

Rosh Hashanah (2nd day): Mother Rachel and Moshe Magen: Let it Be

- Daniel Cohen

Rabbi Daniel Cohen
Rosh Hashanah Sermon (2nd day)
9-16-04

“Mother Rachel and Moshe Magen: Let it Be”

This morning, we as a Jewish people focus on dreams that never die, hopes that kindle forever and tears that seem to never come to an end.

When we read in this morning’s Haftorah that the great mother of the Jewish people, Rachel, refuses to be comforted over her children...for they are not, we know that this symbolizes her sorrow over the exile of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel.

This verse teaches a very poignant and powerful message to Jews throughout history. Tradition teaches us that Jacob buried Rachel in Bethlehem, which is the trail on which the Jewish people would be leaving the city of Jerusalem as it lay in ruins. Rachel cries over the exile of the Jewish people. The prophet Jeremiah says “So does G-d say...Let your voice stop crying, and your eyes stop weeping tears. You will return from the enemies land, there is hope..

Within these verses we gain insight into the nature of exile and redemption for the Jewish people, and the secret to our survival for so many thousands of years. Let us spend a few moments analyzing these verses, and then we will begin to inculcate an eternal message so relevant and critical for us as a Jewish people.

Why is it Rachel cannot be comforted? Why is it she continues to cry? Why is it, as we all know, at a wedding we break the glass at the time of utmost celebration? In the Book of Psalms it is written, If I forget Jerusalem, may I forget my right hand. What gives us the power, and the emotional license to continue to mourn over Jerusalem?

The Midrash explains that there was another individual in Judaism who refused to be comforted, and that was Jacob. When Jacob’s brothers came back to him and presented him with a coat of many colors with blood on it and said “Your youngest and most beloved son, Joseph, has been killed”, the Torah tells us that Jacob refused to be comforted. Normally in the process of mourning, there is a period of time of a year, which our sages allow for mourning, and although after a year we all know the pain is still there, the normal period of mourning has ended.

But for Jacob, the Torah says, He refused to be comforted. The midrash explains based upon a statement of Rabbi Yosi in the tractate Bava Batra at the end of the 21st Chapter.

”We receive comfort for people that have died, for hopes that are extinguished.....but we do not

receive comfort for a human being who is still alive.” For example one of the greatest tragedies in human existence is when a person is taken captive, as is the case of so many individuals in Israel who are missing in action. In these situations, as we know, there is no closure. Rabbi Yosi explains that a person does not receive comfort for an individual who is not dead, because there is not yet despair-- there is still hope.

A person who knows a loved one has passed away, ultimately needs to come to closure and to accept words of comfort, but with one who is alive, for one with whom we still seek a reunion there is no Nechama, comfort, because there is still hope of that rendezvous. It is for this reason that Jacob was never able to be comforted over Joseph, because he still believed in his heart of hearts that Joseph was still alive. This is why the verse about Rachel refusing to be comforted is so powerful. It is precisely the refusal to be comforted and the continual shedding of tears that is an indication to the Jewish people that in the aspirations of the Jew, the return to Jerusalem and the reconnection with the Land of Israel will be fulfilled.

I believe inside each of us there is an inextricable link to the Land of Israel that on some level is quite mysterious. As Jews, we all feel a spiritual connection to our homeland, which at times may seem illogical to the outside world. Reason dictates that Israel should not exist today as a nation. As Mark Twain wrote in his famous piece concerning the Jews, “All other nations have had their rise and their fall—the Babylonians, the Romans, the Greeks but what is the secret of the eternity of the Jew?”

Rabbi Soloveitchik, one of the foremost leaders in Judaism in the 20th century, says “In the Torah there is a mitzvah to wear a tallit, the prayer shawl; and the color of the fringes should be a mixture of white and blue. The fact that Lavan, white, symbolizes clarity, distinction, and rationality is self-evident, for example we say in fact during the High Holiday season “May G-d wipe away our sins so they are as ‘white’ as snow.”

“Tekhelet, blue, in contrast, focuses our thoughts on the grand mysteries of human experience. It encompasses the abstract and the transcendent. Only through our commitment to G-d’s involvement in history can we be motivated to persevere in the face of the travail and trauma that is often inflicted by the world.”

Rabbi Soloveitchik further explains the enigma of Jewish history. He writes, “If Jewish history operated solely with ‘white’ with Lavan we would not be fighting for Israel today. From the standpoint of reason and logistics our efforts against imponderable odds are insane. Building a homeland in a hotbed of hatred surrounded by wealthy Arabs in enormous numbers whose opposition to Jewish striving is seething and unabated, lacks all rational justification. Yet we struggle because the land was promised to us 4000 years ago. It is our homeland.”

Many people who come from the vantage point of reason and feasibility cannot understand our obsession”. Senator Humphrey who was sympathetic to Israel once said to Prime Minister Menachem Begin, “Please speak the language we understand, not riddles, symbols or mysticism. Speak of politics and economics.”

We are astounded people do not understand us. We want them to have as we do ”a techelet

approach—an approach that is interwoven in a sense of consciousness of the mystery and the majesty and the miracle of Jewish history.”

It is the tekhelet of Jewish historical experience that fuels our dreams and enables us to maintain our momentum, our identity and our loyalty under conditions which vary from the very absence of G-d’s providence at times. Only a people fortified by tekhelet can be motivated to reconstitute a safe state after 2000 years of exile.

Today as we stand on the threshold of a new year it is important for us—our generation—to affirm OUR commitment to this dream; to the dream of ensuring a safe Israel and to the hope of making the world a brighter place.

We view Jewish history not as fate, but as destiny. Again Rabbi Soloveitchik crystallizes this theme when he articulates, “Fate means that everything in the world happens to us and around us and we are purely products of our circumstances—we are passive”. But Judaism says clearly that history is not fate, history is destiny. History is not etiological! What happens today doesn’t just happen today as a cause of what happened yesterday; it is teleological.”

We are focused on a goal; we have a destination. That destination may be at times difficult to achieve but we are operating on a different level. We are not spectators, but we are active participants in being partners with G-d in shaping the destiny of human history and of mankind.

I was at the Bronco’s game last week, and I can tell you clearly that the fans were in the game. Whether we were shouting ‘in--com--plete’ or banging on the rafters, we were there. But no how hard we banged those rafters, if the blockers didn’t make the blocks for Clinton Griffin or if the cornerback didn’t make the interception, the fans would not be able to change the outcome of the game.

At the end of the day, WE need to be a ‘part of the game’, to make a difference, to influence ‘the final score that appears on that board’. Judaism says that we are participants, we do count, and we need to fuse the past and the present together to build that brighter future.

The Talmud tells us that in an area of Aravah in Israel, there is a valley that exists between two mountains. At daybreak one day one rabbi was conversing with another and said “If you look into the valley, do you see a ray of light? That ray of light is the first break of dawn. This is how the Jewish redemption will come-- through the darkest, moments of night, there will be rays of light.” In fact it is true that the darkest moment of night is not at 12:00 o’clock, it is not at 2:00 o’clock, it is not at 3:00 o’clock but it is just before the dawn that we experience the fear and abyss of night.

We are the generation following the horrors and tragedies of the first part of the twentieth century. The state of Israel was founded in 1948 and in 1967 we experienced the return to Jerusalem. We are in a time that is called the beginning of the period of redemption.

As many of you know this past summer I had the privilege of traveling with a number of families

to the Land of Israel with my wife and six children, they should live and be well. A number of vignettes from our journey to Israel amplify and highlight this almost dual existence in which Rachel, as well as we, live. They stimulated a recognition of the dark moments of our past and a pledge to never forget; but perhaps more importantly they instilled within me a clear affirmation of our promise to the future that we will take responsibility for turning moments of darkness into light.

I experienced Tisha B'av, the day commemorating the destruction of the First Temple and the Second Temple, in Israel for the first time. Commemorating this day in the Diaspora is very different from being in the Land of Israel, where you feel expressions of mourning in a very potent way.

After reading the book of Lamentations, our entire group gathered together at Zion Square outside the Wailing Wall of the Old City and joined thousands of Jews--men, women and children-- who together walked around the walls of the Old City through east Jerusalem. We walked as a sign of solidarity and hope that despite the fact we were mourning for Jerusalem, our presence and our continual yearning and support to help strengthen our bonds with Israel would ultimately guarantee the fulfillment of these hopes and dreams.

Napoleon once walked into a synagogue in France where he saw Jews sitting on the floor on Tisha B'Av, the saddest day of the year, and said "Why are you in mourning?" The Jews said, "The Temple was destroyed!" He said "I'm going to get those people, when did they destroy the Temple?" The Jews said, "It was over 1500 years ago". Napoleon was taken aback and said "A nation that mourns its past and doesn't forget will merit to rebuild it in the future".

I can tell you the experience of being in Jerusalem with my children on Tisha B'Av night, was one of the most moving moments of hope of my entire life. As we made our way around the Wall, I was with a number of children and adults from our shul who had never been to the Western Wall before. We paused for a moment prior to walking in through the Dung gate, which is the entrance to the plaza at the Western Wall, and I said "IMAGINE, Jews have hoped and cried and prayed to return to Jerusalem for thousands of years. They would have risked so much for this to happen, and here we are standing here on Tisha B'Av night, the saddest day on the Jewish calendar, and we have the privilege to enter into the Old City and to touch the Wall.

At that moment we walked into the Western Wall plaza and I have never seen the plaza so filled with people. As we moved toward the Wall it was virtually impossible for us to come close until it was our turn in the queue. As we got closer, I along with some of the young boys who were with us, made our way to the Wall and together we recited, "Shema Yisrael", which we recite today on Rosh Hashanah—"the Lord our G-d the Lord is ONE".

HOW DO WE, ensure Tikva, the hope? Rosh Hashanah offers us a reminder. Rabbi Avraham Kook, the first chief rabbi in Israel, tells us "There is a reason why today we blow so many sounds of the Shofar." Rabbi Kook says, "The two different times we blow symbolizes the two ways in which we are coming to G-d today". The blows--the sounds that we made moments ago symbolize our power as individuals to shape the world, and the sounds that we make during the repetition of the shemoneh esreh, symbolize the power of community.

Today on Rosh Hashanah it is a time for us to take a moment to introspect and appreciate the power of the individual to make a difference. It is a time to remember people like, Yaakov Chafetz, a man who lived in 1948, and who is remembered at a cable car museum outside the walls of Jerusalem. He risked his life by using his ingenuity to design a cable car to take munitions to help the Jewish people defend themselves against the Jordanians.

It is a time to remember the heroes like Daniel Mandel whose mother we met when we went to Gush Etzion, the site of one of the most important battles in 1948. She was a mother who still mourns for her son but she said, "I understand that even though my son was one of 22,000 young men and women who have given their lives for the state of Israel, I know that the state of Israel serves as protection for millions more".

It is a time to pledge and understand that in Judaism as I mentioned this past Shabbat, there is no such statement as 'Shalom peace be unto me alone'. G-d said to the Jewish people through Moses prior to his death, "I make this pledge today, not only with you but with your children and your grandchildren, to keep my covenant to bring goodness and morality into the world". But Moses clearly said that G-d tells the Jewish people, "The moment we say, Shalom, I am safe and I am secure, we will bring about our own demise.

You see, if we stand on the sidelines today, whether it relates to America or Israel, we may not suffer directly, but our children and our grandchildren will hold us accountable for what we did or didn't do when we had the opportunity?"

As I shared with you when I returned from Israel, one of the most inspiring moments for me was when we went to the Holocaust museum at Yad Varhem in Jerusalem. I was holding my daughter, Shalhevet, whose Hebrew name means 'flame', as we walked into the memorial for the million children who perished in the Holocaust. Those that have been in that memorial know that it is a hall filled with darkness, except for lights that are flickering and bouncing off the different mirrors as a voice intones the name of each child. As I was holding my daughter in my arms, she took the pacifier from her mouth and dropped it in the abyss of darkness. For a moment I told myself that I needed to find it, but I knew it would be impossible. Then I understood that perhaps mystically Shalhevet's act of taking her most important possession, her pacifier, joined with her name Shalhevet, which means 'flame', was saying, "I am paying tribute to you, and my soul and my 'flame' will pledge to perpetuate the strength of the Jewish people".

When we were at the Air Force museum, I saw a photo of IDF fighter planes that were flying over Auschwitz, and I realized the power of the people of Israel and of the state of Israel. This was the first time planes were flown over Auschwitz and Poland, and the pilots were children and grandchildren of the survivors of the Holocaust.

We are ALL in it TOGETHER. We are all mandated today to ask ourselves how WE can turn darkness into light. We are fortunate that in this past year, when there was a swastika emblazoned on the walls of our synagogue on Parsha Zachor, the Torah portion where we remember not only the Nazis but also what all those who have tried to destroy the Jewish people have done to us, we chose not to erase that swastika, but to turn that voice of darkness into many

voices of light by bringing together people of all faiths in support of what is good and right in this world.

One of my favorite insights is offered by a man who is a non-Jew. He was a protestant pastor and leader of the anti-Nazi Confessant Church. He was the son of a pastor, who himself became pastor of an influential Berlin parish and preached to large congregations. He was unsympathetic to the Republic and welcomed the Nazis initially, but he soon saw the danger of the regime. In 1934 he formed the Pastors' Emergency League and in 1937 assumed the leadership of the Confessant Church.

He was arrested for malicious attacks against the state, and spent, on Hitler's order, the next seven years in concentration camps in Dachau, usually in solitary confinement.

He was released in 1945 by the allied forces. His name was Martin Niemöller, and he shared the following which we need to bear in mind in view of the forces that are trying to thwart the destiny of the Jewish people and the Land of Israel, be it in the Sudan, in Breslan, Russia, in Israel, or, within our own country. We cannot stand by silently; we must let our voices be heard.

Martin Niemöller wrote: "First they came for the Jews and I was silent; I was not a Jew, then they came for the communists and I was silent; I was not a communist, then they came for the trade unionist and I was silent; I was not a trade unionist, then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me".

Elle Weisel, one of the most well-known survivors of the Holocaust writes, "The opposite of love is not hate, it is 'indifference'". Our mother Rachel continues to teach us that we share the pain and anguish for our children and for the children of all humanity.

But we must appreciate that history will reach the time of the Messiah, a time of peace, and our question today is, "What are we and are children doing to ensure that that time comes speedily in our days?"

When I was walking in the Old City, I was struck by a verse from Zechariah in Chapter 8:4 which tells us that at the time of the Messiah, "Old men and women will once again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with his staff in his hand because of advanced age, and the streets will be filled with boys and girls playing." This prophecy has come to fruition today in the streets of the Old City in the Jewish quarter in Jerusalem.

Before we left Masada, we all went to the edge of the cliff outside of the Mikvah. Mikvah means a place of hope, a place of perpetuation. The Jewish people who were on top of Masada did not know how they would survive and unfortunately they did not, but they never lost sight of the dream. They built a Mikvah—they hoped for a future, and they demonstrated tremendous spirit.

As we went to the Mikvah we all walked with our children to the edge of Masada and called out in one voice together, MASADA WILL NEVER FALL AGAIN! And we felt acutely that the voices we heard echoing from mountain to mountain, were not only our own voices but also those of the children who did not make it to see that day, and the voices of our children's children, who G-d willing through our efforts, will be able to live in a world that is filled with peace, filled with love, and filled with LIFE!

JERUSALEM is our theme for this coming year-- JERUSALEM in mind through the commitment to knowing and understanding the destiny of the Jewish people—JERUSALEM in heart through the commitment to building our connection with the Jewish people through missions to Israel, through our missions to little Israel, and through our connection in prayer, and JERUSALEM in spirit, through programming that unites us as a Jewish people and also as the broader community of mankind.

I would like to conclude with two final vignettes. As many of you know this past summer the Jewish world lost a great poet and songwriter, Naomi Shemer. She was a very gifted woman whose songs captured the spirit of Israel.

In the “Jerusalem Report”, David Green tells the following story:

In 1967 the mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek, asked songwriters contributing to the annual Israeli Song Festival to dedicate their creations to the divided and depressed capital city. Shemer wrote a ballad that expressed a collective melancholy for “a city that sits solitary...its wells dried up...its marketplace empty.” On little more than a whim, she asked a 30-year-old female soldier named Shuli Nathan to premiere the song at the festival, which took place before an audience of notables on Independence Day.

Even as the evening was proceeding, the army chief of staff, Yitzhak Rabin, seated in the audience, was getting updates on the initial moves of Egyptian forces into Sinai, the action that started the countdown to the Six-Day war. Overnight, Shemer’s pathos-filled song, “Jerusalem of G-d, “became something of a second national anthem. And when, several weeks later, Israeli paratroopers conquered the Old City of Jerusalem, and the Western Wall and Temple Mount became accessible again to Jews, Shemer added a new last stanza to the song, describing the “return to the wells” and the sounding of the shofar on the Mount.

With perfect pitch, Shemer also wrote the song that became the anthem of the 1973 war, which left the country in a very different mood. As someone who occasionally translated the lyrics of foreign songs, Shemer, in the war’s early days, had rendered the Beatles’ “Let It Be” into Hebrew (“There is still a white sail on the horizon/against a heavy black cloud/All that we desire – should come to pass”), but her second husband, Mordechai Horowitz (with whom Shemer remained until the end) urged her not to record the words to a “foreign” melody. She hurriedly wrote new music for the song, but if you sing “Lu Yehi” against “Let It Be,” the identical structure of the two will be apparent.

As we greet the new year let us join in singing the song:

Lu-Yehi-Anthem of Yom Kippur War – 1973
Written by Naomi Shemer (1930-2004)

LU YEHI ALL WE PRAY FOR

Od yesh mifras lavan ba’ofek

Mul anan shachor kaved
Kol shenevakesh – Lu Yehi
There is still a white sail on the horizon
Opposite a heavy black cloud
All that we ask for – may it be
Ve'im bacholonot ha'erev
Or nerot hachag ro'ed –
Kol shenevakesh – Lu Yehi
And if in the evening windows
The light of the holiday candles flickers
All that we seek – may it be
Lu Yehi, Lu Yehi, Ana, Lu Yehi
Kol shenevakesh – Lu Yehi
May it be, may it be – Please – may it be
All that we seek – may it be
Ma kol anot ani shomei'a
Kol shofar vekol tupim
Kol shenevakesh lu yehi
What is the sound that I hear
The cry of the shofar and the sound of drums
All that we ask for – may it be
Lu yehi...
May it be...
Betoch sh'chuna ktana mutzelet
Bait kat im gag adom
Kol shenevakesh lu yehi
Within a small, shaded neighborhood
Is a small house with a red roof
All that we ask for - may it be
Zeh sof hakayitz, sof haderech
Ten lahem lashuv halom
Kol shenevakesh lu yehi
This is the end of summer, the end of the path
Allow them to return safely here
All that we seek – may it be
Lu yehi...
May it be...
Ve'im pit'om yizrach mei'ofel
Al rosheinu or kochav
Kol Shenevakesh lu yehi
And if suddenly, rising from the darkness
Over our heads, the light of a star shines
All that we ask for – may it be
Az ten shalva veten gam ko'ach
Lechol eileh shenohav
Koll shenevakesh – lu yehi

Then grant tranquility and also grant strength
To all those we love
All that we seek, may it be
Lu yehi... May it be...

The final story I would like to share with you is from a man who only eight hours ago recited the words of the Haftorah we recited earlier. His name was Moshe Magen. Moshe lives in Israel and every year he receives the Haftorah, the selection of the Prophets on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, and he reads the words that we read moments ago, the mother Rachel cries for her children...

Moshe reads the Haftorah and cries over the last verses from the Prophets. I was told by a man that knows Moshe well, that he cries as Rachel cried for her children, because Moshe lost his son at Ammunition Hill in 1967. He reads the Haftorah every year despite the tears. Moshe explained that despite the fact, it is Rosh Hashanah and he cries over the loss of his son, he likes to read the Haftorah because the words give him strength. For the words although they bring about his weeping, they also bring about his hope for the future.

We have had moments this past year of weeping--moments of crying for terror in the Land of Israel and terror around the world, yet as we are told, there will be a reward for our efforts. We will be rewarded for what we do as individuals, for how we link ourselves to the community and for how we build the bonds of strength between Israel and the Jews in the Diaspora and for our bond with the people of America in the fight for good over evil.

May G-d enable us to have the strength and spirit to understand that we must never forget the past and that we must have a strong commitment to our future and to our children's future. This Rosh Hashanah we want to make a pledge to do an additional mitzvah for Israel, for the light of freedom and the light of G-dliness in the world; and this way we will merit the prophecy of the Haftorah that our children and our grandchildren will return to their borders in Israel, and we will be blessed with a year of peace and a year of life and blessing not only for us and for the Jewish people, but for America and for our entire world.

May we be sealed in the Book of Life for the year to come.