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### My Changing Dreams of Israel

I really love working at this congregation.

I mean, I don't love everything about it. Our database drives me crazy. I get annoyed when one of the preschool parents at the Meeting House takes my parking spot. And I tire of schlepping prayer books and craft supplies in the trunk of my car. But when you think about the scope of contemporary American Jewish life, and how dysfunctional it can be, these things are pretty minor.

I never thought I would work in a congregation. And many of you probably never thought you would join a congregation. So perhaps we're a good match. As I think back over the 13 years I've been here, I've seen how you have shaped me as much as I have shaped the congregation.

What I most like about this congregation is that it's a full of smart, creative, thoughtful, and open-minded people. People who want to express their Judaism or Jewish identity in a variety of ways, or who want to support their partner in doing so. People who want to find meaning in Jewish traditions or friendship and community at Shabbat dinners.

In certain ways we're not a typical congregation, because we have largely let go of the different Jewish narratives and norms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a way that most congregations have not. We are far from a monolithic group, and we disagree with one another on specific issues. But most if not all of us hold particular concerns and priorities which differ from the established Jewish community in significant ways:

We object to the principle of High Holiday tickets or leadership hierarchies based on the wealth of the members. We fight back against disapproval of our interfaith relationships or those of our children. We believe we should be able to raise our children in a dual-faith household. We question circumcision. We question Zionism. We question extravagant bnei mitzvah celebrations. We prefer to be buried in a green cemetery as opposed to a Jewish cemetery, or we really just want to be cremated. We are patrilineal Jews or converts to Judaism or our Jewish status is a little ambiguous. We are committed to creating feminist prayers and blessings, or we reject binary gender categories reinforced by Jewish law and liturgy. We

challenge Ashkenazi-centric American Jewish culture and advocate for the inclusion of Mizrahi Jews and Jews of color.

Of all the issues that we struggle with, collectively, Israel is often the hardest. We hold conflicting narratives about the place of Israel in Jewish life and of the meaning of a Jewish state, which in part makes it difficult to discuss.

We believe that Israel is a “light unto the nations.”

Or we believe that power can corrupt Jews just as it can all people.

We believe that because Israel is American’s friend in the Middle East we must support it at all costs.

Or we believe we have an obligation to ensure that no human being experiences war or persecution.

We believe that to be a Jew is to support Israel as the Jewish state, resurrected after 2,000 years of exile.

Or we believe that to be a Jew is to align ourselves with the oppressed, even if that means choosing solidarity with Palestinians.

It’s true that these narratives are over-generalized, but they profoundly shape our perspectives. This morning, though, I want to look beneath these narratives. I want to talk about how important our experiences are in shaping our beliefs, and I want to talk about how even our most sacred experiences can mislead us. I want to talk about when dreams die and how sometimes that’s okay. And that acting courageously comes with real costs but so too does fence-sitting. I want to argue that there is holiness in discomfort.

The year was 1994 and I was spending my junior year abroad at Kibbutz Malkiya for two months and then at the University of Haifa. It was a glorious time. Northern Israel was beautiful, and kibbutz life was idyllic. We would hear heavy artillery from across the border with Lebanon and see fighter planes in the sky, but that just added to the mystery and magic of our experience. We hiked through forests, ate carob straight from the trees, climbed on a crumbling mosque.

At the university I created deep friendships with Israelis. I integrated into Israeli culture. I lived next door to Ethiopian Jews and I studied Israeli politics and literature. I travelled all over Israel, and I was mesmerized by everything our tour guides taught us. I was part of the Zionist dream. Jewish history had come alive, and I was walking on holy land.

Palestinians were sort of a footnote of my experience. They were there, but not really. This was about my Jewish experience. My Jewish homeland. My Zionist dream. Israel certainly had problems, but problems can be fixed, a peace agreement could be reached, things would be okay. When I returned to the United States I didn't really understand how people could criticize Israel. The tiny Jewish state might make mistakes, but sometimes it had no choice to engage in aggressive actions towards Palestinians. We had finally fulfilled our 2,000 year-old Jewish dream to return to the land, after all. And then there was the Holocaust and our need to be constantly vigilant about antisemitism.

I believe now that the vision of Israel I so dearly held on to was painfully narrow. I had adopted a powerful narrative without asking too many questions. I had only seen a small slice of life in Israel, and I made sweeping generalizations out of these limited experiences.

Of course, we do this all the time. Our experiences lead us to make certain assumptions, and they at least partially frame our narratives. There's nothing wrong with this – but we do need to challenge ourselves to think critically when we have those experiences. In my case I had embraced the dominant Israeli narrative, but I had never thoughtfully considered any Palestinian narratives.

I don't regret any of my experiences though. Being in Israel that year largely made me who I am, and I am grateful for these intensive experiences at such a formative age. These were sacred experiences, leading me to a strong connection to being Jewish, to Jewish history and culture, to world Jewry. I still believe that Israel is an extraordinary place, that it was an important refuge for Jews who had nowhere to go, and that Jewish culture flourishes there in unique ways. But we are capable of holding multiple and complex beliefs at once and sometimes oversimplified narratives do not serve us well.

I have thought often about that destroyed mosque I had climbed on while I was on kibbutz. It took me many years to realize that it wasn't some ancient ruin. A quick internet search showed that Kibbutz Malkiya stood on top of what had once been a Palestinian village – Al-Malkiyya. I had never wondered what the rubble was all about. I now recognize that even sacred experiences can mislead us. It doesn't mean that we weren't profoundly connected to something greater than us, it just means that we accepted what we were told without probing further.

Five years later I returned to Israel for another year, this time to Jerusalem. I was in rabbinical school, happy once again to be living in Israel.

My roommate invited me to a feminist conference in the Galilee. One night we attended a concert given by Palestinian and Israeli performers. I couldn't understand the Arabic at all, and

the Hebrew was hard to follow. I happened to be sitting with an Israeli and a Palestinian who both translated the song. I still remember one line from the chorus: "Your enemy is just like you."

We make so many assumptions about our enemies. It's striking when we think that Palestinians are just like you and me. When we consider that they have their own unique histories, stories, and dreams. When we stop thinking of them as obstacles to be dealt with, but rather as a people with whom we have a shared past and a shared future.

"Want to go to Gaza?" my friend, Elliott, asked me one day. It was that same year we were living in Jerusalem. He had found a tour company in East Jerusalem that took sight-seeing tours to Gaza. "Did I want to join him and his wife, Sara?"

"Sure, why not?" I answered.

And that was that. We went to Gaza. The year was 2000, before three wars pounded that place to rubble, destroyed its economy, water supply, civil society. Our tour guide took us to an amusement park, the beach, a beekeeping warehouse, archeological ruins, a café, a purse shop, and a refugee camp.

Oh my God, that refugee camp. I had never seen so many people crammed into such a small area. We sat sipping tea with a Palestinian family in a tiny room where nine people lived. A teenage girl slipped me a scrap of paper with her phone number on it. "Help me get out of here," she whispered.

I had never really known about Gaza. I had never known that a million people were crammed into that tiny strip of land. I had never known that it was like a prison, sealed off by the Israeli military in every direction with few ways to get out. I had never known what an incomprehensible humanitarian catastrophe existed just 44 miles from Tel Aviv. This wasn't the Israel I had come to know and love.

My first dream of Israel died in that refugee camp.

I left behind my dream that Israel would just decide to start respecting the human rights of all its inhabitants, end its occupation, and ensure the self-determination of both peoples.

We talk so much about our hope for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. But hope can be paralyzing. Clinging to old dreams can be debilitating. Sometimes it's okay for dreams to die. It doesn't mean we are giving up. It doesn't mean we can't keep working, diligently, for what we believe in. We can, very much so.

We have new experiences. We learn new truths. Our perspectives change. Our narratives break apart. And when they do, we need to grieve for what we have lost. It can take many years for new dreams to emerge. Or maybe not even dreams at all, but new commitments, new passions, new perspectives. When this happens we can open ourselves up to new possibilities.

It can be scary to let go of our dreams because they provide us with moral certitude, with a clear way forward. I guess I don't believe that there is one clear way forward. There are many paths, and some of them are consistent with my values, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences. So I'm going to walk on those, knowing that I might end up somewhere unexpected, and that might be okay.

I visited Israel a few times in the next decade and a half, and in 2014 I returned for two months, this time with my partner, Renee, and our two kids. The only way to explain that trip is that it was fun. Really fun. I read a lot, I walked a lot, I got to travel with my kids.

I learned about privilege. I learned that being Jewish (and American) grants you tremendous freedom in Israel. We could travel wherever we wanted, on whichever roads we chose. We were waved through checkpoints because our license plate was yellow. Palestinians who drove with green license plates faced many more restrictions. They would wait for hours at checkpoints.

Nowhere was privilege more shocking than in Hebron. Travelling there on a study tour opened my eyes to a part of the country I had never seen before. In 1994, after Baruch Goldstein, a Jewish physician born in Brooklyn, open fired on Palestinians praying in a mosque on Purim, killing 29 and injuring 125, the Israeli military began to create "security" on Shuhada Street, the main commercial vessel of Hebron and beyond, in some ways like Madison's State Street. But the security was for the settlers only; Hebron is the only Palestinian city with a settlement built right in its center, and over 600 Israeli soldiers are stationed there, approximately one for every settler. Settlers come in all stripes; these are some of Israel's most militant.

The military turned Shuhada Street into a ghost street, closing its shops, even forbidding Palestinians to walk down it. What used to be a bustling thoroughfare is now eerily empty. Only Israeli Jews and foreigners are allowed to walk down this street. Palestinians who live in tiny homes above the welded-shut storefronts must get there from back doors and over rooftops. It is separation in the extreme. There is nothing was equal about it.

We visited Baruch Goldstein's grave, which is prominently located in a park. We saw small rocks scattered on it, which are left regularly by mourners paying their respects. It was here that I learned about the depth of Jewish extremism. Dr. Goldstein wasn't just one lone fanatic

– a whole movement, backed by the Israeli military and government, is flourishing in Israel. It is shamefully visible in Hebron but has deep roots in many areas.

I learned that there are different laws for different people in the West Bank – Palestinians live under military rule while Israelis live under a democratic, civilian authority. It's so hard to believe – not just the extremism, but the support that the state lends to it.

It's hard to reconcile the reality that we see before us with our hopes and our dreams. It's hard to understand that this is Israel as much as the Western Wall, Tel Aviv beaches, and kibbutzim.

And so the question becomes, what do you do when reality conflicts so starkly with your values?

I believe we have an obligation to start by addressing our own American Jewish community, which has established narrow parameters regarding what is acceptable discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We have to articulate our own beliefs and concerns, our questions and our objections, our perspectives and our narratives.

A tension exists between remaining silent on a complex and challenging moral issue and voicing dissent, and it's not always clear what the right answer is, because there is always a cost. Voicing dissent can lead to social ostracism from one's family, friends, or community. And it can come with professional consequences for rabbis, Jewish communal professionals, teachers, and academics. But there is also a cost to remaining silent.

A study by the Jewish Council for Public Affairs found that one-third of the 552 rabbis they polled – the majority of whom identified as liberal – responded that they were reluctant to express what they believed about Israel. This cannot lead to strong, healthy Jewish communities, and it is, quite frankly, dysfunctional for congregational life.

The Palestinian-American poet, Naomi Shihab Nye, articulates a simple, challenging question: "Why do you have to have only one friend in the region? That's like the dark side of junior high."

The mainstream American Jewish community's refusal to create an open tent and embrace the diversity of American Jews is, well, like the dark side of junior high. I remember my eighth grade prom, and how I disinvited one of my friends because she was going to wreck the party. My excuse was that I was 14. But what is the American Jewish community's excuse when it disinvites Jews with unpopular opinions to the communal party? Aren't we bigger than that? I mean, we can't keep bemoaning a shrinking Jewish community on one hand and uphold red lines that shut out so many Jews from communal Jewish institutions on the other.

I deeply appreciate that our community believes that we can be an open tent that can hold many different perspectives. We believe that red lines quash complex thinking and deeper exploration of difficult issues. We believe that our diversity is a real value to our community. This is very rare.

The first time two parents came to me and told me that they would not circumcise their son, I was uncomfortable. The first time two parents came to me and told me that they were raising their children both Jewish and Christian, I was also uncomfortable. But this community taught me the importance of being open to change. I have learned that when you are uncomfortable, you listen carefully, you sit with the uneasiness, you think carefully, and ultimately you agree or you disagree. Where you draw your limits is much less important than a willingness to be open.

I believe the same is true with Israel. I have had many dreams of Israel die over the past twenty years, and I have decided to embrace the loss that comes with each one. With change always comes loss. We let go of old ideas, we grieve, we come to new understandings, we entertain new possibilities.

I don't know exactly what my current dream of Israel looks like, but I know that it has to honor the religious and cultural traditions of both peoples. It has to respect the human rights of both peoples. It has to recognize the competing historical narratives of both peoples. It has to establish true democracy and equality and civil rights for both peoples.

I believe that there is holiness in discomfort. There is holiness in being real, in challenging ourselves and each other, in letting go of old stories and opening ourselves up to new ones. There is holiness in courage, there is holiness in change.

On this Yom Kippur, may we be profoundly uncomfortable. May we walk a path that is consistent with our values, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences. May we embrace new possibilities and new dreams.

*Gmar chatimah tovah.*