

**We Are All From the Same Small Town**  
**Rosh Hashana Day 2**  
**Rabbi Adam J. Raskin**

*Anachnu sh'neinu me'oto ha'kfar*

*Ota kima, ota blorit se'ar*

*Oto chituch dibur, mah yesh lomar*

*Anachnu sh'neinu me'oto ha'kfar...*

...Naomi Shemer, the late, great Israeli composer wrote these lyrics shortly after the Yom Kippur War. This stirring poem is about two friends who grew up together in the same town, then went off to war together. One came home alive, and the other did not. How haphazard. How simple it would have been for the roles to be reversed. Nevertheless, the two are inextricably linked...*anachnu sh'neinu mei-oto ha'kfar*...they, we are from the same small town. I have thought about these words since this past spring...the Arab Spring as it has been called. A season that at once witnessed the toppling of the some of the most repressive regimes in the Middle East as citizens of one country after another took to the streets demanding freedom, democracy, and the right to self-determination. At the same time however, in the vacuum created by the fall of those powerful leaders, those who have taken their place have expressed apathy at best and antipathy at worst to their predecessors' agreements with Israel. With Egypt's status severely diminished in the region, Turkey vies for regional hegemony, brandishing its credentials by expressing hostility and antagonism toward Israel. That's the litmus test for being a power broker among Islamic nations today! The one who hates Israel the most becomes the one that is respected the most. With those fresh winds of democracy blowing across the Mediterranean, simultaneously the stench of a seething hatred of Israel has been released. Hatred of Israel is a cancer that only seems to metastasize. With Israel perhaps more isolated now than ever in its history, one has to wonder, will a cure for this cancer ever be found?

You know, I was not alive in 1948, when Israel fought for its independence. I was not alive in 1967 when Israel, against all odds, beat back the forces of surrounding aggressors. And I was not in shul on the morning of Yom Kippur 1973 to hear the news

that Israel was attacked again on that holiest day. When SCUD missiles fell over Tel Aviv during the Gulf War, I was glued to CNN. But as frightening as those long nights of waiting and watching certainly were, I think most of us knew that no matter what Saddam fired at Israel, Israel would not, in the end, be exterminated. Today nothing seems so sure to me. Today, Hamas and Hezbollah are united by an unholy theology of genocide. Right now as we sit comfortably and safely in shul, there are 60,000 terrorist rockets pointed at the homes of Israelis. Backing them is the world's number one Holocaust denier, who hosts conventions and rallies to contemplate Israel's demise. We live in a world where ambassadors, diplomats welcome him among the community of nations gathered at the UN...where the Iranian President has a platform to suggest in New York City no less that the United States planned and executed the 9/11 attacks, or that the world is paying the Zionists a ransom for a Holocaust he doesn't even believe occurred. Today, the United Nations welcomes and legitimizes the membership application for a new nation that openly calls for the elimination of its neighbor! It's not only Hamas, but Abbas himself has repeatedly insisted that he will not recognize the Jewish state. Boycotts and divestment efforts, a coordinated international campaign designed to delegitimize Israel as a sovereign Jewish state are prevalent. Yes, today is different. And today I feel more than ever, *anachnu sh'neinu mei-oto ha'kfar*...we Jews, all Jews, American and Israeli, are from the same small town. Today I feel more than ever that Israel is so very necessary to the survival of the Jewish people, that we must redouble our loyalty and our commitment to her existence.

*Anachnu sh'neinu mei-oto ha'kfar*: our destiny is bound up in the destiny of Israel.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the greatest theologian of our time, once remarked: "When the Jews were driven out and no longer dwelled in the Holy Land, the land continued to dwell in them." How true that is for me...There are times when I am sitting outside in my back yard or walking the dog, and a certain smell, a certain sensation in the air reminds me of Israel. When I lived in New York City, passing by storefronts of fruits and flowers, I would think of Israel. And every day, as I scan the newspapers or watch the evening news, my eyes and my ears are invariably drawn to any mention, any passing

comment about Israel. Israel is constantly in my heart and in my soul. Though I live here, part of me is always there. *Anachnu sh'neinu mei'oto ha'kfar.*

The truth is that Israel changed my life. When I was a restless teenager, attempting to figure out my identity and purpose in the world, I was sent to Israel for a 6-week summer teen tour—a bar mitzvah present that had come due three years later. Hiking the Negev, breathing in the fresh cool air of the Galil, swimming in Israel's lakes and rivers and seas, tasting the sweetness of fresh baked rugelach from the shuk on Friday mornings, singing and swaying with *Yiddlach* from all over the world on Friday night at the Kotel, meeting teenagers not much older than me brandishing rifles and wearing the uniform of the Jewish state, perusing the haunting halls of Yad Vashem, overlooking the breathtaking cityscape of Jerusalem...all of this and so much more filled my heart with a love of Jewish life that made me who I am today. Maimonides, the great 12<sup>th</sup> century rabbi and scholar reports that “The greatest Sages would kiss the boundaries of the land of Israel, and kiss her stones and roll around in her dust.” Can you imagine the sight of these great rabbis rolling around in the dirt, lathering themselves with the schmutz of the land of Israel? But that shmutz is holy schmutz! Heschel writes: “When I go to Israel every stone and tree is a reminder of hard labor and glory, of prophets and psalmists, of loyalty and holiness. The Jews go to Israel not only for physical security for themselves and their children; they go to Israel for renewal, for the experience of resurrection.” Anyone who has been there knows this feeling of personal resurrection...Ask those who accompanied the Hazzan to Israel this past summer. Ask the hundreds and hundreds of teens who went on USY Israel Programs or BBYO or Young Judaea Israel summer trips this year. Ask the quarter million birthright Israel participants how Israel affected them...and I think, I know they'll agree with Heschel about how much Israel affected their soul, their very Jewishness, their spirituality, their identity, their commitment to Jewish continuity; How Israel transformed the core of their being. *Anachnu sh'neinu mei-oto k'far*...we are all from the same little town; when we go to Israel we go back to that little town, to our family, to our long lost relatives, to a world that is uniquely and thoroughly ours.

But not everyone is ready to embrace the Israel I love so dearly. Not everyone yet feels that they are from the same small town. Some people hesitate because of Israel's imperfections. It is after all a real state with real problems...corrupt politicians, too much mixing of religion and government, not to mention strikes, labor disputes, and pollution. Yes it has a massive army that I believe is among the most ethically oriented morally sensitive military forces in the world...but it too sometimes makes mistakes. You know the Rambam said in his laws of Teshuvah, *kol echad v'echad mi'bnei Adam yeish lo zechuyot ve'avonot*—Every single person, he said, without exception has merits and transgressions. Israel is no different. Only some people hold Israel to a standard that seems to magnify the *avonot*, the shortcomings, the imperfections, and ignore the *z'chuyot*, the many, many merits of Israeli progress, democracy, technology, health care, disaster relief, cultural and literary depth, and civil rights, and egalitarianism. It is a standard that no other nation is held to. You need only look at Syria which is by every account massacring civilians and suppressing free expression every single day as it props up the brutal Assad regime, but still the Arab world fulminates about Israel and virtually ignores outright Syrian oppression. Sometimes Jews themselves become deluded by these inconsistencies and some are Israel's harshest critics.

Furthermore, the glory days of pioneer kibbutzniks bronzed by the Middle Eastern sun, romantically building the foundations of a new state are, for most, memories of the distant past. Today, Israel is an ultra-modern, technologically advanced capitalist state. When I was a kid, if you didn't fill up your blue pushke with money for Israel or plant a JNF tree you were neglecting the welfare of your people. But today, Israel is a major, world class economy. The factors that motivated Jews a generation ago to connect with Israel have monumentally changed.

The American Jewish Committee commissioned a study on the importance of Israel to American Jews between the ages of 18 and 39. This age group is fully one third of the American Jewish population. It found that while the Holocaust is a very important part of the identity of young Jews, Israel comes in much lower. 18% said they feel emotionally distant from Israel. 5% said they feel very distant. 19% said that they did

not agree that Israel was a major part of their Jewish identity. In another poll conducted by the Israel Project, 19% of American Jews said they would never speak about Israel or defend it in non-Jewish company. Shmuel Rosner, the Chief US Correspondent for the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz, asked the AJC to study this strange population of Jews who are unmotivated by Israel. The findings are telling: These people are almost always unaffiliated with any organization in the Jewish community. They are the people who practice Judaism the least. And they are the most uninvolved in synagogue life. Finally, they are overwhelmingly under the age of 40. The secular Zionism that motivated people 20, 30, and 40 years ago is not working today. It seems that the surest way to pass on a love of Israel is to pass on a love of Judaism. The greatest guarantee of Jewish allegiance to Israel today is Jewish allegiance to Judaism!

Today's Zionism is a powerful symbiosis of being pro-Israel and pro-Jewish. When I was a 16 year old spending a summer in Israel, I didn't only come back as a political supporter of Israel. I came back infused with a Jewish identity that was shaped by a living, breathing, normative Jewish community. Not only was I a Zionist, I was a more committed Jew because I saw that Judaism did not live exclusively books or in ancient history, but in a modern state where Jews govern themselves, where the legal system is impacted by Torah values, where those laws are enforced by Jewish police officers and Jewish courts; Where Hebrew is spoken not only by rabbis and scholars, but also by cab drivers, rock stars, famous athletes. Where the calendar is calibrated according to Jewish holidays, and where Shabbat brings celebration and cessation to an entire nation. It was uniquely in Israel where I witnessed the ultimate expression of Jewish life and values, each and every day. And critically, especially for American Jewish teens, Israel is a place where Judaism enjoys a unique dignity. Where you wouldn't think twice about wearing a kippah on the street; where an American Jewish kid can enjoy feeling part of the majority culture. You can't take these things for granted in our world today! I first attended the AIPAC policy conference in Washington when I was a freshman in college. And I came back from this pro-Israel conference, after having personally lobbied my congressman, and listened to Israeli and American political figures, with thousands of Jews from across the country, I came back to campus wearing

a yarmulke. Israel had not only affected my political interests or piqued my cultural awareness, it touched my soul, my religious identity as a Jew. And that's what it does for adults and teens and children every single day. This is why Israel is critical to the Jewish people, and what's truly at stake when we speak of Israel's ultimate survival. *Anachnu sh'neinu mei-oto ha'kfar...* We are all from the same small town.

It's interesting that on each day of Rosh Hashanah we are reminded of the stories of Abraham's two sons Ishmael and Isaac. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah we read about Ishmael and his mother Hagar, and how they are ultimately forced to leave Abraham's household. Then, this morning, we read of the precariousness of Isaac's existence, nearly succumbing to his father's sword on Mt. Moriah. The two brothers hardly get along, and in fact the Torah tells us that neither they nor their descendants will ever be close. But I believe that the way God handles the rivalry between Ishmael and Isaac is instructive for us today. Quite simply, God recognizes that both Ishmael and Isaac have legitimacy. Both are Abraham's sons. Both deserve inheritance, land, and promises of a bright future. This is how God reassures Abraham as he dispatches Ishmael and Hagar...don't worry, he too will be the father of a great nation. He too will be blessed. In short, God acknowledges both children's stories, both narratives. That is, in my humble opinion, the first step toward peace between the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac. The modern State of Israel has acknowledged the Palestinian narrative. Ever since accepting the UN Partition Plan in 1947, which would have given more of the land to Arabs than Jews, Israel has acknowledged the Palestinian connection to the land. That was repeated at Oslo in 1993, Oslo II in 1995, at Wye River in 1998, at camp David in 2000, in the Gaza withdrawal in 2005, and in PM Netanyahu's offer from the dais of the UN to negotiate with President Abbas...since they were after all in the very same building together. But the response has never been to acknowledge Israel's narrative. Even in his speech last week at the UN Mahmoud Abbas referred to "the Holy Land, the land of Palestine, the land of divine messages, ascension of the Prophet Muhammad and the birthplace of Jesus..." Not one mention of a Jewish or Israelite presence...not the land of Abraham, or Moses, or the Hebrew Prophets or the Israelite Kings, the land of two Temples and their priests or the continuous Jewish presence there ever since...He

could not bring himself to even let the words pass his lips that there was a historical Jewish presence there. Tell me, how can peace be achieved with a party that repudiates your history? That denies the fundamental tenets of your story? Regrettably, I do not believe it's possible until the Palestinians are able to say with sincerity and forthrightness, yes we have a claim to this land, but so too does the Jewish people. Yes, we have a history here, but so too do the Jews. Yes we have an ancestral, visceral connection to this place, but we recognize that it is central to Jewish identity as well and we are prepared to sacrifice and compromise and negotiate in deference to both of these parallel narratives. It seems almost unfathomable that those statements will be made any time soon.

Like many things in Jewish life, the date of Rosh Hashanah was once a matter of debate among our sages. The Talmud records that Rabbi Yehoshua believed that the world was created in the month of Nisan, when Passover occurs: *B'nisan nivra ha'olam*. But Rabbi Eliezer, his contemporary and colleague, argued that the world was created in Tishrei. Obviously Rabbi Eliezer won that debate. But when you stop and think about it, this is a rather strange time of year for the world to have been created. Springtime would seem a more natural choice, when buds are blooming, and the world is re-emerging from a long winter dormancy. Autumn days get shorter, it gets dark earlier, leaves are falling not sprouting. Rabbi David Ellenson teaches that it is easy to have hope and to believe in renewal in the springtime, when everything seems fresh and new and optimistic. But the Jewish calendar teaches that we ought to have hope even when things look bleak, even when winter is on the horizon. These have been difficult, ominous days for Israel. They have been fraught with fear and unanticipated threats. But it is precisely during this bleakness that the nation that has Hope as its national anthem must look to the future optimistically. I believe that Israel will not only survive, but will thrive. There will be difficult and challenging days and years ahead for all of us who love Israel. But as long as we remember that we are all from the same town, we will stand together, advocating for Israel with vigor and hope, and never give up on the dream that peace is possible, peace is achievable, and that Israel will not only survive but will continue, with our help and with God's to thrive! *Kein Yehi Ratzon! Am Yisrael Chai!*