery. After decades of harsh criticism, Western European democracies are eager to learn from Israel how democracies confront terrorism. Just the fact of Israeli democracy, 90% of its citizens having come from non-democratic countries, and defending itself, surviving and prospering surrounded by aggressive, barbaric, medieval tyrannies – is, itself, a miracle.

I am well aware of Israel's flaws. But I have not dwelled on them from this pulpit for two reasons: First, much of the criticism is obsessive, excessive, disproportional and unfair. That it often comes from liberals and progressives motivates me, as a progressive, to respond with all the intellect and all the Zionist enthusiasm that I can muster. Second, we have limited time together. If you are prepared to hear me out for a while, better to fill that time on what is most important. I even shied away from raising the outrage of the ultra-Orthodox monopoly in Israel – despite the fact that for twelve years I led the effort for religious pluralism on behalf of the American Reform movement.

But the events of the summer changed my mind. The Israeli government's decision to back out of its pledge to expand a non-Orthodox prayer space at the Western Wall, and ongoing discrimination against the Reform and Conservative movements, have brought to a head a crisis that has been brewing for decades. If not resolved, this crisis will destroy the relationship between the Jewish state and the Jewish people. It is a graver threat now than all of Israel's many security challenges, because it will determine the future relationship between the Jewish state and the Jewish people.

Israel has strayed from Herzl's vision. Among his foundational principles for the future Jewish state was the distancing of religion from political patronage:

“We shall...not permit any theocratic tendencies to emerge among our spiritual authorities,” Herzl wrote. “The rabbinate will be honored as highly as their valuable functions require and deserve. But they must not interfere in the administration of state.”

Herzl knew what all of us know. Religion and politics is a potent brew that when mixed can destroy both religion and politics. The ultra-Orthodox monopoly in Israel does not strengthen religion. It weakens Judaism. It distorts Jewish values, breeding arrogance, the opposite of what Judaism urges. One of the great talmudic sages, “Rabbi Chanina bar Idda said: ‘Why is Torah compared to water? Just as water flows from a high place to a low place, so do the words of Torah remain only with one who is humble.’”

Observing Israeli Haredi leaders, does anyone think of humility? They project pretension, conceit, ego, and an unwarranted self-assurance in the truth of their convictions that repel even Orthodox Jews, let alone the many millions of secular Israelis and Jews worldwide.

Political power corrupts. The lure of purse and patronage ensnares even the highest authorities. A former chief rabbi of Israel is in prison now. It might interest you to know that among the crimes he confessed to, was taking large bribes from foreigners who wished to convert to Judaism. His requirement for conversion was money.

There is a wall of ignorance, indifference, neglect and disdain in the top echelons of Israeli political leadership. They betray the Herzlian vision they claim to uphold.

The *Kotel* crisis – the issue of prayer at the Western Wall – is not really about who gets to pray there, what type of worship is acceptable there, whether women can read Torah there. It is that too. Similarly, the crisis of conversion – how a non-Jew becomes a Jew recognized by the Jewish state – is not really about what are the standards of conversion, how long the process should take, what is the curriculum. It is that too.

But at the core – these crises are about who gets to decide: The most extreme, the most narrow-minded, the least representative, the most retrogressive and intolerant forces in contemporary Jewish life, or the forces of moderation, tolerance, respect, pluralism and modernity that Herzl envisioned, values now embraced by the vast majority of Jews worldwide?

Most Haredi Jews are not even Zionists. The ultra-Orthodox parties in the Knesset oppose as a matter of principle, the idea of a Jewish state – a “triviality” that does not prevent them from taking the State’s money – most of which comes from non-Orthodox taxpayers.

And they are the ones to determine matters of religion and state! They are the ones who cast such a menacing shadow over the relationship between Israel and world Jewry! Such is their sway that even the Israeli prime minister feels he must bend the knee in prostration to their dictates?

They see the Western Wall not as a national shrine. They consider it a big open-air ultra-Orthodox synagogue. I am not opposed to big ultra-Orthodox synagogues. I am in favor of them, for those who find solace there. I am not opposed to a fundamentalist understanding of Jewish law, for those who find meaning there. I am not opposed to people living in accordance with their values, even if they are not my values. Moreover, I believe there is much we can learn from, and even admire in, those whose commitment to Jewish law – *halakhah* – is so intense.

What I oppose is the awesome powers of the state granted exclusively to the most intolerant forces that then impose their worldview on everyone else. This ultra-Orthodox monopoly distorts Judaism, Zionism, pluralism and democracy itself, causing enormous and intensifying friction within Israeli society, and fraying the fabric of fellowship and faithful friendship between the Jewish state and the Jewish people.

The question is not whether there is a place for Haredi sensibilities in Israel. The question is whether Israel embraces only Haredi Judaism: The question is not whether Orthodox men and women should pray separately at the Western Wall. The question is whether that should be the only option. The question is not whether Orthodox rabbis should be entitled to officiate at weddings and funerals, and apply Jewish law to family matters for those who want it. The

question is whether only they should govern on matters of religion and state: that Orthodox Judaism should be the only form of religious expression that the State recognizes, despite the sensibilities and practices of everyone else, the vast majority of contemporary Jews.

Does the State of Israel agree with the ultra-Orthodox view that there is only one legitimate way to practice Judaism – their way? That is the question. Does the Jewish state agree that Reform and Conservative Judaism are illegitimate? Israel is the only democracy in the world that discriminates against non-Orthodox rabbis and movements. Can you imagine what the reaction would be if Germany, Britain, or France tried that?

Politics is about power; a fight for influence. But the essence of *Haredi* opposition to Reform and Conservative Judaism is not political in the conventional sense. It is not a clash over who gets a larger slice of the national pie. It is a ferocious, implacable philosophical conviction that we are a mortal threat to them and to the Jewish people: that what we represent is not even Judaism. As one former Chief Rabbi of Israel said:

“Reform Jews have no place in Israel. They are a nation apart. We should vomit out these people. They should not live in Israel. They are essentially dead.” Or this pearl of wisdom from a former Chief Rabbi earlier this month: [Reform Jews are like] “Holocaust deniers. They shout about Holocaust deniers in Iran [but] they deny more than Holocaust deniers.” Two weeks ago, a Member of Knesset from an ultra-Orthodox party was forced to resign in punishment for the grave sin of attending his gay nephew’s wedding.

And these are the people that the State, in its infinite wisdom, determined should have exclusive authority over religious life!

In 1999, I led a delegation of 33 Reform rabbis to Israel and we prayed at the *Kotel*. Word got out the night before that we were to be gathering at the Western Wall in the morning. When we arrived, a mob of ultra-Orthodox Jews surrounded us. They bellowed “Nazis” and “haters of Israel.”

The police were so concerned that they built barricades to separate us from them. One would think that, especially, the Orthodox would be pleased that Jews want to pray at the *kotel*, and that they would do everything they could to encourage Jewish worship there. Instead, thirty-three rabbis prayed inside a cage at the Western Wall because of a mob. Can you imagine what the reaction would be if this happened in Germany, Britain or France?

I utterly reject the contention that American Jews, not being citizens of Israel, should stay out of these questions. Is Israel the national home of the Jewish people or not? Do we take that seriously or not? Does Israel have responsibilities to world Jewry, or not? Does world Jewry have responsibilities to Israel, or not? Should we just lay down and let the most extreme elements thwart Progressive Jewish movements, and trample upon Judaism’s most cherished values? Either we are connected by the bonds of culture, religion, history and destiny, or we are not. If we are, we have a stake in the character of Israeli society and a responsibility to participate in its up-building. Isn’t that what Israeli politicians and diplomats tell us all the time?

In a speech to the Jewish Federations of North America, the prime minister, himself, said to American Jews:

“I will always ensure that all Jews can feel at home in Israel – Reform Jews, Conservative Jews, Orthodox Jews - all Jews.” He received a rousing ovation. That was before he reneged.

The Israeli government made a solemn pledge to world Jewry to implement the Western Wall agreement and broke its word. The agreement between the prime minister and representatives of world Jewry, was sealed and sanctioned by the Israeli Cabinet. It was official policy, a sacred trust between Israel and world Jewry.

The agreement’s collapse fully exposed the dimensions of the crisis. Even that small space at the bottom of the hill, hidden from the main plaza, in a place that most people do not even associate with the *kotel* – even that – was too much. The political terror imposed by *Haredi* parties pulverized the personal promise of the prime minister, sanctioned by his own Cabinet. “Woe is us, what alternative did we have? Stand up to the *Haredi* parties? Do the right thing; honor our commitment?” How naïve you Americans are.”

So what we are going to do about it?

Some have suggested that we should just walk away. “You don’t want us: Fine, we’ll pick up our marbles and leave: A plague on all your houses. I’m happy to live my life in New York and my Jewish life on West 68th Street.”

Do not delude yourselves. We may as well cut the heart out of our body. See how long the body can live without the heart. To be a Jew is to be bound up with other Jews. *Kol yisrael arevin zeh ba-zeh* – all Jews are responsible one for the other, say the Rabbis.

Moreover, turning away from the Jewish people guarantees increased Jewish alienation in America. Herzl was right when he asserted that, “Zionism is a return to Judaism.” Rabbi Wise was right when he wrote: “I was a Jew by faith up to the day of the Congress... At Basle, I became Jewish in every sense of that term.” Judaism is not simply a type of religious worship. The Jewish people is our own. The Reform movement already tried walking away from the Jewish people in the first half of the twentieth century. It nearly destroyed us. We are still paying the price of that catastrophic deviation.

Do you like the president? Do you agree with everything the Administration says and does? Do you think America is perfect, ideal, utopia on earth? What are you going to do about it – walk away: A plague on all your houses?

Some have suggested that we should boycott Israel; withhold philanthropy and withdraw financial support.

I do not believe in boycotts. I do not believe in partial boycotts. These are non-Zionist and non-effective responses. They would do more harm to us in America than good in Israel. If you prefer United, fly United, but I do not support boycotting El Al as a matter of policy.

Some have suggested that we should cease contributions to Federations.

This, too, is the wrong way. The Federations and the Jewish Agency are our allies. They have come to realize that the ultra-Orthodox monopoly in Israel is a threat to Jewish continuity in America. They understand that most Federation supporters, most AIPAC and Israel activists, most philanthropists, most of the Birthright money – come from Jews who are not Orthodox.

They derive their Jewish identity in non-Orthodox ways. If they are affiliated, it is mostly with Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative synagogues.

So what are we going to do about it? To pull away is precisely what our opponents want. We must come closer. That has been our problem. We are not close enough. We need to fight. We need to fight harder. The good fight is good for us. Struggle breeds excellence. Opponents test our resolve. They force us to consider what we really believe and how strongly we believe it.

We must start with ourselves, our own movement. We must come closer. That has been our problem. We are not close enough. Not only were we absent from Israel in its pre-founding and formative years – Rabbi Wise was a lonely voice of Zionism in the anti-Zionist Reform wilderness - we are still not as committed as we should be. We need to catch up: This fight is hard. We need to work more, not less.

To make a real difference we need to come closer. That has been our problem. We are not close enough. We need to be in Israel, full time, tilling the soil and planting a Progressive harvest. We must build hundreds of vibrant synagogues, schools and community centers; train hundreds of rabbis, cantors and educators who have good full-time jobs.

We can do this. Israelis will flock to us. They yearn for religious alternatives. We have pockets of spectacular success in Israel. Some of you have seen this with your own eyes on Israel missions. But we cannot prevail only from abroad. We must create a mass nation-wide Reform movement on the ground in the Promised Land.

This will take time. It is hard. It is a slog, not a sprint. It is expensive. The opposition is fierce. There are no shortcuts. In the final analysis, even the *Kotel* issue, let alone all of our other objectives, cannot be addressed through press releases from abroad. We must press for release inside Israel.

And - we must pay for it.

Three hundred thousand families affiliate with North American Reform synagogues – over a million affluent people. How many of them participate in any way in the great drama of Israel? How many of them contribute in any way to what we say is the urgency of Reform rights? Do we mean what we say? Do we say what we mean?

We have hardly even begun to wage the kind of fight that can make a real difference. We have taken the easy way: talking too much, acting not enough. We avoid the hard fight with easy words. We expect something for nothing. We want instant results on the cheap. We are unwilling to make the kind of long-term investments that will pay dividends in the long term. When confronted with hard choices, we have chosen the path of least resistance.

If we are to realize our aspirations, we must come closer. There is no alternative. We are not close enough. That is our problem. We need to demand more of each of the three hundred thousand families of our national movement - the Union for Reform Judaism. They need to participate more. They need to give more. And if we are not prepared to do this, we should complain less and expect less.

Accordingly, our synagogue president and I will assemble and lead a delegation of SWFS representatives to launch discussions with the leadership of the Union for Reform Judaism, and

with any other Reform synagogue that wishes to participate with us, aimed at two principle objectives:

First, to discuss how the Jewish Federations can help direct more support to those in Israel who share our worldview. If our Federation friends see themselves as the umbrella philanthropy for American Jews, together we must launch a process that will reprioritize Israel investments to better advance our common values and counter the threat to all of us from the ultra-Orthodox monopoly in Israel. How is the American Jewish community going to invest more money on the ground in Israel that over time will make a difference?

Second, we will explore how our national synagogue dues structure might be reoriented towards greater investment in Israel. If we expect this reorientation from Federations, should we not also reform ourselves? How can more of the funds that you – and every other member of a Reform synagogue - pay to our national movement - be used for what we say is among our highest priorities?

Let's have a national discussion. Let us not bounce from crisis to crisis without resolving this festering problem once and for all.

The stakes are very high. Israel needs Progressive Judaism more than ever. Israel needs our socially progressive worldview. Israel needs a strong religious force to counter the stultified, extreme, coercive and pre-modern worldview of *Haredi* Judaism and the intensifying political extremism of right wing religious Zionists.

Moreover, the American Reform movement needs a vital Progressive counterpart in Israel more than ever. We need a flourishing Progressive movement in Israel for our own viability in North America. Already today, Israel, not America, has the majority of the world's Jews. That majority will only grow in decades to come. In the absence of immutable bonds with the Jewish state, the Hebrew language, the people and land of Israel, non-Orthodox Jewish identity will disintegrate here. The Jewish soul cannot survive without the Jewish body. Progressive Judaism in Israel is our bridge to Jewish peoplehood. It provides the blueprint to North American Reform Jews how to be a liberal Zionist – both progressive and Zionist.

The Western Wall is the only remnant of the Temple complex still standing. In August of the year 70, on the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, Roman legions burned the Temple to the ground, bringing to an end a thousand years of Jewish independence. The determination to self-determination would lay dormant for 1800 years. It stirred again only at the end of the 19th century, awakened by the prophet who stayed in Suite 117. There, on the banks of the river, our people set sail anew:

“There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.”

Our Sages taught: At the time of the Temple's destruction, young priests gathered on the roof of the sanctuary, with the Temple keys in their hands. As the fires raged below them, the priests proclaimed before God: “Master of the Universe, since we did not merit to be faithful guardians [of your sacred house] we are handing the keys back to You. Thereupon, they threw the keys upward. The Rabbis say that a kind of palm of a hand emerged and caught the keys. The priests then jumped from the roof of the Temple into the fires below.

It took two millennia to restore the House of Israel. A kind of palm from above dropped the keys into the hands of that remarkable soul who unlocked Suite 117. He opened the door of the modest, un-upgraded room, lay the bags of two millennia of Jewish history by the bed, went out to the balcony, breathed in the fresh air of modernity, and there, by the mighty river, changed the current of Jewish history.

The keys are now with us. May we be worthy guardians of the restored House of Israel.