

Israel and the Power of Our Stories¹
A Sermon for Second Day Rosh Hashanah
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Shanah Tovah

I remember when I was very little, my father of blessed memory brought home a few oranges. They were the biggest oranges I had ever seen. But that is not what made them special. What made them special was they were Jaffa Oranges. They had come all the way from Israel. I lifted the orange to my nose and smelled it. To my young self, I was smelling the Holy Land. As I ate a slice, I was miraculously, if only momentarily, transported to the land of miracles.

This was in the early 1960s. Israel had only recently been born on the heels of the destruction of six million Jews in the Holocaust. My parents viscerally understood, deep in their gut, why a Jewish State was necessary. They knew that if Israel had existed in the 1930s or 40s, the Holocaust never would have happened. Israel would have accepted the refugees the rest of the world rejected and would have bombed the rail lines to Auschwitz the Americans had refused to bomb. They had heard their grandparents' stories of a Europe for centuries rife with violent anti-Semitism so they knew my brothers and I were safer, even in the U.S., because the Jewish State had been reborn.

Most of us in this sanctuary never knew a time in our lives in which Israel did not exist. For most of us, rising anti-Semitism is not a daily experience. For most of us, Israel is no longer little David facing Goliath. Although still surrounded by enemies seeking its destruction, Israel now has the military edge. Thank God, or else Israel would have been destroyed long ago, its citizens slaughtered. That is not hyperbole though we might wish it were.

Most of us in this room are also uncomfortable to varying degrees with Israel's use of power, of the human cost of Israel's necessary self-defense, particularly in the West Bank and Gaza, as a result of unceasing aggression from terrorist groups like Hamas and the lack of a reliable peace partner. We are troubled by how the need for continuous vigilance has given birth to our own home grown vigilantes and extremists, even if they represent only a small percentage of Israelis. We are troubled that our children have become the newest targets of an anti-Semitism cloaked as anti-Zionism on college campuses. We are worried the lessons we taught our children about the Jewish values of compassion and treating everyone as equal has made them vulnerable to the biased half-truths and falsehoods promoted to undermine Israel's legitimacy and thus erodes the place Israel had in our own and our parents' hearts and minds.

My friends, on this holy day, I do not want to trot out facts, though they are important. I do not want to talk about the Matzav, the exceedingly complicated situation in Israel and the Middle East. We can do that another day. Today, I want to talk about stories. Our People's stories. Our family stories.

From our earliest days as a People, we have been a people of stories. There are simple stories that shape us as children and complex stories that guide us through complicated times as adults and emerging adults. So today, I want to tell you four sets of stories about the hero of our Torah reading this morning, the founder of our People, Father Abraham, and about Israelis who emulate him. Together I believe these stories can help us navigate the complicated world in which we live.

The first story is about how Abraham leaves his homeland to follow God to a new land, promised to him and his descendants, to us. In this land, God promises that Abraham's

descendants will become a blessing to all the families on earth.ⁱⁱ Israel takes this charge to be a blessing very seriously.

When Emmanuel Buso was pulled barely-alive from rubble 10 days after an earthquake devastated Haiti, the first faces he saw were those of Israeli rescue workers who had flown across the world to save lives.ⁱⁱⁱ Israel's emergency teams are often the first to arrive anywhere there is a disaster.

When Ugandan children from Lake Victoria villages began showing signs of protein deficiency, Professor Berta Sivan of Hebrew University developed a way to reintroduce native carp, whose population had been decimated, and train villagers to build fish farms to spawn and raise them. Now local children get enough protein in their diet.^{iv}

When Syrian refugees first arrived at Israel's border seeking medical care, Israel set up and continues to maintain a field hospital for them and regularly transports serious cases to Israeli hospitals for treatment.

These are just a few of the many stories of how Israel serves as a blessing by sharing its medical and technology advances to help feed the hungry and heal the sick around the world.

My friends, don't believe the half lies of Arab propaganda. The Zionist dream is not a European invention. It began thousands of years ago with Abraham. Except for the sojourns of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob outside the Land, and the 70 years of the Babylonian Exile, there has been an unbroken presence of Jewish communities in Israel for thousands of years. For most of that time, Jews lived under foreign rule. Just as India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Algeria, Eritria, Indonesia, Iceland, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Kuwait, and so many other people deserve their own states, so do we. So often we forget Israel is a small country, roughly the size of New Jersey with a population less than that of Virginia. Yet the help it offers others is outsized. I can't help but think Israel does this because our People's story began with God charging Abraham to be a blessing to others.

The second story opens as Abraham finally arrives at the Promised Land, only to fight with his nephew Lot. They agree to go their own ways. Yet when Abraham hears Lot has been captured in a war, he takes up arms to rescue him. Abraham understands that we are all family and family take care of each other.

I had a friend in rabbinical school who would disappear from class for days on end to help bring Ethiopian Jews through difficult mountain passes to meet planes that would carry them to Israel. He didn't have to endanger himself. Though they looked nothing like him, my friend, now Rabbi Seth Frisch, knew they were family so he did what he could to help them. That is what it means to be the children of Abraham. All Jews are family. We are to do whatever we can to help each other.

Our third story opens as we learn that the promised land is arid and largely, but not totally, unsettled. Other tribes also live there. Following tensions over water rights, Abraham signs the first Jewish-"Palestinian" peace treaty with the Philistine King Avimelech of Gerar.^v They agree to share the land and water and respect each other even as they remain faithful to their own beliefs and traditions. In other words, our people's story begins with making friends out of those who could be enemies.

George Deek is an Israeli diplomat and an Arab. He comes from one of the oldest Christian families in Jaffa. His grandfather was an electrician. He worked with Jews in the Jaffa electric company. In 1948, when Israel became a State, Arab leaders warned that the Jews planned to massacre all the Arabs that remained. Arab leaders promised that those who left could return home in a few days after the combined five Arab armies destroyed Israel.

Horrified about what might happen, George's grandfather decided to flee with most others. When the war was over, he realized he had been lied to. The Arabs hadn't won the war and the Jews hadn't killed all the Arabs. His grandfather looked around and saw nothing but a dead end life as a refugee with no future for his young wife and child. Of all his brothers and his sisters, only he decided to return to his hometown, Jaffa. Unlike his relatives, he wasn't brainwashed with hate because he had Jewish co-workers, friends. He reached out to one of his friends at the electricity company and asked for his help to return. That friend not only helped him return to Israel but helped him get his old job back at the electric company.

George readily acknowledges that discrimination still exists in Israel. Yet Arabs also serve as members of parliament and on the Israeli Supreme Court. His siblings and cousins are doctors, lawyers, architects, executives, and electricians. George explains the reason he is an Israeli diplomat and not a Palestinian refugee from Lebanon is because his grandfather chose to do something the rest of his extended family would not: look toward the future and live among those who were considered his enemies and make them his friends.^{vi}

As George explained to a journalist for *The Tablet*, "You don't need to be anti-Israeli to acknowledge the humanitarian disaster of the Palestinians in 1948. The fact that I have to Skype with...a cousin in an Arab country that still has no citizenship despite being a third generation there, is a living testimony to the tragic consequences of the war." ...When India and Pakistan were established, about 15 million people were transferred...more recently, more than 2 million Christians were expelled from Iraq. The chances of any of those groups to return to their homes are non-existent. Why is it then that the tragedy of the Palestinians is still alive in today's politics? ...It seems to me to be so," he said, "because the Nakba – the day of Catastrophe – has been transformed from a humanitarian disaster to a political offensive... It is demonstrated most clearly in the date chosen to commemorate it, May 15, the day after Israel proclaimed its independence. By that, the Palestinian leadership declared that the disaster is not the expulsion, the abandoned villages or the exile. The Nakba in their eyes is the creation of Israel. They are saddened less by the humanitarian catastrophe of the Palestinians, and more by the revival of the Jewish state."

He argues that the key to change is connected deeply to the ability of the Arab world to accept the legitimacy of others. He explains, "If there is no place in the Middle East for a Jewish State, then there is no place for anyone who is different...And this is why we see today persecution of Yazidis, Christians, Baha'i, Sunni against Shia and vice versa, and even Sunni against other Sunni who do not follow Islam exactly the same way.The day we accept the Jewish State as it is, all other persecution in the Middle East will cease."^{vii}

It takes two to make peace. Abraham and Avimelech. George's grandfather and his friend. George does not know the name of his grandfather's friend. But I can tell you he was the child of Abraham, making friends out of those who would be enemies and living together in peace. I cannot help but think that George's ability to see beyond the destructive Palestinian narrative of despair, anger, and blame to a potential future of cooperation has a lot to do with the story his grandfather told him of how he could turn to a Jewish friend and find a helping hand to live together in peace.

This leads us to our final, and most difficult story, the story we read today in our Torah. God tests Abraham, asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham rushes to do God's bidding. He rises early. He evades Isaac's questions. He binds Isaac and lifts the knife. Then God's angel calls to him, twice. Only after the second call does Abraham respond, "Henini, here I am." Only then does Abraham hear the angel and lower his knife. Only then can his values moderate the passion of his faith.

Why did the angel have to call out twice? Perhaps, the only way Abraham could go forward with what he understood as God's command, to kill his own son, was to divorce himself from his feelings, his conscience. The angel has to call twice to reach both aspects of Abraham, the part that blindly follows what he thinks God wants and the part that knows that what he thinks God wants is inconsistent with the values and ethics God has taught him. Only when both parts are active can Abraham answer "Henini: I am completely here."

In this disturbing story, I believe God is warning us of the dangers of extremism: that blind faith can lead to terribly harmful actions. Blind obedience isn't good. In fact, it can be very bad. We are to struggle with balancing competing values, of ensuring one's own security and success with ensuring fairness and justice for others, in an effort to live meaningful lives in peace with our neighbors.

This is an important lesson particularly today as extremism is sweeping not only the world, but also spreading among the radical orthodox and settler movements in Israel.

Listen to this story I heard from Rabbi Jack Reimer about Rabbi Arik Ascherman who, like Isaac, found a knife raised above his throat.

My friend Rabbi Ascherman was head of Rabbis for Human Rights in Israel. Among the things he did was help Arabs harvest their olive crops to protect them from Jewish settler vigilantes like "The Boys of the Hilltops," young Jewish religious settlers who vandalize Palestinian farms and attack farmers.

As he left one such harvest, Rabbi Ascherman saw some of these hilltop boys setting fire to the Arab's olive trees, even though the Torah prohibits destroying fruit trees. The fire was already too strong to extinguish so he focused on documenting the fire and the two "Hilltop Boys" up ahead of him. A third young man came up behind him, throwing rocks that hit him. Then the young man drew a knife and ran towards a journalist accompanying Rabbi Ascherman. As Rabbi Ascherman chased after the young man to save the journalist, the young man turned on him, kicking him so he fell. The young man jumped on top of Rabbi Ascherman, his knife poised above him. Then - all of a sudden - for no apparent reason, the young man got up, put his knife in his pocket, and without a word, walked away.

When Rabbi Ascherman got home he did two things. He went to synagogue to *bentsch gomel*, the prayer we recite after a dangerous experience. The second thing he did was pick up his rifle and take his turn on guard duty. You may believe in the rights of Arabs to live in the land as equals, as Rabbi Asherman does. But in Israel, when your community and your family are in danger from terrorists, you help with its defense.^{viii}

Rabbi Asherman has no idea why, at the last minute, his assailant put down his knife and walked away. I would suggest the young man heard the same angel who had called to Abraham calling him, telling him to put down the knife, reminding him of his Jewish values not to kill except in self-defense or defense of others and not to hate your brother in your heart.

So many young people tell me they reject religion because the religion they see on the news sows hatred and violence. The point of Abraham's story is that God also rejects that kind of religion.

Israel does better than most countries in striving to live as an ethical state. But even the best people, even Abraham, can become myopic under terrible stress and have to be reminded to align their actions with their values. We do a disservice to Israel when we fail to demand that Israel more consistently align its actions with Jewish values where it falls short. At this year's AIPAC Rabbinic Symposium, former Israeli Parliament Member Dr. Ruth Calderon begged us American Jews to use our influence with the current Israeli government to combat extremism and promote pluralism in Israel. We are family. Israel needs our help in this way, too.

We also do a disservice to our young people if we only share stories of how wonderful Israel is, as true as those stories are. When our kids get to college and hear more difficult stories,

they will say to us, “You lied to us: Israel is not a utopia.” And then they will be vulnerable to the lies and half-truths of those dedicated to Israel’s delegitimization.

It is up to us to help our young people understand the issues, know enough history to sort fact from fiction, and understand that there are progressive, pro-Israel organizations that promote civil rights, religious pluralism, and respect for diversity. Then instead of finding their cause in anti-Israel activism, perhaps they will find a way to apply their passion for justice to improving the Jewish State, as Rabbi Ascherman has done.

Long gone are the days when a Jaffa Orange could evoke awe in a young girl’s heart. In these complicated times, when there are no simple answers, it is the stories passed down from generation to generation that shape our values and help us navigate what may lay ahead.

We are a people of stories. The stories about Abraham teach us to be a blessing for all people, to care for family, to make friends of enemies, and to reject extremism. These stories drive Israel to share its incredible technological advances to help the world and to embrace Jews who still seek safe haven. They inspire Israel, and us, to seek to turn enemies into friends and to reject extremism.

Rabbi Harold Kushner writes, “We are not expected to be perfect. We are expected to strive to be extraordinary.” Israel is not perfect. But for all its faults and failings, Israel is extraordinary.

We learn by the stories we hear, so let us learn our stories, tell our stories, and live by the values transmitted in our stories and thereby help build a stronger Israel and a better world.

Shanah Tovah.

ⁱ © Copyright. Susan Grossman. 2016. My appreciation to Rabbi Harold Kushner for the idea that we transmit who we are as Jews through the stories we tell. See Harold Kushner, “The Stories that Make us Jewish.”

ⁱⁱ Gen. 12:2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nicky Blackburn, “65 top ways Israel is saving our planet,” *ISRAEL21c* (April 14, 2013) <http://www.israel21c.org/the-top-65-ways-israel-is-saving-our-planet/> (Accessed Sept. 20, 2016.)

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Gen 21:22-32. While the term “Palestinian” is used here, there is no historic evidence that modern Palestinians are descended from the Phillistines. The Romans renamed the Jewish state of Judea Palestine to try to weaken Jewish national aspirations after the second Jewish revolt of Bar Kochba in the second century. Under British rule, the term “Palestinians” referred specifically to Jews. *Jewish Virtual Library*, “Origins of the Name Palestine” <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/History/palname.html> (Accessed September 21, 2016.)

^{vi} George Deek, “Israeli Diplomat, former Deputy Ambassador to Norway and Nigeria. speaking to an audience in Oslo.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8m6ux-IeNo4>. (A shortened version of this speech was presented to the AIPAC Rabbinic Symposium, Sept. 7, 2016, Washington DC.

^{vii} Adi Schwartz, “Israel’s Best Diplomat Offers Hope to the Entire Middle East,” *Tablet* (July 28, 2015) <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/190615/israels-best-diplomat-george-deek>. (Accessed Sept. 6, 2016.)

^{viii} My appreciation for sharing this story about Rabbi Ascherman and identifying it as an Akedah.