

Rabbi's Report from Israel

Shabbat Pekudei 5776

March 11, 2016

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When a congregant is entering rehab, after an accident or a stroke, I always preach the same message: Rehabilitation requires two traits that don't obviously go together: patience and persistence. No, I'm not suggesting the type of patience that passively accepts the situation as it is. To the contrary. Patience is required because, even under the best of circumstances, with hard work and fabulous therapists, broken bodies and brains take time to heal. That patience must be paired with persistence, an unswerving commitment to the sustained effort necessary to make progress in rehab.

I was reminded of my "patience and persistence" mantra frequently when I was in Israel in late February for the annual convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Our Reform rabbinate assembles annually, meeting in Israel every seventh year. I have been blessed to participate in all four Israel conventions since my ordination, the first being in 1995. Looking back over the twenty-one years that have passed since that first Jerusalem convention, I marvel at the extent to which patience and persistence have led to progress for pluralism, and especially for our Reform Movement in Israel.

My sharpest memory from that first convention, in 1995, was a visit to *Beit HaNasi* -- the Israeli White House, if you will -- ceremonial residence of Israel's President.

The President at the time was Ezer Weizmann, of blessed memory, a war hero and nephew of Israel's first President, Chaim Weizmann. During our formal audience, a prominent colleague respectfully pressed the President on the question of equal religious rights for all Jews in Israel. The President's response was harsh: Unless we were making *aliyah*, prepared to move to Israel and become citizens, we were in no position to ask that our Movement be recognized.

I was dumbstruck. Wedding officiated by Reform and Conservative rabbis in Israel are not legally binding. The state keeps thousands upon thousands of Orthodox rabbis on the government payroll; but in those days, not a single rabbi or any other Movement was similarly compensated. The numbers of Reform and Conservative Jews in Israel were few, admittedly; but since when did basic

equality depend on numbers? Jews raise our voices for justice throughout the world. Why would living outside Israel disqualify American Jews from advocating for what is right?

We were not patient. We wanted equal rights for Reform and Conservative Judaism in Israel then and there, in 1995 and even before that. And we were not wrong. Basic justice demanded it.

Still, we had work to do. That's where the persistence comes into play. In 1995, very few Israelis had been ordained as Reform rabbis. More American-born and -trained Reform rabbis lived in Israel than native or long-time Israelis, ordained in Israel. Reform congregations were bilingual, because many of the members and worshippers on any given Shabbat were American-born Israelis or visitors from abroad. Significant work was required to build a Movement that would gain the recognition and respect of average Israelis -- and with that recognition and respect, slowly but surely, rights have followed.

What a difference two decades make.

When I was in Israel two weeks ago, our delegation attended a hearing of the Knesset Committee on Absorption and the Diaspora. Leaders of Reform Judaism, Israeli and North American, were received with honor as they addressed Israel's parliamentary committee. Even more impressively, some fifteen Knesset members -- from across the political spectrum, including two members of the ruling Likud Party -- extolled Reform Judaism and Jewish religious pluralism in Israel. Earlier in the week, our leaders met with Prime Minister Netanyahu and with President Rivlin. The President welcomed us all with a recording message, affirming the place of liberal Judaism in the Jewish State. None scolded us for not having moved to Israel, or suggested that doing so is a prerequisite for expecting our Israeli colleagues to be granted the same rights as Orthodox rabbis.

Perhaps the greatest compliment of all was the venom directed at us in the press by Israel's ultra-Orthodox establishment. As Rabbi Eric Yoffie has written, their opprobrium signals recognition that Reform Judaism has made significant inroads in Israel and palpable fear that Orthodox hegemony is coming to an end, in favor of equal religious rights for all Israeli Jews.

How have we done it? Perhaps most importantly, Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem will later this year ordain the 100th rabbi to complete our Movement's Israel rabbinic program. Often heroic, Israeli Reform rabbis are establishing and

growing congregations and community centers, schools and public presences, in cities and towns throughout the country. The central address for Bar or Bat Mitzvah for the children of Israelis who call themselves "secular?" Beit Daniel, the Reform mega-synagogue in Tel Aviv. The central address for meaningful dialogue between Israeli Arabs and Jews? A congregation called Yozma in a suburb called Modi'in. Israelis overwhelmingly support religious equality for men and women; the large number of women among Israel's Reform rabbis speaks volumes. LGBT Israelis considering a spiritual home? The Reform congregation is the only place to go, and a wonderful and welcoming place, whether the rabbi is gay or straight. Heck, there's even a Classical Reform congregation in Jerusalem, praying from an Israeli version of the Union Prayer Book, Sinai Edition, as we are tonight.

The most moving moments of most American Jews' Israel experiences are at the *Kotel*, the Western Wall of the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem. I confess that I have really had to "fake it" with groups at the *Kotel* in the past. Yes, I understand about all the generations of our people who prayed their whole lives for the opportunity to stand before those ancient stones. Still, the enforced separation of men and women, under separate and grossly unequal conditions, have made the Wall feel *treif* to me, not at all holy. For thirty years, Women of the Wall has been holding a monthly gathering in the women's section to celebrate the New Moon. All too often, women have been beaten or jailed for the "crime" of praying with a *tallis* or *t'fillin* -- or, God forbid, seeking to read publicly from an actual Torah scroll in that sacred place.

In the weeks before our convention, at long last, a compromise was struck. An area at the southern end of the Western Wall has long been the only place where men and women could pray together at the *Kotel*. Up to now, though, that area doesn't feel or look like part of the *Kotel*, but more like an archeological or construction site. Under the new plan, approved by Prime Minister Netanyahu and his cabinet, that area will be redesigned into a separate, equal part of the *Kotel*. It will be called *Ezrat Yisrael*, the area for all the Jewish people, under joint control of the Jewish Agency and the Reform and Conservative Movements. There, men and women will worship side by side or together, with dignity equal to those who pray at the gender-separated sections which will remain under Orthodox control. Even though the design and construction have yet to begin, praying there two weeks ago, knowing what is to come, with a woman rabbi wearing *t'fillin* reading from the Torah before us, I was deeply moved at the Western Wall as I never have been in my countless visits since 1976.

Much remains to be accomplished, and not only at the *Kotel*. As many of you know, Toni and I have family in Israel, including three nieces in their late 20s and early 30s. Though two have legally recognized marriages, because I officiated at private ceremonies on this *bimah*, none of their "real" weddings, the ones in Israel, officiated by Conservative rabbis, has any legal status. And that's just one example.

The gains our Movement has achieved over the years have been the result of sustained effort, growing our Reform presence throughout the Jewish State and fighting for our rights. Anat Hoffman, who heads the Israel Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, continues to lead our struggles. Come to Israel with our Temple group in September; we are scheduled to meet with Anat personally. She wouldn't admit to being patient. However, she has persistently stood up for equal rights, celebrating victories even as she reminds us how much work remains. I would call that "active patience." Even as we rejoice in the historic victory at the *Kotel*, the Israel Religious Action Center has filed suit against El Al, seeking to stop its flight attendants from asking women to switch seats because an ultra-Orthodox male, in a perversion of Torah, says he's forbidden to sit next to a woman.

Tonight, we read from the fifth of five Torah portions about the erection of the Tabernacle, a sacred place for the Israelites to worship in the desert. A long and winding path has gotten Moses to the great moment of fulfillment that he celebrated as he completes this holy place.

We pray that, like Moses, our Reform Movement in Israel may continue to build holiness with patience and persistence.

On Sunday night the 28th, when I was already at the airport to leave Israel, our eldest Israeli niece gave birth to twins, Ron and Noah, at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. Their parents, Ruth and Amit, aren't legally married in Israel. Hardly secular, Amit heads Israel's Conservative youth movement. To them, a legal marriage would mean bowing to exclusively Orthodox authority. With the right kind of patience -- and even more, with persistence -- Ron and Noah will one day live in a very different Israel, with religious equality for all Jews.

Amen.