

The Auto Mechanic and the Book Seller --
Tales of Tikkun Across the Israeli Divide
Rosh Hashannah, 5775
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I try to hold them both, each as unaware of the other as of the gift each had given to me. Only some seven kilometers apart, they inhabit different worlds. One is an auto mechanic in the Palestinian Arab village of Beit Jalla. The other is a book seller in the heart of Jerusalem. I had called Jeremy, an old friend and colleague whom I hadn't seen in twenty-four years, when I last left Israel. We have emailed and spoken by phone here and there, sharing our wrestlings with violence in text and in life, each nurturing teachings of nonviolence to slake a thirst so deep. Long ago we would talk of his struggles in being an Israeli conscientious objector to military service, and, of much lesser consequence, the threat of expulsion I faced from a Hebrew University dorm for refusing fire-arms training as part of civil guard duty. Asking Jeremy to take us out to see people and places amidst the gathering violence, I felt quietly frustrated when he suggested we come with him to do some errands. As we embraced by the curbside where he picked us up, I was struck by a certain sadness that clung to Jeremy, only vaguely belied by the sway of his graying pony tail, a sadness I came to recognize among many long time activists for peace and reconciliation. As we got into the car, I realized why the first stop was the auto mechanic.

Driving the short distance to the ever-expanding edge of Jerusalem, just beyond the invisible green line of the sixty-seven border, what should be an ordinary errand became an expression of faith in ordinary people as peace-makers, a quiet act of civil disobedience for the sake of human connection and possibility. Beit Jalla is in "Area A," the designation for Palestinian towns and cities to which Israelis are barred by Israeli law from going. Having long trusted the Palestinian auto mechanic with his cars, Jeremy was not about to break faith in the face of deepening social and political stress. In an effort to minimize legal complications, we met in the parking lot of a small hotel at the edge of Beit Jalla, rather than at the service station. In the searing heat, I chuckled at the name, "Mount Everest Hotel," so named as the highest spot in Jerusalem. Around us, young men and boys played soccer, dust swirling in honor of the World Cup in far off Brazil. As the auto mechanic bent over the open hood of Jeremy's car, we took a walk down the road into Beit Jalla. On the wall around the town, graffiti proclaimed in large letters, "All Walls Fall, End the Occupation." Toward a time when people would not be divided from each other, I had witnessed a simple act of *tikkun*, of repair, meaning amidst the ordinary. In the parking lot of repair, the auto mechanic explained to Jeremy what he had done and what was needed, all so ordinary, so familiar to all who own a car. Shaking hands with Imad, the auto mechanic, before we left, he smiled as I said to him, "this is about so much more than repairing a car."

As I walked along King George Street a few days later, the country now on a war footing, the distance to Beit Jalla and beyond was greater than what it had already been. I passed what had once been one of my favorite spots in Jerusalem, long ago as a student, "Stein's Books," *Shtein S'forim*/שטיין ספרים, now all closed up, a jumble of furniture visible through the plate glass windows. I recalled the old-world book store that had fascinated me, the volumes on its maze of shelves telling the story of the Jewish people, our journeys of exile and homecoming. From behind his desk, the old book seller with the very full mustache was his own part of the story, telling in his Viennese accent of books and of himself. On one of my visits to the store, Mr. Stein carefully wrapped for me these volumes right behind me, here, in the book cabinet, a set of Mishna from Vilna, their bindings weary now and in need of repair.

In a state of reverie, following in my own footsteps of long ago, I crossed the street toward Independence Park, *Gan Ha'atzma'ut*, seeking shade as I continued on my way. As I passed an apartment building, a large, hand-lettered sign in Hebrew script caught my eye, *Shtein S'forim*/שטיין ספרים. At the nexus of nostalgia and now, I followed the arrow around to the first floor apartment that was the book store. I entered the embrace of a maze of floor to ceiling shelves, all filled with volumes telling the story of the Jewish people, our journeys of exile, and, of homecoming. I could not see anyone, but I stood mesmerized, the most beautiful melody wafting among the stacks, the sound of *chazonnnes* filling the book-scented air, prayerful verses in rich cantorial chant. I followed the singing through the stacks to its source, a man, perhaps in his forties, sitting at the desk at the front end of the store. I waited politely as he finished his verse of song. He smiled at me through pursed lips, knowing I would understand the importance of such things, such as are not meant to be disturbed or rushed. I extended my hand as he finished, asking of a connection to *Shtein S'forim*/שטיין ספרים that was across the street, that I remembered from so many years ago. Standing now, and clearly delighted, he leaned toward me and spoke two words that held such warmth and pride, *sabba sheli* / *my grandfather*.

I told him of the books I was looking for, none straightforward, but most important to me, three missing volumes of a large set, long out of print. He smiled at the challenge as he climbed a ladder, finding other volumes of the set, but not the three I needed. Wanting to see if another book seller might be able to aid in our search, he picked up the phone, tucking it between his shoulder and his ear as he waited, while cradling in his left arm a large volume with a broken spine. From a hefty squeeze jar held in his right hand, he ran a bead of glue along the outside of the binding and then deftly pressed the cloth cover into place over the old stitching and made the book whole.

I thought of a rabbinic teaching and of choices to be made, *where the sword is, the book is not, where the book is, the sword is not*/ *ey seifa lo sifra v'ey sifra lo seifa* / אי סייפא לא ספרא ויא ספרא לא סייפא. Later in the day, returning along the way I had come, I stopped in to see if the book seller might have found the books I was seeking. He hadn't, but he motioned with his head to come over and look at a photograph he held up for me. It was a picture of an old man with a very full mustache sitting at a desk in a book store, his young grandson proudly standing next to him. I smiled and thanked the

grandson as he promised to keep searching for my books, and to send them to me once he found them. As I got to the door, he called out with great optimism, *hishtadlut*/השתדלות/*striving, only a matter of striving*.

The Auto Mechanic and the Book Seller -- Tales of Tikkun Across the Israeli Divide, are vignettes from our time spent in Israel this summer that in the way of Chassidic tales contain their own teaching. Held in these vignettes there is so much of what I feel when in Israel, so much of what swirls within myself in regard to Israel, love and yearning, the familiar and the foreign, hope and heart-break.

I had not been in Israel since leaving at the end of a sabbatical twenty-four years ago this summer. I had not anticipated the number of times I would be asked why, why so long? I had to decide how to respond to the quizzical looks, to an eyebrow raised in judgement. There were very few with whom I could be honest and share my wrestling as well as the realities of my life. How much to tell people of what had been over the years, how much to share? The truth is, I also felt so much pain, not sure how to hold it all, how to take it all in, what to do with all of my feelings about Israel, the yearning and the pain. With those in whose sympathy and understanding I trusted, I shared more deeply, including the pain, even as I listened to the fullness of their stories and struggles. It was so good to be there, to go literally and figuratively from Shabbos days to week days, from *kodesh l'chol/sacred to profane*, easier there, as I now recalled, to give expression to the entire range of feelings than it is from here, to both celebrate and challenge.

Pause, take a breath, we all know the feeling, it can be so hard to talk about Israel, to feel about Israel, to think about Israel, to hold it all, to hold it all and each other, whatever our politics. It is a little like talking about love and intimacy, family, faith, how much to share, of what with whom? I struggled greatly in deciding whether to talk about Israel on this holy day, all of us here together, so many diverse thoughts, feelings, opinions, knowing that I can't do justice either to my own struggles or yours, or to all of the diverse realities that plead for space in my heart. I tried to push it away, not now, not today. But I couldn't, so filled with feelings, so much churning following the events of the summer. I need to be honest, to speak from where I am, of what has consumed me. I struggle with how to talk about Israel in the way of *d'rasha*, literally a seeking, a talk in the spirit of Torah that comes of one's own searching, a *d'rasha* as opposed to a political lecture. So I share from out of my own experience, both from within the Land and from within myself, inner and outer landscapes merging, sharing vignettes of brokenness and wholeness that offer a context for wrestling beyond themselves.

In truth, beyond headlines and politics, to speak about Israel in its essence begins in Torah. To talk about Israel is to talk of Torah, the Torah of our life as a people, the Torah of life. Israel is part of the Jewish fabric, part of who we are as Jews. Unfolding on many levels in time and space, the first steps of the Jewish journey in the physical realm are toward the Land of Israel. When Avram and Sarai are told by God to go to the land that I will show you, *el ha'aretz asher areka*/אל הארץ אשר אראך, they don't know

yet where they are going, but we know. Yearning for return to the Land weaves as a prayerful thread through *Siddur and Machzor*, through weekdays and Shabbos, on holy days as today. Before affirming God's oneness in the Sh'ma, and therefore the universal oneness of humanity, we offer words that reflect a particular people's history, *Bring us back in peace from the four corners of the earth and lead us upright to our land*/וְתוֹלִיכֵינוּ קוֹמְמִיּוֹת לְאַרְצֵנוּ / *And, similarly, in the Musaf prayers of these days, V'karev p'zurenu mi'ben ha'goyim*/וְקָרַב פְּזוּרֵינוּ מִבֵּין הַגּוֹיִם/*Draw near our scattered from among the nations...; And bring us with gladness to Zion, Your city, and with everlasting joy to Jerusalem, Your sanctuary.* Part of engaging honestly with who we are as Jews is to engage, to wrestle, with our relationship with Israel. To wrestle is inherent in who we are. Whether an expression of God's humor or God's understanding of the human quest for meaning, it is no accident that the name by which each of us is called, received from our ancestor Jacob, is the same as that of land, state, and people, Yisra'el, one who wrestles with God and people, and perseveres. *Hishtadlut* / השתדלות -- it is only a matter of striving....

For all of that, some may think, why so tormented, why so freighted, just be present with Israel, just support Israel. Others may think, why put so much in the way of looking at hard realities, of doing what needs to be done for the sake of justice and peace. I honor each view and each critique. I share from my own struggles, which I hope contain some of each view and more, some of where we all are. Together, we come toward a truth that is as imperfect as each of its seekers. I asked so many people with whom I spoke this summer, how do you hold it all together, how do you find hope? Across the spectrum of belief and opinion among us, we begin by holding each other as one in this time and space. Some weeks before Mieke and I went to Israel, our community honored rabbinical students among us who would be spending time this year studying in Israel. On that Shabbos I offered a prayer for them, not realizing how much in its essence it was for me: "May you not lose sight of beauty amidst all that would deny it, nor amidst the beauty lose sight of struggle and strife. May your hearts be big enough and spirits brave enough to hold it all, all the brokenness and all the wholeness.... May you go out from the study hall and back again, from wall to wall to peer beyond, to bridge separations between Jews and Jews, between Arabs and Jews, gathering the tears of Hagar as of Rachel, each weeping for their children."

The trip from Ben Gurion Airport to Jerusalem took much longer than it should have. Traveling in a *sherut* with about a dozen people, we were delayed near the town of Modi'in amidst a sea of people and traffic. Joined in silent awareness, irritation evaporated in the stillness that enveloped us. We had become part of the throngs of mourners, now counted among them, following the funeral for "our three boys," as through the weeks since their kidnapping Eyal, Gilad, and Naftali came to be called throughout the Jewish world. Even as they were being laid to rest, three became four. Only in holding Mohamed as our own, as well, is there any hope that someday Israeli and Palestinian parents shall together hold their children without fear. In that prayerful spirit, we went to a vigil the next day to plead for grieving without revenge. Our friend, Rav Arik, Rabbi Arik Ascherman of Rabbis for Human Rights, picked us up. When I asked him later of holding it all, of finding hope, he answered with his characteristic resolve, "we just have to keep going, our work makes a difference." Amidst the crowd at the vigil, I was startled to suddenly hear someone call, "Rabbi Reinstein." I turned to see a young woman who had been a

sixth grade student of mine at the Solomon Schechter Day School in Newton. Living in Israel, she was here, passing out leaflets against racism. Our children, all.

How it pained me not to tell our friends over dinner of the vigil we had just come from. I have known them for decades and have always avoided politics, wanting to preserve a warm friendship rooted with her in childhood family connections. Feeling their despair, wanting to hold them too, I asked in a tone more pastoral than political if it felt worse than at other times of tragedy. We stumbled into that place I dreaded going. He could barely contain his anger at American Jews who voiced opinions about Israeli policies, "those who don't live here, who don't share in the dangers, whose children don't go into the army," and his voice trailed off across the divide into his own place of pain and distance. I spoke of the polarization in the American Jewish community, of the need to find ways of talking with each other, of allowing for discussion and debate as part of fostering a relationship with Israel, of the people we will lose, especially young people, if we don't. "We don't need them," he responded coldly.

Of polarization and its perils, we were leaving shul on Shabbos afternoon when the siren sounded to warn of an incoming rocket. We turned around and quickly went back into the building and down to the shelter, picking up several neighborhood children on the way. In the shelter, a woman asked if the kids wanted to call their parents to let them know they were safe. With an attitude undoubtedly learned from the adults he wouldn't call on Shabbat, a boy of about ten looked at her with disdain, "*anachnu Yehudim/אנחנו יהודים / we're Jews,*" he said. *Davka*, even here, I thought.

Seeking wholeness among so many shards of brokenness, I had made a commitment before coming to Israel to reach out to another old friend. He had stopped speaking with me after seeing my name on a letter opposing the first Gaza war. Toward the greater *tikkun* of a more just and peaceful world, one of the great challenges for all of us, wherever we are on the political spectrum, is how to keep talking with each other. My friend and I met for coffee, *davka*, on the day this Gaza war began. I told him I needed to listen to him to better understand his hurt, his distress with my views and actions. Animated and impassioned, words poured forth as he described what it means to him to be an Israeli and the difficulty for others to understand; the struggles, the fears, the hopes in spite of it all. At times, I wanted to hold him and so many others close in their aloneness, to comfort and console, to offer hope of a dream's return. At other times I could only hold my head in my hands and cry within, hearing in his words the turning of faith to fatalism; there is little way out of the challenge of occupation, there really isn't anyone to talk with, inequities suffered by Palestinians, as in checking ID's in a public park as he had recently witnessed, are regrettable but unavoidable, two states is a nice idea but not really feasible, little alternative to taking on Hamas again.... I swayed in my chair as though davenning, the distance between so near and so far. In the end, I acknowledged that I can't know just what he feels, that we are coming from very different places, but that I valued his friendship and hoped that we would keep talking. His words and the depth of his emotion became part of my effort to hold it all. Bridging the divide across a table in a Jerusalem cafe, I put my hand on his and said that I hoped our effort to renew connection would bring a modicum of *tikkun* to a time of so much pain and anguish. A short time later, his wife wrote to say that all four of their sons were now in Gaza, that these were the worst days of her life.

The occupation is startlingly unspoken, an unseen cloud among so many Israelis, so many Jews, acknowledged with a shrug, lip-service paid to two states, little willingness to do what really needs to be done, neither for the sake of the other nor for self-preservation. Faith turning to fatalism, it becomes backdrop and metaphor for the separation of people from each other and from themselves. Jerusalem and Ramallah are so near to each other, perhaps fifteen minutes driving, and so far, as from Jerusalem to Beit Jalla, from Jewish reality to Palestinian reality. Standing at the divide, I desperately wanted to get to Ramallah, as long planned, feeling an urgency to listen, to talk, to see. We had been introduced to Laila through her nephew, a friend of ours in Boston, and had corresponded a number of times. We struggled with whether to go in the current climate. My head said not to go. My heart rebelled, not wanting fear to separate people from each other. We decided to base our decision on what Laila and the Palestinian taxi driver thought, a friend of Leila's, placing our safety in their hands as its own expression of trust, of *tikkun* across the divide. We consulted many times, and by late morning the plan was to go. Just before we were to meet the driver, Laila called us back to say all of the check points into the West Bank had been closed, there was no way to come. I felt both crushed and relieved. Her next words comforted me, "at least fear didn't stop us." In the same way as of a mother writing to tell of her sons in these worst of days, a short time later, Leila wrote to share words from a friend in Gaza: "We don't know where and when and who? I'm spending my time trying to assure my 2 kids, ages 5 and 7...; I have to maintain strength all the time. Can't let the family collapse. Don't know how much longer I can take it...; we spend our time anxiously waiting for the next shower of bombs, it's sickening..." In the same note, Leila added: "The helplessness is great. I've been silently detached from news. Don't want the masters of wars to decide my feelings and reactions. Don't want them to poison my soul with hate..."

I tried to hold them all, my friends' four sons, and all the other soldier sons of mothers and fathers worried sick, Leila's friend's children, all the children in Gaza with no place to hide, all the children in southern Israel too familiar with hiding. If only the children could play hide and seek together, reminding us to seek another way, all the same issues now as festered before the war, before there were so many dead. As the death toll in Gaza mounted, so many innocents, so many children, I was overcome with horror, with grief, how to hold it all? I am afraid for the narratives of hate and denial now renewed for another generation. Every rocket fired into Israel denies its right to be, its place among the nations. Every time the mantra is uttered by Jews that we value our children more than they, they become less human, more easily denied the right to be. The more we retreat to a mantra, the less we think and allow ourselves to feel. It is a dangerous illusion that cuts us off from the very ones we need to embrace if there will ever be *tikkun* across the divide.

There was a deep weariness in Elliot and Veronica and a certain joy in their simplicity. As for so many long-time peace and justice activists in Israel, there was a sense of despair, of being at a dead end. "How do you hold it all?," I asked. "Barely," answered Veronica. And of hope? "In the details of day to day, mostly in caring for our grandchild, changing diapers, walking, shopping." Welcomed into their home on that Shabbos evening, twenty-four years melted away across the divide of time and distance. We davened together, the four of us, Veronica and Elliot, Mieke and me. At one point I went out onto the balcony to daven by myself. I was overcome with emotion, startled by the tears suddenly rolling down my face as I looked out over the Biblical landscape, the rocky hills rolling down to the valley so far below, new hills

rising up and disappearing again beyond themselves. I could hear the strains of Shabbos songs wafting through the air, carried from nearby windows on the honey-suckle breeze, warm and soothing. I opened a worn siddur in need of repair and held it to my heart, thinking of a book seller and his grandfather in Jerusalem. In the distance, I could see the minaret of a mosque in an Arab village, and the twinkling lights of Beit Jalla, so near and so far.