

Finding Hope in Difficult Times

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Let me tell you story, both grand and personal. A few weeks ago my aunt in Israel died after a long illness. Doda Rivka, as we called her, was the last of the generation of my father's family who witnessed the pre-state history of modern Israel. Although her passing marks the end of an era, the story of her resilience and of my father's inspires in me hope for the future in the difficult time we find ourselves in today.

Not long ago one of the high school students I teach in our religious school mused aloud about living through the education disruptions of COVID. "Could we please NOT live in 'unprecedented times?' ", he asked. I understand that. It seems to be journalists' favorite word these days. And I'm not even talking about the election! But the truth is we are living through extraordinary changes in our world. And far too often we treat them without a sense of history – without an anchoring in the complicated interactions from which they came. Or sometimes we make up false narratives which tie complex modern realities into simplistic narratives of origin – which do more to obscure than to reveal. This has been particularly true regarding the Israel / Palestine conflict over the past few decades, which has been greatly heightened and disturbingly simplified since the horrors of October 7 and the war in Gaza that has brought such destruction and pain to Israelis and Palestinians over the past year. And we American Jews who sit far away from the daily realities of this war are deeply affected as rising anti-Semitism has come disguised in anti-Zionism, leaving many of us battered and confused.

Truly unprecedented times.

My Doda Rivka's death brought me back to a memory of the world in Israel / Palestine that her life and the life of my father encompassed. They were both born in Safed, in northern Israel, where the Jewish community had a remnant that never left the land. Jews remained through the expulsion by Rome and the wars of the Crusades. The Jewish cemetery in the Safed Old City has graves dating back to the late centuries before and after the Common Era. My own family has generations of graves there.

On the first day of the year in 1837 there was an enormous earthquake which devastated the Jewish and Arab communities of Safed. My ancestor of 3 generations Rabbi Levi Yehudah Kahana, was sent by one of the European Hasidic rabbis to help to rebuild the community. A hundred years later, the Jewish community began to expand not from Jews escaping Europe, although there was that, but from a massive immigration of Jews expelled from Arab lands – a story not well told. These Arabic speaking Jews had a natural relationship with the Arab inhabitants of the land as well as with the Yiddish speaking European Jews already there. In those last years of the 19th Century the inhabitants of Palestine – Jews and Arab – were united

in a struggle against the waning power of the Ottoman Empire which still had control and ownership over the land.

The 20th Century saw a European competition for power over the land of Palestine and throughout the Middle East. Today my Muslim friends and I trace the great sin of the colonial West in the region to a secret treaty made in 1916 between two diplomats, the British Mark Sykes and the French François Georges-Picot. This famous Sykes-Picot Agreement, later ratified by their respective governments, divided up the Middle Eastern countries of the Ottoman Empire between Western Powers, ignoring historic and ethnic identities. This blatant colonialist land grab would have profound effects on the region and the world and would ultimately lead to tragedy in my family.

In 1920 the League of Nations gave Great Britain the Mandate to administer Palestine and Transjordan, and to put into effect the Balfour Declaration's commitment to a "national home for the Jewish people" alongside the Palestinian Arabs. But, as was usual for the British colonialists, the authorities found it easier to control the population by pitting one ethnic group against another. The common enemy of the Ottomans was forgotten as Palestinian Arabs and Jews began to fight each other.

In March of 1938, during a period known as the Arab revolt in Palestine, a hundred years after my family first arrived, my grandmother Tziporah, along with her mother and my then 3 year old aunt Rivka – my father's youngest sibling – were riding in a taxi to a wedding in Haifa. As the taxi was traveling along the Acre-Safed road, with Jewish license plates, it was attacked by an Arab gunman who killed the driver and brought the car to a stop. He then approached the taxi and shot point-blank the adult passengers within. My grandmother's body fell on the little girl Rivka and shielded her from the assassin's view. A passing car stopped behind the taxi and scared the shooter away, ultimately saving my aunt's life.

The murder was newsworthy and was only one example of violence being perpetrated by Arabs against Jews and Jews against Arabs, and British against both at that time. But in the town of Safed it galvanized the Jewish community in outrage. The funeral was a major affair and anger was in the air.

My father was a 16 year old yeshiva student at the time, living away from home when he got the terrible news. They had no radio at the yeshiva, but in town he heard the names of those killed. He came home to participate in the burial of his mother and grandmother, along with family from all over the country.

This is how my father told the story of what happened next – in a video I made of him near the end of his life:

As we walked in the funeral, of course the streets, it was the Jewish streets, where Jews lived, everything was closed. And all of a sudden we saw an Arab, who was a young fellow. . . I was very frightened . . . very concerned with him - people could simply tear

him apart. So I went to him, took out from my pocket any money that I have, it was not too much, but everything that I have, and gave it to him as tzedakah. When the people saw me crying and giving to him tzedakah, they let him go. They went away.

This is the story that my family holds close. The teenage Jewish boy whose mother was murdered by an Arab terrorist refused to let that hate be perpetuated to an innocent bystander. Although he grew up and fought for Israeli's independence against the British colonialists, my father never let his personal tragedy foment a hatred for Arabs. He believed that if the British would be forced to leave, the Arabs and Jews would find a way to work out their differences.

Sadly, his optimism and hope has not yet borne fruit. Over the past more than 80 years, there has been terrible violence committed against both sides. Extremist Arabs and Jews have kept the conflict simmering. Arab terrorists have murdered Jews and the national aspirations of Palestinian Arabs has been violently quashed by settlers and an increasingly powerful and nationalistic Israeli government.

My father rarely talked about his experiences before the War of Independence. But I remember when I was a rabbinic student, walking through the streets of Jerusalem with him, where he would suddenly stop and point out, for example, a balcony where he and Menachem Begin had given an address to the people. His dream of a free nation for the world's Jewish community was long and painful in coming. But its reality has galvanized Jews around the world and given us hope.

From my father I have inherited a love for the Jewish state of Israel – not always for the governments of a particular era – just like here – but always a love for the land and the nation and the hope for empowered Jewish identity and independence that Israel represents. That Zionist idea – of a reborn Jewish National homeland living in peace alongside its neighbors is a dream begun and not fully fulfilled. But that hope has sustained us, wherever Jews have lived.

About 40 years after my father's ancestor arrived in 19th Century Palestine, a young Hebrew language poet named Naftali Hertz Imber penned a poem while living in Romania. Originally from Austro-Hungarian Galicia, Imber wandered around Eastern Europe before finally settling in Ottoman Palestine. By the time he left in 1888, his simple Hebrew poem "Tikvatenu" – "Our Hope", had become popular among the early Zionist pioneers in the Jewish farming community of Rishon-le-Zion. Merging with the melody from a popular Moldavian folk song, the tune was renamed "Hatikvah" – "The Hope."

*Our hope is not yet lost
The hope of two millennia
To be a free people in our land
The land of Zion and Jerusalem*

עוד לא אבדה תקוותנו
התקווה בת שנות אלפים
להיות עם חפשי בארצנו
ארץ ציון וירושלים

As I said, that hope is not yet fully realized. While the Jewish people have built a remarkable reality in Israel: a thriving by fragile democracy, a world medical, scientific and technology leader, a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society unique in the Middle East. But we are not a free people in our land while violence, fear and war remain a constant threat. Only peace and mutual recognition and acceptance will bring the fulfilment of the 2000 year dream.

Although Hatikvah was not officially adopted as the Israeli national anthem until 2004, it was sung at the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland in 1897 – and every Congress after. It was adopted at the 18th Congress in 1933 as the Zionist Movement's anthem along with the familiar blue and white flag. It has served as the unofficial and official Israeli national anthem since the founding of the state in 1948.

Hatikvah – the Hope – the belief, even against all evidence. For 2000 years, the hope was for an indigenous, forcibly exiled community to return to its ancestral homeland. And for the past 76 years, the Hope is that we can live together in peace with our neighbors and with the indigenous Arab Palestinian people who also trace their roots and history to the land. The example of my father who fought against the colonialist occupiers but sought to find common ground with his Arab neighbors, to recognize their humanity – has guided me in my love for Israel. Hatikvah, the Hope, is that peace can be found when the extremists on both sides – who believe that all the land is only for them – when the extremists will not drive events but the middle majority can listen to the other, can respect each other's rights to life and dignity and freedom – when we can find a way to live side by side in two states for two people – that ultimately we can find peace.

It must start with respectful listening – something in very short supply these days. I recognize that my story, my narrative, my family's journey is very different than those of Arab Palestinians. Our histories, our narratives, contradict each other. This is even truer today when Israel's absolutely justified need for security has come at the cost of so many Palestinian lives. After the evil and cowardly attack of October 7, the thousands murdered, the hundreds still held as hostages today – Israel's righteous goal to destroy Hamas' ability to ever attack again has left horrible devastation among Gaza's civilian population. And now the war Hamas wanted has expanded into Lebanon. And the driving force behind it all, Iran, has for the first time become directly involved. It is hard to hear the stories of Palestinian loss – and many Israelis do not. Their media doesn't present it – just as our media does not tell the story of Israeli pain, loss and displacement – or of Hamas' cynical and criminal use of its own population as human shields. Still, we do not find peace by denying each other's stories, but by listening to them. There are Israelis who see every Arab as a terrorist, there are Palestinians who see every Israeli as an invader. In their narratives, there is no hope – only brutal imposition of will. But the Hope lies in those who will listen, who will give respect, who will offer dignity.

This respectful listening is also not what is happening on our American college campuses. This is not what is happening in our American politics. Our divisions dehumanize the other and make their life experiences irrelevant and unworthy of consideration. A few weeks ago I was approached by a leader at a local college about the possibility of holding a public dialogue with a Muslim friend of my choosing on the history and situation of Israel and Palestine – to model respectful listening and sharing. We were more than willing based on assurances of ground rules among the student participants of respect and curiosity. But, as I was told, it was the professors who refused to allow the dialogue on campus and the organizers could not guarantee our safety. This saddens me. But I have hope. This is a terribly charged time – and devastation and loss on the Israeli and the Palestinian sides are beyond comprehension. Perhaps in time a dialogue like ours can take place on a college, just as it could and does in countless homes in Israel and Palestine. We see this kind of conversation as rare and brave – but the people who live in the land, the people who are directly affected by the violence and the absolutism – so many of them have these kind of personal human connections. That is where the hope lies.

The political and military reality has kept the region mired in old patterns. Iran and its proxies have consistently made clear that their only real goal is Israel's destruction. This makes every crisis an existential crisis for Israel. Extremists on the Israeli side – many inspired by my extended family – view domination, exile and expansion as the only response. Absolutism – the view that it all belongs to me and I will never be safe until you are gone – is a view that a minority on both sides share but that has kept us trapped for generations now.

When I was young, my father's cousin, Meir Kahane – yes, that Meir Kahane - the founder of the violent Jewish Defense League, would sometimes come on speaking trips to my hometown of Houston. On those occasions, my father would often attend the talks and would stand up in the audience to publicly argue with Meir's extremist views. My father was no peacenick – I was seen as the naive radical leftist in my family – a tradition my children continue by being more leftist than I am. They make me proud. Still, although my father held his right-wing beliefs about Israel, he was at heart a Humanist, and rejected Meir's extremist views. I am sure this was not easy for Meir, as he had always looked up to my father, who was known as "Gadol" "the great one" in the family – The local Jewish newspaper would write a headline "Kahane vs Cahana," and then Meir would come back to our home for dinner and they would laugh and sing together. I remember this as an example of human and family connection even in the face of deep public and policy disagreement. Today, sadly, I don't think we live in a political world in which this can happen. We do not break bread with people we disagree with; even family. But, I do believe it represents our hope. Hatikvah – a possibility. Human connection, conversation, appreciation for the humanity of the other, even when you disagree profoundly, creates a path that denies absolutism. To the extremist, the only answer is "you must lose so that I can win." In fact, your losing is even more important than my winning. To the humanist, life is not a zero sum. To the humanist, my win, my gain, at the expense of your pain and loss is an incomplete

win. The humanist listens to the story of the others and asks to be heard as well. Together the hope – Hatikva – is that we can find a way to live together, to respect the dignity of the other, to see the humanity in the other.

Despite our student's wishes, we do live in unprecedented times. The challenges are real: the rise in antisemitism in the United States and around the world, a politics of dehumanization and growing authoritarianism in our country; and Israel – also bound up with extremist and authoritarian politics - is mired in a war for its survival which could possibly extend for years. But I hold out hope. There is a pathway which is not immediate but it is clear. It is a view of the world which does not seek to dominate but to negotiate – to see the humanity and the desire for dignity and peace which lie not with extremists and their weapons of war, but in the eyes and the stories of others. Before Hamas' brutal attack on October 7, there was a growing awareness of Israel as taking part in a regional alliance, led by Saudi Arabia. This Sunni coalition was part of the impetus for Hamas in attacking Israel. And Iran's terrifying ballistic missile strike yesterday made clear to the world the necessity for such an alliance. The war in Gaza has complicated but not eliminated that path – but it will rely on a pathway for Palestinian rights and independence: a Palestinian state living at peace with a secure and strong Israel. At the moment, in the midst of war, there is no political or popular will in Israel or among Palestinians for such a path. That is understandable. And that is where American Jews can help our Israeli friends and family take the long view. It will take time, but I will not give up on the land and people I love.

My aunt Rivka was the last of her generation in my family – a child who saw her mother murdered by terrorists – as ultimately happened to my father's cousin Meir Kahane. Rivka, who witnessed the birth of the Jewish state, who lived through wars for its protection, who died even as missiles from Houthi rebels are being aimed into Eliat in southern Israel where she lived, far from the boarder of Gaza or Lebanon. We are now in a new era. It is dark and obscured at the moment, but Hatikvah – the hope – still lives. And we who live far away from the war zone are still a part of bringing about this hope: a Humanistic hope, acknowledging the truths of the other. As the prophet said:

*These are the things that ye shall do:
Speak the truth with your neighbor;
fulfill the judgment of truth and
peace in your gates; (Zech. 8:16)*

אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשׂוּ
דַּבְּרוּ אֱמֶת אִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ
אֲמַת וּמִשְׁפַּט שְׁלוֹם
שִׁפְטוּ בְּשַׁעְרֵיכֶם:

May our hope be for truth with our neighbor and peace in our gates. Amen.