

Hope

Today, I want to talk about hope. The national anthem of Israel is ha-Tikvah, the Hope, and I want to talk about what we can hope for when we think about Israel, a land and a people to which we are inextricably tied by history and by our common peoplehood. In simple demographic terms, of the roughly 14 million Jews in the world today, about 6 million live in Israel and 6 million in the United States, while the other 2 million are scattered among many countries. That fact alone makes Israel central to the Jewish project. But it has been hard in recent years to talk about Israel with hope. We have seen the peace process become a no-peace process, and we have watched the worst impulses of American politics replicated in the Israeli political system. Where is the hope?

I had the amazing opportunity this past spring to take a trip to Israel with Rabbi Gordon that restored my hope along with my resolve to engage with Israel. The trip was with a group called Interfaith Partners for Peace, pairing rabbis with, on this trip, Protestant ministers to encounter Israel together, its struggles, its successes, and its prospects for peace. Later this fall we will host a program here at GJC with my clergy partners, including the Reverend Rebecca Kirkpatrick of Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church and the Reverend Joyce Shin of Swarthmore Presbyterian Church. But I wanted to share just a couple of stories today about what gave me hope on that trip.

The trip had two main objectives: to share and compare our different personal and religious connections to the land Christians and Jews, to perhaps different degrees, both see as holy, and to explore how Palestinians and Israelis are, perhaps improbably, working together for peace in small-scale organizations that usually escape our notice. To fulfill the first objective, we visited Jewish and Christian holy sites in the land together. The Jewish sites I had, unsurprisingly, seen before, but the Christian sites were wholly unfamiliar to me, places I may have driven by but never seen. I had some vague idea that Christians venerated the “land where Jesus walked,” but I was a little unclear on the details.

One of the first sites we visited was Yardenit, a baptismal and pilgrimage site on the Jordan River, just as it exits the Kinneret, the Sea of Galilee. At Yardenit people remember and talk about Jesus’s baptism, but interestingly, it’s not the site traditionally believed to be the location of that event; that is far away, across the Green Line and difficult to visit. Because of that, the Israeli government established Yardenit as an “alternative” pilgrimage site, one that now draws over 400,000 visitors each year. Not only is Yardenit not really believed to be the site of Jesus’s baptism, the Jordan River at that point is really no more than a trickle, not enough to make the story of the baptism plausible. To deal with that, the government authorized a special diversion of water to create baptismal locations at Yardenit for the sake of the pilgrims. Despite the rather artificial origins of this site, some of the ministers on our trip were clearly moved by connecting this spot to the Biblical story they knew so well, wading into the water and filling bottles with it to take back to their congregants. Others, however, were completely unmoved, saying they felt no connection to the location, only to the story. The

diversity of the ministers' reactions was a hopeful sign to me, mirroring the varied reactions that Jews have to the land and the different ways that we do and do not connect to the stories grafted onto it. If we could understand this diversity, I thought, maybe they could understand ours.

Later in the trip, we crossed the Green Line and headed into Bethlehem to visit another place I had never been, the Church of the Nativity, traditional site of Jesus's birth. Even though millions of pilgrims and tourists from all over the world visit this site, the Palestinian authorities decided that this group—our group of mixed Jewish and Christian clergy—needed special security. Rabbis and ministers, walking together: now that's clearly a dangerous situation. So, closely guarded by armed Palestinian policemen with uniforms marked "State of Palestine," we headed into the church and down, down into the cave beneath containing, tradition holds, the manger where Jesus was born. Here, even the most rationalist of the ministers were deeply moved, many to tears. I remember one of them raising shining eyes to the group and saying, "This is where He was born!" Again, I was inspired to see how even the most skeptical among them found a deep connection to holiness in a place associated with their core religious texts. If they could feel that connection, I thought, then maybe they can understand the complex but equally deep connections that Jews feel to the land of Israel.

We proceeded to visit many organizations where Jews and Palestinians are working together to bring their people closer to each other, but one that stands out is our visit to Kids 4 Peace, a wonderful organization that accompanies Palestinian and Israeli children through a 6-year peace curriculum. Jointly run by an Orthodox Jewish Israeli woman and a Muslim Palestinian man, Kids 4 Peace is an amazing example both of the connections that can be nurtured between young people and of the strength of commitment that so many Palestinian and Israeli families feel to personally working for peace. Like many other such organizations, Kids 4 Peace doesn't just connect the kids; it connects the families, and that makes all the difference to its impact, which is growing every day. As inspiring as that story was, I was even more moved when the Israeli and Palestinian leaders—who have worked together for years—talked very openly about what happened on the day when the U.S. government announced that it would be moving its embassy to Jerusalem. The Israeli leader immediately began fielding phone calls from staff and parents. Are we still having programs? Is this the end? She couldn't understand why. When her Palestinian co-leader arrived, they immediately headed to their office and had hours of emergency dialogue. It turned out that despite all of their work and talk, they realized that there was still so much they didn't understand about each other. In the end they decided that they didn't know what the future would be, but they did know that they were not going to stop working together, not going to stop trying to build the Jerusalem and the Israel in which they want to live.

I found that this story restored my hope because it was not the story of people from different sides who found that they agreed with each other and so decided to work together to promote their shared opinions. These are not people who agree with each other on almost anything except their shared desire to learn and interact with each other. They are not

connecting because of their sameness but because of their startling difference. The leaders say that they attract very few families that are left-wing or peaceniks, very few that are secular. Most are religious and have very strong, often opposing views about the conflict and what to do about it. And yet, despite all that separates them, they are reaching out to connect with each other.

This is the kind of hope that this interfaith trip brought home for me: not the hope of magical resolution or a sudden outbreak of sanity and peace. Instead, I came back hopeful because despite all that is going on in Israel, there are so many people committed to reaching out across all that divides them to find and encounter each other. If they can do that, then there is no limit to what can be achieved—listening, understanding, even peace. *ha-Tikvah*—that's the hope.

How can we support that hope? There are so many ways, and I'm going to run quickly through a bunch of different ones so that you can find one that appeals to you. One way to support Israel that we have known about for years is to invest in Israel Bonds. This is an investment, not a donation; these bonds provide reasonable rates of return while supporting civilian infrastructure projects within the Green Line in Israel, building up the strength of Israeli civil society by preparing it for the future that we hope for. There are Israel Bonds cards on the table in the Charry Lobby, and I encourage you to pick one up and find out more about whether buying Israel Bonds could work for you. Inside that Israel Bonds card you will find a slip of paper with the names of a variety of Israeli non-profit organizations that are in desperate need of your support. Almost all Israeli NGO's could not survive without donations from abroad; we are the backbone of the kind of hopeful projects that I saw with my Christian partners in Israel—they would not exist without us. On a high level, the Jewish Agency for Israel supports wide-ranging programs and advocates for diversity and social action in Israeli society, including lobbying the government to be more inclusive in its policies and programs. In addition to Kids 4 Peace, I have included Hand in Hand, which runs joint Jewish-Arab schools educating over 1,800 students this year; Tag Meir, which advocates for inclusion and acceptance of different segments of Israeli society; and One Family, which supports victims of terror. And there are so many more to choose from! Ask me if you want more ideas.

When we support these different organizations in Israel, we express our faith that there is a future, that hope has not been lost, and that *ha-Tikvah* has not lost its meaning for us. Please join me in giving of your time, your attention, and your resources to Israel during this year. Please join me in hope.