

Rabbi Jessica Spitalnic Brockman

Yom Kippur 5779 Sermon  
"Peace of Mind"

Where I grew up, there lived several famous actors that you may have heard of. Not superstar famous but very well known – Mary Beth Hurt, Susan Dey of "The Partridge Family, Vanessa Williams. And Alan Arkin, whose son was in my 4<sup>th</sup> grade class. Alan Arkin, who you may know best from playing the grandpa in 'Little Miss Sunshine', it was announced, would be coming to visit our 4<sup>th</sup> grade class and speak to us. While we had a general sense that this was something important, as our mothers were very excited for us, we didn't quite understand who he was. In order to prep for his visit, they showed our class the 1966 movie, "The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming." The movie which was already 11 years old by the time I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade was a goofy, wacky comedy about a Soviet submarine that gets stuck on a sandbar off the coast of New England. The movie, released at the height of the Cold War, was a critical and commercial success but far over the head of a fourth grader. Regardless, I remember vividly the film and Mr. Arkin's visit and I still feel a warm feeling towards Alan Arkin when I see him in movies and even his children who have gone on to commercial success as well. That Cold War farce flew over our fourth grade heads and planted in me and my classmates the confusing sentiment of needing to adore something but not sure how or why.

I have been thinking about my own 4<sup>th</sup> grade confusion because of something that is happening at Temple Beth El in January. We will be hosting a unit of Israeli soldiers. They are coming through a program called Peace of Mind. Established shortly after the second Lebanon war when some soldiers complained that they were suffering emotionally from their experiences during the war, these original soldiers understood that they needed help, but didn't know how to go about receiving that help. They had not been clinically diagnosed with PTSD so the Israeli government would not provide funding for therapy. The idea was to heal these young men together, as a unit. It was both innovative and untraditional, but produced some very positive results. Since that first group in 2007, Peace of Mind has facilitated healing 60 units, which equates to roughly 1000 people.

This unit of 15 soldiers, some in the reserves and some still in the military, and two therapists that are coming here, will be staying in our homes, worshipping with us, celebrating with us, enjoying the generosity of congregants who will donate sporting event tickets, therapeutic space, means and resources for their time with us.

The Jewish community they will visit in January of 2019 is very different than the Jewish community that existed when Israel was born in 1948. I worry there is a confused and unsure love that lies in our relationship with the Jewish state. It is a place our mothers told us to love but ask yourself do we?

For many of us, Israel is a vague abstraction colored blue and white that has the kibbutz and the falafel and the army. An Israeli scholar who visited TBE this spring was relieved that the first meal we served her there was no falafel. Everywhere she had been in the States to speak, she was served Israeli food, she let us know as she happily dug into her

pasta and tomato sauce. It is that warm fuzzy falafel feeling we have been taught – connections like fourth grade me towards Alan Arkin, supposed to feel something but confusion as to what exactly.

The best illustration of this lies in “The Fable of the Goat.” Shai Agnon, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Israeli writer and Nobel prize winner told “The Fable of the Goat” as a metaphor for the relationship between Israel and Jews around the world. The story tells of an ill elderly man who was ordered by doctors to drink certain milk from a certain goat. The man’s son ultimately found this elusive goat with milk that was sweeter than honey and had curative powers. The man urged his son to find out the place this goat was from and so the son tied a cord to the goat’s tail to follow it.

The goat went into the cave, and the son followed her, holding the cord. They walked thus for an hour or two, or maybe even a day or two. When they emerged from the cave, the youth saw lofty mountains, choicest fruit, and a fountain of living waters and perfumed wind. Carob fruits full of honey dropped from the tree, and the goat ate of the carobs and drank of the garden's fountain.

The son called to the people nearby, “Good people, tell me where I am, and what is the name of this place?”

They answered him, “You are in the Land of Israel.”

The son, drawn in by the land, wrote a note and tucked it behind the ear of the goat and sent it back to his father.

When the man saw that the goat had returned without his son, he cried and wept and hit the goat so hard it died right there and only then did he see the note that said, “Father, follow the goat back to the most marvelous land and we will be together again.”

When he had read all that his son had written, he clapped his hands to his head and cried.

Since that time the mouth of the cave has been hidden from the eye, and there is no longer a short way to the land of Israel.

Shai Agnon saw that the chasm between the fledging Jewish state and the Jews around the world would evolve to be like the distance between the man and his son. There was a place that was wonderful and we were supposed to love and be nourished by it but we were separated by not only miles but experience and history.

The story rung true for us as American Jews, as the notion of peoplehood on this soil was developing. American Jewish peoplehood meant that though we shared ancient traditions that were tribal and diverse but as American Jews we shared a unity like no other place in the world. We developed that cohesiveness and one voice for all intents and purposes. (<https://jewishstudies.washington.edu/portfolio/noam-pianko/>)

Once upon a time we were a cohesive American community with intrinsic understandings of being tied to one another by something larger. This is what made Jews march for Soviet Jewry in the 80's. And there was an unspoken understanding of not "airing our dirty laundry in public" – which is to say, don't fight politically with one another. And to support Israel.

Alongside that Jewish peoplehood flourished our American identity. We were welcome here. We were successful here. We were embraced here, physically and metaphorically. And we were raised on a soil of a country that had the origins of democracy from its very first breath. We were not bogged down by notions of monarchy, hundreds or thousands years old, but instead as our Declaration of Independence says, "All men are created equal." The American Jew was reinforced by a national reality of power and strength but also comfort and ease.

And over time, that distance alluded to in the goat story did not disturb us here in America by a disinterested population that is not even bothered by the chasm.

Today our Jewish world in its embrace of freedom and choice does not feel affinity with Israel in the same way we did for Israel's first 70 years. (The Deep Sources of a Great Divide, by Yehuda Kurtzer, The New Republic September 6, 2018) There is in the words of Yehuda Kurtzer, "An apathy among the broader American Jewish population as it drifts from the demands of particularistic Jewish identity, in which for many decades reflexive attachment to Israel played a significant role."

Just as no self-respecting 4<sup>th</sup> grader of today would sit through the 2 hour and 6 minute "The Russians are coming, the Russians are coming" and the 1977 idea of celebrity has fallen by the wayside in a day when any of us can become celebrities thanks to social media, we cannot not guarantee a unified American Jewish voice. Nor should there be. We are a diverse community – yes some are apathetic – some are angry and some are informed by the freedoms we have found on American soil to inform our love of Israel, even it means disagreeing. And some are just fine with however things are. Some speak up. Speaking up about keeping promises for egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall or expressing disapproval of this summer's nation-state law, a new Israeli law that the Reform movement opposed because of its harmful effect on Jewish-Arab relations in Israel, as well as its negative impact on the balance between the various core founding values of the State of Israel.

We speak up so we can work to engage those marginalized in the relationship between Israel and Diaspora Jewry. As Tal Becker said, "not wanting to air one's dirty laundry in public should not be an excuse for – as it often becomes – not wanting to do the laundry. The dirty laundry metaphor too often becomes an instrument for silencing dissent and silencing activism to correct moral flaws." (The Biggest Threat to the Jews? The Partisan Divide, Yehuda Kurtzer, January 22, 2018, The Forward)

The choices and diversity and openness of the majority of the nature of the American Jewish non-Orthodox community combined with the 6,580 miles from Boca Raton to Jerusalem, the cultural differences and just plain lack of knowledge and interest reinforces that distance between us. Even brave Israel has at times expressed fear at the growing independence and strength and acceptance at large of the American Jewish community.

In September of 2011 the government of Israel launched a campaign of videos and billboards in cities with large concentrations of Israelis, including New York and Los Angeles. The messages included "Before Hanukkah turns into Christmas, it's time to come back to Israel," and "Before Abba turns into Daddy, it's time to come back to Israel."

Both communities, Jews in Israel and Jews in America have an unprecedented strength, wealth and vision, creating an independence from one another. We wonder do we still need each other here or there?

The billboard campaign was shut down almost as soon as it was rolled out and at the time Ambassador Michael Oren issued a statement: "The Ministry of Immigrant Absorption's campaign clearly did not take into account American Jewish sensibilities, and we regret any offense it caused. Prime Minister Netanyahu, once made aware of the campaign, ordered the videos immediately removed from YouTube, and he ordered that the billboards be removed as well. The prime minister deeply values the American Jewish community and is committed to deepening ties between it and the State of Israel." (<https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/1.5215854>)

But the Pandora's box had been opened. Both communities, Jews in Israel and Jews in America have an unprecedented strength, wealth and vision, creating an independence from one another like never before.

In America, especially today's America, there is not a silencing. And that difference and that confident independent outstanding voice that sometimes even yes struggles and disagrees, that American Jewish community voice is the one that these soldiers need to hear. That confidence in Jews of America that created our past and the diversity and independence of the present can provide a model of strength to these soldiers. Our strength lies in the freedom we have to express those various attitudes not just in the world at large, but right here in our synagogues. There is not that same freedom of religion for the more liberal branches of Judaism in Israel as we well know. We have that magical combination of this American reality of freedom of opportunity, speech and worship combined with safe space we will offer, both physically and metaphorically to these soldiers to process. Israel may be the Holy Land but for these soldiers in January, Boca Raton will be their holy land.

One of the most powerful phrases in the Torah is *Hazak v'Amatz*. Translated as "Be strong and courageous, the phrase is used by Moses in addressing Joshua to go forward in strength as Moses will not be with him in the land of Israel. God reaffirms *Hazak v'Amatz*, "Be strong and courageous" to Joshua as well. But then, after Torah ends, in the book of Joshua something changes. *Hazak v'Amatz* that had been spoken by Moses and by Gd, at

the end of the first chapter of the Book of Joshua, is spoken by the people to Joshua. They say to Joshua, their leader, their soldier, their warrior who is going to fight many battles, *Hazak V'Amatz*, "Be strong and courageous." It is the people that say it and in saying it foster a love and devotion and connection that echoes the spirit of Moses and of Gd. But it comes from the people.

These soldiers that are coming to be with us through Peace of Mind had families, commanders, lieutenants, chief of staff all with who wished them courage and strength. But in order to begin their to repair, to take the experience on the battlefield and let it inform their life off the battlefield they need to hear Be strong and courageous from us. The *chazak v'Amatz* that we utter to them is not of the physical strength and bravery. They have already exhibited that. They have seen the worst fighting and the ugliest of humanity and plumbed the darkest depths of difficulty. The physical battles they may have already fought, but that long road back to repair from those scars brings them here this January and each of us has the potential to be a part of providing that space for them to heal in far from the young state where the battles are fought just down the highway.

Several years ago in Israel, I met with past participants of the Peace of Mind programs as we were first exploring the possibility. These veteran soldiers had been medics who had not been able to save the life of a fellow soldier during the most recent Lebanon War. With the passage of several years and more importantly, away from Israel, the unit was able to learn the lingering blame, guilt and shame that still existed even as the unit had gone back to their civilian lives. The anger, tears and ultimately healing that came from this process created by Peace of Mind could only happen outside the land of Israel. There is a certain machismo in a society where nearly everyone serves in the military that does not provide space for these conversations on native soil.

I understood this more completely several months ago, after an incident at Temple Beth El. It was our privilege to host the former Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Barak here in May, celebrating Israel's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. Because the evening's proceeds would go towards Peace of Mind, we brought in a young man who had just completed the program. I was excited to introduce the Former Prime Minister to him but no sooner had a gotten an introduction out of my mouth with words of explanation, the former Prime Minister uttered the word "*Shtuyot*" in Hebrew. "Ridiculousness" is a good translation. The Prime Minister's generation, that of Israel's first 70 years is not yet ready to accept the vulnerability that comes with the aftereffects of war and rejects outright programs like Peace of Mind. And how can you blame them? The Holocaust hovers, the wars Israel fights are just a few miles away and almost every parent there lives in dread and fear of that famous knock on the door from the commander with news your child has been killed. There is no room to admit hurt or pain or damage.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik has explained: "The concept of holiness is rooted in the bond between man and G-d that exists in the context of actual life." By letting these soldiers into our actual lives we are doing holy work here in the midst of the freedom as American Jews and helping dissolve the distance between us. The Americanness of our Jewry is the very thing that can help the young soldiers learn from us and then help the

Jewish homeland go forward to the next 70 years and beyond in *Hazak v'Amatz*, Courage and Strength.

Shana tova and Tsom Kal.