

Erev Yom Kippur 5779

Rabbi Max Miller

For anyone out there who has ever made a challah, and many of you have or will make one with me soon, you know it is a careful balancing act. Just like these days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, we carefully balance the ingredients of our lives, weaving together a story of our year. Braiding together the many strands of our challah I cannot help but think back to the sweetness we have shared dancing and singing at B'nai mitzvah, learning and questioning texts of Torah, and playing and growing each and every Sunday. Like the bit of salt added to challah, we have also shared bitter moments of mourning and prayers for healing. Together, we have woven a beautiful year mixed with many wonderful laughs and tears, smiles and hugs. As Temple Emanu-El enters its 40th year, I can't help but bless and be so grateful for our portion.

Ashreinu, mah tov chelkeinu How happy are we, how good is our lot.

Somewhere between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, just off Highway One, the main thoroughfare between the two largest cities is my Israel. When most people talk about living between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, they mean the suburbs of either, or they are talking about the mindset that they have: religious, meaning Jerusalem; or secular, meaning Tel Aviv.

When I tell most people that my Israel is a city called Ramle. They either think I said Ramallah, the major city of the West Bank, or, if they're familiar with some of the smaller cities in Israel, then they're surprised to see that I don't have any scars. Ramle shares a lot in common with a place like Baltimore or Newark. Ramle is a tough place, a working-class city, with salt-of-the-earth kind of people. It's also an ancient city. Today, Ramle is a mixed city. The demographics of the town break down just about the same as the State of Israel itself; 80% of the population is Jewish, about 16% is Arab Muslim and about 4% is Arab Christian. Ramle isn't known for many positive traits, but I know it as the first place in Israel I could truly call home.

At the epicenter of Ramle, in fact, along the ancient road that connected Jaffa to Jerusalem is the center of my Israel Story. Tucked away off Herzl Street, the main drag through Ramle is a small restaurant called Samir's. Samir's, as you might be able to guess from the name, is not a Jewish-owned restaurant. Samir Dabit, a Christian Arab, founded the restaurant in 1948 after his family fled Jaffa and settled in Ramle in the same year after Israel's War of Independence. Christian Arabs are a small demographic of the Arab world, a persecuted minority as well. As a minority population in Israel and practically everywhere else in the Arab world, the Christian-Arab community often bridges the divide between the three major religions in the Middle East: Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

Samir's restaurant is famous nowadays, well marginally famous, for making *the* best hummus in the entire world--translates as hummus here in Atlanta. Like New York for Pizza, Montreal for bagels, or Kansas City for BBQ, I'm not sure how Samir's does it, but it must be in the water. Just like the wells of the ancient days where people would come to gather and kibbitz, Samir's is a similar sort of watering-hole.

I met Samir and his son Jahlil right after I graduated from the University of Maryland in September of 2011. I moved to Israel at that time to be an English teacher for a year in a city that had few English speakers. Anyone who has been to Israel in the past 15 years can tell you that in most of the places you go, Israelis speak better English than Americans speak Hebrew. In fact, even the best American Hebrew speakers will go to Tel Aviv, speak in Hebrew to Israelis, and they will respond in perfect English. It can be maddening.

I saw my work in Ramle as a year of service to the Jewish people. I would share my American Jewish experiences with them, I would help them learn English, and I would build a bridge between American Jews and Israelis. I also knew that I would gain so much from the relationships I would build. My Jewish students, colleagues, and friends taught me so much about what it means to be Israel and to live in the REAL Israel. Little did I know that the most impactful relationship would not be with my Jewish students or my Jewish colleagues, as enriching and profound as they truly were. The most meaningful relationship I had was with the Dabit family: Samir and his son Jahlil especially.

I would walk into Samir's and it felt a lot like walking into a home. Samir, from the kitchen, would greet me in Hebrew and Arabic. His voice was like that of a mob boss, but I challenge anyone to find a kinder man than Samir. His son, Jahlil, just a little older than me, would greet me with a hug, a smile, and the kind of conversation that comes from sincere caring. I've never seen a menu at the restaurant, though I know they exist. I would walk in, and Jahlil knew exactly what I wanted. On my walk home from the school I taught at, I would stop by the open-air market, and usually, I would walk the ancient road from the market to Samir's and catch up with my friends. Samir and Jahlil became my family that year. That year I went to Samir's home for Christmas, and I went to Jahlil's home many times with my other friends simply to talk and hang out. Jews and Arabs getting along, sharing meals, telling jokes: building relationships.

The conversation didn't always turn to The Conflict, but when it did, there was an understanding that Israel needs to be safe and secure. I understand that, and so did they. In Ramle, the ancient city along the road from Jaffa to Jerusalem, we also came assuming the best in one another. You see, Jahlil, born in the 80's, grew up in the Jewish schools of Ramle. He grew up as a Christian in Jewish spaces, even if he is not particularly religious. His Hebrew is better than his Arabic, and he recognizes that the Jews have an ancient connection with Israel, but it is also *his* home.

All too often his home, the Jewish State, acts in ways that negate his connection to the Land. Yet, he still chooses to make a life in Israel because it is his home. Jahlil approached every conversation with the same generous listening that he expected from each person with whom he sat and talked.

When Birthright came to town I would come to Samir's restaurant to hear the discussions led by Jahlil. I was so thankful that Birthright brought dozens of buses to Ramle, exposing participants to Jahlil, his narrative, and this kind of conversation. Dialogue for coexistence must run in the blood of the Dabit family, because for years Samir brought his story around the United States, ostensibly doing cooking demonstrations; when in reality, these were profound opportunities to listen and speak about living in peace with our neighbors. With hundreds of Birthright participants, Jahlil, whose English is excellent, would tell his story and his family's story about growing up in Ramle with Jewish friends and Jewish neighbors, celebrating Simchat Torah at the kibbutz down the road, but not always feeling like he was equal. The Birthright groups would leave with a sense of mixed pride and concern. Jahlil loves his home, but his home does not always return the affection. Still, Jahlil keeps the conversation going. He refuses to stop the dialogue simply because of the obstacles in his path.

While some may choose to disengage with Israel, American politics, or any divisive topic in 2018, I believe that doing so is the opposite of the Jewish approach. It's not what we teach at the Diamond Family Religious School, it's not what I learned growing up at the Davis Academy, at the Weber School, and it's especially not what I learned at Samir's. Every time we talk, it's not going to be perfect, but we must strive to listen, to hear the humanity in the words of our partners, and not allow ourselves to shy away from the uncomfortable conflict in conversation. This is the active Zionism of many in my generation, and it may be very different from the Zionism of our parents and grandparents generations, but it is our best bet for the future. We believe in a Jewish and democratic state that is safe and secure, and we also believe that Israel must work in ways to ensure that there is religious pluralism, equality for minorities, and an open environment for dialogue that leads to coexistence.

One of my favorite Jewish authors, Yossi Klein Halevi, a Brooklyn-born Israeli, recently published a book on this very topic called, "Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor." In an open letter to Palestinian society, Yossi tells his narrative of Zionism. The book is an invitation to conversation. Yossi lives at the edge of East and West Jerusalem, in a neighborhood called French Hill. I know this not only because it's the premise of his book, but because I've spent many meals eating at a home next door to his. This Jewish world is so incredibly small.

Yossi describes the view from his porch on French Hill as a way of speaking about the present situation between Israelis and Palestinians. Yossi's letters to his neighbor are not just about the present, but about the past and future too. The letter's come down to a very particular point: Jews

and Palestinians each have a connection to the Land, neither group wants to leave, therefore, the only way forward is to talk, listen, and learn in order to coexist.

Yossi begins these letters by saying:

Dear Neighbor,

I call you “neighbor” because I don’t know your name or anything personal about you. Given our circumstances, “neighbor” may be too casual a word to describe our relationship. We are intruders in each other’s dreams, violators of each other’s sense of home. We are living incarnations of each other’s worst historical nightmares. Neighbors?

But I don’t know how else to address you. I once believed that we would actually meet, and I am writing to you with the hope that we still might. I imagine you in your house somewhere on the next hill, just beyond my porch. We don’t know each other, but our lives are entwined.

And so: neighbor.

Neighbors, living within shouting distance of each other’s home, but they might as well be on the other side of the world. Except that they can’t move. They won’t move. They are each grounded to the land.

Yossi is a Zionist. He believes in a two-state solution. He sees Israel as the fulfillment of Jewish ideals, but he is not blind to the past. He fought in the IDF during the First Intifada. He lost friends in the Second Intifada. He knows the costs at stake. Yossi Klein Halevi’s Zionism, the Zionism I believe we should embody, is aware of the past and present but knows that the only way forward is through dialogue, earnest listening and carefully spoken words that generate meaningful progress, the kind that happens at Samir’s, the kind that we each can participate in as well. We’re doing a lot this at Temple Emanu-El this year with classes and speakers that invite deep and nuanced conversation about Israel. If you want more information on these opportunities, please reach out to me. I would be happy to sit down with you.

In an age where it is all too easy to retreat to digital echo chambers, let us be activists for in-person dialogue. Don’t think that this is some 21st century Silicon Valley fad. We’re reclaiming a core tenant of Judaism: arguing with our enemies and making peace.

Whether we prefer discourse, dialogue, or even argument. Let’s get down to what that really means: listening and speaking with those with whom we disagree. The classic example in Jewish literature is the Talmud. To even look at a page of Talmud is to see generations upon generations of Jews engaged in earnest learning and open debate. Each page of Talmud is like an open letter

to a neighbor; not all the neighbors in Talmud are friendly. This is life. This is the real world. In Israel, in America, ages ago and to this very day.

No two Jews exemplify this action of heated discussion better than Hillel and Shammai. Two polar opposites of Jewish action and belief, Hillel and Shammai did not agree on anything. They didn't even agree on who could convert to Judaism. Our rabbis teach that once, when Shammai was approached by a potential convert who only wanted to learn the Bible and not the Talmud, Shammai rejected him immediately. However, when the same person asked Hillel the very same question, Hillel accepted that person immediately and the two began to learn even the Talmud. Their disagreement ran as deep as who could be Jewish, still, this did not prevent them from talking with one another, from living side by side, and even from marrying their children to one another.

We know that we fall into the hole, the rut, the trap of echo-chambers, of homogenous groups where our cynicism grows, we can preach to the choir, and make bogeymen out of the "other." Until we start using generous listening, the echoes may only reverberate louder. Generous listening doesn't mean sitting politely, criss-cross applesauce, with our hands in our laps. No, generous listening is where, after we hear someone's story, we ask honest questions that generate deeper discussion and draw us in. We don't hold back our opinion. Instead, we offer it with the understanding that the act of sharing brings us closer, even if we disagree.

We haven't lost that same ability to struggle and argue. Our very name, Yisrael, means struggle with God, and we know our namesake, our forefather Jacob struggled with God and humans and prevailed. It is only through struggling, talking, and listening that we will make Israel and the Jewish people into beacons of light unto the nations.

Perhaps the greatest gift of the Jewish people to the world is the perseverance to live together despite our differences. If we fail to continue the dialogue, if we retreat into echo chambers, then we do not only risk losing the dream of Zionism: of Israel as a pluralistic, democratic Jewish state. We risk losing our ability to coexist and still hold our different opinions. We risk allowing our differences to divide the Jewish collective into factions, when, for millennia, the Jewish people have been united because of our differences.

The epicenter of this dream is at Samir's. I always return to Samir's, even though it's never really the same now when I go back. Samir died two years ago. His son Jahlil now runs the restaurant, but the vision has not changed one bit. That is what gives me hope. Places like Ramle, Samir's especially, places where TV cameras rarely visit, these are the reasons we have to hope for a better future. Better doesn't mean easier, in fact, it will most likely be very hard, but I know that when we sit down to a meal, when we come hungry for understanding, then we will be filled with hope.

In 5779, may we favor the hard, slow conversation that feeds understanding and hope. May we engage with those who seek to bring people together, rather than polarize. May our dialogue at the water cooler or the Shabbat table generate relationships that lead to peace. A peace that does not mean everyone has a unanimous opinion, but a peace that comes with living our differences together when it comes to Israel, America, or Judaism. I lived it in Ramle, I saw it at Samir's. If it's possible in some small town along the ancient road from the sea to the capital, somewhere between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, then why can't it be possible here too.

Ken y'hi ratzon

G'mar chatimah tova

Shana Tova