

Toldot 5782
Filling Wells
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Long after the dinosaurs went extinct, non-Israelite peoples dwelled in what we now call Israel. Some four thousand years ago, according to Biblical legend, Avraham and Sarah arrived to establish a new community in that land. Their project took off when his sons became heads of large families—the family of Ishmael, his firstborn son, and the family of Yitzchak, our patriarch. Over time our ancestral family grew and came to occupy more of that land, which according to our Torah was given by God in perpetuity for the nation that would emerge from them.

Avraham dug a number of wells in the land. After his death, we read: “*V’khol ha-v’eirot asher khafru avdei aviv, sit’mum Plishtim vay’malu afar.*” “All the wells which his (Isaac’s) father’s servants had dug...the Philistines stopped them up, and filled them with earth” (Gen 26:12-15). Now, why would the Philistines close wells from which they and their cattle would have benefitted—and why fill them so as to erase their very presence? This question has puzzled generations of scholars. One (Hak’tav V’hakabala) suggests that Isaac called the wells by the names his father had used, using names that reflected God’s beneficence to Avraham and his family, as a marketing strategy to draw the neighboring peoples toward their God. “He called the well[s] by names[s] that would drive home the true existence of the one God,” says the commentator, “...Abraham strove to turn the hearts of those who denied God.” After Avraham’s death, the people had returned to idol worship, and Isaac attempted to resurrect the names of the local wells in order to bring back the locals to identify with his clan.

Regarding this interpretation, the great Torah scholar Nechama Leibovitz wrote, in 1972, “Today in the age of Jewish renaissance in the homeland where wells are being literally dug in the land of our forefathers fructifying the desert areas of the Negev, we can appreciate the greatness of the Patriarchs who combined their dissemination of the true faith with the practical reclamation of the soil by digging wells and watering the ground. We know, too, that the Philistines were not pleased with these wells and did not wish to see the desert made fertile” (Studies in Bereshit, p. 260).

Leibovitz notes that this digging and filling of wells has repeated in generation after generation, from the Biblical period to her day. She reflects on the Jewish experience of exile as a series of displacements and expulsions, from one neighborhood to the next, one city to the next, one country to the next, beginning with this filling of wells in today’s *parasha* and continuing and leading up to the founding of the modern State of Israel.

As we return to this story of the filing of wells 40 years after Leibovitz's writing, we come knowing, whether we want to talk about it or not, that the narrative of occupations and displacements is a complex web of competing truths mixed with outright denials of history and corrupt politics on both sides of the fractured relationship between the family of Ishmael and the family of Yitzchak. And we must talk about it, however much it raises the spectre of antisemitism and our collective trauma. I will begin there, today, two days before the anniversary of Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass in 1938 Germany.

There is a new antisemitism streaking across the world and finding purchase on American university campuses. This new antisemitism is cloaked in anti-Zionist rhetoric. It is powerful because it draws on verifiable facts about what is actually happening in Israel and the occupied territories. According to the ADL, 32% of American Jewish students report that they have personally experienced antisemitism over the past year, and 43% have either been the targets of it or have watched it happen. This antisemitism is not only evidence of massive cultural division, and rising nationalism worldwide. It is not only the pendulum swinging back as it always does when Jews get too comfortable. It is also linked directly to the politics of the modern State of Israel, which has always been held to a different standard than any other country—and which is committing immoral, illegal acts that should cause outrage, regardless of the complicated and twisted path that got us to this place.

We are a traumatized people that yearned for refuge in our historic homeland where we could breathe, be safe, and try to become normal, strong people, tillers of our soil and masters of our destiny. The State of Israel is in a real sense a modern miracle for which we strove and which was achieved at great and ongoing cost.

We are, at the same time, the strong kid on the block where day after day, the other traumatized people suffer, powerless, due to forces beyond their control—forces on the Palestinian side and forces on the Israeli side. This is egregiously true in the Occupied Territories. It is also true within the State of Israel proper.

A few years ago the Knesset passed a law known colloquially as the Naqba law. "Naqba" means "catastrophe." It is the word by which Palestinian Arabs refer to and understand what happened to them in 1948 during Israel's War of Independence. The Naqba law makes it illegal for any organization in Israel to use that term to describe the events of 1948, on peril of losing all of their government funding. In a democratic State, over 20% of Israel's population will lose funding for schools, community centers, and the like if they invoke that term. And the truth is, what happened to those people in 1948 was a catastrophe.

There is history many of us, I suspect, were not taught. Yitzchak Rabin wrote, in his memoirs as Commander of the Palmach, defending the nascent State, describing what he named as the hardest thing he had to do, when he had to expel over ten thousand Palestinian civilians from Lydda—the city now know as Lod, and march them, along with the people of Ramle, over the border into what he called “Jordanian Hell territory.” Many of us were not—I was not—taught this history. I was taught that stories that were untrue. That is difficult.

The plugging up of wells and erasing their trace works both ways in that precious little corner of the Middle East.

In 2005, before the withdrawal from Gaza, Ariel Sharon told the Knesset, in session: This is an occupation—Kibush, meaning subjugation, or conquering. You may not like the word, but that’s what this is. It’s not good for the Palestinians. But it’s also not good for us. And it *is not good* for us—not morally and not tactically.

I believe that being honest about what has happened and what continues to happen can only strengthen us, not only because we cannot solve problems we refuse to see and name, but also because many of the brightest and most thoughtful emerging leaders of North American Jewry demand that we do and will settle for nothing less.

This past week, the NY Times Magazine (Nov. 2, 2021) ran an article by Marc Tracy, formerly a staff writer at The New Republic and Tablet, winner of the National Magazine Award, and now a media reporter, entitled “Inside the Unraveling of American Zionism: How a New Generation of Jewish Leaders Begin to Rethink their Support for Israel.” The article describes, at length, a phenomenon that began when some 20 rabbinical and cantorial students from different rabbinical schools started a WhatsApp thread which they eventually named “Rad Future Clergy.” Many of these aspiring Jewish leaders met and became friends while studying together in Jerusalem the same year that my son Benjy was there. These are people he knows. One of them is his *chavruta*, or study partner, in two courses at JTS.

The WhatsApp thread began in reaction to an escalation in tensions around the Sheikh Jarrah evictions that have been ongoing for years. The students then drafted an open letter, calling on American Jews to adjust their orientation toward Israel. Then the recent war began, with rockets from Gaza met with Israeli airstrikes against Hamas, civilian street fighting between Jews and Arabs in Israeli cities, and a final death toll of over 250—including 12 Israeli civilians, and over 100 civilians in Gaza.

I am going to quote liberally from Tracy’s piece now:

““Blood is flowing in the streets of the Holy Land,” the letter began, “For those of us for whom Israel has represented hope and justice, we need to give ourselves permission to watch, to acknowledge what we see, to mourn and to cry. And then, to change our behavior and demand better.” They urged Jews to rethink their support for American military aid to Israel, which totals roughly \$3.8 billion annually. They insisted that Jewish educators complicate their teaching of Israel’s founding to convey ‘the messy truth of a persecuted people searching for safety, going to a land full of meaning for the Jewish people, full of meaning for so many other peoples, and also full of human beings who didn’t ask for new neighbors.’”

I continue to quote liberall from the article: “The letter contained several provocations. It compared the Palestinians’ plight to that of Black Americans — a group whose struggles for civil rights have long been embraced by the same establishment the letter was calling out. ‘American Jews have been part of a racial reckoning in our community,’ they said. ‘And yet,’ they added, ‘so many of those same institutions are silent when abuse of power and racist violence erupts in Israel and Palestine.’ It described in Israel “two separate legal systems for the same region,” and later called this system “apartheid.” It arrived amid war, violating the [longstanding] imperative many Jews [have] felt to stand with Israel as the rockets fly. And it did not contain alongside its indictment of Israel’s actions a straightforward condemnation of Hamas’s aiming weapons at civilians.”

“There are an extraordinary 93 names at the bottom of the letter, which can still be seen on the Google Doc where it was [posted](#). They hailed from eight institutions, virtually every one in the United States that trains rabbis and cantors — the vocalists who lead congregations in prayer — outside of Orthodox Judaism.

“Some 17 percent of the institutions’ students signed the letter, according to figures provided by the schools...even though virtually all the students...believed attaching their names to the letter meant risking career prospects [–which did prove true].. The signers’ breadth was underlined when the letter was [published](#) in The Forward, America’s most prominent Jewish newspaper,...promoting Lex Rofeberg, a rabbi and co- host of the “Judaism Unbound” podcast“ to state, “It’s clear to me that this list includes future leaders of American Judaism.”

The [students’] letter intimated that the primary cause of the fraying pro-Israel consensus is that “a generation of Jews is confronting head-on the tension between Jewish universalist principles and the idea of Jewish particularity — that Jews possess special obligations toward one another. For years, American Jews could look upon Israel as a tiny state full of long-oppressed people with hostile neighbors, and even see

themselves as underdogs in their own country, so this tension could remain largely out of view.”

The letter...asked American Jews to view the Mideast...as another instance of one powerful group's oppressing the less powerful one. This was its most profound and destabilizing argument: That Jews, after two dozen centuries of dispossession, persecution and exile have the upper hand and the responsibility to act like it. As one co-signer stated, “All of our texts were written during a history when we were the victims. What do we do now that we have power?”

I'm done liberally quoting the article now and almost finished speaking.

The question “What do we do now that we have power?” is a good place to pause in our emerging discourse on the Israel-Palestinian conflict. The fact that we are traumatized by thousands of years of history, or even by the Holocaust alone, does not absolve us of our responsibility to seek to understand the situation in its multifaceted complexity and moral perplexity.

I have a feeling some of my colleagues would call what I just did here a “Death by Israel” sermon for a Rabbi. I don't think so. I am trusting you to be able to talk honestly about what is real, with each other and with me.

So, what do we do now? We talk, and we listen. May God give us the courage and humility to learn, and may we build from a place of hope.

Amen.