

Yes, We Have No Bananas (Maybe)

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Erev Rosh Hashanah

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Shalom, it has been a long time; remember me? I haven't written since last April. Much has transpired in the intervening months. Wendy and I traveled to Southern California, not once, but twice to celebrate weddings at which I had the honor to officiate, including one at the end of July for my nephew and, now, niece Scott and Lainie Donnell. Those trips kept us away for much of the summer, so I did not have much to report from our home base in Jerusalem, hence my protracted silence. One thing that our sojourn back in the familiar climes of California underscored for both Wendy and me was the fact that no matter how much we enjoyed being with family and friends and how "at home" we felt in those accustomed surroundings, Jerusalem is really home to us now. Celebrating our second anniversary as Israelis on July 7th away from Israel just didn't seem right to us. It felt so good to get back home again.

When we returned from our first trip in June, I received a phone call asking me if I would join the faculty at the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion to teach liturgy as a sabbatical replacement for the coming year. Realizing that I would have to spend much of my second trip to Los Angeles gathering and preparing class readings and materials, I nonetheless could not resist the temptation to get back into the classroom.

This past week the College has interrupted the regular curriculum and class schedule to prepare the students for the upcoming High Holy Days with a special Elul program. Elul is the Hebrew month that precedes the advent of the Days of Awe—Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—and is traditionally a period of preparation, reflection, prayer and repentance in anticipation of the holy days ahead. Among Sephardic Jews, every night during the month of Elul beginning in the wee hours after midnight through dawn special penitential prayers called Selichot are recited. Ashkenazic Jews recite their Selichot on the Saturday night prior to Rosh Hashanah (at least three days prior to the new moon of the month of Tishri). The High Holy Days don't "just happen," they take preparation, concentration and dedication if they are to have any spiritual value and efficacy.

During our Elul program we presented a "walk through" the liturgies of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur for the students to give them a deeper appreciation and understanding of the prayer services of the holy days. In keeping with my approach to Jewish liturgy in general, I described to my students how the liturgy is by no means a random compilation of prayers, poetry and readings piled upon each other over the centuries like the strata of an archaeological dig. On the contrary, a better way to view the liturgy of our tradition is to see it as a magnificent symphony, carefully orchestrated with recurring themes, distinctive movements and clear voices. Unlike a symphony, it is not the work of one composer, but the result of many hands and hearts working together in a unique harmony.

Viewed from this perspective our liturgy is a kind of tone poem weaving together the collective, aspirations and fears, triumphs and tragedies, strengths and foibles, spirituality and human frailty of our people. It sings of our past and to our future; it cries for our dead and praises God for the gift of life. It takes us up and down and up again from hope to despair to hope again as we consider the human condition, our own humanity and sinful frailty and the enormous God-given power we have been granted to effect change in our lives and in our world through repentance/accepting responsibility, prayer/resolving how to effect necessary change, and righteous action/implementing those changes. Our liturgy helps me get a perspective on the “now” and see it in a much broader perspective.

As I look back on the year that has past it seems to unfold like a kind of litany of woe—the tumultuous aftermath of the Second Lebanese War; the scandals that have beset our government at the highest levels; the violent take over of Hamas in Gaza; the daily Kassam bombardment of Sderot and other towns in the Negev while the world remains silent; Iran’s nuclear threat growing more ominous and its verbal threats more odious, raising no one’s ire but our own; the revelation that there are neo-Nazi gangs from the Former Soviet Union right here in Israel. And this is just from the Israeli news!

There is, indeed, much that is troubling in the news right now, but there is also much that bears the promise of hope. Olmert and Abbas are very close—so rumors and news pundits tell us—to producing an outline of principals for the upcoming meeting in November based upon the near-agreement proposed by President Clinton at Camp David and an unsigned agreement between Yossi Beilin and Abbas subsequent to the Camp David proposals. What may prove to be most significant about the hoped-for November meetings (if they materialize) will be the presence of the Saudis. Their very attendance may have more significance than any specific proposals that may emerge from the confab.

The Israeli economy is still growing despite the upheaval that is coursing through the American and European financial markets. Our financial czar, Stanley Fischer, the Governor of the Bank of Israel, assures us that Israeli banks and financial institutions have pretty much kept themselves away from the sub-prime fiasco. There is much promise on the economic horizon.

Yes, there is much in the news these days...bad news, good news...all kinds of news. But, if you really want to know what has been eating up the column inches in our newspapers of late, here is the real scoop—

This year, 5768 on the Jewish calendar is a biblically ordained sabbatical year (Ex. 23:10-11). That means that no annual crops may be grown on Jewishly owned land within the borders of the Land of Israel. That means that only imported produce and that grown on land owned by non-Jews may be consumed by those who observe the laws of the sabbatical year (an important issue in the kosher laws). Thus any market, restaurant, hotel or any other public establishment that requires kosher certification, must make sure that its source for produce complies with the laws of the sabbatical year. Now, to complicate matters, there are several kosher-certifying bodies here in Israel. The largest two are the Chief Rabbinate, the official governmental body (supposedly representing the interests of the general public

in matters of Jewish Law) and the other is BaDaTz that represents the anti-Zionist ultra-orthodox communities—there are more certifiers, but these are the main two.

Heretofore, over the past many, many decades, the Chief Rabbinate has gotten around the laws of the sabbatical year by means of a legal loophole called a *heter mechira* in which Jewish-owned land was “sold” to a non-Jew for the duration of the sabbatical year, thus allowing Jewish farmers to work the land and Jewish consumers to purchase and use the produce. Those who were more stringent were free to purchase produce only from non-Jewish and imported sources, and these products were so designated in the stores. Everyone was happy and a viable solution was realized, right? Wrong!

This year things changed...as the Eidah Haredit (the ultra-orthodox community) has gotten politically more powerful, it has gotten more brazen. Not satisfied with controlling its own community and what produce it consumes and has access to during the sabbatical year, the Eidah Haredit has put pressure on the Chief Rabbinate not to accept the time-honored *heter mechira* as a means to allow Israeli-grown produce to enter the markets this year. This will place a major financial burden upon the farmers forced to forego a year’s production income and impose additional costs on the non-Haredi Israeli consumer who will be forced to pay higher prices for imported products and restaurant bills.

Now the Chief Rabbinate is in a bind, it cannot do away completely with the *heter mechira*, after all, it made it official in the first place under Israeli law, nor can it resist completely the enormous pressures of the Eidah Haredit who hold considerable political clout. So, what did the Chief Rabbinate decide to do this year? They maintained the *heter mechira* however they allowed the district rabbi in every locality to decide for himself whether or not he would allow it to be used. That means that in some localities where there is a secular majority, such as Herzliya where very few citizens even care about whether or not their produce has the heter or not, only produce that meets ultra-orthodox standards may be sold. If a restaurant refuses to use the more expensive products (often at the risk of their slim profit margins) they will forfeit their kosher certification. In other words, the Chief Rabbinate—a governmental institution—is being dictated to by an anti-Zionist body and failing to enforce its own policies in the interests of the state and its citizenry because of the coercion of a small but politically power minority. The issue is now being brought before the High Court of Justice...

So, when you consider that we spend so much time and energy worrying about the kashrut of a banana, the rantings of an Iranian lunatic pale by comparison, don’t they?

You know, I am really looking forward to sitting back and enjoying the symphony of my High Holy Days services this year...I need the perspective.

To you and yours, Wendy and I send our best wishes for a happy, healthy and fulfilling New Year and may you be inscribed in the Book of Life with signatures of blessing.

Tizku le-shanim rabot! Shanah Tovah u-metukah!

Shalom from Jerusalem.