

When I returned from living in Israel, for the third year of my training for the rabbinate, I worked in Balfour House in UJIA-Makor - now known as the Jewish Life Education Centre. This is a centre for Jewish Education and supports the various youth movements, clubs, groups and community based projects that are working in the field of informal Jewish Education. Whether the people who visit are seeking educational resources, youth work training or youth work ideas they aim to provide it.

It is a remarkable experience working there over the Summer. In the lead up to Summer camps the madrichim (staff) swarm all over the building sucking up as much information as they can and writing hundreds of activities before they leave to take care of literally thousands of Jewish young people up and down the country.

That year I arrived just in time to meet the Israel tour leaders preparing to take 1500 young people on tours over the Summer. Talk about an exhausting prospect - having taken tour in 1997 I had a rough idea what they were in for.

Sleepless nights, desert hikes, emotional and social growth (sometimes accompanied by the odd 16 year old crisis) and, in theory, a long lasting place in the hearts of the participants for the land and Judaism. Hopefully they will not have to endure what I did on my first morning in Israel as a 21 year old leader - when I woke up to discover my wallet had been stolen. I'm still not sure for whom it was more annoying, me, my parents who were

woken up to my phone call at 6am with a request to cancel my cards, or my co-leader who had to get everyone on the coach whilst dealing with her colleague cum extra participant (ie ME).

Nevertheless we had a marvellous time and young people for years have been getting on planes annoying the other passengers and travelling to the Holy Land.

There is always something of great calendrical significance in Israel. This year it is 40 years since the 6-Day War, next year will be 60 years since the foundation of the state. The year I returned from Israel was the 100 anniversary since Theodor Herzl died. The architect of political Zionism is perhaps somewhat idolized but nevertheless one feels compelled to admire his vision.

Indeed, around this time three years ago I sat on the shores of the Sea of Galilee in the beautiful Kinneret Kibbutz cemetery comparing the visionary leadership of Herzl to that of Moses. Herzl too did not see the realization of his dream, though he predicted that it would come into fruition 50 years after the first Zionist Congress in 1897 - what's one year between Jews.

I admit it. I was more moved by seeing the graves of some of the great Zionist ideologues and activists than I was discussing the similarities and differences between Moses and Herzl. In those days (of the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> Century) it was much more straightforward to believe in an ideology

and its inherent truth. Today we have sophisticated critiques of ideology: that it is a way of creating an oppressive totalising truth; and there are always competing ideologies that seem to pull and push us. We may even reject the notion of ideology entirely in favour of the discourse of dialogue and encounter of the other referred to by Levinas the Jewish philosopher as 'the defenseless face'.

No, we cannot again take on the purity of truth with which the men and women fought to establish a homeland for the Jewish people. I am not sure that is even desirable. The battle for absolute truth and an absolute way is bitter and harmful to all of humankind - and especially for two peoples whose histories have become so intertwined. No one person has access to the truth and the belief that one does is, I believe, an idolatrous act. It replaces the mysterious and unknown, God, with humans. And that is very dangerous.

It is my opinion, that the outcome of placing ourselves at the center of the world and an absolute faith in our ability to 'know' everything can only result in what the world witnessed 60 years ago, with the Shoah.

This dark moment in our history, and the history of the world, was in no way compensated for by the foundation of the State of Israel. What sick logic believes that the death of six million Jews and six million other people is compensated for by a sliver of land? But she did become a source of

comfort, for renewal: a renewal in faith and a renewal in hope, a start of the tikkun (repair).

You see, the dark moments in Judaism are always remembered - Yom Hashoah will be marked by our community next Sunday night. But Judaism is not an 'oy vey' religion. We always try to turn from loss, destruction and despair to hope and celebration. In some respects, that is what the end of Pesach brings for us, as we read the powerful texts of the Torah and Haftarah this morning. The main portion of the texts we read remind us that God is intimately involved with us as a people and that there is a future redemption - that we can still have hope that we are moving forward to a time when Egypt will be only a memory of the past.

However, there is another side to the texts. In particular, the Torah reading. They are pointedly particularistic and contain ideas that I am sure many of us find distinctly problematic - in particular Deuteronomy 4:38, in which the Israelites are told they will dispossess nations and inherit their land. The inadequacy of the text is perhaps only a reminder that we do not know it all and do not have access to total truth and absolute perfection - any product of human hands is inevitably flawed. That is to say, my greatest concern is not in reading these texts from the bimah on Seventh Day Pesach, when I know I can comment on them in my sermon or davar Torah. But rather, in the knowledge that it is verses like verse 38 that can be used by Jews who believe in the divinity of the Torah - a belief in its

inerrant nature and power to prophesy about the future. Two features which then make it incredibly worrying.

This morning, though, our portion reminds us of the text in its historical context. The violent conquest of the land was understood, by the authors of the Bible, to be part and parcel of the redemption of God. Just like the subsequent exile from the land was also read into this world view - God redeems and God sends us into exile.

So our message of hope, derived from the celebration of Pesach and our scriptural readings this morning must be woven into our own dreams of redemption - of what our future will hold. And for what it's worth, I may not long for a redemption that mirrors exactly the redemption of the Torah, neither do I necessarily agree with every word of the Zionist ideologues buried in the Kinneret Cemetery, but I do not believe that they need to be discarded like damaged goods. Those early Zionist ideologues were not completely wrong.

We must not be naïve, nor ignorant of the facts and we must know the problems that we face. But within all that we can pursue a vision of hope that grapples with the multiple narratives confronting a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Jew and steer a path through them touching on some of the most profound truths in our Jewish existence. On Pesach we can have hope...we must have hope for ourselves and for all of humankind.

11 Then God said unto me: 'Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say: Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.

12 Therefore prophesy, and say unto them: Thus says the Eternal GOD: Behold, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, O My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel.

13 And you shall know that I am the Eternal, when I have opened your graves, and caused you to come up out of your graves, O My people.

14 And I will put My spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land; and you shall know that I the Eternal have spoken, and performed it, says the Eternal.

(Ezekiel 37)