

Remember the assignment the first day of school: ‘OK students, it’s time to talk about what you did over your summer vacation!’ The teachers might have us draw pictures or write stories, interview each other like we’re writing a newspaper article. But the question was always the same, ‘what did you do over your summer vacation?’

Tonight, I have the opportunity to share with you what I did over my summer Sabbatical. And I come before you with too much to share in one sermon, let alone five. I come before you with not only that which I will share over these High Holy Days, but what I hope we will be able to engage in over the entire year. For we cannot possibly expect to get our Judaism fix in only two days, but we can lay the foundation for what we hope to explore this year.

First, I have to say, thank you! Thank you all for the opportunity to take these past three months to refresh and reconnect. Thank you for the opportunity to live, study and grow in Israel. The last time I was in Israel for a long period of time, I was a student, alone, and immersed in my studies toward becoming a Rabbi. This time, I was not alone. Not only did I travel to Israel with my family, but you were with me as well. After 13 years of experience with you, my congregation, I brought you into my studies and travels considering how I might bring it back and share it with you. While it was personally enriching, I hope that it will be communally fulfilling as well. For what I learned over my summer Sabbatical is not only for me, but also for all of us to explore.

This summer I realized that the conversation we need to engage in over these High Holy Days and over this coming year is one of, *amiyut*, or peoplehood. But what is peoplehood? I can say that my spell check is not happy with this word for it insists that it does not exist. Nor, in

Hebrew, is *amiyut*, really a word. True, both use the word “people” or “*am*”, but what is peoplehood? The dictionary defines it as a noun

1. the state or condition of being a people.
2. the consciousness of certain beliefs or characteristics that make one part of a people; sense of belonging to a people.

As we sit here in this sanctuary over the High Holy Days, we cannot help but feel a part of the larger community. We cannot help but feel connected because we are surrounded with so many in our Jewish community. It is safe, it is awesome, and it feels good. There’s nothing more satisfying than being together, seeing old and new friends all in one place. It lifts our spirits and automatically, we are transformed into the place of feeling like we belong because we are sitting here together. Peoplehood is easy when we are all together on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is exciting to see where we have come as the Jewish people.

While I was in Israel, Matt and I took Dahvi and Yoni around to all these amazing historical sites. Archaeological excavations uncovered ancient cities in which we were transported to where the Israelites studied, prayed, worked, socialized and lived. In these places, like Masada, Caesarea, Beit Shean, Akko, Tzefat, Beit Guvrin, Moresheh, Jerusalem, just to name a few, we would recount the lives of our ancestors the Israelites, who not only lived in these places, but fought for their existence and were even expelled.

“(*)Look, here at the place where the Israelites worshipped freely until the Babylonians came in and destroyed their homes and sent the Israelites into exile. (*)Look, here at the synagogues and schools that the Israelites, who returned from exile in Babylonia, established when they returned. (*)See the great amphitheatres and cities that the Israelites built in

response to that which was being created in places like Greece and Rome. (*)Look kids, this is where the Zealots fought the Roman legions as Jerusalem was being destroyed. (*)This is where the people stood against the great armies, the few against the many, holding on to what they believed until the fateful night when they took their lives rather than be taken as slaves or killed by the Romans. (*)And here is where Israel’s Declaration of Independence was written and read for the world to hear. (*)It was here where the Israelites fought against those who sought to destroy her in 1948, 1967, 1972 and even where the missiles land today and the shelters to which the people run and pray to be safe. (*)Look, at this vast country that for thousands of years, so small and whose people seemed so insignificant, has survived time and time again. (*)And look, how today Israel is a leading nation in technology and scientific development. How the people who so many have sought and still seek to destroy stands so strong and stable. But remember, Dahvi and Yoni, while it may seem that Israel stands on her own with such strength, it is only because all of *am Yisrael*, the people of Israel, whether in the land or throughout the world, are connected to her and support her that she survives. It is through peoplehood that not only will the land survive, but that we will survive.” And yes, during a time in which peace seems to be so distant between Israel and her neighbors; where the Palestinian people seek their own nation yet only through a unilateral declaration of independence, without regard for a peace process, we have to hope that Israel and her neighbors will some day find peace and security. The issues are so complex it seems so easy for us to say what we think should happen from across the ocean. We may not be able to fix the issues of peace, but we can and we should voice our support for Israel for she is and has been the home of the Jewish people for generations.

In a world of archaeological artifacts and digs, we can uncover our past, but we have to take those shards of pottery and build our future. So where is it that peoplehood began? And where is it going and where will it take us?

Let’s start at the very beginning. Adam and Eve. God created the world, created all of the creatures and finally, on the last day, God created humans, Adam and Eve. But unfortunately, this first attempt to create them was not good. And with that, God started over again with Noah and his family – it was God’s “do over.” But even after that, we read in Genesis 11, the story of the Tower of Babel.

“And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they lived there. And they said to one another, Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly. And they had bricks for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, Come, let us build us a city and a tower; whose top may reach to heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” (Genesis 11:1-4)

Again, there needs to be a do-over, but not by destroying the people, rather, spreading them out throughout the world through speech and land.

But then we come to Avram who will become Avraham – who enters into an eternal covenant with God. What does he get with this covenant? That God will bless him and make him a great nation. God will multiply his seed and bless those who bless Abraham and curse those who curse him and his family. And in our Torah portion which we will read tomorrow, the *Akeidah*, the binding of Isaac, the great final test of Abraham, what does he receive for his loyalty to God? The same blessing as when Abraham and God first met; that he should be a

great nation and that God will multiply his seed and bless those who bless him and curse those who curse him. This is a covenant of lineage and a statement that what it means to be a part of the people is to be a part of the family – it is not about what one does or how one acts. This Genesis covenant of peoplehood is not about how you act, rather it is who you are related to and there is no getting out of it. This is an eternal covenant.

But there is a shift in Exodus. Moses and God meet at a burning bush and God is introduced through the ancestors of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but that is as far as the blood lines go. Rather God turns to the connection with the people by hearing the plight of the Israelites in slavery in Egypt. They cried out and God answers by telling Moses to go to Pharaoh and say, “let My people go that they may worship Me.”

God wants more of the people than just being a part of the family. Now God is seeking that the people do something to be a part of the peoplehood. The identity of the Jewish people in the Exodus model is no longer just about saying that we were born into it. No, now, if we want to truly be a part of the covenant, our identity must be linked to our experiences and actions.

Our Genesis and Exodus models present us today with two ways of identifying ourselves as Jews. Through Genesis, Jewish identity is through birth and identifying as a part of the family. Through Exodus, one may identify as a Jew through action. Yet, where are we today? Where are you today?

Is the Genesis model becoming irrelevant? Some may challenge that it may even feel racist in that it is a closed model – you are born into it. Is the Exodus model too challenging or inaccessible? Many times people do not want to take the time to learn and do, especially in the

lives we have created for ourselves today – we just don’t have time with everything else we have to do.

But as a synagogue community, we are in the best position to examine our peoplehood and our identity as the Jewish community. The Genesis model is disappearing. “Based on current intermarriage rates and the average number of Jewish children per family, the chances of young, contemporary Jews having Jewish grandchildren and Jewish great-grandchildren, with the exception of the Orthodox, are extremely remote.”¹ We then must consider that it is not enough to be Jewish just by being born a Jew, but rather, being Jewish is by acting and engaging in Judaism and Jewish peoplehood.

So I challenge us with a very simple question: Why should we be Jewish? Unfortunately, there is no one reason. We can talk about how to be Jewish but there is no real reason about why to be Jewish. That, we must decide on our own and this we will study together tomorrow.

What does it mean to be a part of peoplehood? That too is something that each of us sitting here tonight will have to examine and challenge oneself with. Is it enough to just say, “I am a Jew?”

Over these next ten days, I want to challenge us to consider what our definition is of peoplehood. We are going to explore our community and how we are each important pieces in the TBS community, the Orange County community and the community of the Jewish people in Israel and abroad. We will explore the challenges of anti-Semitism as it exists today as well as examining justice versus righteousness through the story of Jonah. And finally, we will sit at the

¹ The information provided by a culminating conclusion of a research article co-authored by Antony Gordon and Richard Horowitz

feet of the teachers who came before us, listen to the words and the lessons they shared with us and what we will take into this next year.

Peoplehood may be frustrating to my computer’s spell check, but it is crucial that it is a part of our vocabulary today and tomorrow. Be assured, this examination of identity and peoplehood is not a conversation that is unique to our generation. No, this is a conversation that has been going on for many generations and will be held in generations to come. The glass is not half empty, the Jewish people are not going any where soon. But today, the Jewish people are at a crossroads at which we have the amazing opportunity to redefine who we are and how we are Jews in the year 2011/5772.

Look kids, yes, there are many places where they tried to destroy us, but this is the place where we still stand strong. Now go and plant your seed.