



CCAR and HUC-JIR
Joint Commission for Sustaining Rabbinic Education



Sefirah Study

Portraits of the Holy Land: Antiquity to the Present
April 25 – June 13, 2005

Week 7 – Introduction
Motzei Shabbat at Kaffit
Dr. Barry Chazan

As I write these words, it is Saturday evening – *Motzei Shabbat* – in Jerusalem and I am actually sitting in the Kaffit Coffee Shop on Emek Refaiim Street. In the course of a ten-hour flight my psyche has switched from being pre-occupied with the outcome of the Heat-Piston series and the drama of Mark Felt (Deep Throat) to preparations for the disengagement, announcements of all-night study sessions on *Shavuot* around the country, and the latest intrigues in the Labor party.

Seven weeks of our Sefirah Study have come and gone and we have traveled decades, centuries, and many millennia of preoccupation of the Jewish people with this place where I now sit – and where many of you have sat in your years as students or afterwards.

Our original “crew” – Avraham, Isaiah, the rabbis, Herzl, Montefiore, Brandeis, Ben Gurion, and Keret, - are still sitting over in the corner discussing their issues. They send regards, wish you were here to join them, but don’t worry; they will be here discussing the issues for years to come.

Tonight I want to briefly listen in on a few of the conversations around me, and then return to some of the original questions I posed many weeks ago, when we first met.

At the table next to me are three young adults discussing their future. They have just finished MA degrees at the Hebrew University, and they now are beginning to carve out a life. “We are looking for a job, an apartment, a car, and a significant other,” they tell me. “How is the search going?” I ask. “There are lots of used cars available” one says “but the other three things are tougher. Political science, comparative literature, and international relations aren’t hot items in the classified columns.” Soon they leave; one goes home (i.e. to her parents’ house where she lives), the second to get ready for *miluim* tomorrow, and the third to search for “a significant other” at a more promising site.

At a near-by table a group of Birthright Israel participants and their staff are talking: “Awesome, it’s just awesome. This place is unbelievable. Alive, Jewish, people like us, we were at the Wall on Shabbat, the Israelis on our bus are so special. My life has changed. Why didn’t they ever show us this before? Awesome, Awesome, Awesome.”

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At another table, three adults are discussing which "Tikkun leil Shavuot" to attend. They are reading from a full-page advertisement in the *Shabbat* edition of *Haaretz*: "At *Zvi Yisrael* on *Hovevi Zion* Street, they're going to have Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar and Adin Steinsaltz. David and Doniel Hartman are going to be at Machon Hartman. Reba Carmel and Amy Klein at *Ta Shma*. Aviva Zorenberg at *Yakar*. Uriel Simon and Danny Tropper at *Ohel Nechama*. Professor Rahel Lior and Rabbi Danny Landes at *Pardes*. Ronit Matalon, Michael Marmur, Naami Kelman Ezrachi, and Nir Barkan at HUC-JIR Jerusalem, and a four-day *Shavuot* Weekend of study and walking tours based on Agnon's writings at the Hyatt Regency." I leave them to their tough choices.

At other tables, I hear discussions about, of course, the disengagement, can we trust the PA, is Abu Mazen really very sick, what will Bibi do after the disengagement, is MK Poraz going to take over the Shinui party, the problems of Russians and Ethiopians in Israel... I hear discussions about world politics, Judaism, national politics, whether there ever was a Moses at all, Jerusalem local politics, and parents, spouses, children, wives, being in love, being out of love, happiness, and sadness.

Probably the most striking thing about Kaffit, Jerusalem and the State of Israel on June 4, 2005 is that *it is*. We forget - we forget too easily. This is a new age, a new phenomenon, an unknown chapter in Jewish history. An alive, contemporary modern State, in which many diverse people – Jews and non-Jews – live attempting to carve out lives, exists for the very first time in Israel. With all due respect to Avraham and Isaiah, the State of Israel on Saturday night June 4, 2005 is a different universe from the place where they walked. The Jerusalem of Kaffit is light years away from the Heavenly Jerusalem imagined by the rabbis who never were here. And the tables of Kaffit and the "Kaffits" around the country are not exactly full of the kinds of Jews that Montefiore or Brandeis may have envisioned. And while Ben Gurion was a savvy politician and realist concerning world Jewry and Israel, he still wonders why all of you are "on line" rather than "in place" here and now at Kaffit.

Jewish history is in a new chapter and in some ways we can't yet fully answer the question as to what Israel means. At the same time, there do seem to be some conclusions from our multi-week journey.

It is clear that the notion of the Land of Israel has held constant as a core Jewish value throughout the long "Chain of Tradition" which constitutes Jewish history. As our teachers and texts over the past weeks have shown us, it seems quite apparent that our spiritual, intellectual, and communal leaders as well as our "regular people" (*amcha*) have not been willing to give up the firm belief that the Land of Israel has meaning for Jews. Even one of the great Jewish renegades Sigmund Freud (who defined himself in a letter to a non-Jewish Swiss colleague as a "godless Jew") said the following about the Land of Israel in a correspondence to Stefan Zweig:

...we hail from there...our forbearers lived there for perhaps a whole millennium...and it is impossible to say what heritage from this land we have taken over into our blood and nerves.

But, said, Freud, "we" (he the godless Jew, you and I) have indeed taken something from this land into our blood and nerves.

We have seen that over the ages our leaders and teachers have sought out creative and meaningful new answers to explain the meaning of Israel for our lives as Jews. They have engaged in that finest of Jewish traits – interpretation – to seek meaning and message for this core place from which Freud said "we hailed."

While there have been successive attempts to re-interpret, it is striking that the various answers also continue to exist in contemporary Jewish life especially but not just in Israel. Avraham's views still live in certain settlements and hillsides in Israel today – and in parts of New York, Los Angeles, Lakewood, and other areas of the Jewish world. There are Jews who hold to Avraham's credo of a Covenant between God and the Jewish people which has given this Land to the Jews. It is not a credo that has conquered the world of most of Sefirah's readers and many other North American liberal Jews, but it has sustainability as we are seeing these very days.

A tradition of Israel which links it to other core Jewish moral and spiritual values – which likes to trace itself to Isaiah and the rabbis – clearly is powerful in worlds from which many of us come. This world believes, as fervently as do the "Avraham-ites," in Eretz Yisrael, but it wants to see it as a source of new and better standards of: how human beings can treat each other, how conflict can be settled, and social justice and personal ethics. This tradition wants to hold Israel to a higher standard – just as it holds Jews and Judaism to higher standards.

There is a third tradition, represented at the table by Herzl, Brandeis, and Montefiore, and summed up by Freud who joined us tonight which says that the answer to the link is neither metaphysical nor ideological; it is rather what Yosef Yerushalmi in his book **Freud's Moses** calls the "the psychological Jew." Brandeis, Montefiore, Freud, and many of us may be linked by something we simply can't explain; we are, in that hackneyed phrase, "family." In his preface to the 1930 Hebrew translation of *Totem and Taboo*, Freud wrote:

If the question were put to [me]: "Since you have abandoned all these common characteristics of your compatriots, what is left to you that is Jewish?" [I] would reply "A very great deal and probably its very essence. [I] could not now express the essence in words, but some day, no doubt, it will become accessible to the scientific mind"

Finally, for well over five million Jews today the answer to the question "What does Israel mean?" is "It's home. It is where I was born or moved to; it's where I went to high school, served in the army, it's the country whose flag I pledge allegiance to, it's where I will marry, have children, have pain and joy, and die." This answer of course is clear and self-evident for most of the people at "Kaffits" across Israel –but it is less apparent to those who at this moment are in coffee shops and restaurants in Melbourne, Skokie, New Orleans, or Cincinnati

So now we can briefly return to our opening questions of seven weeks ago:

Why so many meanings?

Because Jewish history is a long winding path that has taken many turns which have seen diverse venues, cultures, and perspectives. Judaism, Jews, and Jewishness have gone through many metamorphoses, as has "The Promised Land," "Eretz Yisrael," "Heavenly Jerusalem," "Palestine," and the "State of Israel." And the story is probably not over.

Why can't some leader just give us the answer?

Hess misled us a bit with the title *Rome and Jerusalem*. As we all know, it doesn't work that way in Jewish life, as Steinsaltz's brief chapter on Jewish leadership underscores. For good or for bad - or for good - we have great questions and that is probably our strength. As to the answer: "Now go out and learn [and choose]!"

Who is least likely to be well received in your congregation?

I'd love to hear your answer to that. Most histories and sociologies that deal with Israel in American Jewish life are in agreement that the Aliyah, Promised Land, and Refuge from anti-semitism speakers are the least resonant in American Jewish life. At the same time, it continues to be the case that Ben Gurion, Golda Meir, Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Rabin, and Arik Sharon might well be the Israelis you would probably most like to have show up next Friday night to speak to the congregation (of course their coming many mean different things to them than it does to you or your congregants).

Who is missing?

There are people missing from the table. Some of them are Israelis that you have met over the years: Israelis of your movement, university professors, enlightened politicians, educators who have established new institutions for the study of Jewish texts, and just plain Israelis. These are people who are very much like you – reflective, committed to human and universal values, and also proud of their Jewish roots and heritage. There is a colony of compatriots like you that you should seek out in your wrestling with the question.

Similarly, there is a group of people like you in North America and other world Jewish communities who feel deeply and profoundly linked to the State of Israel. They/you are in some way internally ignited with deep passion for Israel and they/you are seeking meaningful ways to explicate this and transmit it to your congregants and students.

Finally, there are Hebraists – poets, writers, musicians, journalists – who have strong beliefs about the role of Hebrew as a force for shaping Jewish identity. They have written words that are gems and if we but could read and speak together in one tongue the table conversation might be so different.

The voices of these groups may well shape the next era of the discussion and it would be a wonderful choir.

Are we doing our work well as leaders concerning Israel – or is there more we can do?

The cup is half full and half empty. Much good effort has been made, but we have not done the job well enough. Somehow we have not made the Israel gene part of our people's DNA; we have not injected it into our Jewish oxygen. In our preaching and teaching we have too often turned Israel into a "problem," a "crisis," an "issue," a "dilemma." We have routinized the charisma; we have diluted "the love of our youth."

It is not totally our fault. Contemporary Israel is about politics and this arouses heavy issues. Contemporary Israel is about conflict and war and these are complicated matters. Contemporary Israel has taken stands vis a vis Jewish denominations and this a subject of great concern.

There are no easy solutions, but I do want to end with four telegraphic thoughts:

1. We have to make "coming to know" Israel a primary part of our Jewish work. It needs much re-invigorated effort. It needs you. I consciously have decided not to use the phrase "teaching Israel" because I have come to believe that standardized notions of "teaching" can do more harm than good. "*Ladaat*" in its deepest sense of internal insight and love should be our goal.
2. We may have to put aside a bit our answers and strong views so that the question of Israel's meaning can be the heart of what we do—rather than our answers, baggage, or strong views. We have stolen the question from our young by telling them the answers (and specifically by turning Israel from a question into a crisis)
3. The comment of the Birthright Israel participant rings in my ear, "Why didn't they ever show us this before?" We have failed our young in one great way – we have not let them see for themselves. We have the greatest pedagogic resource a people could ever want – a real live, not artificial Disney world - place called the State of Israel. It is "awesome" – and we haven't made this part of the Jewish journey of our people.
4. If we all had Hebrew as our second language, we probably would not be having this particular discussion. A language creates a link that probably precedes and supercedes most other links.

IT'S CLOSING TIME

Even Kaffit closes, and I have to go to meetings, meetings, meetings tomorrow. It's been great having coffee with you for seven weeks. Talk to me during the week and I'll answer back. Hag Sameach!

Barry