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### The Dilemma

“What’s that?” she said, pointing to my hair.

I brushed my hand over my head, for we were passing the overhanging bushes where the dragon flies gather; I assumed one had landed on my head.

“No!” moaned the dark haired girl as we trudged up the path to the outdoor sanctuary.

I was confused. It was my first week at camp this summer and Amit was one of the young Israelis whose parents thought it would be a good idea to send her to a Reform Jewish summer camp in the US. Early on she had attached herself to me with that mix of charm and chutzpah that is quintessentially Israeli.

“Oh it’s a *kippa*,” I said, “I wear it when I pray.”

“No you don’t,” she said. “It’s only for boys.”

“No, here girls can wear them too, if they like,” I replied.

With that look of universal pre-teen disgust, combined with the all knowing Israeli attitude she pronounced, “*Lo nachon*” “Not right,” and skipped off to join the service where boys and girls sat side by side, singing ancient prayers in Modern Hebrew and English idioms. I smiled at the perfect inconsistency of it all.

During the High Holy days it is not only our individual selves that we consider when we take a *cheshbon nefesh*, an inventory of our souls. This is also a time when we are keenly aware of the Jewish community and our connection to the larger issues facing us on a national and international level. Placing ourselves in this context, we have come to a critical and confusing crossroads with Israel which merits our honest examination.

For lack of better words, I will call it The Dilemma. At the outset, I would like to give the caveat that today I am offering a framework from which you might consider your own attitudes and actions. My words are not intended to define the solution for any individual much less for our country or our people as a whole, but rather to illuminate the complexity of the situation so we may better understand the choices that lie ahead of us. In a nutshell, here is The Dilemma as I see it. We are living at a time when there are opposing positions wrestling for support not only in the world at large, but for many of us, in our own minds as well.

The American Jewish community has historically been characterized by two dominant traits, which describe many but not necessarily all, of its adherents. First, Jews have typically embraced a liberal political agenda. What this has meant is that we tend to support leaders and programs that promote diversity, help the impoverished, defend the weak, protect the minority, advance education, and provide opportunities for equal access to all that our nation has to offer. Often we do this even when we do not derive a direct benefit ourselves. For example, by in large, we support public education, even if we send our own children to private schools. We are

willing to decrease our own income through taxes, if it will help those less fortunate. We defend civil rights, even of those who would speak out against us. We do this in part, because of our strong belief in the idea of *tikkun olam*, namely that we are partners with God in repairing the world in all its brokenness.

We also behave this way because as we read so often in the Torah, “we remember the stranger because we were once strangers.” We care for the weak, the poor, the orphan, the widow, in short the underdog, because we have an ingrained empathy and identification with them. This blend of compassion and justice is core to our Jewish identity.

A second trait that has characterized the American Jewish community is support for the modern state of Israel. Although there was a very brief period when certain segments were concerned that this sentiment might be perceived as a conflict with one’s American allegiance, that issue was soon resolved. American Jews have overwhelmingly supported the State of Israel with financial assistance, political lobbying, and by visiting the country. We have taken pride in her accomplishments and rallied to her defense; if not physically certainly in the battle of public opinion. Although we are citizens of this country and choose to make our homes here, we feel a deep spiritual and historical connection to Israel.

While these traits may have described the American Jewish community in the past, recent trends suggest that the nature of this community is changing. Nowhere is this more evident, than in our relationship to Israel. The time has come for us to examine our established views against a complex and ever evolving scenario both here and in Israel. Only in this way, will we be able to evaluate our choices clearly when it comes to such a critical subject.

Let us begin in our own backyard, with the political and cultural reality here. Following the attacks of 9/11 America has had to confront its perception and relationship with Islam in new ways. Prior to that, Islam was not on the forefront of most American’s minds. As Jews, we probably gave it more attention simply because of our relationship with Israel. However, nowadays, it seems that just about everyone in America has an opinion on Islam. As evidenced by the public discourse over building an Islamic center near where the Twin Towers once stood, we see that this topic has become increasingly important to the average American.

Americans’ perception of Islam has been greatly influenced by recent events- by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the attempted underwear bomber, the shooting at Fort Hood, the attempted car bomb at Times Square, the arrests of individuals in the US suspected of having links to terrorist organizations, the ongoing anti-American rhetoric from various web sites and speakers, the activity on many American college campuses, the continued killings around the world done in the name of Islam, by those who call themselves Muslims. These activities have led to a phenomenon that the media has dubbed, “Islamaphobia.” This term suggests a wide spread irrational fear and hatred of Islam and its followers.

For American Jews this growing “Islamaphobia” is a problem because it causes us to directly confront topics that make us squirm. On the one hand, we approach the subject from our core Jewish values of justice and compassion. We are quick to defend the principle that the actions of a few must not be allowed to define an entire people. We point out the dangers of ethnic profiling and breach of civil liberties. We talk about our shared Abrahamic lineage and

the striking commonalities of our Semitic ancestry in language, culture, and religion. We are quick to identify with the experience of being a minority in a predominantly Christian country.

Part of our Jewish identity is to be self reflective, as evidenced even by these Holy Days. We believe that examining our own actions and beliefs is essential to living a meaningful life. So we probe even those sensitive places, have we in anyway contributed to this growing fear and hatred of Islam? Are we personally harboring any prejudices, have we been biased? We think it must be a horrible time to be a Muslim in America these days. We wonder, how can I reach out across this growing rift of isolation?

And yet, many are beginning to question their empathic impulses. We might intellectually understand the rich history of Islam, and the many contributions that Muslims have made to civilization in areas such as the arts, math, science, and literature. We might have even learned enough about the pillars of Islam to appreciate and respect its core religious beliefs. We may personally know Muslims whom we hold in high regard. Nonetheless, it is becoming increasingly difficult to turn a blind eye to the hatred that is coming from people and places who identify as Muslim and assert that Islam is completely irrelevant to the discussion. Perhaps even more disturbing, we cannot ignore the deafening silence of the vast majority of Muslims, although there have been extremely important, but far too few, outspoken exceptions.

Even among those who disavow terrorism as perpetuated by fanatics, there are precious few who speak out against the people who teach hatred and support violence. It seems as if there is an unwillingness to examine internally the causes or structures that are perpetuating this hostility and an eagerness to place the blame externally. This denial is as disturbing as the violence and destruction.

At the same time we are outraged by those who are stirring up this “Islamaphobia.” We abhor the stupidity, danger and insult of a church burning a Koran. We are deeply concerned about the growing intolerance in American for Muslims.

Our feelings about Israel are also ambivalent for a number of reasons. Although we stand firmly against those who seek to delegitimize Israel, we are pained when we feel delegitimized as Jews by Israel itself. The recent Rotem Bill which has been put on hold only because of intense political lobbying by American Jews in Israel, is the most recent example of a trend in Israel that makes many of us feel alienated from the very country we say is our spiritual homeland. As the ultra Orthodox increase their influence in religious, cultural and political matters in the country, we begin to feel like we don’t belong.

At the same time, many American Jews also have mixed feelings about being critical of Israel especially now. As Israel faces increased international condemnation which intensified following the flotilla incident this summer, we are reticent to add our voices in any way to those whose ultimate goal is to destroy her. Although we might not love every political or military action Israel takes, we do love Israel. Within Israel there is a wide range of opinions expressed freely in the media and on the streets, but outside Israel this can feel risky at times.

As American Jews, we wear two hats in our relationship to Israel and the United States which are usually not in conflict, but recently even this assumption feels a bit shaky. We wonder if this administration is as supportive of Israel as the last one. How much pressure is ok for

America to put on Israel to make compromises for the sake of peace? We know that the US is in a key position to help broker peace between Israel and the Palestinians and we also know that America views Israel as strategically important in the Middle East. However, many in the Jewish community feel that something has shifted under the present administration, even while we acknowledge that the Jewish vote was very strong in favor of our current president.

Add to all of this the hard facts that the demographics and attitudes of the American Jewish community are changing rapidly in ways that directly affect how we relate to Israel. Birthrates among Reform Jews are flat or declining, while the Orthodox segment of our country, although still a minority is growing rapidly. Interest in Israel among Reform youth is waning according to some recent research while the Orthodox youth remain as committed to Israel as ever.

And just to make matters more complicated after almost a two year hiatus, the peace process was jump started again last week when Secretary of State Clinton brought together President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu for direct talks in Washington, D.C. This meeting was predictably met with a new spat of Hamas terrorist attacks against Israel as they continue to vow to wipe her off the face of the map. These brutal attacks left 4 dead, 1 wounded and 7 orphaned in their wake.

In addition, on September 26, the one year freeze on new settlements which Israel instituted as a means to entice the Palestinians to the peace table will expire. The Palestinians are saying this moratorium must continue in order to keep the peace talks going. However, Israel is saying this was a one time incentive to get the Palestinians to even come to the table and in no way was conceived as a precondition to talking about peace. Israel has said that the issue of the settlements, like the issue of Jerusalem, the right of return, borders, etc. must all be negotiated during the talks. Meanwhile the clock is ticking as the deadline looms only 3 weeks away.

And here we sit, in Georgetown, Connecticut trying to make sense of all of this - of our feelings, of how best to support the country we love, how best to bring peace to the area, how best to deal with the anti Semitic rhetoric and anti Israel propaganda found in the media and on the web, how not to get caught up in the wave of fear and hate, yet how not to be naïve to the real threats that exist.

There are no simple solutions. However, I would like to put forward an approach that comes from this morning's Torah portion for it contains much wisdom. Today we read the poignant story of Hagar and Ishmael. The two are wandering in the desert, out of food and water, prepared to die. Hagar cannot bear to watch her son succumb to death so she leaves him, walks a distance away, sits down and begins to weep. Ishmael too starts to cry. In Genesis 21:17 we read- "And God heard the voice of the boy; and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is."

Later, the rabbis interpreting this verse point out that the phrase, "where he is," "*ba-asher hu sham*," is unnecessary. Where else could God have heard him other than where he is? This seemingly superfluous detail is explained by Rashi, the 11<sup>th</sup> century commentator by use of this midrash:

The angels in heaven were alarmed when they realized what God was about to do for Hagar and Ishmael. They knew that God was going to show them a well that would save their lives. But they also could see that in the future the descendents of Ishmael would kill the Israelites. They wondered how God, who had to have known all of this too, could think it was a good idea to save this boy now. The angels went to God and challenged Him. “Master of the Universe, they said, for him whose descendents will at one time kill your children will You provide a well?”

Looking down on the child, God responded, “What is he now, righteous or wicked?” The angels replied, “Righteous.” God then said, “According to his present deeds will I judge him.” “This,” said Rashi “is the meaning of what is written, ‘God heard the voice of the boy where he is now.’ It means in the condition, not the location, of where he is now.”

We learn from this divine insight that wise decisions require clarity and flexibility. We too need to cultivate these traits especially as regards making choices about Israel today. How can we develop our own clarity and flexibility so we might perceive and respond to the condition of how things are now. *Ba-asher hu sham*

I would like to offer the following suggestions:

- 1) We need to distinguish between criticism and delegitimization. Delegitimization means negation of the right of the Jewish people to self determination or the right of Israel to exist as Jewish state. Delegitimization seeks to destroy Israel with words and opinions as much as bombs and terrorist attacks seek to destroy her through fire power. When we hear or speak words about Israel we need to be clear. Criticism of Israel’s policies or actions that is offered as a means to improve the country is not delegitimization, even if we disagree with it. There is such a thing as positive criticism. Inside Israel, people do it all the time. Those of us who live outside the country can do it too if it is done in a civil, manner out of love and with a humble recognition, that although we have a stake in Israel, our lives are not on the line in the same way as those living there.

A wedge must be driven between those whose words seek to deny Israel’s right to exist and those whose words come from a place of trying to strengthen Israel’s existence. Delegitimizers need to be exposed for their hypocrisy and hatred and marginalized. Critics need to be thoughtfully and respectfully engaged.

- 2) We would do well to stop thinking about Israel and all matters related to her as falling neatly into two monolithic sides, call it the Left which doesn’t care about Israel and the Right which is religiously and politically tyrannical. These are over simplified labels which come with old assumptions. The truth is much more nuanced. We need only look at the idea of a two state solution which used to be a left wing notion and is now strongly supported by a right wing Prime Minister and most of the country.

Now more than ever, we need all groups, from J Street to AIPAC to engage with Israel. This vision which is being called Big Tent Zionism is our challenge in the year ahead. Only if all groups are made to feel welcome in the dialogue will we be able to secure the future of a pluralistic Jewish state grounded in the values of equality, justice and peace.

- 3) The third recommendation is that we should understand struggle as a legitimate part of the Zionist experience and evidence of a robust and enduring democracy, and not misunderstand struggle as a failure of some kind. Because we have a democracy in America, we are often too quick to judge all other democracies by our experience.

But the truth is that Israel has an amazing democracy with an active free press, an independent justice system, a parliament that has an expansive array of representation coupled with a strong economy and infrastructure. Israel is a democracy that is older than more than half of the democracies in the world today and the only functioning one in the region.

If we are really to look at the situation *basher hu sham*, in the condition as it exists now, we would see that Zionism today is an incredible balancing act lived out by a group of people from diverse socio economic and ethnic backgrounds, bringing together a variety of religious and political opinions in a land facing incredible security issues. As internal and external forces threaten to pull this balancing act out of kilter, we should trust in the self correcting mechanism within Zionism to seek and find equilibrium as it has in the past and as it is committed to doing in the future.

- 4) My fourth suggestion is something that I think is hard for us to really appreciate – the reality of hatred and the imperative for security. On a personal level, most of us have not experienced someone hating us to the point that they are willing to kill us. As a country we are aware that there are those who hate us, but we have grown up with the luxury that we can mostly ignore them.

Even after 9/11, we have a hard time believing in the profound hatred that people are capable of and the destructive force that can unleash. This is a lesson that we are starting to learn. But even if we were to allow for the possibility of this kind of hatred, we do not have a long history of feeling physically threatened by it. This too is a lesson that we are starting to confront. Israel on the other hand has grown up with the reality of hatred and security threats since its inception. Although these concerns are not a *carte blanche* to ignore human rights, we in America are only starting to understand what it means to confront this kind of threat. We have only to look at our own behavior in our country, in foreign battle fields and in prisoner of war camps when we have felt threatened to see what happens to us under these harsh realities. We have much to learn from Israel as she has to learn from us.

In conclusion, why in this complicated and some would say dark time should we still remain optimistic about this current round of peace talks, even though they have been tried before, and some have already written them off. Let me offer four points that I hope will leave us in a positive albeit cautious, state of mind.

- 1) This is the first time in history when the Arab nations do not see Israel as their biggest danger. Iran is a larger threat to them and there is tacit acknowledgement that things could really get worse and the clock is ticking.
- 2) Israel is negotiating for the first time with a partner who shares a common menace. Hamas is as threatening to President Abbas as he is to the State of Israel.
- 3) There is strong support for a two state solution in Israel by the Prime Minister and the majority of the Israeli people.

- 4) President Obama has made this peace process a central issue of his administration and Secretary of State Clinton is clearly focused on these direct talks as a priority.

In this year ahead as we consider our relationship with Israel and the many complicated factors that relate to this sensitive subject, let us remember the way that God beheld Ishmael, *basher hu sham*, and judged him in his present condition. Keenly aware of the past, and concerned about the future, we too must look upon this situation, *basher hu sham*, where it is now. May we strive to see this complex situation with clarity and flexibility and let us remain optimistic in the pursuit of peace and justice for all.

On my last day of camp, Amit found me as I was packing up my room. In her hand she held a plastic bag from which she fished out a key chain and presented it to me. It was a tiny book of psalms adorned with colored rhinestones in the pattern of the breast plate the ancient Cohanim wore. I was touched. I asked her if she knew what it was.

“Oh it’s just something pretty I thought you’d like. It’ll bring you good luck,” she said.

I thanked her and gave her a hug. As she skipped off, I opened the tiny book and realized that I would never be able to read it; the print was like grains of sand. And so we parted - one not seeing, one not knowing. Yet somehow knowing and seeing our timeless connection: a common history, a shared destiny, one people.

THE END