**Checking Our Mezuzah**

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**Yom Kippur Morning**

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The Fifty-Fifth Reserve Paratroop Brigade was encountering surprisingly little resistance. The war had begun two days before. Israel had launched an attack on the Sinai Peninsula, seeking to break the Egyptian blockade of the Straits of Hormuz, which had closed off shipping to Eilat. Israel had advised Jordan to stay out of the conflict, but King Hussein chose to attack. Israeli troops repelled the Jordanians and moved into Jerusalem the next day. Now, on June 7, the Defense Minister, Moshe Dayan, gave them the clearance to take the walled Old City. Nobody realized that Jordanian troops had by then pulled out of Jerusalem toward Jericho.

Colonel Mordechai (“Motta”) Gur prepared to obey the order. He got out of his half-track, which was parked overlooking the Lion’s Gate. Journalist Yossi Klein Halevi describes the scene:

Motta sat on the ground and gazed at the walled city. It was a bright, cool morning, and the sun was on his back. The gold and silver domes of the Temple Mount glowed before him. He closed his eyes, as if in prayer. He was about to enter the Jewish pantheon, along with King David, who’d conquered Jerusalem and turned it into his capital; Judah the Maccabee, who’d purified the Temple after its desecration by the Hellenists; Bar Kochba, who’d thrown himself against Rome and lost the Jews’ last desperate battle for Jerusalem. Then came the centuries of enforced separation, landscape transformed into memory. And now landscape was reemerging from dream, shimmering back into tangible reach.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Gur returned to his vehicle. His driver pushed through the Lion’s Gate. They reached the Dome of the Rock, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Western Wall. The Jordanians were gone. No one fired. There was silence. “Cease fire!” Gur ordered the battalion commanders. Then he radioed General Uzi Narkiss, commander of the Central Front. *Har habayit b’yadeinu,* “The Temple Mount is in our hands.”

A few moments later, General Narkiss’s jeep pulled up. In it was Shlomo Goren, chief rabbi of the Israel Defense Forces. He carried a Torah scroll in one hand and a shofar in the other. Paratroopers rushed down the Temple Mount to the Western Wall, Rabbi Goren joining them. Halevi writes, “The narrow space before the Wall – barely five meters wide and twenty meters long – filled with soldiers. Rabbi Goren was lifted onto shoulders. He tried to blow the shofar but was too overcome. ‘Rabbi,’ said an officer, a kibbutznik, ‘give me the shofar. I play the trumpet.’ Goren complied. The sound that emerged resembled the blast of a bugle.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

A month before, on Yom Ha’atzma’ut, Independence Day, a singer named Shuli Natan premiered a song. Naomi Shemer, the country’s greatest songwriter, had composed it. It was called “Jerusalem of Gold.” It spoke of the longing that Jews in Israel felt to unify the city that had been divided in the War of Independence nineteen years earlier. Now the soldiers were singing it at the Wall. Within days, Shemer had changed the last verse to acknowledge that the city was now whole. It made no reference to the Arabs living there.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This summer will mark the 50th anniversary of the 1967 War. No Jew who was aware at the time will ever forget it, and nobody who wasn’t will completely understand how it felt. Israel seemed in danger from the surrounding Arab forces of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. The fears of annihilation changed to shouts of relief and victory as the Jewish state resoundingly won the war in the Biblically charged period of six days. But on the seventh day, Israel found itself in charge of a vast amount of new territory: from Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip; from Syria, the Golan Heights; and most significantly, from Jordan, the eastern part of Jerusalem and the West Bank of the Jordan River, also known as Judea and Samaria.

The Torah tells us that when we first entered the land of Israel, we were to count off fifty years. On Yom Kippur of that year, the shofar was to be sounded. And then, each of us was to return to our ancestral home. This is to happen every fifty years thereafter.[[4]](#footnote-4) As we look at Israel fifty years after the Six Day War, after the shofar was first blown at the Wall, it is time to do *t’shvuah,* to return to where we need to be as a people.

When you travel to Israel, you see mezuzot – mezuzahs – everywhere. They are on homes and synagogues, but they are also attached to schools, museums, and governmental offices. A mezuzah is a set of Jewish texts that we affix to our doorposts. It reminds us that we live by Jewish values. The Talmud provides instructions for making sure our mezuzah is in good working order. We’re supposed to check a mezuzah on a private house twice in every seven years, but we are to check a mezuzah on a public building twice every fifty years.[[5]](#footnote-5) As we come to this fiftieth year, this time of returning to ourselves, let us use the occasion to check our mezuzah on the public building that is Israel.

Of course, I don’t live in Israel. It’s presumptuous of me to opine about its politics and society. But I can speak about my own experiences there, and I can use those to shine some light on what has happened in this fascinating and complex place.

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I first traveled to Israel in 1979, when I was in graduate school. I went with a college friend of mine. I saw the sights, as every rookie visitor does. I got up early to climb Masada. I swam in the Mediterranean Sea near Tel Aviv. I visited the Israel Museum and marveled at the Dead Sea Scrolls. And I went to the Western Wall.

Last month, the commentator Daniel Gordis wrote a thoughtful article in the *Jerusalem Post.* Dr. Gordis leans toward the right in terms of Israel’s politics. In the article, he mentioned that he is comfortable hearing and responding to those on the left in Israel who disagree vehemently with him. He wondered why he doesn’t feel the same about American Jewish critics of Israel. And he noted that, unlike homegrown Israelis, “many of these writers produce work that is almost exclusively about bashing Israel, never reflecting on the much that is good about the Jewish state.”[[6]](#footnote-6) I take this criticism to heart. I have frequently found that there are policies and programs of the government of Israel that I disagree with. It’s time to start this conversation by mentioning some positives.

I was able to go to the Western Wall because Israel captured the Old City in 1967. Under Jordanian rule, no Jews – neither Israelis nor others – were allowed to enter the Old City. Had they done so, according to a scholarly analysis, they would have found that immediately after the Jordanian conquest, soldiers “looted synagogue, schools, and homes [in the Jewish Quarter] and made a fire of religious articles. Acting under orders, Arab soldiers dynamited synagogues and schools in the area.” When Israeli soldiers entered the Yohanan ben Zakai synagogue complex during the 1967 War, “they found garbage piled to the ceiling.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Israel cleaned up what could be cleaned up. It opened the Western Wall to Jewish worshipers. I have to say here that it did so through dynamiting Arab homes to create the Western Wall plaza that stands there today.[[8]](#footnote-8) But it did ensure that Jews could finally return to our holy site.

But Israel did more than look after the Jews. After we had prayed at the Western Wall, my friend and I walked up the stairs to the Temple Mount, where the Temple itself once stood. There, we visited the Al-Aqsa Mosque, third holiest in Islam. And we entered the Dome of the Rock, whence Muhammad was supposed to have journeyed to heaven and where, in Jewish understanding, Abraham bound Isaac to the altar. We found Muslim worshipers there, because Israel had allowed Muslims free access to these places. Since the Second Intifada in 2000, Jews can no longer go up to the Temple Mount, but negotiations are taking place that may change that.[[9]](#footnote-9) In any event, Israeli rule has meant that the three Abrahamic faiths now have control over their holy sites.

There are more good things to say about Israel. It remains a vibrant, if at times exasperating, democracy, the only one in the region. Its inventions have benefited humanity. For a small nation, it has done amazing things. These are part of what we look at when we check the mezuzah.

Let me tell you about a more recent visit to Israel. This past winter, I attended the convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Reform rabbinical association. It was held in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. One morning, all of us boarded buses to go to various destinations. Our bus was different from the others. It was heavier, because it was weighted down with a bulletproof coating. As to why we had to take this special bus, let me recount a bit of history.

Jews lived in Hebron continuously since ancient times. In 1936, after anti-Jewish rioting, the British government removed essentially all of Hebron’s Jewish families. After the War of Independence, Hebron passed to Jordanian control. Needless to say, Jordan did not let any Jews return to the city.

Israel took Hebron as part of the 1967 War. At the next Passover, a group of Jewish religious nationalists rented rooms in a hotel to hold a seder there. They didn’t leave, and the Israeli government decided not to force them out. They eventually set up a settlement in the outskirts of the city. In 1979, a related group of religious nationalists moved into the center of Hebron and stayed. After the Oslo Accords in 1995, Israel took control of the central part of the city and gave authority over the rest of Hebron to the Palestinians.[[10]](#footnote-10)

After 1967, Israelis built settlements throughout the West Bank, partially to secure territory in any forthcoming peace negotiations, partially in response to a religious imperative to settle all of the Biblical Land of Israel. These settlements have been hugely controversial. Tension between settlers and Palestinians surfaces constantly.

One place it surfaces is a rotary that our bus had to go through on the way to Hebron. Our tour guide was explaining this to us when we were pulled over by troops. Those checking their smartphones soon found out why. A Palestinian had attacked people in a local store and was shot and killed. We saw his body covered with a cloth. We stopped taking pictures. Eventually, we went on to the city.

We heard from two people in Hebron. The first was a representative of the settlers, a charming young man who grew up in America. He told us that Jews simply wanted to come home to this holy city. The same imperative had led the early Zionists to settle the land.

Our settler guide took us to the Tomb of the Patriarchs, the Biblical cave of Machpelah. This site is one of the reasons that Hebron speaks to the Jewish imagination. It was the first land that our ancestors were said to own in Israel. Tradition claims that it holds the remains of all of the patriarchs and matriarchs other than Rachel. We stood in front of the Tomb of Abraham. We felt the cool wind come up from the cave. Our guide said, “Our father is buried here.”

Jews can go into one part of the Tomb, Palestinians to the other part. This has remained the rule since 1994, when a settler named Baruch Goldstein shot unarmed Muslim worshipers there. The whole Tomb is open to the Jews for six days a year and to the Muslims for six days a year.

After our settler guide was done with us, we heard from Nadav Bigelman. Nadav is a member of Breaking the Silence, a group of former Israeli soldiers who talk about their experiences enforcing the occupation. He pointed out that the city is split in half with the army guarding a Jewish population of maybe 500 settlers in the middle of a Palestinian city of 120,000. Of those Palestinians who remain, many cannot leave their houses by the front door. They have to pass across rooftops from house to house or break through the interior of abandoned homes until they come to an alley or cross street they can use.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Nadav talked about staging raids on Palestinian houses where there was no discernible security reason for doing so. He asserted that forces did this simply to intimidate the Palestinian population. And he left us with these words: “The occupation is a monster. What happens over here seeps across the Green Line,” the old 1967 border, into the core of Israel’s soul.[[12]](#footnote-12) Hebron is another place to check our mezuzah.

I traveled to Israel most recently this summer, to study at the Shalom Hartman Institute. One day, I went with some other participants to learn about the GLBTQ community in Jerusalem. Tel Aviv is known as a gay-friendly city, certainly the most gay-friendly in the Middle East. Its annual pride parade is a must-attend event for politicians of almost all stripes. Jerusalem is different.

We climbed the steps to a small office filled with old couches and mismatched chairs. We were greeted by Tom Canning, director of the Jerusalem Open House for Pride and Tolerance. Tom told us about the struggles of the Open House. For instance, Palestinian gays and lesbians have decided that they won’t work with his group, because of their fear of validating Israeli rule. And he talked with trepidation about the upcoming Jerusalem Pride Parade.

The parade is much smaller than Tel Aviv’s. Tel Aviv is primarily a modern, secular city. Jerusalem is a city of religions, and as part of that it has a vibrant ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, community. The Haredim regard homosexuality as an abomination. A few of them take that to the most extreme place.

The previous year, on July 30, 2015, thousands of people participated in the Jerusalem Pride Parade. One was Shira Banki, a sixteen year old high school student who went with several of her friends to show their solidarity. A Haredi man named Yishai Schlissel had stabbed three people at the Pride parade in 2005. He served ten years in prison. Immediately upon his release, he went to the 2015 parade. There he stabbed six more people, including Shira. She died two days later.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The religious nationalism that fueled Baruch Goldstein was not the only force unleashed by the aftermath of the 1967 War. That nationalism broke the prevailing Jewish narrative of a tolerant, secular, socialist society. With the murkier results of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, what was left of that narrative – namely, a trust in the ability of the Ashkenazi secular elite to lead the country – that too fell apart. Sephardi votes helped end the socialist monopoly on power and put the right-wing Likud Party in charge. As the prevailing narrative failed, it also opened the political door for others to take a lead in Israeli society, including the previously marginalized ultra-Orthodox community.

Today, there is no one prevailing narrative. Israeli society has been described as consisting of a set of tribes: Secular, Sephardi, national religious, ultra-Orthodox, Arab. They don’t always get along. And sometimes, the results are tragic. We wonder when everyone will beat their knives into ploughshares.

A few weeks ago, I saw a movie. It’s called *A Tale of Love and Darkness,* and it was directed by its star, the Israeli-American actor Natalie Portman. It’s based on the memoir of the same name by the great Israeli novelist Amos Oz, and it tells the story of his childhood. At one point, you see the young Amos go off to learn from one of his tutors.

That tutor was a woman named Zelda Schneerson Mishkovsky. As the name Schneerson suggests, she was a descendant of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the founder of Chabad. She wrote poetry under the name of Zelda. I want to share with you one of her poems:

Every rose is an island

 of the promised peace,

Eternal peace.

 Within every rose

 dwells a sapphire bird

 whose name is “vehit’tu,” they shall beat

 And it seems so near

 The light of that rose

So near

 Its scent

 So near

 the silence of its leaves

 So near

 That island –

 Take a boat

 And break through that sea of fire.[[14]](#footnote-14)

As we enter the fiftieth year, we have checked our mezuzah. We have looked at our Israel. And this Yom Kippur, we listen for the shofar that proclaims the Jubilee. We return each of us to our holdings. The trip isn’t easy. It takes us through a sea of fire. But it is time to take that boat. It is time to learn about the changes in Israel, to understand the complexity of the story. And then, through that complexity, it is time to find that sapphire bird, vehit’tu, that bird that calls us to beat our swords into ploughshares, our spears into pruning hooks, to sit each one under their own vine and fig tree, and for none to make us afraid.

*Kein y’hi ratzon,* be this God’s will.

1. Yossi Klein Halevi, *Like Dreamers: The Story of the Israeli Paratroopers Who Reunited Jerusalem and Divided a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid.,* pp. 90, 96; Gershom Gorenberg, *The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements, 1967 – 1977* (New York: Times Books, 2006), p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Halevi, *Like Dreamers,* pp. 59-60, 98; Gorenberg, *Accidental Empire,* p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Leviticus 25:8-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. BT Yoma 11a. My thanks to Prof. Michael Marmur of the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion for leading me to this text and for many other insights in this sermon. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Daniel Gordis, “Time to take the Twitter test,” *Jerusalem Post,* Sept. 22, 2016, http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/A-Dose-of-Nuance-Time-to-take-the-Twitter-test-468432. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Marshall J. Breger and Thomas A. Idinopulos, “Jerusalem’s Holy Places and the Peace Process,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Paper No. 46 (1998), p. 12, [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gorenberg, *Accidental Empire,* pp. 42-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Nir Hasson, “Report: Israel, Jordan in Talks to Readmit non-Muslim Visitors to Temple Mount Sites,” *Haaretz,* June 30, 2015, http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.663644. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For the story of the initial Passover seder in 1968, see Gorenberg, *Accidental Empire,* pp. 142-152. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See also David Shulman, “Hope in Hebron,” *New York Review of Books,* March 22, 2013, http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2013/03/22/hope-hebron/. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For more from Breaking the Silence, see http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Yair Ettinger, Yarden Skop, and Chaim Levinson, “6 Stabbed at Jerusalem Gay Pride Parade by Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Assailant,” *Haaretz,* July 30, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.668796>; Yaniv Kubovich, “16-year-old Stabbed in Jerusalem Pride Parade Succumbs to Wounds,” *Haaretz,* Aug. 2, 2015, http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.669161 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Zelda, “*Kol shoshanah,*” “Every rose.” This poem was called to my attention by my teacher Rachel Korazim. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)