

In Twenty Years What Has Changed? Rosh Hashanah 5783 Day One Israel Remarks

by Rabbi Fredi Cooper

Before Pesach, as is for many of us, I do a deep cleaning of my kitchen to ready the Coopers for the holiday. I love that Rosh Hashanah does not require the physical cleaning of the kitchen, refrigerator, the ovens and the changing of all of the dishes, pots and utensils. It therefore truly allows for the cleaning of our souls to prepare ourselves to come before God.

This year was a little different in the Cooper household. Happily, we have a daughter from Israel with us for the holiday and the entire fall season. In preparation for her arrival I have been deep in the process of a Fall house cleaning and disposal. In this process I came upon a binder with all of my outlines and sermons from the year 5764, almost a time period of twenty years. That High Holiday season I was the guest rabbi at West End Synagogue in Manhattan filling in for a colleague who was ill. My Yom Kippur sermon entitled :”Blood on My Street” was amongst my discoveries. In those remarks I spoke with passion, as a mother, who at that time had just one daughter living in Israel, about my sorrow after a terrorist attack that had occurred just before Yom Kippur on my favorite street in Jerusalem, Emek Refaim. It was and still is, a street on which I feel that I am “at home” when I am walking on it.

I was most moved in the re-reading of my words from 5764 at how much had changed in these twenty years---and of course what still had not. In my reading I was anxious to find what I hoped for then and to see how it measured up to what I hope for today. Much of the premise of what I wrote then was how my sheltered daughter had chose to live her life in our “homeland”. To me, then it seemed her choice was filled with danger. I wondered how much safer she would be had she chosen to stay closer by in quiet Chestnuthill where she had grown up. I must admit to you that my words from that time had a degree of self-assured smugness that my sense of peace at home was so correct.

Change---fragility of life----choppy waters in the seas that surround us----I am so much more aware of all of these today than I was then.

Yes---it is the signs of a world transformed that are mostly what call to me today when I re-read my words. In 5764, just two years after 9/11, I felt so sure that the home she had left to live in Israel was the place that stood on a solid foundation. In the US, I was sure, we had it right. We could tell Israel how to do it better. We possessed answers if only those living in Israel would listen to us!

But our world at home has been shaken to it’s core and the ground we stand on here today is no longer firm or solid. We are standing on teetering grounds. Perhaps this is truly the time when we can look to each other in Israel and the US to find some way to steady our fragile world.

Since last High Holidays, I have been blessed to be able to return to Israel again, two times. These visits had seemed so our to reach at the start of the pandemic. We felt so glad to be “home” again. We treasured every minute with now, both of our daughters in Israel. We felt alive with them now that Israel felt it safe enough for families to be together. In our “second home” we walked the streets mostly in Tel Aviv, but also on Emek Refaim, and the streets gave me some optimism. Assuredly, this optimism was tentative as I now really know how quickly all of conditions of our lives can change.

I offer two sources of that optimism.

Walking the streets of Tel Aviv, even with social distancing, there was an electric energy that pervaded the air. Of course, in Israel, it is just the norm to eat outdoors, and every restaurant and café was filled with life and excitement. As Heshie and I walked home from dinner one night we encountered a sight that I would not see at home. We walked in the dark, around 9:00 at night, behind three little girls. They wore their leotards and tutus from ballet class and they had their backpacks slung on their backs. They walked home together in the dark as a normal activity. It threw me back to my own childhood when children could play, walk and even take buses on their own without fear. This was a scene that I knew I would not encounter when I returned to Chestnuthill....back in what I once considered the “safer neighborhood>”

I also must say that on those two visits I felt some hope from the shaky coalition government that had formed with unlikely partners. While all acknowledged it was unstable and may not hold....at the time they were working together and accomplishing things that had not happened in years, like passing a much needed budget. It was a perfect example that people of different minds could even find a way to talk and work together.

Of course there is no room to live without worry and I do worry. That coalition, as we know, could not hold. Again, Israel will go to elections for the fifth time in five years. It is not clear that a stable government can be reached in this upcoming election. Without stability, the ground again quakes with the possibility of violence and destruction as both Israel and the PA search for leaders who can sit together, negotiate and end this ongoing cycle.

Back in 5764 there were words I quoted that are still apt. David Grossman an Israeli author stated:

“Dialogue, as difficult as it may be has tremendous importance in shaping the nature of the peace to come. Dialogue also contributes to the political maturation of its partners.”

Just last week the partners showed at least in words spoken some inclination toward dialogue. At the UN, Lapid said: “ we seek peace with our neighbors and we are here in Israel to stay forever.”

And Abbas stated: “ Israel should return to negotiations with the PA to show a commitment to a two state solution.”

Words we can hear with hope, words that we need to embrace and hold the parties to....we seek peace and we should return to negotiations. We need to continue dialogue and that words alone cannot solve the situation in Israel/Palestine or at home in the US. There are so many divisions that the past year has shown us clearly. To steady our fragile world we will need....wisdom, commitment, connection, negotiation, dialogue and a devotion to bend the arc consistently toward justice.

In closing:

This year dear God teach us:

To continue to reach out to one another

To work always to seek peace and heal divisions

To hear the voice of the other who may not agree with us

To even try to touch all that we may fear

To finally assure that all of the children of the earth can wander about freely and safely

On this day of Rosh Hashanah

We turn our faces

Our hearts

Our souls

To one another so that

Face to face

Eye to eye

Soul to sould

We may once again find a way to peace in our world

Hand in Hand