

Message for *Parashat Hukat*: 15 July 2016

A Call for Naiveté

By definition, a utopia is something that is never expected to be realized, and in this sense, it is true about the founding ideal of every country on Earth, Israel included. It takes idealism and a bit of naiveté to start anything from scratch, let alone, a new country!

Theodor Herzl was an idealist. Herzl is known as the founder of modern political Zionism. His best-known work is *The Jewish State*, in which he lays out the plan for the establishment of a sovereign country for the Jews as the only solution to the Jewish persecutions. Yet, he wrote another less well-known book, a novel titled, in German, *Altneuland*, “Old New Land.” The novel tells the story of a well-to-do Viennese Jew who, after fleeing his privileged life, finds himself in the Land of Israel. There, he joins in the effort to create a New Society in the Old Land, which becomes a beacon of civilization in the Eastern Mediterranean –a sort of Switzerland of the Middle East.

Less-known, is that, in 1906, that novel was translated into Hebrew by Nahum Sololow as ... *Tel-Aviv*. Yes, Tel-Aviv is named after a book by Herzl! Yet, without going through the entire novel, there is something endearing about Herzl’s approach to Judaism: his naïve approach to how Jews and Arabs should have related as they shared the land ...

One of the main characters, David Littwak, son of an ex-peasant street peddler in Vienna, clearly a *Polacken* not a *Jecke*, proclaims, that the New Society rests on this ideal:

“[...] It would be unethical to deny a share in our commonwealth to any man, wherever from, whatever his race or creed.”

Given what we know today about the difficult relationship between the Jewish majority and the other minorities in Israel, I know that Herzl's utopia of a New Society in an Old Land seems more and more unattainable. Some suggest that to think that Jews and Arabs can share a life in Israel is extremely naïve. Yet, I believe that a healthy dose of naiveté may lay at the bottom of the deep connection that many of us feel towards the State of Israel.

I must confess that once I was very naïve about Israel in the best, most positive possible way, and that now I long for it. Allow me to share a personal memory. Being Jewish in Argentina means being a Zionist. All our Jewish education is Israel-centric. So, when I first encountered Jews at age 16 and my appetite for everything Jewish grew voraciously, so did my need to develop a relationship with Israel. It began with Hebrew: I studied Modern Hebrew at my home congregation and then at age 17, I entered the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary, where I took intensive Hebrew classes, all with Israeli teachers. I loved every minute of my daily Hebrew lessons –and I did all my homework diligently ...

I know now that I was also a bit naïve. Naïve not in the sense that everything that the government of the State of Israel does is wonderful and blameless, but naïve in how I perceive Judaism in Israel. So, for instance, I thought that Israel was this wonderful place where everyone was Jewish and lived Judaism daily –not Ultra-Orthodox Judaism, but rather the kind of non-Orthodox Judaism I encountered in Argentina. Basically, I thought that Israel was a place where I would not have to

explain to anyone why we went to services on Friday and not on Sunday –little things like that ...

Little things that made me dream that one day I would live there. Little by little I learned “the truth:” that in Israel people drive on Shabbat, that the malls are open, and that most Israelis never heard about *Havdalah*. So my idea that in Israel everything was Jewish in a wonderful, uncomplicated way, was a bit misinformed. Some may say, my views were simple and incredulous.

I was almost 25 years old when I visited Israel for the first time in August of 1993. By then, I was more prepared and less naïve about what I was going to experience ... or so I thought. It was my 25 birthday, and I was all alone having a pasta dinner somewhere off King David Street in the heart of Jerusalem. How depressing! And then it hit me: I WAS in Jerusalem, having dinner, on my 25<sup>th</sup> birthday and everything around me WAS in Hebrew, the menu, the street signs, the news on the radio ... and I could understand it all, and it was wonderful ... and it felt like home.

Fast forward 20 plus years, to my last visit to Israel earlier this year, in March. Every time I visit Israel, I meet Jews who are still naïve about the future and who maintain Herzl’s utopia alive. I had the opportunity to spend time with Anat Hoffman, the director of the Israel Religious Action Center. Anat is always working on several issues to advance religious pluralism in Israel. If you follow the work of Women of the Wall, *N’shot Hakotel*, whose tallit I’m wearing tonight, you know it is not easy work –it is one step forward and two backwards ... for over 20 years! When asked why go through all this work now, given the political realities in Israel, Anat responded,

“Show me even one other Jewish state and I will apply. Right away. But this is the only one we've got. All we can do is try to make it better.”

Anat knows it is hard to make any progress; we know it's hard, but we must keep trying. All the knowledge we may have about how the politics of this or that issue in Israel should not deter us from keeping Herzl's naïve vision alive.

We read in the book of *Kohelet*, Ecclesiastes, *ki berov hochmah rab ca'as*, For in much wisdom is much grief *veyosif da'at yosif mach'ov*, and he that increases knowledge increases sorrow. The older we get, it seems, the more leery, skeptical and cynical we get. As individuals and as a people, we seem to have lost that sense of wonder about the Jewish State. The longer the conflict between Jews and Arabs in Israel lingers, the longer religious pluralism is delayed, the harder it seems for us to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

The land of Israel as a Jewish locale has never been a perfect place for any generation of Jews. I refuse to lose the naïve dream that we can build a better place. Politics are beyond understanding, but human ideals are not.

In our old-Siddur, Gates of Prayer, we read:

“IN A WORLD torn by violence and pain,  
 a world far from wholeness and peace,  
 give us the courage to say, Adonai:  
 There is one God in heaven and earth.”

It is a challenge for us all to continue to believe that better days for the State of Israel are yet to come; that the future is indeed brighter than the present. It is a challenge and it is our hope that the utopia is still alive in our hearts and minds.

In the epilogue of *Old, New Land*, Herzl writes, “...But, if you do not wish it, all this that I have related to you is and will remain a fable.” We sing it Hebrew, *im tirzu, ein zo haggadah*. This is the spirit I invite you to discover or rediscover in your hearts. It is in this spirit that I hope and pray that you heard my message on this Shabbat. I pray, let us find a corner of our Jewish souls and let it be naïve. May we listen to the call of our tradition teaching us to make our world a better place, one Jewish State at a time. May this be our vision and may it come soon, *bimhera veyamenu*, in our own days.