

YOU AND I ARE FROM THE SAME SMALL TOWN

SONG:

rpfv u, utn ubha ubj bt  
rga , hruc v, ut 'vnuv v, ut  
hf - rnuk ah vn - ohrcs yuhj u, ut  
/rpfv u, utn ubj bt

*You and I - came from the same small town  
We're the same height, our hair the same shade of brown  
We used the same words, we played all the same games;  
Everything about us seems the same.  
We walked together each day through fields of green  
And every night out on the town we would be seen  
We even loved the same girls as one another -  
I always thought of you as my brother.  
But every Friday eve  
as the wind rustles the leaves  
of the trees, so softly, through  
that's when I remember you  
We found the same paths and trails to explore  
We were trained in the same instruments of war  
We'd crawl through fields of thistle and of thorn  
But to our village we'd return.  
But I remember that endless battle day  
when I saw that they had shot your way  
and when I reached you when the fighting had died down  
I took you back to our town.  
We've come back to our home today  
It seems like nothing had changed while we were away  
But now while through a green field I pass,  
you lie beneath the grass.  
But every Friday eve  
as the wind rustles the leaves  
of the trees, so softly, through  
that's when I remember you*

haha , ukhku  
hahj j uraf  
rcug , uruj a , urnmc  
rfuz l, ut hbt zt

Naomi Shemer - the most renowned of all of Israel's songwriters - wrote this song after the Yom Kippur War. It's Israel's classic "There but for the grace of God go I" song - about two friends who grew up together and went to war together. One survived, the other did not and the surviving friend realizes just how simple it would have been for it all to have happened the other way - It's a feeling we know well. I have spoken with

people in this community who continue, a year later, to be consumed by the realization that if their offices happened to have been on the 90th floor instead of the 50th floor they wouldn't be alive today. Or someone who, a few years ago, interviewed for a job at Cantor Fitzgerald and didn't get it - knowing that if she *had* gotten the job, perhaps *she* wouldn't be alive today. When WE feel that we have been spared misfortune that has befallen people who are just like us it makes us identify with them all the more. It tightens the bond between us.

Especially as we approach the one-year anniversary of the horror we lived through - I find that there are many people who didn't necessarily lose relatives or close friends who find themselves drawn to the particular stories of a particular person with whom they can identify - with whom they seem to have many overlapping life details - someone of approximately the same age, or life stage, or who worked in a similar kind of job, or who had children of the same age. We feel a closer bond - and a heightened sense of responsibility -- when we know that it could just as easily have been us.

This seems to be a human trait - our worlds are organized in a series of concentric circles of concern. We make every effort to feel all suffering going on everywhere in the world - And hopefully we act to rectify all suffering going on anywhere in the world. But it's natural, and to me it's very appropriate for us to tend to feel it most deeply when it happens to people with whom we have a connection -- when we can picture how the suffering could have happened to ME instead of HIM or HER.

Now, of course, in Israel they've also been feeling this 'there but for the grace of God go I' sensation - for most of the past 80 years - but especially over the past two years - and especially especially over the past several months. The statistics are just staggering. Over the last two years, there have been -- you won't even believe this number - there have been 14,267 documented attacks or attempted attacks against Jews in Israel - Killing 610, seriously injuring 4,497. And that doesn't even include attacks with rocks or firebombs - or the number of attacks would be several times higher. [statistics: IDF spokesman] Almost every Israeli knows several people personally who have been killed or injured. Israelis today know that the decision to go to out to eat, or to go shopping, or ride a bus, or even to go to a bar mitzvah party or a Passover seder, might be a decision that would put them in the path of a suicidal murderer. Israelis know that they are **all** targets - and that the objective in this war is NOT merely to create a Palestinian state. If that had been the objective, the Palestinians would have gotten that 2 years ago. The objective of this war -- the stated objective of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and the implicit objective of Yasir Arafat and his cronies, is to continue raining terror down on Jews in Israel and weaken Israel's morale until, at some point in the future, Jews finally realize that they are a foreign implant in the Middle East and they go back to where they came from - and then there can be a state of Palestine to replace the State of Israel.

People who have lived in Israel for many decades and have seen many crises over the years consider this present crisis to be on par with any that Israel has ever seen. My teacher, Rabbi Danny Gordis, who lives in Israel, tells about how during the early weeks and months of the Intifadah, there was one colleague of his, a professor in his 60's who had lived his entire lifetime in Israel who would always have words of reassurance. He would say, "you just have to learn to wait these things out. We had frightening days right before the Six Day War, we were panicked during the first days of the Yom Kippur War.

But it works out. We just have to be patient.” But a few months ago, these pep talks ceased. And instead, when asked how he was doing, the colleague said, “Who knows? This is really out of control. It’s hard to see any way out of this. You know, for the first time I can remember, nothing we do is working. I don’t know ..... [With all this going on,] I can’t possibly get any work done.”

There’s an especially disturbing story in the Talmud about the city in Israel called Tur Malka. Two thousand years ago, during the Jewish Revolt, the city was overtaken by the Romans and they started to massacre the Jewish inhabitants. But there was a hill right in the middle of Tur Malka, such that people on one side of the hill couldn’t see or hear what was going on on the other side of the hill. So the situation actually ensued when there was partying and feasting going on on one side of the hill while there were massacres on the other side of the hill. The story reminds me of how after the terrorist attack at Hebrew University five weeks ago that killed seven students and staff of the university, including five Americans, Many of us saw television footage of the raucous celebrations in Gaza - Palestinians celebrating that people such as these had been killed. Massacres on one side of the hill, celebrations on the other, because the people on one side of the hill are unable to see and acknowledge the humanity of their neighbors on the other side of the hill.

And this crisis for Israel is, of course, also a terrible crisis for the Palestinian people, who now, finally, show increasing numbers of people who feel that the whole suicide bombing strategy was a serious mis-step for their cause - increasing numbers who now realize that the path to the Palestinian state they seek lies in democratic reform and negotiations, not in increased violence. But many Israelis feel it may be too late. When for almost 2 years, your neighbors have supported a campaign of suicidal terror against you, and now the talk about how they’re thinking of ‘toning it down’ for tactical reasons, it’s hard to imagine ever trusting them again - or ever making concessions to them again. Considering these facts, it’s absolutely amazing to think that positive points of contact still sometimes exist between the two communities. I hope I can do justice to a story that Ken Schept, a leader in this congregation told me last night about his recent trip to Israel - he just got back last week. While in Israel, Ken met an Israeli tour guide - actually, like most Israeli tour guides these days, he’s an out-of-work Israeli tour guide - who told him the story of how he had been the operator of one of the last tour buses to be in Bethlehem a few months ago immediately before all hell broke loose. He was sitting in his bus, waiting for the rest of his tourists to return to the bus, when he started to see a mob amassing itself, he heard gunshots, and he sensed terrible danger. He wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible. But he knew he had a responsibility to the rest of the tourists, who had not yet returned to the bus. Then he saw a person he knew walking up to the bus - a Palestinian tour guide with whom he had worked previously. The Palestinian tour guide said, “Let me come onto your bus, and they won’t do anything to you.” And the Israeli tour guide said, “Are you crazy? Suppose you come onto this bus, and they don’t see you - they could do something to the bus anyway, and you could get hurt. Or suppose they DO see you come up onto the bus, and they think you’re a collaborator!” But again, the Palestinian tour guide said, “Let me come onto your bus, and they won’t do anything to you.” And that’s what happened. He came onto the bus, and the mob passed right by the bus, and they were able to leave Bethlehem in safety. The Israeli tour guide continues to keep in touch with his Palestinian colleague - by

phone. With things the way they are, they certainly can't arrange to see each other in person. And he says he is sure that this kind of story - while it's not the kind of story to make it into the headlines - is something that happens every day.

Thank God, there seems to be a lull now. There hasn't been a major terrorist attack in over a month. But we know that there are dozens of attempts every day, so that could change any moment. You may have read about the car bomb that was intercepted by Israeli forces just yesterday - which if it had reached its target could certainly have killed hundreds of people if not thousands.

I have to share with you that even as I am in the middle of delivering this High Holiday sermon related to Israel, I can't believe I'm actually doing it. When I think back to the High Holiday sermons I remember from my youth. I don't remember ever hearing any sermons about God, or about spirituality. They were usually about politics, especially about Israel, and how things were difficult for Israel and how we needed to support Israel more by donating money, or buying Israel Bonds. And when I became a rabbi, I promised myself: as important as Israel and these political issues may be, the High Holidays should be a time to focus on the ESSENCE of what it means to be a Jew - they should focus on how we can deepen the spiritual component of our lives, how we can most authentically do Teshuvah - return from the dissatisfactions and mistakes in our personal lives, in our relationships, in our life priorities. I have led High Holiday services and given sermons each year for the past 11 years. And true to this goal, I have never given a High Holiday sermon that revolved entirely around Israel. But this year is different. This year, Israel's challenges have made it all the more clear to us that support for Israel IS part of the essence of what it means to be a Jew. Because the grand ideas and concepts of Judaism will attain SPIRITUAL survival only if the Jewish people attains BODILY survival, which, without a strong Israel, is by no means assured. And because the love and dedication to all of humanity that Judaism tells us to pledge has no credibility if Jews are not willing to see and feel the pain of our own brothers and sisters.

I chose the song with which I began my thoughts this morning because I know that there are many American Jews, and relatives of Jews, for whom the crisis in Israel is of geopolitical interest but not of particular emotional interest. The 9/11 tragedy touched these people deeply - because it took place on familiar territory. THAT crisis led them to say, "there but for the grace of God go I." But the crisis in Israel is the crisis of a foreign land, far away - and many may even see it as a crisis that is morally ambiguous - a crisis in which there is suffering going on on both sides. It can sometimes be genuinely perplexing for such people to encounter the passion that supporters of Israel sometimes display. When I am asked, "Why do you care so much about what's going on in Israel?" I begin my answer with the words of the song.

rpfv u, urn ubhba ubj bt

American Jew, Israeli Jew,  
we are both from the same small town.

Just by way of example, I think about my own family. My great-grandmother Hinda Sturm Scheinberg had at least 3 brothers and sisters. She emigrated to this country with her husband from a small town in Galicia, near Poland. Two of her sisters managed to settle in Palestine, where they raised their families. And one brother remained in Poland

- and we can guess what happened to him. By and large, those who didn't leave before the war were killed in the whirlwind of the Shoah - the Holocaust. Just one fateful decision, made in the year 1912 is what led to my being born here and my cousins being born in Israel instead of the other way around - just as it led to my family thriving here today and my cousins' families thriving in Israel today and my great-great-aunts and uncles' families being wiped out instead of the other way around.

רפ"ו ו, ו'ת"ן שבח"א ו'ב'ת

Whether you go back 2000 years, or 100 years, the two of us -- all of us -- came from the same small town - even the same family. Our similarities and kinship will always bind us together. And let me tell you that in all likelihood, my story is also your story - or, if not, then it's likely to be the story of someone close to you. Too many people forget how and why Israel came into being in the first place. Too many people forget - or perhaps never knew - how the State of Israel sprouted from a dream of more than a century ago. a dream of Jews around the world finally living in security, free from persecution. People like Leo Pinsker, Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau looked at the history of our people and noticed some inescapable patterns. Wherever Jews lived, we were persecuted, so often massacred and killed, or exiled. So often, we were told: "Jews, you don't belong here. Why don't you go back where you came from?" And so the crazy idea occurred to them: We don't belong here. Why don't we go back where we came from? These anti-Semites keep on saying, we're not real Europeans. We're Middle-Easterners. We don't belong in Europe. So let's establish a state of our own - a state of freedom and equality for all, but one in which Jewish rights will be assured. A state on some portion of the land where our people first came into being. Then we take the Jews out of Europe, and we've solved the problem. We stop being homeless, we re-join the family of nations, Jewish culture is proudly reborn and the anti-Semitism disappears. Okay. So that last part didn't go *exactly* according to plan. But we all know: if Israel had existed in the 1930's, during that window of time when Jews *could* have left Europe, there would have been no Holocaust. But instead, in the absence of a Jewish state, there was not a single place around the world that would take these refugees. So most of them ended up going to crematoria instead. History has shown that that's what can happen when Jews have no where to go home to. As challenging as the situation is currently for Jews in Israel, imagine what the situation would be for Jews around the world in the ABSENCE of a state of Israel.

Too many people forget - or perhaps never knew - how time after time throughout the past century, Zionist leaders sought reconciliation with their Arab neighbors - but were generally rebuffed, because ANY kind of Jewish presence in the Middle East was seen as an affront.

Too many people forget - or perhaps never knew - that after the United Nations voted in 1947 to partition Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state - that the day after Israel declared its independence, all the armies of Israel's neighbors invaded with the intention of strangling the new state in the midst of its first breath. And then again in 1967. And then again in 1973. And - that despite it all - time and time again, Israel has - surprisingly enough - been willing to make concessions and compromise for the sake of peace. It happened with Egypt in the '70's - with Jordan in the '90's. But the adversaries

have to arrive at the negotiating table in good faith -- with a **genuine** commitment to halt the violence. Which Arafat and the Palestinian Authority have obviously not shown.

Rosh Hashanah tends to be a holiday that is focused around INDIVIDUAL responsibility. But of necessity, we speak today of our COMMUNAL responsibility to do as much as possible to offer Israel our love and our support. We have any number of methods to choose from. We can give Israel the gift of our time, and our attention. We can make it a priority to be well-informed about the situation in Israel -- in a more sophisticated and non-sensationalistic way than CNN and the New York Times can provide. With the Internet, this is easier than you think - you can start by looking at our synagogue's web site ([www.hobokensynagogue.org](http://www.hobokensynagogue.org)) and the Israel-related media links we include there. We can learn enough about Israel that we begin to feel passionately about the various imperfections that exist in that society - just as imperfections exist in this country and everywhere else - and then we can endeavor to improve them. We can write letters to newspapers on those frequent occasions when Israel's record is distorted in the media. We can demonstrate our solidarity with people in Israel - who take great solace in feeling that they are not alone. We can communicate regularly with people we know in Israel. If we are able, we can consider visiting Israel. Ken Schept, from our community, just returned from a trip to Israel and reported that -- as many had reported to me - the hotels were empty, the shops were empty, and any time he made a purchase from a store, he was practically embraced by the proprietors. Once again, if you go to our synagogue web site, you'll find a link to a web site called [www.shopinIsrael.com](http://www.shopinIsrael.com) - that makes it very easy to buy Israeli products - and help to offset some of the financial difficulties there. You can take a 'virtual trip' to Israel - spend as much money buying Israeli products on the Web \ as you would if you **actually** traveled to Israel! Another outstanding organization that our community will be supporting is called One Israel Solidarity Fund ([www.walk4israel.com](http://www.walk4israel.com)) which provides financial assistance to families that have lost loved ones to acts of terror or whose primary breadwinners have become disabled through acts of terror. As you can imagine, the need is great. And our community plans to serve as the sponsor of a particular family.

Also, on this holiday of Rosh HaShanah, we can support the people of Israel by joining them in hoping and praying for better days. You may be surprised to know that Jewish tradition actually expresses two opinions about what time of year the world was created. Rabbi Joshua held *okugv trcb ixhbc* -- that the world was created during the spring, in the month of Nisan. While his colleague Rabbi Eliezer held that *okugv trcb hra, c* -- the world was created in the fall, during the month of Tishrei. We know who won out. Our liturgy refers to this day of Rosh HaShanah with the words *okug , rv Ouhv* - today is the birthday of the world. It's a peculiar choice for the world's birthday. The autumn season feels more like an ending than a beginning. The days are getting shorter; nature is gearing up for a period of dormancy. Rabbi David Ellenson has written that perhaps the lesson here is that it's relatively easy to have hope, and to believe in renewal, in the springtime, when everything seems fresh, and new, and optimistic. But the Jewish calendar teaches us that we ought to have hope and believe in renewal even when things look bleak, even during the fall, 'even when the harshness of winter is on the horizon.' No matter how bleak the prospects for peace have seemed this year, our brothers and sisters in Israel have managed not to give up hope. After all - the hope - *vUE, v* - is the

Jewish people's national anthem, both figuratively and literally. In the words of the Amidah for Rosh HaShanah which we will recite later on today, we pray to God that we may continue to have reason to hope for better times. *יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד* God, we pray that you may grant honor to your people who have suffered so much this year - *אֲנִי וְעַמִּי וְיִשְׂרָאֵל* to those who live in fear, we pray, God, grant the ability to praise; to those who seek You, God, grant *נִסְחָה* - grant the ability to hope. *יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד*

May you soon grant joy in your holy land, and celebration in your city, a joy and celebration shared by all the residents of the land as they dedicate themselves together to peace. Ken Yehi Ratzon - so may it be your will.

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