

It has become my practice to study the *hevbw h twrp* ((parashat ha-shavuah)—the Torah portion of the week—on Thursdays and Fridays each week as Shabbat approaches. I study Chassidic texts in a study partnership with my *chevruta*), Rabbi Bob Freedman in Princeton, New Jersey, and I review a number of *midrashim* and commentaries in preparation for our own Torah study here at Beth Israel Judea, and in order to write a weekly *hrvt rbd* (Devar torah). I have tried to make it my regular practice, in fulfillment of the instruction in Pirke Avot, and as part of my commitment to living with integrity, to make the study of Torah a “fixed habit”. So even when I am vacationing in the summer, or someone else is leading Torah study on Shabbat morning, I still set aside the time to study the *hwrp* (parashah).

And it is a good thing...because this summer I was asked, rather suddenly and without warning, to give a brief *hrvt rbd* (devar torah) at a Shabbat dinner table where I was a guest.

The parashah was *Mattot*, the penultimate portion of the book of Numbers, and the verse I chose to speak about was the one where the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Dan approach Moses with the request that they be permitted to settle permanently on the West Bank of the Jordan River, and not enter into or settle in the Land of Israel. Now I must point out that this can be taken as a Biblical proof text that the West Bank is not actually a part of *Eretz Yisrael*, otherwise they would not have had to make this request of Moses. But that was not my point then, nor is it now. It is just a small point I wish to make this morning so that my friends who are supporters of Peace Now, as I am, and who believe that the Green Line is more than just ink on politically correct maps, as I do, can go home happy.

The point that I was making then, and that I want to make this morning is about Moses’ response—God’s response as the Torah tells it—to the question that the 2-1/2 tribes’ inquiring minds wanted to know.

For in the Book of Numbers, chapter 32, verses 4 and following, the question was put to Moses, Eleazar the Priest and the chieftains of the community:

“...the land that Adonai has conquered for the community for Israel is cattle country, and your servants have cattle. It would be a favor to us,’ they continued, ‘if this land were given to your servants as a holding; do not move us across the Jordan.’ Moses replied to the Gadites and the Reubenites, ‘Are your brothers to go to war while you stay here? Why will you turn the minds of the Israelites from crossing into the land which Adonai has given them? That is what your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh-barnea to survey the land...”

“...Then they stepped up to him and said, ‘We will build here sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children. And we will hasten as shock-troops in the van of the Israelites until we have established them in their home, while our children stay in the fortified towns because of the inhabitants of the land. We will not return to our homes until every one of the Israelites is in possession of his portion...”

“...Moses said to them, ‘If you do this, if you go to battle as shock-troops, at the instance of Adonai, and every shock-fighter among you crosses the

Jordan, at the instance of Adonai, until God has dispossessed God's enemies from before God, and the land has been subdued, at the instance of Adonai,, and then you return—you shall be clear before Adonai and before Israel..."

"...The Gadites and the Reubenites answered Moses, 'Your servants will do as my lord commands.'"

What is interesting to me, is that Moses' answer to the tribes' request was that it is actually "ok" to live outside of the Land. Now this may come as a surprise to religious Zionists, who, following the teachings of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Hacohen Kook z"l, the first Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael and the father of Religious Zionism, believe that Jewish life outside of the Land of Israel is "*hevel*"—without meaning and without purpose, except of course for the purpose of preparing for a life inside the Land. Rav Kook teaches that *Eretz Yisrael* has a special quality and only the union of *Am Israel* to *Eretz Yisrael* (the People of Israel to the Land) can make both of them whole.

But I wish to take issue with Rav Kook, because I do not think that that is actually what the Torah is saying. I think that the Torah is saying something very different...that some Jews will choose to live, as some Jews have always chosen to live in *Eretz Yisrael*, and some Jews will choose to live, as some Jews have always chosen to live outside the Land. And that those of us who have made the choice not to "cross the Jordan", those of us who have built "sheep-folds for our flocks and towns for our children" outside the Land, have an obligation to ensure the settlement, security and well-being of those who choose to "cross the Jordan" and settle in the Land. Only then will we be clear before Adonai and before Israel.

So the question that is before us on this Yom Kippur morning is "what does this obligation mean to us in our day, and how can we go about fulfilling it?"

But before I go there, I want to say a word about Jewish life in the Diaspora.

I believe that Jewish life in the Diaspora can be vibrant, nourishing of the soul and spirit, religiously satisfying and fulfilling in every way. I believe that Jewish life in the Diaspora has enriched the Jewish People, and indeed has saved us from extinction during periods of history when we were exiled from the Land. I believe that Judaism and its teachings have enriched the world because we have spread to its four corners — Yamah, v'kedmah, tzafonah v'negbah, west, east, north and south — and that it is a part of our covenantal mission and part of God's plan for humanity that we live in the Diaspora as well as in the Land. I believe that there is meaning and purpose for Jewish religious life in the Diaspora—for my life—and that I can find complete religious fulfillment and complete connection to God right here in America. Otherwise, I would not choose to live here.

My friend and former boss when I worked for the Union for Reform Judaism, and one of my teachers along my life path was Arthur Grant, of blessed memory. Arthur was a great lover of Zion. His father, Norman Grant z"l, was a hero of Israel's War of Independence, even though he lived in Canada and remained outside the Land of Israel throughout the war. Norman Grant was the person who organized the illegal shipment of weapons from Toronto to Israel, providing guns

and ammunition to the Haganah, the forerunner of Israel's Armed Forces. At that time, it was extremely difficult to send munitions to Israel from the United States, and so Canada, and my home town of Toronto in particular, became the center of the illegal arms shipments.

Now, unlike his father, Arthur did live for several years in Israel, but he ultimately chose to make his life, and his contribution to Jewish life, in North America. I asked him about that once. He said to me, "I discovered that I would rather be a Hebrew teacher in North America than an English teacher in Israel." Arthur died peacefully in his sleep some years ago, at far too young an age, on a flight home from Tel Aviv. And I remember what he taught me about loving Israel from outside her borders, and about the obligation we have to her, whenever I think of him.

This morning, I want to suggest that there are several components to fulfilling our obligation to our brothers and sisters, our sons and daughters and grandchildren, our aunts and uncles and cousins, and our friends...and their brother and sisters, sons and daughters...who have chosen to settle in the Land, and that all of these components are necessary, and eminently doable from right here in the Diaspora.

#### First, informed advocacy on behalf of Israel.

We cannot be supporters of Israel unless we are informed about her situation. We need to be much more conversant about life in Israel, the social, political, religious and economic challenges that Israel faces as a society, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Israel's place in the larger theatre of Middle East politics and international security, and the specific relationships—social, political, religious and economic, between the United States and Israel. We need to know the names of her cities and where to find them on the map. We need to know the names of her leaders, and how her political system works (though some might say that God only knows...)

As individuals, we can and should be reading about Israel in local and national media. We should read at least one Israeli newspaper regularly (English language versions are available on-line). And we should check out recent books and publications about Israeli society, culture and politics, either on-line or whenever we go to a bookstore (assuming we can still find one). As a congregation, we should establish an Israel Committee to bring speakers and informative programming to our member families and establish links to sister-congregations and agencies in Israel that are worthy and badly in need of our support.

We can and must advocate for Israel in the community-at-large. Beginning with our friends and neighbours, talk about Israel and her situation and give them information they might not otherwise have. Monitor local and national media, and write letters to the editor when you feel that Israel's interests are not being fairly represented. Support our kids at Hillel and on their university campuses, where anti-Israel activity is rampant and lies are spread. Begin with San Francisco State, closest to our congregation, and encourage the leadership there to take publicly declared affirmative action to effect measurable and meaningful change to the purveying of propaganda, and to the atmosphere on campus.

#### Second, financial support through charitable donations, investments and "buying Israeli".

Israel is a country that has been in a state of war since her inception. The strain on her economy is tremendous, and social welfare programs often fall victim to insufficient resources. The needs of Israel's poor and elderly, her religious and educational institutions are often passed over by government, only to be met by the private and charitable sectors and by philanthropists from Jewish communities in the Diaspora. You can help. At least one Israeli charity should be among those you support annually. There are a myriad of needs out there which are currently not being met. You can support them directly, through community chest funds like UJA or the New Israel

Fund, one of my favourites. I would be happy to talk with you directly to help you identify worthy causes in need of support and how to reach them with your donations.

For those who, even in this difficult economy, have active investment portfolios, you can and should include investments in Israeli projects and corporations. There are a number of financial advisors and investment companies in our community that specialize in Israeli ventures, and I would be happy to point you to one of them. And just like we should buy “made in America” products to support our national economy, we can be on the lookout to “buy Israeli” in order to support Israel’s economy as well. And when we know of someone who is travelling to Israel, we can give them a little extra “spending money” to drop while they are there. Israel’s shopkeepers and manufacturers, and their children and their parents will thank you.

### Third, support of Israel through Zionist affiliation and support of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism.

We should all be members of a Zionist organization. We should stand up and be counted among those who support Israel. Zionism is not a dirty word. Zionism is not racism, even if racists and bigots and anti-Semites in the United Nations or in Durban or anywhere else say it is. It is not a dirty word, even if some in the Jewish community have disdain for it. You know, there is an old Jewish joke that a Zionist is a person who gives some money so that the child of some other Zionist can make aliyah...but it is not that, either.

Zionism is, in its variant forms, a philosophy, a religious movement, a political ideology. For some, it is simply to be a lover of Israel. I am proud to be a Zionist. It is an integral part of my Jewish identity and my being. I want people to know that I am a Zionist, an unabashed lover and supporter of Israel and her people. That is why I am a member of a Zionist organization—ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists. That is why I stood for election to the Canadian delegation of the last World Zionist Congress, and why I am proud to have been elected as one of Canada’s 21 delegates. If you are not a member of a Zionist organization, you should be. Forms to join ARZA are in the foyer. Stand up and be counted.

Zionist affiliation is not enough however. As a Reform Jew, you should also be a supporter of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, our Reform movement in Israel. I believe that Israel needs Reform Judaism, because the hearts and souls of so many Israelis are yearning for a spiritual connection, a way to connect to the religion and God of the Jewish People, the People to whom Israelis feel so deeply connected. But the absence of a strong and vibrant Reform Judaism creates an emptiness in the hearts of the majority, who do not find the connection they are seeking in the Orthodoxy of Israel’s religious establishment, any more than you or I find it in the Orthodox Jewish community here, (as evidenced by the fact that I am talking to you here, in a Reform synagogue, this morning.) And the absence of a connection to the spirituality of Jewish religious life in the majority of Israelis creates a heaviness in the heart and soul of the nation.

The good news is that our movement is growing. Israelis are beginning to discover and respond to the message of our Israeli Movement, that “there is more than one way to be Jewish.” Hundreds of weddings and b’nai mitzvah are being held each year in Israel’s 31 Reform congregations and 46 Masorti (Conservative) communities. Hebrew Union College’s Jerusalem campus has ordained a new generation of Israeli-born Reform rabbis and continues to attract new leaders to serve this growing movement. The Israel Religious Action Centre is known throughout the country, and indeed throughout the world, as the premiere organization promoting Judaism’s social justice values in the streets, in the courts and at the Wall—in pursuit of religious pluralism and a liberal, democratic and just society for Israel. Part of our obligation to ensure the

settlement and security of those who choose to live in the land is to support our movement in the achievement of these goals.

Fourth, regular (and frequent) travel to Israel.

One can only know Israel after setting foot on her soil. One can only know Israelis and understand their lives and partner with them by meeting them on their own turf. One can only feel “at home” in Israel by “going home” to Israel, even if it is only for a short stay.

I believe that it is a religious obligation of every Jew, especially those of us who choose not to live in the Land, to visit Israel. In ancient days, those who lived outside the Land made pilgrimage to *Eretz Yisrael*. It was their ideal to make that pilgrimage as often as possible, but at least once in their lifetime. Surely it should be our ideal to do no less. Programs like Birthright were established to ensure that our high school and college-age children and our young adults would carry out this ideal, have this experience and fulfill this obligation. All of our children should go on Birthright. The Reform movement “Keshet” Birthright trips are an excellent way to do this, and all you have to do is call me and I will help you to enroll your children.

If you have never visited Israel, this is the year to go. If you have visited Israel before, this is the year to go. Even if it is your practice to visit Israel often, this is the year to go. Beth Israel Judea will be offering a family tour to Israel this summer, led by me and Ricki. It will be hot and dry, but given the summer weather in San Francisco and in Pacifica where I live, we will welcome the change. Details are available in the foyer. I’ll look for you at the airport.

And Fifth, volunteer service.

There are many programs that make it possible for Jews from the Diaspora to spend either short or extended periods of time doing volunteer service in Israel. Young people can teach English as a second language, or do community building projects in underprivileged neighborhoods. Dual citizens and volunteers can do military service. Adults and seniors can do volunteer service on military bases, freeing up Israelis from their *miluim* (Army Reserve) duties and allowing them to have more time with their families and for their professional lives. And all of these programs will bring you to the Land, and offer you tours and experiences that will take you from west to east, north to south — Yamah, v’kedmah, tzafonah, v’negbah, the Mediterranean Sea to the Sea of Galilee, Rosh HaNikra to Eilat. And of course, to Jerusalem, Israel’s heart and her treasure.

These are the things we can do, and we must do, as inheritors of the mantle of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Dan. To fulfill the obligations Moses placed upon them, and upon all of us who have chosen to live on this side of the Jordan river. Only then “shall we be clear before Adonai and before Israel.”

May this New Year be one in which we strive to achieve such clarity.

Ken yihi ratzon

Rabbi Danny Gottlieb