SHABBAT HAGADOL 5779
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Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC Canada
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This weekend marks Shabbat HaGadol, or The Great Shabbat. Traditionally it would be on this Shabbat that the rabbi would give his longest sermon of the year.

Where are you going, why are people getting up and leaving? (made you look)

Don't worry I will not keep you here past your bedtime tonight, I am still recovering myself from jet-lag, we returned from Israel just this past Sunday night.

Traditionally it would be on this night and tomorrow morning in particular that the rabbi would share in detail how to prepare your home for. A kosher pesach, going over the rules and customs of the seder. I am happy to do that with anyone who has questions during the oneg Shabbat but I have two other topics I would like to address on this Shabbat HaGadol.

Tonight I want to share some reflections and observations from my recent trip with our Temple Sholom community members to Israel. In the wake of the Israeli elections I think there are a few things we need to talk about.

Tomorrow I will speak about the parasha Metzora, which deals with plagues and skin disease and how it informs the current outbreak of measles in parts of the ultra-orthodox community. So if you want both messages, it will be a Shabbat HaGadol as you'll have to come to shul twice in one weekend. But you get next Friday night off as we will not be having services during seder.

So Israel…

First let me just say that every time I go to Israel it is transformative and special. This most recent trip even the more so because it was the first time that Sharon and I took our children and had the incredible experience of seeing Israel through their eyes.

We celebrated Judah's Bar Mitzvah yet again, along with two other children from our shul at the Kotel, the Western Wall in Jerusalem and did all of the things that one would expect on a first timers trip to Israel. We floated in the Dead Sea, it was quite cold and windy so there was not much lounging and floating but we got the requisite picture with mud and road a camel. We toured Masada, Caesarea, Tzfat and walked on the walls and roof tops of the old city of Jerusalem. We stood on the Golan Heights and overlooks Lebanon & Syria, appreciating just how close those countries are to such a vital natural resource for the Jewish state.

We attended Shabbat services at our sister congregation in Tzur Hadassah, shopped in the open markets of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Jaffa, we mourned and were thankfully, though surprisingly

uplifted at Yad v'Shem as the new exhibit tells a story of hope and redemption amidst the images of horror and destruction.

As Israel Trips go we checked every box, and a few extras as we visited with friends and went off the beaten path to camp in the Negev and live on a Moshav. It was delicious, not just the food, which every time gets better and better in Israel, but it was sustenance for my Jewish soul.

Although as delicious as our experience was, there were moments and observations that left a bitter after-taste, things I found hard to digest, and metaphorically upset my stomach and gave me heartburn.

Which in the context of preparing for seders I guess has its own kind of symmetry?

I want to share three observations with you this evening from my recent trip.

1. The status of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
2. What its like to be a Jew in Israel
3. The rising influence of Evangelical Christians in Israel.

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Israel – I felt your hopelessness and resignation this past visit and it sat like a heavy matzo ball in my stomach. There is no partner for peace with the Palestinians, there appears no path I that leads to a safe and secure Israel. While we were there sirens went off in the south and just north of where we were staying in Tel Aviv as rockets rained down from Gaza. It was so routine most of the Israelis we were with hardly noticed or reacted in any way. They say that you can adapt to anything if given enough time, and after years going on decades of diplomatic stalemate, a generation that has never known peace on either side of the Green Line, for the first time I too felt hopeless and resigned.

I no longer believe that a two-state solution is possible, a fear of inevitability that I have been preaching and warning about since the second intifada. Because the alternatives to a two-state solution leave me more worried than ever for Israel's long-term security and viability as a Jewish and Democratic State.

The promised annexation of the West Bank by the new Netanyahu government in service to the hard-right wingers in his coalition backs both sides into a corner from which I do not see a way out.

Israel cannot absorb 2 million Palestinians living in the West Bank as citizens, the demographics will bring the end of the Jewish State in our life time. Nor can Israel annex the land and not give full rights of citizenship to its Arab inhabitants, setting up a defacto apartheid state and bring down upon it the enmity of the entire world.

What I learned in Israel this trip was that both left and right in Israel been lied to by their leadership. The Left was lied to when it was told there were Palestinian partners for peace, who believe in Israel's right to exists as a Jewish State – I heard no such voices from the Palestinian side.

The Right was lied to when its leaders told them that you can control another people. We have the Passover story, let alone the reality of the occupation and check points to attest to the fallacy of that position.

I honestly do not know what to do. What is really where the vast majority of Israelis fall as well, and why maintaining the status quo was the platform of both major parties in the recent election.

They say that time heals all wounds, but left untreated as our Torah Portion about skin disease teaches us, time can also lead to growing infection and ultimately the loss of life and limbs. The situation is not getting better over time, its getting worse, the infection is spreading and impacting all of Israeli and Palestinian society.

Progressive Judaism

Every time I go to Israel I feel less and less religious. In Canada and the US I proudly and comfortably wear my kippah in public, in Israel I take it off and put it in my pocket.

In Vancouver I yearn to be in Israel to hear Hebrew in the streets, to wish taxi drivers "Shabbat shalom", to see Israeli flags wave from life guard shacks on the beach and taste aisles and aisles of kosher food in the markets and restaurants. But when I am in Israel, I miss our synagogue. I miss a Jewish community that gets along with each other, supports each other, values the other in spite of and often because of our differences.

This trip clarified for me that I can't be Jewish in Israel. Not in the way that I am Jewish here, not when my Judaism is expressed through my religion and my values. I don't recognize my Judaism in Israel anymore. Amongst the haredim there is troubling phenomenon taking place, I noticed it first a few years ago when I was rafting on the Jordan river with our group and Haredi yeshiva students were wearing a tallit katan (the religious undershirt with fringes on all four corners) on the OUTSIDE of their clothing. I asked them why and their answer was that they didn't want to hide the commandment but display it proudly.

This visit I witnessed the inevitable next level of this kind of religious fervency, men walking around all day with tephilin on. In the markets, on the bus, walking on the street. That's not my Judaism, nor was it the Judaism of the great sages of our tradition, it's a wholly new and I think dangerous interpretation of religious ritual. Its fanaticism and truthfully, I simultaneously worried, embarrassed, horrified and scared.

Evangelical Christians in Israel

Lastly, we have known for a long time that the Christian Right have been passionate, generous and vocal supporters of Israel and current Israeli policy. This support and its influence have grown exponentially over the 15 years of the Netanyahu Government. What was apparent during this trip to Israel was just how powerful that partnership has become and how fundamentally troubling it really is.

You need to understand something about evangelical Christian love for Israel, it is rooted in a fundamentalist Christian theology of Armageddon and the rapture. To the true adherents to this fatalistic theology all Jews need to move to Israel so that the final battle between the forces of light and darkness can take places in the hills around Israeli city of Megiddo, which will bring about violence and destruction on a cosmic scale, the Apocalypse,

The specific order of end-time events can vary from preacher to preacher and group to group, but in general they share the view that the return of the Messiah will follow the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and the restoration of the state of Israel as a kind of Jewish theocracy.

The problem is that things don't go well for Israel or the Jews in particular. Once everyone is gathered in Israel and the Temple is rebuilt an international assault against the nation of Israel will commence signaling the end of times. The rebuilding of the temple is just "to prepare way for this final conflict."

The problem is that while this is a joyful event for the small group of faithful Christians who are raptured, it spells disaster for members of other religions. "None of this is good news for the people who live in and around Jerusalem, who amount to pawns in this end-time scenario. The suffering of Arab peoples is taken for granted, Jews take the brunt of this final 'great tribulation.'" The theology holds that Jews will not be saved without first converting to Christianity. The support of the state of Israel, therefore, should not be misconstrued as unwavering support for the religious rights of Jews; at the end of time Jews must convert or die.

Why does this matter? Evangelical Christians have now surpassed north American Jewry in total financial support for Israel. They give more money and thus have more influence on Israeli policy than we do, as evidenced by the right-wing government's embrace of their agenda and rejection of progressive Jewish causes and values in Israel.

For Israeli Jews who don't believe in these interpretations of history, these end-time prophecies might seem irrelevant. Why worry about the possibility of a divine genocide that takes place according to a particular strain of Christian theology when you do not believe in Christianity at all? If Christians are funding your existence with your eventual destruction in mind, who cares? After all, there are far more tangible enemies surrounding you on a universally-agreed upon terrestrial plane and defense against those enemies is a more pressing concern.

The unknown but nonetheless important threat here is, what will happen if this particular group of Christians become convinced that they do live in the end-times? What if they get tired

of waiting and want to hasten the coming of the messiah and the final conflict? It sounds like a bad science fiction movie, but this is really happening. Christian tours out number Jewish tours of Israel by 3 to 1. We brought 30 people from our congregation to Israel, the two men standing behind me in the passport line at Ben Gurion were on a church trip that had brought over a hundred. It was for one of them his 7th time in Israel.

The rightward shift in global politics and the rise of fundamentalism is of course happening in Israel as well, but it is being funded by a group of people who quite literally love us to death, I don't see how in the long term this is, "Good for the Jews?"

I don't want to leave you on a down or depressing note, and you know that you have skin disease and measles to look forward to tomorrow morning, so let me share briefly one uplifting and fun highlight of our trip.