



Parshat Pinchas
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When Our Marriage Hits a Rough Patch
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Every summer I go to Israel with our Hartman delegation, and when I come back home people ask, “How was Israel?” Every summer it has always been so easy for me to say fabulous! Israel *is* fabulous, and being there is usually inspiring. Often I try to turn the conversation to whether they might join us next summer at Hartman.

But this week, when I got back, and people asked me how was Israel, for the first time, I could not say in good conscience fabulous. Parts of the experience *were* fabulous. Hartman is fabulous, studying Torah and learning from their great teachers is fabulous, and mostly being there with our members as we experience Israel together was fabulous. But sadly the word fabulous does *not* take in the experience of being in Israel this summer. In the interests of being truthful, what I have told people this week, and what I tell you now, is that Israel is *complicated*.

This past Tuesday was the 17th of Tammuz, which frames the three weeks culminating in marking the destruction of the first and second temples on the 9th of Av. These are the famous three weeks of mourning when we are supposed to be thinking about the oncoming destruction of the temple and of the Jewish state. These are the three weeks when there are special Haftarat of rebuke, like the one from Jeremiah today, that do not end, as other Haftarat do, on an up note. Rather these sober Haftarat remind us that the destruction did not happen overnight. Did not happen in a vacuum. The destruction came from somewhere. The walls were breached. The destruction that engulfed our people and our homeland flowed from those breached walls.

Being in Israel for two weeks, I saw first-hand the walls are being breached today.

The first breach is that the government of the State of Israel reneged on an agreement it made concerning the southern part of the Kotel, known as Robinson's arch, and the new and improved entry through which all visitors of the Kotel were to pass. The idea, agreed upon by all parties, was that there would be a single entry way that would allow a visitor to the Kotel equal and free access to three different choices. If you were a man and wanted a men only service, there was a section for you. If you were a woman and wanted a women's only service, there was a section for you. If you were a man or woman and wanted an egalitarian section, there was a section for you. This agreement reflects that there is not one expression of Judaism that is authentic but many; that Israel is not the homeland of Orthodox Jews or Haredi Jews only, but the homeland of the Jewish people. Prime Minister Netanyahu agreed to this deal.

But after the deal was agreed to, Haredi officials objected. If there is only one entrance, that might lead somebody to conclude that an egalitarian service is valid; is authentic; is a coequal form of Judaism. And we can't have that. We cannot nurture the impression that an egalitarian service at Robinson's arch is as valid as a separate seating service because it is not; there can be no one equal entrance for we must show that egalitarian Judaism is not valid and is not coequal.

And here is where the perverse politics of Israel comes to play. Prime Minister Netanyahu's government is hanging on with 61 seats. Ten of those seats are from Haredi parties who are deeply invested in delegitimizing egalitarian Judaism. To appease those ten members of his governing coalition, to stay in power, the Prime Minister of Israel threw us under the bus. In the process, he reneged.

When God called Abraham, it was to create a people whose mission was to do justice and

righteousness, *laasot tzedakah u'mishpat*. For the government of Israel to renege on a deal is the opposite.

The second breach is that Judaism's holiest site, the Kotel, is now the place where Jews like us, where Jews who are the majority of North American Jewry, are separate but unequal. Our Judaism is disrespected in Israel. Indeed, that is precisely the point. To disrespect us is why the Haredi parties insisted on renegeing.

The third breach is that if you talk to Israelis, they do not get why so many North Americans are so deeply disrespected. Israeli Jews, and North American Jews, are not connecting; indeed we are growing farther apart, and that is a very dangerous situation for world Jewry. What's the big deal, Israelis ask. It's the Kotel. Most Israelis don't go to the Kotel and don't care. You can pray in other settings in an egalitarian fashion. Why do you have to make such a lightning rod out of the Kotel. Let it go and focus on the big picture. Israelis, including but not limited to my flesh and blood Israeli family, tell me this.

But here is what they don't get. They don't get the great power of symbolism. Why is taking the Confederate flag out of the state house such a big deal? It's just a flag. Why is taking the statue of Confederate General and slave owner Robert E. Lee out of the public square such a big deal? It's just a statue. The Confederate flag is not just a flag, the statue of Robert E. Lee is not just a statue, and the Kotel is not just another place to pray. Each of these has enormous symbolic power. Each speaks to a marginalized minority—whether African Americans here, or Masorti Jews in Israel—reinforcing their position on the margins of society.

In short, in this week of the 17th of Tammuz, in this period of the three weeks, there are serious breaches which make being in Israel complicated, not fabulous.

How do we understand this, and what do we do about it? I have been marinating on this question for several weeks, I have been losing sleep, and here is my best thought.

I feel like we are married to Israel, but our marriage to Israel has hit a rough patch. The good news is that our tradition equips us with how to handle just this situation. What is true of our marriage to the State of Israel is also true of the people of Israel's marriage to God.

The Jewish people's marriage to God is eternal. According to classic rabbinic theology, God is the groom, the Jewish people are the bride, Sinai was the chuppah, the Torah was the ketubah, and the marriage is forever.

But this marriage is forever running into rough patches. God and the Jewish people are forever disappointing one another.

The most stunning expression of the forever marriage being at the same time a troubled marriage takes place in the first two chapters of the prophet Hoshea. Hoshea wants to embody the troubled marriage. God tells him to marry a prostitute, a woman named Gomer. She is faithless. She has children with her lovers and they are given names like Loh Ammi, which means You are not my people, and I will not be your God.

What do we modern people make of this weird story, a prophet marrying a prostitute? I think prostitution here speaks to what happens when unworthy things creep into a relationship and distort it and threaten to destroy it. It is unworthy to marry a prostitute. It is unworthy to renege on a deal. It is unworthy to treat Israel as a Haredi shtetl where non-Haredi Jews are second-class citizens. All of which can leave us feeling Loh Ammi, Israel will not be my homeland. Israel is not into us. We won't be into Israel.

But the prophecy of Hoshea does not end in this dark place. Rather, the prophet and the prostitute do not give up on one another, as God and the Jewish people will not give up on one

another. The prophecy ends with beautiful words that we recite every morning when putting on tefilin:

I will espouse you forever;
I will espouse you with righteousness and justice,
And with goodness and mercy,
And I will espouse you with faithfulness
Then you will know the Lord

Marriage requires working at it every day. Because of this ongoing work, Hoshea's marriage to Gomer is saved and strengthened, and the child once named You are Not My People gets renamed Children of the Living God.

So too the marriage between North American Jewry and the State of Israel requires working on it every day.

When we hit a troubled spot in our marriage, we don't give up. We dig in. We double down. To be a person of character means not bailing when the going gets tough. To be a person of character means to repair, restore, redeem our deepest commitments every day. Jews in miserable, vulnerable places prayed for 2,000 years for a Jewish homeland. They were expelled and massacred and their prayers were not answered. By an accident of birth, we happen to have been born when the miracle of the rebirth of Israel happened during our lifetime. That miracle imports the obligation not to bail, but to dig in.

One day this week, I was blessed to receive an email by one of our long time members whose grand niece just enlisted in the Israeli army. She grew up in a Conservative egalitarian home and is now in the Tzahal. As I looked at her picture at the induction, in uniform, I had two thoughts. First, the Haredi parties in the Prime Minister's coalition disrespect the Judaism in which she grew up. Second, good for her. She is not letting that get in her way. At the tender age of 18 she gets that her mission is to move from Loh Ammi to Children of the Living God.

How was Israel? Complicated. Not easy. Far from perfect. But still a miracle. Still a blessing that we are alive to see it. Still a marriage worth fighting for. Shabbat shalom.