

Hugging and Wrestling: The Joy and Challenge of Israel

Yom Kippur 2017 Rabbi Amy Joy Small

Temple Mount

This summer, as has become my summer practice, I studied for 2 weeks with the Rabbinic Torah Seminar at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, my 31st Israel trip. Today I'd like to highlight some powerful experiences, with the intention to open a much broader conversation about Israel.

I had never been onto the Temple Mount. My first time in Israel in 1982 was a summer of study at an Orthodox women's yeshiva -- a story for another day. I learned then that it was inappropriate for a Jew to go onto the Temple Mount because only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, the Temple's inner sanctum. It is dangerous to step, even unwittingly, onto the ground where the Holy of Holies was located. Since the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, our sages have taught that the Gd's dwelling there is eternal. Today's *Avodah* service, recalling Yom Kippur atonement rituals in the Temple, recounts the dangers faced by the High Priest upon entering the *Kodesh Kodashim*. He would die if he was not completely purified and holy.

Over the years, I continued to avoid the Temple Mount, even as I grew less worried about that risk. There is other peril there: The Temple Mount is the location for Islam's sacred Dome of the Rock, administered by the Waqf, the Muslim Authority, since 1967. Given the political and security situation, sometimes inflamed by extremist Jews who have tried to lay claim to the Temple Mount, offending and outraging Muslims -- I have chosen to avoid it.

But this year, the Hartman Institute worked out a special arrangement with the Waqf for a small-scale rabbi's tour of the Temple Mount, including the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque. This was an extraordinary first, organizationally and personally.

Our group of about 25 rabbis were given stern instructions: No clothing or jewelry or bags or hats that showed anything Jewish or Israeli would be permitted. No Kippot. We had to look Muslim, which meant women's legs and heads were to be covered.

To get there, we started up the walkway from the Kotel area, but were told to turn back -- we couldn't enter through the obviously Jewish area; rather we walked through the old city Arab quarter to enter as Muslims would enter. There our Waqf guide met us and guided us through the sites.

A brief explanation: The Temple Mount complex, built in the 7th century by Muslim rulers, includes the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque. Islam teaches this is where the Prophet Muhammad made a miraculous night journey to heaven, accompanied by the angel Gabriel, starting from the Rock in the center of the Dome, the Foundation Stone. Some Muslim authorities place the ascent to heaven from inside the adjacent Al Aqsa Mosque. This is the third holiest site in Islam.

The Rock also bears great significance for Jews, as the site of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac, the *Akedah* -- a sacred Jewish origin story in Torah. For Muslims, the *Akedah* involved Abraham taking his first-born son Ishmael to this rock on Gd's command.

Jews pray toward this site, and though Muslims now pray towards the Kaaba at Mecca, they originally faced the Temple Mount as the Jews do. Beneath the Foundation Stone is a cavern known as the Well of Souls. It is

sometimes thought of as the traditional hiding place of the Ark of the Covenant. More on the Ark in a moment.

One rabbi who had signed up for the trip at Hartman ultimately decided to skip it when she could not be assured that we wouldn't be stepping on the Holy of Holies. But among our group was one observant member of the Hartman staff who would not go inside the structure of the Dome. She stood outside and eagerly grabbed me when I exited so she could hear about it.

Another colleague approached me as we entered the Mount to ask if I could make her look like a Muslim woman with her skirt and scarf, after she observed me comfortably getting ready. She'd never been to a mosque and surmised that I had. This is definitely true.

Inside, we walked around the Rock at the center and were then ushered into the Well of Souls below. Even as I recall it, I am breathless. It was a surprisingly intense, enveloping spiritual experience.

Both Jewish and Muslim traditions talk about what may lie in the Well of Souls. The Talmud imagines that the Foundation Stone covers an abyss containing the raging waters of the Flood. Muslim tradition imagines it to cover a bottomless pit with the flowing waters of Paradise underneath. Legend has it that Noah landed here after the Flood. The souls of the dead are said to be audible here as they await judgement.

As we stood there, I was filled with an inexplicable awe. In our brief time inside the Dome, I meditated by the Rock, imagining Abraham there with Isaac. I didn't want to leave. But our hosts were nervous about calling attention to us, so we were ushered out.

The Temple Mount is expansive and beautiful. Al Aqsa is exquisite and awe inspiring. I was very grateful for the opportunity and also sad to

leave. If only we could all be friendly; I wished I could sit among the Muslim worshippers, as a Jew, enveloped by the holiness of the place.

A few days later a gunman entered same Temple Mount gate where we had begun and opened fire on Israeli security guards, setting off a dangerous round of hostilities. We were very lucky to have been there before that happened. Surely our visit would not have been allowed afterwards.

Jerusalem is such a complicated place. Each time I go there I reflect -- Jerusalem is my favorite, craziest place on earth.

From the Arab quarter we journeyed to the Jewish quarter. There we met with a Brooklyn born rabbi who is co-director of the Temple Institute. He spoke passionately about his community's view that the Third Temple will soon be rebuilt, and they are preparing for it.

Understand, of course, that this would mean the destruction of the Muslim holy sites. OY VEY.

But the folks at the Temple Institute have complete faith that Gd will miraculously bring this to pass -- soon. They provocatively go onto the Temple Mount to daven because they believe is only OUR holy site. But the provocation has a darker side -- bringing about the prophesied war to end the world as we know it, ushering in the Messianic age. They are often arrested, of course.

The folks at the Temple Institute have been studying for years, in great detail, the Temple structure, practices and the sacrificial instruments. They have created the clothing of the priests, the altar, sacrificial implements, the Temple's musical instruments, and a facsimile of the ark itself. They even hold practice-run real sacrifices, dressed in the priestly garb, using the Torah-true implements they have created, in big public

ceremonies, recently attracting an audience of nearly 1500 observers.

They took us to their ultra-modern museum in the Jewish quarter, where we were guided through exhibits of these items. At the very end of the tour was the ark! One colleague remarked, “Hey, has everyone seen Raiders of the Lost Ark? This doesn’t end well.” It was a savvy joke and I laughed out loud. But then it sunk in -- we had been told by the Institute’s director that this was the only item that was not a usable reproduction. In fact, they feel certain they know where the real ark is buried. Oh Gd! It hit us -- they could try to dig to find it. All I could picture was WWII. This frightening thought has haunted me ever since.

Who funds the Temple Institute? Rumor has it that much of it comes from American Evangelical Christians, who are anxious for the apocalypse and the second coming, in addition to wealthy American Jews; even the Knesset helps to fund them.

Thankfully, our respite from drama was lunch at a favorite Jewish quarter café overlooking the Kotel plaza. But look out the window and there is yet another deeply spiritual, emotionally complicated place. The Kotel -- the Western Wall that once surrounded the Temple Mount is our people’s holiest site. I used to feel spiritually alive and connected when I visited the Kotel. These days that only happens if I am with others who find spiritual joy there and when I have the chance to sing joyously with Women of the Wall. But at other times, I feel alienated and sad and sometimes very angry.

At Israel’s founding, Prime Minister David ben Gurion gave control over religious affairs to the Orthodox rabbinate, which at the time was far more moderate than it is now, and considerably smaller in number. Now they are increasingly right wing and extremist. Ultra-Orthodox parties in Knesset have held tight control over all Jewish affairs and have threatened

to leave governing coalitions if they don't get their way. They have gradually seized more power in recent years, dictating that converts may not be considered Jewish if not converted by their official rabbinate, controlling all conversion, marriage, divorce and burials of Jews. Their increasingly right wing orientation has driven about half the population, for example, to get married abroad or just to skip getting married at all. Even my friends who consider themselves traditional leave Israel to obtain legally binding marriages, since their non-Orthodox Jewish ceremonies are not sanctioned by the rabbinate. The *Rabbanut's* religious coercion extends to Kashrut supervision rules, Judaism in the public square and rules in the IDF.

My friend Rabbi Uri Regev, founder of the organization *Hiddush, for Religious Freedom and Equality*, is one of a core of activists trying to wrest control of Jewish life in Israel back to the whole Jewish people, not just those with the most extremist religious views. The Israel Religious Action Center, headed by Anat Hoffman, is another. And while Uri and Anat may debate which issue is most crucial to tackle most vigorously, they are both part of a movement of Israelis seeking to turn the tide on Jewish religious freedom and pluralism in Israel.

The Kotel has become a flashpoint for this battle. The official rabbinate gave control of the Kotel plaza to one of their own, a rabbi who runs the Kotel plaza as an ultra-orthodox synagogue. This can be very alienating for all of us who value egalitarian Judaism, but especially for women. For nearly 30 years the group *Women of the Wall* has sought to secure the right of women to pray as a group, out loud, with the ritual garb of their practice, and with a Torah scroll -- all of which are banned by Rabbi Rabinowitz in the women's section. After years of legal battles and massive, disruptive protests by ultra-Orthodox men and women, with occasional

violence against the women who have come only to pray -- which I have personally experienced several times -- and arrests of WoW leaders, a historic compromise was reached after three years of high-level negotiations that would create an egalitarian prayer space at the Kotel. This Kotel deal is now dashed, as Prime Minister Netanyahu caved in to pressure from his Haredi, ultra-Orthodox coalition partners.

How ironic that I can feel such sadness and pain at Judaism's holiest site and I felt awe and wonder in the Muslim holy sites. But I am not naïve - - at any moment the reverse could have happened, if there had been, Gd forbid, a terrorist attack. Visiting Israel during the first and second Lebanon war, during the second intifada and rocket attacks from Gaza, I have learned the fear, anxiety and anger that Israelis experience.

But the Kotel is a central symbol of Jewish unity to Jews around the world. The abandonment of the Kotel compromise has soured relations between American Jews and Israel with unprecedented fury. These are the words of a letter from the rabbis of the Conservative movement to Prime Minister Netanyahu, which I signed, just one month ago:

August 31, 2017 – 9 Elul 5777
The Honorable Benjamin Netanyahu
Prime Minister of the State of Israel
Jerusalem, Israel
Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

We the undersigned represent the rabbinic and lay leadership of Conservative Judaism including approximately 850 *kehillot* worldwide, 1700 rabbis, camps, schools, college campuses and national and international Jewish organizations; approximately **two million Jews worldwide**. **We are writing to express to you our dismay, anger and sense of betrayal concerning the events of June 25, 2017 in which the Cabinet tabled the *Kotel* Agreement of January 2016 and simultaneously the Legislative Committee of the *Knesset* put forward a new Conversion Law that would codify the *Rabbanut* as the sole authority in Israel**

for conversion to Judaism.

Mr. Prime Minister, we are Zionists. We have, will and continue to support Israel as the realization of the Jewish dream “*lihiyot Am chofshee b’artzeynu* – to be a free people in our Land.” You must understand, however, that in the 21st century we find it unconscionable that Israel, the Jewish State, is the only democratic state in the world in which not all Jews are recognized or supported equally under the law or in the public square. For decades we have put aside our self-interest of recognition for the values of *Klal Yisrael* and for assuring the building of Israel’s infrastructure and security. We live in a different context today than did our grandparents at the time of Israel’s founding and our parents in the aftermath of the Six Day War. The status quo is no longer tenable or tolerable.

In our view the *Kotel* Agreement, the Conversion Law, and frankly all issues of personal status in the Jewish State are linked. The time has come for Israel to end the *Rabbanut* monopoly on the Judaism of the Jewish State. The time has come for Israel to embrace Jewish pluralism as a positive value to ensure the Jewishness of the Jewish State and its democratic values.

We call upon you, therefore, to immediately implement the *Kotel* Agreement that you yourself led in serious negotiations with our partners the Jewish Agency, the Jewish Federations of North America, the Reform Movement, Women of the Wall and us. We call upon you to assure that any Conversion Law put forward recognizes the diversity of *Klal Yisrael* in determining who is a Jew and does not allow for a *Rabbanut* monopoly in Israel or elsewhere in such determinations.

In a few short weeks Jews around the world will gather in sacred community to celebrate the *Yamim Noraim*. Our rabbis will preach words of introspection and inspiration toward living a meaningful Jewish life. We will speak about Israel as an ideal as portrayed in our liturgy and as reality. We will encourage our community to purchase Israel Bonds, to visit, to make *Aliyah* and to support our Masorti Movement institutions that further Jewish pluralism in Israel.

Mr. Prime Minister, you can influence the content of our *Yamim Noraim* messages. Will we speak of Israel’s reality in a language of betrayal or hope? Will we speak of struggle or achievement? We ask you to lead; we ask you to fulfill your promise to us that Israel will be the homeland of the entire Jewish people – Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and secular.

Bkhavod Rav,

Rabbi Steven Wernick, CEO
USCJ

Margo Gold, President
USCJ

Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, CEO
The Rabbinical Assembly

Rabbi Philip Scheim, President
The Rabbinical Assembly

Jerusalem -- and Israel -- are so complicated. My friends at the Israel education organization, *Makom*, coined the term, “Hugging and Wrestling” to describe honest, clear-eyed engagement with Israel. Indeed, I love Israel and yet I struggle over what Israel is and will be as a Jewish, democratic nation.

Sadly, most American Jewish education about Israel and most Jewish communal rhetoric about Israel engages only in the “hugging.” That has sent many American Jews careening into a brick wall when they encounter the difficult challenges of a modern Jewish state in the Middle East. There are indeed many great challenges, and we need to face them together as a Jewish people, with clear-eyed and honest assessments.

Israel has accomplished miraculous feats in science, medical research and high tech, to name just a fraction of Israel’s accomplishments, for example: drip irrigation; preserving, recycling and cultivating water resources in a region challenged by water shortages; many hi-tech inventions and innovations that have literally changed the world, and the list goes on. Israel is a place where ancient history and ultra-modern culture exist together. And Israel offers a rich and unique flowering of Jewish culture that is unlike anything we could accomplish without our homeland with a majority Jewish population, with a calendar and public square reflecting the rhythm of Jewish life and history.

I love being with Israelis -- they are typically honest, direct, and exquisitely open-hearted. As a people, they are also incredibly creative. They have had to be -- they didn’t grow up in the comfort we have known as second, third, and fourth generation American Jews. My friend Roni who grew up on a secular *Moshav* in the North is an educator who knows way more Talmud by heart than I do, and she applies it to life and poetry and art. But she is a stranger to prayer and synagogue customs. She and I have exchanged many ideas and taught together in Israel.

My friend Rani, another amazing educator, grew up secular in Tel Aviv, and talked with his friends about the spiritual void they felt. What's the point of putting our lives on the line for a Jewish state when we don't really know what it means to be a Jew. Rani and a few others started a community called Beit Tefila Yisraeli in Tel Aviv. They came to the States to learn from the best of the American Jewish community's synagogues and brought ideas back to create a uniquely Israeli style of Jewish worship and celebration. Their artful weaving of traditional prayers and ceremonies with contemporary Israeli songs, melodies and poems, is awesome. In the summers they hold Kabbalat Shabbat, Friday night services on the pier at the north end of the Tel Aviv beach and now several hundred people come to celebrate Shabbat together.

My high school friend Harriet, who has lived in Israel since college, took me to Shabbat dinner with her boyfriends' secular family. His son-in-law, who goes out to a bar with friends after Shabbat dinner on Friday nights, as is common in Tel Aviv, asked me to make *kiddush*. His 3-year-old daughter wanted a kippah just like me and she imitated me throughout the evening. The dad later called Harriet to tell her how much it meant to his family to have his young child spend Shabbat with a woman rabbi -- this was a new beginning for the Jewish future.

My friend Elan, a wonderful Jerusalemite who is a highly regarded educator, helped to initiate a Jerusalem organization dedicated to reclaiming a thriving pluralistic Jewish community in Jerusalem, in response to the "*Haredification*" of Jerusalem. One huge success is the weekly Friday afternoon musical kabbalat Shabbat celebration at the two-year-old First Station complex, held in the open air, prior to the time for synagogue services. Jews of many religious communities and lifestyles sing and dance together. One of the groups who presents there is Nava Tehila, who came to VT this spring, treating us to their inspiring prayer melodies.

This explosion of Jewish engagement is happening in a variety of creative ways all over Israel, an exquisite renewal of Jewish life for a contemporary world. They have so much to offer us as Jews on this side of the ocean and we can greatly enrich our Jewish experiences through our mutual sharing.

There is so much to say about Israel, in both hugging and wrestling. You may have noticed that I have not talked about Arab-Israeli issues and controversies, including the conflict with Gaza, the occupation and settlements of the West Bank, Palestinian governance and rights, and the pressing need for a just resolution with the Palestinians. Nor have I talked about the 20% of Israel's population who are not Jewish -- Palestinian Israelis, Druze, Bedouin, and a small Christian population. The list of political challenges is long, and important. These are very complex issues that require in-depth learning and listening.

Far from ignoring these issues, I have been involved in interfaith leaders' peace initiatives for almost 15 years, and have talked with Palestinians in Ramallah, Jericho, Bethlehem and East Jerusalem, among others, and I've spent much time in living rooms in homes in Jewish settlements, listening, learning and connecting. But these conversations are not for today.

This is an opening to our conversation about Israel. I began by sharing my surprising hugging and wrestling spiritual experiences on the Temple Mount and at the Kotel. At the core, we are all just human beings seeking Gd. In fact, this was what Imam Hassan said this past May at our Interfaith Seder -- saying he is a human being first, a Muslim second. We have more in common with our Arab neighbors than that which divides us. And even more so with each other. We'll talk.

Hugging is good -- there is much to fuel pride in what our people have created in our ancient homeland, rising as a phoenix from the ashes of the Holocaust, pogroms and tens of centuries of persecution.

There is also much about which we should wrestle -- as Israelis do every day. For us, that requires engaging with the complexity of Israel's story. As divided as we are as Americans, and as charged as our internal Jewish divisions over Israel have become, we must rise above them. It can be scary to open our minds and hearts to different narratives that are difficult or painful to hear, but that is the only way we will best learn how to contribute to the betterment of the Jewish people and Israel -- and the world. And it is the way we will live the values that Torah and our sages have taught us.

I grew up learning to be very proud of Israel; even proud to be a Jew **because** of what our people have created in Israel. There is much to make us proud of Israeli democracy, entrepreneurship, contributions to knowledge and science and aid to other countries. We know there are also tremendous challenges that have created deep divides between us. What does it mean to be a Jewish and democratic state? It seems so easy to say, but hard to do. But, as Theodore Herzl said, "*Im tirtzu ein zo Aggadah*" -- if you dream it, it will not be a fantasy.

Come with me to the Rock, to the Foundation Stone. What was it that Abraham was called to become? Abraham learned that first of all, we love and nurture our children and devote our lives to building their future. We do this so they can continue the conversation with Gd, as Isaac was called to do. In the quiet of the Rock, what is Gd calling us to do? *Shma Yisrael!* First, we must to listen.

In this spirit, our community will embark on a journey in the desert together. That is, we will open our minds and hearts to learn and to listen to each other compassionately and respectfully. Over the course of the year, I will be teaching iEngage, an extensive curriculum from the Hartman Institute, that will guide us on this journey. Our first session later this

month will lay the groundwork for how we can talk with each other about Israel when we have even vastly different views and very strong feelings. First, we will listen. I hope you'll join me.

I want to add that many OZ members have asked me about a congregational Israel trip. In discussion with some of our leadership, I think it is best to do a quick and simple survey to determine who might be interested in going, what time of year is possible and what is not possible, what type of trip do we want, and how to make sure it is as affordable as possible. Look for that survey soon and please respond.

Gemar Chatimah Tovah.