Kiryat Shemona – *Mah Tovu*

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After high school and before college, I spent a year in Israel as a volunteer for a new program called OTZMA. The program was meant to strengthen relationships between Israeli and American Jews. In 1987, decades before Birthright, this was the cheapest way I could go to Israel. For $750 I got a flight to Israel, an exceptional educational program, travel throughout the country, three and a half months in a kibbutz ulpan, and a monthly stipend for the better part of a year.

I wanted to go because I knew I would get to work on kibbutz. I loved the idea that especially on kibbutz and in Israel as a whole, I could be part of a society where the individuals were bound together in a shared mission. This mission was partly about protecting Jews from anti-Semitism, but it was also about building a society of shared sacrifice, deep communal bonds rooted in utopian visions that were both biblical and socialist. At 18 this was an identity and a way of life I wanted to embrace.

I also very much wanted and got an adventure, of the kind it would be hard to replicate today. I was far away from my parents in a way that 18-year-olds rarely are now. To call home I had to get a massive stack of phone tokens called *assimonim*, to use a pay phone. Forget about the internet, e-mail and cell phones. I wrote my parents aerograms on thin blue paper when I thought of it, maybe once a month. They diligently wrote me weekly letters that included a $20 bill, which I would trade at good rates with owners of falafel stands. In the Israel of that time, I often would travel on weekends to Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, with little money in my pocket and an unclear destination. I could hitch rides or get on a bus, meet strangers and rely on them for help, offering me free meals and sofas to sleep on.

After working on kibbutz, studying Hebrew in ulpan, volunteering at Kefar Hadassim, a kind of state-run boarding school for immigrant and disadvantaged kids, we volunteers were sent off to spend the spring in different working-class, usually depressed, communities around Israel. I was sent to Kiryat Shemona. I simultaneously loved and hated my time in this sleepy town of 20,000. Kiryat Shemona is mostly known for being close enough to the Lebanese border to be a regular target for the short-range Katyusha rockets. Still romantically attached to the myth of the early pioneers, I had volunteered to work construction. I imagined I could actually build something.

It is kind of remarkable now to think that with no skill or experience in construction, I somehow believed Israel could benefit from my physical labor. The closest job they could find for me was working at kind of an assisted living center, doing odd jobs. This usually involved drilling holes into concrete blocks and trying to shove little plastic things into the holes that a screw could be fastened to. Whether I was sent to repair a screen door or handrail, these jobs proved to be more about me visiting with the elderly residents and being served sweet mint tea and biscuits than about getting anything fixed.

I would like to say I contributed something to the community of Kiryat Shemona, but the truth is we volunteers were largely on our own in a community that didn't much know what to do with us. And what I lacked in direction I made up for with typical late-teen irresponsibility. The year after I did this program, they announced that the program would no longer be open to students right out of high school. Sadly, I now realize I probably had something to do with this change in policy.

I have been thinking a lot about Israel this summer. As you might expect, this is in part because of the ongoing drama about the Palestinian bid for statehood in the U.N. But what has really been capturing my attention and causing me to think about Israel has been the Israeli social movement that began in July and that, though far less reported, is, I believe, more consequential not only to the future of Israel but to the future of the Jewish people.

The July social movement is rooted in the growing dissatisfaction of many Israelis with the cost of living in a country where the gap between rich and poor is second only to the United States, but where the average household wage is half that of the average in the U.S., and the cost of basic living is almost universally higher. Signs of this dissatisfaction had been bubbling up earlier in the summer with things like the successful boycott of the Israeli breakfast staple of cottage cheese.

But the movement really started to take shape when Daphni Leef, a 25-year-old video editor from Tel Aviv, was asked to vacate her apartment because the building was being renovated. Unable to find an affordable apartment – rental prices in Tel Aviv have doubled over the past five years – Leef created a Facebook "event," inviting her friends to protest high housing prices by erecting tents on Tel Aviv's exclusive Rothschild Boulevard. Daphni Leef was motivated by both immediate and deep self-interest. That she did not have a place to live may have been her immediate self-interest, but her anger that economics and housing policies made it nearly impossible for her to find an apartment represented the kind of deep self-interest which we can only address with the help of others.

She pitched her tent on Rothschild and was joined by hundreds of others who shared this deep frustration and concern about affordable housing. She was joined not only in Tel Aviv but in tent camps that sprung up all over Israel. This movement, which started as an angry statement rooted in the immediate self-interest of one woman trying to find affordable housing in Israel, quickly became about something much larger. It became a national dialogue about the Israeli social contract.

The tent camp protests were joined by hundreds of other protests, with huge gatherings all over Israel every Saturday night. At the most recent high point of this protest movement, on September 3, over 300,000 people protested in Tel Aviv and nearly half a million in all of Israel, for what was the largest protest ever in Israel. This night of protest was participated in by 6% of the population, and polls show that it was supported by nearly 90% of the population. To put that in perspective, 18.5 million Americans would have to join a day of protest to match these numbers. This protest included five times as many people as were present at the height of the protests in Tahrir Square. (For more statistics and history visit http://action.nif.org/p/salsa/web/common/public/signup?signup_page_KEY=6318.)

To give you an idea of the breadth of this movement, the following is an excerpt from a poem by Anat Levin circulated as an invitation to the protest (from "The 'One Million' demonstration, September 3, 2011"). It's called **The Reasons or: Invitation to the demonstration.**

> Because Lily, who cleans offices, had her rent raised this week from 2400 to 2800 shekels. She gets 1444 shekels from the National Insurance Institute. Now she has to look for a new flat and doesn't have a computer. She can't search online. And she is sixty one;
>
> Because Sigal from the Middle Eastern restaurant is a single mom, lives in a small room at her relatives' in the Hatikva neighborhood with no hope;
>
> Because Maya has two little girls, a medium apartment, a full-time job, a big overdraft;
>
> Because Lior has two master's degrees and no job; . . .
>
> Because Yudit takes a bus and a bus and a bus to work (she sits in the back with a book or, when exhausted, looks at the view);
>
> Because Hagit has no air conditioning and it's summer;
>
> Because Dana has been working since she was sixteen (a waitress) and she is thirty eight (a secretary) and still pays rent;…
>
> Because Shai cannot afford to buy the journal that published her poems;
>
> Because they canceled bus line 53;
>
> Because Rami's sister has a daughter and twins and cannot afford diapers;
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> Because Yoav is studying philosophy and everybody tells him he's wasting his time;
>
> Because Liran is not coming back from Japan because when you're 40 you can't find a job;…
>
> Because Gilad Shalit was abandoned just like your loved ones, your sons and your daughters, would most likely be abandoned too;
>
> Because I do know all of these people. They are real people;
>
> Because you can't live in a poem;…
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> (This is slightly edited – the poem in its entirety can be found at http:// blogs.forward.com/the-arty-semite/142572/.)

Israelis are used to self-sacrifice. Many generations had come as immigrants, worked hard, and given their entire lives to building this small Jewish nation. For much of Israel's history, people knew that they might be suffering but at least they were suffering together. This willingness to sacrifice, perhaps best exemplified by the compulsory military service, was rewarded not only with a state-provided safety net but with a deep sense of shared purpose.

The current wave of protests over the cost of housing and basic goods stems partly from the feeling that the government has stopped doing all it can and should for average citizens — stopped making sure they are well housed and fed — and that the collective vision that animated Israel is being lost. The July movement in Israel was a wake-up call that this social covenant is broken – that individuals are being asked to sacrifice, but that this sacrifice is not being shared equally. (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/06/world/middleeast/06israel.html?_r=1&emc=eta1)

A primary slogan of this movement is *Ha'am doresh tzedek hevrati* – directly translated "the people seek social justice," but which I think might be better translated "the people seek justice that is communal." The implied message that justice could be found by citizens taking responsibility for each other was strengthened when this chant was transformed at later protests to *Ha'am yotzer tzedek hevrati* – "the people create social justice."

In the U.S. we do not have institutions, like a military draft, that build an understanding of shared sacrifice for the benefit of all. We don't tend to see our own economic challenges – high tuition for college, or problems with health insurance, and so on – as something we endure for the good of the country or community. We tend to experience these hardships as individual worries, failings, or inadequacies rather than as challenges and sacrifices we endure for the good of the whole.

A classic poem from Israel's founding, by Amir Gilboa, has been put to music by Shalom Artzi and has become an anthem of this new Israeli movement:

> *Pitom kam adam baboker* – "Suddenly a man wakes up in the morning"
> *Umargish kishehu am, umatchil lalechet* – "He feels he is a nation and begins to walk"
> *Ulechol hanifgash bedarko, kore hu 'shalom'* – "And to all he meets on his way he calls out 'Shalom!'"
> (The full text of this poem is at the end.)

This poem speaks to the yearning for a shared purpose and shared commitment like that of the earlier pioneers in Israel. But it also speaks to the awakening of shared brotherhood and community that this movement has inspired. For many of us, the closest we have come to such a feeling might have been in the days after September 11, a unity that was rooted in shared despair and pain. Imagine what it would feel like to experience that kind of compassionate unity in a moment of communal hope.

Let me read you a little of Daphni Leef's speech from Sept. 3 – Daphni Leef, who helped to start this movement and was now speaking to a crowd of more than some 300,000 Israelis:

> My generation grew up with the feeling that we were alone in the world. It's us versus the TV screen. That the other is our enemy that he is our competitor. We grew up with the feeling that we are living in a race we have no chance of winning, that we mustn't rely on anyone else. They taught us that it's either you or him.

I pause to note that I think many 25-year-olds here in the U.S. might describe a similar feeling. Except that it has only been with the onset of the recession that they have begun to question whether this is a race they can win or to consider what they have been racing toward.

> *Daphni continued:* We were closed up each of us in his own cycle, a cycle of dissatisfaction, in a feeling of absurdity. And suddenly we began to talk, and more importantly: We began to listen.

Again I pause to explain this reference. You may have a picture of what economic protest looks like. But a hallmark of this movement has been dialogue and listening. On one night more than a thousand white plastic tables were set up, at which people sat down with strangers to talk about the issues these protests have brought to the surface, and to listen.

> *Daphni continued*: We've replaced the word *pity* with the word *compassion*. We've replaced the word *charity* with the word *justice*…. We've replaced the word *consumer* with the word *citizen*…. We've replaced the word *alone* with the word *together*. This is the greatest thing that we've done this summer. I don't know about you, friends, but it's already irreversible. We'll not agree to go backward! We are striding forward, to a better future, to a more just country.
> (For her entire speech, see http://makom.haaretz.com/blog.asp?rId=275.)

When Daphni Leef says this change is irreversible, that she won't go backward, she isn't saying that she will stay in a tent forever. Or that she will never think about things like her career or finding a nice apartment or a good school for her children. She is offering a kind of prayer that this moment of collective responsibility and collective interest in the hardship and challenges of the individuals of the community will not be lost. That a new covenantal dedication is being reborn, rooted in the Zionism of an earlier generation.

Just as that generation rooted itself in the visions of generations of Jews. As we say when we return the Torah each Shabbat, and sing more prominently over these Days of Awe:

> *Hashivenu Adonay eleycha vanashuva, Hadesh yamenu kekedem*
> Return us to you Adonay, Renew our days like they used to be!

Or as we say every Saturday night before havdalah , "The Jews of old had light and happiness, joy and love – may it be so for us!"

I can't tell you how moved I was when I started hearing from my friend and fellow Reconstructionist Rabbi Amy Klein about the demonstrations she was attending in Kiryat Shemona. On September 3,10,000 people gathered around Kiryat Shemona's tent community. 10,000 in a town with a total population of 23,000. In a town where folks are mostly poor and fatalistic. 10,000 people protested in Kiryat Shemona, where I went as a young 19-year-old, imagining that I was there to help them, because this is a place where despite poverty and hardship, people take responsibility for one another.

I could tell you countless stories about Moroccan, Syrian, and Yemenite Jewish mothers who knew another truth of my trip to their village: That I was there to be taken care of by them. These women fed me more food than I could eat, food that was spicier than I could eat, but all of which I ate, out of respect, because I knew it was given with tremendous care and generosity.

Not that anyone could have said it at the time, but it was almost as if the residents of Kiryat Shemona were saying to me, "You think you have come to help us build, but really we are going to build you. We are investing in you, young man, so that you might know what it is like to feel connected to something bigger than yourself, so that you might know what we know every day, here on the border's edge of Israel, that we Jews are all bound together."

Kol yisrael aravim zeh bezeh, "all Israel is bound one to the other." Sometimes we don't need to break bonds to feel a sense of liberation; we need to build them.

At Sinai the Jews entered into a covenant with God, not as individuals but as an entire people. For many of us, one of the places we most feel our connection to humanity is through our concern for the well-being of fellow Jews. I think it is this desire to acknowledge that our lot is in fact tied together with a broader community that compels us to show up on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I think it is our desire for more meaningful bonds of community connection that inspires many of us to join synagogues.

And I do not believe I am alone as an American Jew in feeling connected to Israel in part because of the deeper social contract that seems present there. It is part of why we fought for the freedom of Soviet refuseniks or were concerned with the poverty of Argentinian Jews or buy coffee made by Ugandan Jews, and it is why for many, regardless of our politics, Israel is so important. We feel responsible to and linked with the people *Yisrael*.

The value we are exploring this year is Tikkun 'Olam, our obligation to repair the world. And much of our effort will be directed externally, toward helping others. It can be hard to feel you are repairing the world if you never leave home. But the work we do to acknowledge our own personal challenges – the things that keep us up at night, the problems that we suffer through alone but really shouldn't have to, the problems that we can't solve alone – this work is the very most basic building block of Tikkun 'Olam.

The very act of admitting that we need help, that we can't do it alone is a small Tikkun, a repair. The very act of seeking out partners with whom to share our story is a Tikkun. The effort required to, with the help of others, recast our problems as issues we can work to change together is a Tikkun. Actions that begin rooted in individual self-interest often blossom, moving us to feel more connected to others in our acknowledgement of our own vulnerability.

This summer in Kiryat Shemona a town that regularly elects candidates from Israel's political right, their demonstrations have included participation and speeches by Israeli Arabs, as they have throughout Israel. And it is worth pointing out that there have been dozens of tent encampments in Israel's Arab villages, and these Jewish and Arab protesters have been working together. It is noteworthy that these demonstrations by Israelis have drawn inspiration from and made connections to the uprising of the Arab Spring, with a banner at the Tel Aviv demonstration reading *Rot'child Pinat Tachrir,* "The corner of Rothschild and Tahrir."

In the religiously conservative, heavily Orthodox Kiryat Shemona, my friend and fellow Reconstructionist Rabbi Amy Klein led kabbalat Shabbat services. I am not sure which is the bigger story, that a woman rabbi was leading services or that secular Israelis showed up. And that similar expressions of liberal Judaism were popping up at demonstrations throughout Israel. This new voice for liberal rabbis and this embrace of Shabbat prayer at predominantly secular

demonstrations is another striking story.

Mah tovu ohalecha ya'akov, umishkenotecha yisrael. "How wonderful are your tents, Jacob, your dwellings, Israel." Perhaps you are like me – excited by the idea of living in a tent camp protest. Moved by the effort of joining together with others, while getting by with very little, all the while planning bigger, more creative actions. Or perhaps not…

But my guess is you can think of a moment when you had to get by with less, but your life felt richer, because at that moment you felt a stronger sense of fellowship with the people in your life. Moments when your connection with friends or commitment to family or the help you gave or received from a near stranger felt like the most important thing.

It need not be a protest like the ones in Israel or a disaster like Sept. 11, but it might be. You don't need to have joined a commune, though perhaps you did. It might be something very simple, like your memory of summer camp as a kid, or maybe college was a little like this, or maybe you feel a touch of this connection saying hello to neighbors as you join together to shovel walks after a big snow. I know I am always surprised at the fellowship that arises between families, strangers really, who have pitched their tents at a camp ground.

Mah tovu ohalecha ya'akov, umishkenotecha yisrael. "How wonderful are your tents, Jacob, your dwellings, Israel." When Balaam offered this blessing to the people Israel, it was supposed to be a curse. But as he looked out at them, a people in the wilderness with no land and with little more than their tents pitched side by side, all that came out was a blessing.

Sometimes it is in our shared acknowledgement of insecurity that we find liberation and wholeness. It is not that any of us need more hardship in our lives, but when we throw our lot in with others in need, when we refuse to be strangers and share the truth of our suffering or challenges, when we pitch our tents together, our curses can become blessings.*

**The conclusion of this sermon was inspired by a poem by Nir Levy, shared with me by Aaron Back (http://southjerusalem.com/2011/08/the-tents-produce-poetry/).*

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Full text of the poem by Amir Gilboa:

SUDDENLY A MAN WAKES UP
A SONG IN THE MORNING

Suddenly a man wakes up in the morning
He feels he is a nation and begins to walk
And to all he meets on his way he calls out 'Shalom!'

Corn stalks are growing up in front of him
Between the cracks in the sidewalks
and lilac trees shower down rich fragrance on his head
The dew drops are sparkling
and the hills are a myriad of rays
They will give birth to a canopy of sunlight for his wedding

Suddenly a man wakes...

And he laughs with the strength of generations
in the mountains,
and the shamed wars bow down to the ground,
to the glory of a thousand years
flowing forth from the hiding places,
a thousand young years in front of him
like a cold brook, like a shepherd's song,
like a branch.

Suddenly a man wakes up in the morning
He feels he is a nation and begins to walk,
and he sees that the spring has returned
and a tree is turning green again
since last fall's treeshedding.

Suddenly a man wakes...

Ha am doresh tzedek Hevrati