

YK AM Sermon

2021

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Sylvia Treppel died just a few days before her 99th birthday. I only knew Sylvia toward the end of her life. For years I visited her at her apartment at Brightview. She'd invite me in. 'Rabbi, rabbi, I'm glad you're here.' I'd come in and we'd talk. If she was weak, her New York accent was still strong.

Each time we sat together she shared parts of her story with me. I watched her try to remember. I heard about her children, her grandchildren, her great grandchildren. She'd tell me about her late husband Murray.

As she spoke I always took in the photographs on the shelf behind her. It was a kaleidoscope of long-ago cruises and simchas and scenic vistas. In the most prominent picture she stood with her beloved Murray on their wedding day, this fading black and white photo of the two of them from so long ago, so young, so eager to take on life together.

On the week of Sylvia's funeral I spoke at length with her family. They filled in a lot of the gaps for me. They told me about her work, her sewing, her love of mahjong. How they moved from New York to Willingboro and eventually Mt Laurel. They told me as well about their wedding day, based on everything they'd heard about it over the years.

It was like I was transported there as Sylvia and Murray stood in the rabbi's study. The date was January 11, 1941. Outside, Brooklyn was a postcard of snow and ice. Thank God the synagogue's heat was working. This wasn't always the case.

They'd met at the age of 16 and now, wide-eyed, with no money to their name and earnestness in their hearts, they were ready to pledge their lives to each other. Sylvia had made her wedding dress herself.

The small reception after the ceremony set them back a total of \$50.

There were pictures taken of course, in essence to remember such a special occasion, but also to bring everyone some cheer when they looked back on those pictures.

After all life was anywhere from hard to untenable in the winter of 1941.

It was while talking to her family that I learned that Sylvia's wedding dress, the one she made herself, was actually blue, not white. She had chosen the color to match her eyes.

I wondered how many people had glanced at that picture over the eighty years that it existed, whether at Brightview or once upon a time in Willingboro, or so many decades ago in Brooklyn, all the friends and neighbors over the many years. They probably looked at it with a grin, as one looks at timeworn wedding pictures, but had no idea that the dress was in fact blue. How could they have known?

A black and white picture can only tell so much of a story.

Then I started to think about how often we take a look and so quickly want to believe that we know enough, have seen enough, are prepared to make a judgment that is fair or fair enough.

Be honest: How many times do you make a snap judgment based on what someone is wearing or driving, the town they live in, what they eat, how they spend their free time.

We take these black and white pictures all the time.

On a more profound level we do this around race and gender and sexuality. We do it around religion and politics. We do it around age, marital status, and body type.

Have you ever had the experience where you only really know someone in passing and then have a chance to get to know them or talk with them at length and learn all of these remarkable and extraordinary things about them?

I watch that happen at the synagogue all the time. I didn't know you went to Michigan! I didn't know you grew up in the Bronx! I didn't know you were in AE Pi. You lived on 73rd Street? My parents lived there. You were born at Lenox Hill? That was my Torah portion too! I love that show! I love that book! I thought I was the only one who read it. No, no, no, lots of people read the Torah.

The epitome of black and white thinking comes when we talk about Israel, a fact made even more clear a few months ago during yet another painful episode in and around our precious Homeland.

If you want black and white thinking, if you're looking for a total lack of nuance, if you want to die by pre-packaged platitudes then do I have the topic for you. It's Israel. It's always been Israel.

Even in the Torah, when God promises this sacred land to the Israelites, Moses has twelve scouts go ahead to get a closer look. God had sold it to them in simplified form: Look, it's flowing with milk and honey, it's your destiny, it's the land of your ancestors. Can you just go with it?

The scouts, to their credit, want to go deeper. Touch the place. Experience the place. Seek out the contradictions and problems, the beauty and history. And that's what they do, taking forty days to survey the land for themselves.

Maybe you know the story. Of those twelve scouts, ten return with negative reports. In Numbers 13 they tell us that the cities are fortified and large; the people are powerful.

Only two of the scouts, Joshua and Caleb, urge the people forward. 'Let us by all means go up,' they say in Numbers 14. 'The land that we traversed and scouted is an exceedingly good land.'

The ten scouts foreshadow what we know to be true today: It's easy to be a detractor.

There are so many who would turn their backs on Israel, deny Israel, from both inside and outside of our Jewish community, and poke holes in the very notion of Zionism. We see it in the international community. We see it in Washington. We see it online. We see it in those whose anti-Zionism and antisemitism are so thinly separated that it's hard to know where one ends and the other begins.

Those noble scouts of yesteryear also prove that there are so few who are ready to stand with Israel, support Israel, as Joshua and Caleb will, engage in the messiness of Israel and relate to Israel in a way that allows for constant dialogue around its political, religious and social realities.

I found myself like an Israelite this summer, wondering where the Promised Land was actually, what it is, and when we will ever get there.

The issue wasn't Israel itself. Let's say it clearly: Israel has the right to defend itself and did.

The issue wasn't Gaza. Let's say it clearly: The people of Gaza, human beings, have had their wellbeing hijacked by extremist leadership bent on destruction, supposed martyrdom, and the never-ending demonization of Israel.

The issue instead was the elusive people of American Jewry. I looked high and low for even a hint of nuanced thinking, a nod to the historic episodes that have led to the current predicament between Israelis and Palestinians. I wondered if there would be some context given, instead of the ever-predictable nature of one reporter after another, one social media post after another, one op-ed after another.

What are settlements exactly? What is the Green Line? Why does a place like Hebron matter so much? What exactly happened in 1948, 1967, 1973? Tell me about East Jerusalem. Talk to me about the Temple Mount. Let's unpack what it means that the current coalition at the fore of the Knesset is a mosaic of religious and secular, Muslim and Jewish, male and female.

My dear friends, if you and I don't present our kids with a layered understanding of Israel, who will? If we don't share with our children the various truths that hold at any time when it comes to the Israeli AND Palestinian peoples then we become like every other talking head and arm our kids with little more than a black and white picture.

They'll never see the blue, and their Zionism will be tenuous at best.

You tell me you love Israel; you jump to defend Israel on Facebook. I ask you which Israeli authors do you read? You tell me you love Israel; I ask you which Israeli papers do you read?

You tell me you love Israel, I wonder which Israeli causes you support. You come to me furious about the Democrats or the Republicans, or the Democrats and Republicans, I ask you how your Hebrew is.

You tell me you love Israel, I ask if you even watch Shtisel.

You tell me you love Israel, I ask if you know names like Gilad Kariv or Anat Hoffman, two proud Israelis and Reform Jews who are urging Israel forward all the time on issues around acceptance and tolerance.

When I walked through the Old City of Jerusalem eight weeks ago, sandals on my feet, sun beating down, Hebrew and Arabic echoing off the ancient walls and hanging together in the same summer air, I marveled at all of it: It's still here and we're still here, the wonder of it, the miracle of all of it.

When I walked down the beach in Tel Aviv, waves lapping, beach volleyball and family picnics all around me, I could cry at the fact that we live at a time when Israel breathes life, that the experiment continues in our very lifetime.

I could feel under my feet all of the epic grit and splendor, the prayers of so many, the myths and marvels, this place of impossible wonder and color and godliness.

I'm so thankful that we and our children even have the option to follow Joshua and Caleb into such a magical place.

Our Talmud group spent time with Tractate Yoma this past year, the large volume that delves into every aspect of Yom Kippur. At one point, the Sages discuss the earliest Yom Kippur rites, how two-thousand years ago our ancestors would bring sacrifices up to the great Temple in Jerusalem, each one a physical offering in the name of atonement and their longing to do better in the coming year.

We learned that, after the long day, when it was time to clean up the remaining ashes, early generations of priests would actually run to be first; they were so eager to take on the dirty work of the holiday and thus show that no religious act was beneath them. The text notes that later generations did not rush in this manner or show such eagerness.

At first glance we would say that, of course, our ancestors had a piety and devotion we simply don't have. Here we might be tempted to resign ourselves to the fact that your grandparents and mine were simply closer to their faith and God and Torah and yes Israel than we are or our kids ever could be.

But then the text will make a sharp turn and note that later generations of priests weren't less interested at all; they were more committed to other aspects of the rite. As the Jewish population grew, the need around the day grew, and changed, and thus their attention turned to the logistical organization that such large crowds required.

There are many today who would issue judgment over an entire generation, especially when it comes to Israel. How many speak with scorn of millennials, those in their 20's and 30's and paint them all as one. They're apathetic, disinterested, and / or so totally woke that everything is wrong. And all the more so regarding Israel.

While we early priests grew up as unwavering lovers of Israel, fighting for the very existence of Israel, they are checked out. These kids today are so-called 'slactivists,' you say, in it only for their continued membership in an insta-famous fraternity of like-minded souls.

While we grappled with true hardship and glued ourselves to the news amid the Six Day War, their manbun is set to explode if the barista gets their order wrong, Door Dash runs late, or – heaven forbid – they can't remember their Netflix password.

But I would contend that the younger generation isn't less interested at all; they're interested differently, and maybe by necessity, just as those later Talmudic sages were. And thank God.

To this younger generation I say, 'go for it.' Bring your love of social justice to Israel as firmly as you can. Engage, learn, visit, root your readiness to make change in the complexity of our Homeland.

Are immigrant populations treated well there? Are women fully included? Is there a pay gap? Is the IDF living up to the highest of Jewish ideals? Are the impoverished cared for? What's the story with the LGBT community in Israel and are they treated fairly? Orthodox rabbis receive funding from the government, do Reform rabbis? Orthodox rabbis are permitted to officiate at weddings, are Reform rabbis?

What about the nearly two million Israeli Arabs who live and mingle and contribute not as would-be Palestinians but Israelis with Israeli passports? Do they have equal access to health care and pensions and social services?

Wrestle with all of it, like Joshua and Caleb did.

As Israeli journalist, Atila Somfalvi, put it recently: 'What have you done in recent years to fully understand Israeli society, or to present yourselves to Israel?'

Here are some other ideas:

If you're a high school kid, do a high school semester at Heller High, the Reform movement's program in Israel for teens where you learn Hebrew, travel the country, and have classes that keep you caught up so that when you come back to the U.S. you're where you need to be.

If you're a college kid, think about a semester in Tel Aviv or Haifa, both of which have stellar universities.

If you've graduated college and are trying to figure out what to do with your life, first of all that's fine, second of all consider taking a gap year in Israel before grad school or a first job.

And of course Birthright is a free trip available to everyone between the ages of 18 and 32.

Join me in fighting for an even holier Israel and do it with chutzpah because it's your land too. Grow closer because you care about it – I know you care about it - and are deeply invested in it. 'Present yourself to Israel,' maybe as your parents have, but maybe in totally new ways.

For those who claim that this isn't supporting Israel, I would say this is the purest form of support. For those who say our obligation is to love Israel, I would say this is the truest form of love, a love that is not blind, but honest and committed, and goes well past the question of Israel's security.

To those of us who are older, I would challenge you too. First, let's stop bashing the kids. Let's remind ourselves, especially as we re-read the story of the scouts, that there are lots of ways to engage with the Promised Land and be *ohavei Yisrael*, lovers of Israel.

Your relationship with Israel isn't the same as your parents', why should your kids' relationship to Israel be the same as yours? Just as they parent differently and shop differently and eat differently and travel differently, it goes without saying that their Zionism will be different. And that's a good thing.

I'd also say this: You are ready to loudly defend Israel online. Can you go further too? You're ready to send articles to your children and grandchildren (and rabbi), what else can you do? Are you educated on why the situation is so fraught in 2021? When are you going to visit or visit again?

Should we go there this summer? I'm ready. You know I'm ready. Send me an email to tell me you're ready too.

My favorite Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, helped give voice to an entire generation of Israelis. I was honored to meet him in the final years of his life. I want to share with you, in closing, his poem titled "The Jews."

The Jews are like photographs displayed in a shop window

All of them together in different heights, living and dead

Grooms and brides and Bar Mitzvah boys and babies.

And there are pictures restored from old yellowing photographs.

And sometimes people come and break the window

And burn the pictures. And then they begin

To photo anew and develop anew

And display them again aching and smiling.

Here's to remembering what was and looking forward to what will be. Here's to a year of hope, a year of fulfillment, a year of peace for you and your family, for all of us, this human family, fractured and fragile, soaring and sacred, like our beloved Israel.