

Vision and Reality: Israel and all the Rest of Life

Parshat Mishpatim 5769
By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

Last Friday, Rabbi Danny Gordis had an editorial in the Jerusalem Post, entitled In Perspective: The Election we all Lost. In it, Gordis bemoaned the lack of idealism and vision in Israel's most recent election and in Israeli society in general these days.

Rabbi Gordis began by telling the story of a young woman serving in the Israel Defense Forces as an educator for some of Israel's most problematic soldiers. These soldiers are high school drop-outs who come from broken and impoverished homes with a history of violence. The army is their last chance to make it and Israel takes its responsibility to them seriously, not only by training them as soldiers but by educating them. One day, it seems, this young woman was speaking to her charges about Zionism and one of her students asked: "How do you know so much about Zionism? Are you a new immigrant?"

Rabbi Gordis and his friends chuckled at this comment. Of course there is some truth in what this soldier said: Most Israelis are dismissive and derisive of Zionism. Only new immigrants, primarily North Americans, seem to be at all concerned with the vision of Theodore Herzl and Ahad Ha'am that gave birth to the modern state of Israel. Israelis are too busy dealing with the harsh realities of life. These days they are more concerned with survival than idealism. They are deeply aware of the looming threats which surround them, and the festering sores in their cities. When an Israeli says, *Al tidaber ba'tzionut*, "Don't talk to me about Zionism," what he's really saying is, "That's a lot of bologna," or possibly something less polite to say in mixed society.

So the fact that the theme of this year's Rabbinical Assembly convention was *Tzionut: Hazon U'Mitziut*, "Zionism: Vision and Reality," is most significant. One could easily dismiss our convention as the typical musings of a bunch of North American Jews, but the truth is, we focused on both aspects of Israel society: the dream of what Israel could be and the realities that it must deal with each day.

Dream and reality are not the unique province of Israeli society. We are constantly negotiating the gap between these two perspectives on life. And the truth is we could talk about vision and reality here in America too. The dialectic between these two perspectives is as old as the Torah itself. As human beings we are constantly trying to figure out where our vision ends and reality begins. This week's and last week's Torah portion really force us to focus on vision and reality in society. They ask us to consider that dealing with both is a necessary part of life.

Parshat Yitro and *Parshat Mishpatim* are the very core of the Torah. Last week we read about the revelation at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments. In ten simple and eloquent statements we find the essence of our way of life: belief in God, eschewing idolatry, using our words with integrity, observing the Sabbath, honoring our parents, and living an ethical life with respect for all of God's creatures. What could be more beautiful or simple than this? Who doesn't believe in the

Ten Commandments? In the Ten Commandments we have a vision of what the world could be and what it should be.

Parshat Mishpatim is more complicated. This *parshah* is referred to as *Sefer Ha'berit*, the Book of the Covenant. It presents us with a collection of laws touching on every aspect of life. This is one stop shopping for the minutia of daily life. Unlike *Parshat Yitro* these laws are casuistic; that is, they are not presented unequivocally but in the form of case studies. "If such and such takes place then you shall do the following..." Unlike the Ten Commandments which are presented quite directly, "Thou shall," and "Thou shall not," these laws are messy. They acknowledge the complexities of life.

- What happens when an ox gores your neighbor?
- Sure, a person is supposed to honor his parents. But what happens when someone strikes his father?
- God redeemed us from slavery. Slavery is wrong. But how should you treat a slave if you have one?
- People should get married and live happily ever after. But what happens when a man seduces a woman?

Parshat Yitro and *Mishpatim* present the two sides of life: vision and reality. Whether we like it or not we live with both: a greater moral vision of life as well a realistic attempt to wrestle with life's messiness and complexities.

American Jews would like to think that Israel is some kind of ideal, and when they realize that it has all the messiness of any other place, they're disappointed. How often have I hear people say that they're waiting 'for peace' to visit Israel. Its time to stop waiting and encounter both the vision and reality that makes Israel such a unique place! How often have I heard people complain about Israelis for being so rude, so pushy... so, so real?

Israel is one of the rare societies in the world that exists both as the product of a great vision and the messiness of a complicated reality. There aren't many places that combine these two perspectives: America is one of them. Our country was founded on a document which begins, "We hold these truths to be self evident..." But we all know that those self evident truths don't always work; that they have to be turned into a reality in the give and take of daily life – and that can be so terribly messy. We fail in creating the ideal as often as we succeed. It's three steps forward and two steps back. We are constantly asking, "What now?"

Similarly, Israel was built on a vision but how we get from that vision to the details of daily life is complicated. And *davka* that's what I love most about Israel today. I love the fact that Israel is not *Gan Eden*; it is not some type of utopian Garden of Eden. It's a real place where people push and shove, where the streets are dirty, and in which the end is not assured. It's a place that commands my involvement.

In the *Birkat HaMazon*, the Grace after Meals, we recite a special prayer in which we ask God to bless the land of Israel, *Reshit tzmichat ge'ulataynu*, "the beginning of the flowering of our redemption." We don't ask God's blessing for some idyllic place. Rather we ask God's blessing for a place that is just at the beginning of its journey – a place that has a lot of serious obstacles to overcome before it completely blossoms into a utopian vision. For me, 'faith' is the belief that Israel will get there, not through divine miracles and interventions, but through our involvement and engagement with this great experiment. No one has a right to complain about Israel unless he or she is prepared to contribute to the building of that society.

So we talked about a lot of things at the Rabbinical Assembly convention last week.

- We heard about the serious challenges that Jerusalem is facing. It has become the poorest city in Israel. Between a Haredi and Arab communities, a significant percentage of its population pays no taxes and does little to help and build a better community.
- I had the opportunity to travel around Jerusalem to better understand the complexities of the *geder hahafrada*, the fence that separates Israeli and Palestinian communities. It was clear how important this fence is for the security of Israel but how damaging it has become to an already divided society. Even the terminology is complicated: What do we call this phenomenon; a containment wall, a security fence, a separation fence, or something else? In Abu Dis someone had scrawled on the wall: “From the Warsaw Ghetto to the Abu Dis Ghetto.”
- We discussed the problems of the rabbinate in Israel. Having a government agency which determines religious policy is both necessary for a Jewish society but corrupting and demeaning of our most basic human values.
- And we watched as Israel’s elections unfolded. Israel is the only society in which you can win a majority of the vote but still lose the election because you can form a coalition.

Maybe the most important thing that happened at our convention is that we made a commitment to encourage Aliyah by Conservative Jews. With all the other problems we are facing these days in the Conservative Movement that may sound down right crazy. But the truth is if we want Israel to succeed we need more cockeyed idealists who share our values and our commitment to both democratic and religious values – something that is terribly lacking in Israel these days. And that is exactly what Rabbi Gordis wrote in his editorial last week. I quote:

“It is one of the unexplained peculiarities of Israeli politics that while Russian immigrants have produced an ample share of political candidates, the thousands of Americans now living here have yielded almost none. Is that because we imagine we can better contribute to the state in other ways? Or is it because the ugly, hostile nature of Israeli politics seems too daunting for our Protestant dispositions?”

Whatever the reason, now may be the time to rethink that reticence and to roll up our communal sleeves. No one else is speaking about "who we are and how far we've traveled." But the collective lives of immigrants are about that. Perhaps, precisely because of our personal narratives and the political heritages we've brought with us, staying out of the fray is a right we no longer have.

Years ago, when I was working for a large American foundation in Jerusalem, one of the Israelis on staff said to me, "The problem with all of you is that you come here thinking you're going to show the natives how to do it." I recall feeling embarrassed and stammering that no, of course we didn't think that that's what we were doing. But he was right, and I was lying - to him and to myself. This is still a country in formation, and as in generations past, its future depends in no small measure on what its immigrants can contribute.

We should not be embarrassed by the fact that there are things we know and believe, precisely because we've come from a different place. Given what the "natives" can't say and what some "non-natives" from non-democratic countries are saying, our right to observe quietly from the sidelines has now expired.”

I believe that Rabbi Gordis' words apply as much to us as they do to American Jews who have made Aliyah. We like to think that we have a stake in Israel. But that stake is only possible if we visit Israel, if we spend significant time in Israel not as tourists but as volunteers and unless we are willing to even consider the possibility that Israel is the place where we belong. If nothing else, that's what I got out of this trip. Life is not just an idealistic vision and it's not some nitty-gritty reality. It's what we make of the two. It's how we take the Ten Commandments from Parshat Yitro and then ask "how do we apply them to the daily realities of life" in Parshat Mishpatim? And Judaism is not just about our personal faith or ideals but how we use that faith and those ideals to create a society. Creating a society is always messy – but there is no greater challenge in the world.

You know, growing up, it seemed that all rabbis ever talked about was Israel. And the rabbis of my generation reacted to this by trying to focus on more 'spiritual' and 'ethical' ideals in our sermons.

But maybe we made a mistake...for what greater challenge can there be for the modern Jew than to be a part of this great social and spiritual experiment of Eretz Yisrael, after two thousand years of building not only a land for Jews but a Jewish homeland as well.

And if we remain silent we may lose that opportunity forever!!

Shabbat Shalom