

What is Alive?

“Here is where we have the sorting bins,” the pre-school teacher explained . “Right now we are working on “alive” and “not alive.” I looked into a bin and saw a tiny green dinosaur, a rose patterned tea cup, a bowlegged cowboy, and a fossilized fern leaf inside a clear paperweight. I was puzzled; none of them looked alive to me. They were plastic. But even beyond the obvious, was an extinct dinosaur alive? If we could pretend the cowboy was alive, could we also pretend he had been shot dead? The fern leaf had been part of a plant. But was a part of a living thing counted as alive or only when it was connected to its whole?

Later when I dropped off my daughter to her new school, she instructed me to hold the hand railing as we climbed the stairwell. “No, that’s not the right way” she said. “This is the going up side of the stairs, and that is the going down side. You are going upstairs now, so walk on this side.”

“Wow, I thought chastised. Who knew I had been climbing stairs the wrong way for the last few decades.” There was a right way to choose an activity, to do an activity, to clean up from the activity, a right way to walk, talk, climb, even sit. I wondered what would happen the first time these kids took a subway during rush hour. But for now, I understood that these were essential lessons.

I am not sure what the teacher would have said about this morning’s story. Abraham did listen to God, which was a right thing to do. But he was about to commit murder, which would have placed him in a very big time out. Isaac we would have put in the “alive” category. But he came very close to being “not alive.” However, God didn’t say kill him, he only said “offer him up.” So maybe Abraham was not using his good listening ears. This was a big test for Abraham, which he passed, so he was smart. On the other hand, he wanted descendents to pass his religion onto and since he was ready to kill his son Isaac and had abandoned his only other child Ishmael in the desert, maybe he wasn’t really so smart. Good/bad, smart/stupid, right/wrong, we learn as young children how to sort out life. Separating things into categories is the way we start to make sense of the world and our place in it.

At this self reflective season we must ask, “How applicable is this paradigm once we are out of the sippy cup stage?” This oversimplified view of the world coupled with the insistent ego of a toddler is acceptable when confined to a padded playroom. But, life is more complex than it was in preschool and failing to recognize and respond to this reality can be dangerous.

This black and white perspective is particularly hazardous when applied to matters of Israel. As a Jewish community we have an irrefutable bond with our ancient homeland and the modern state that exists today. However, we can be misguided if we approach this important relationship with the naivety of a little child labeling things “alive” and “not alive.” At the start of a new year and at a time when US/Israeli relations are in the spotlight, let us examine this critical connection with searing honesty and mature wisdom.

Sorting out our own feelings, to say nothing of the politics and security issues of Israel is certainly more difficult than determining what is alive and what is not, but perhaps that is as good a place as any to start. So what is alive when it comes to Israel? First and foremost Israel is

alive. This is an obvious but not inconsequential statement. Israel is alive as a modern state founded 64 years ago. Israel is alive as the Jewish homeland where our people have had a continuous presence, for the last 3,000 years, even during periods of Diaspora and dispersion. Israel is alive, in spite of the fact that she is surrounded by nations that strongly desire that she was not and enemies that relentlessly seek to destroy her. Israel is alive in the sense of having a flourishing culture and society, thriving with financial and technological advances, populated by a highly educated and diverse populace, based on the ideals of a democratic, Jewish nation. In all these ways and more, Israel is very much alive.

However any further discussion about her existence is often seen through the oversimplified lens of - does this threaten Israel's existence or not. Israel's existential concerns ultimately trump every conversation. Too often we look at Israel the way a toddler would analyze a plastic figurine and adamantly pronounce "alive/not alive."

In Israel, the issue of security dominates all other considerations. Understandably it is the first and foremost concern, as well it should be. But it should not be the last or the only one, even though other concerns may seem like luxuries when one's survival is continuously challenged.

Outside the State of Israel, we feel obligated to not give any ammunition to Israel's enemies by doing or saying anything that would in any way question her existence. But while the existential concern is real, it cannot be allowed to cover up the myriad of other issues that Israel faces that have nothing to do with those who hate her and everything to do with those who love her. There is more to being alive than merely existing.

So what are the threats to Israel today, beyond the existential challenges she faces? Israel is alive, but in a distorted way when her democratic values are severely compromised by bowing to the whims of extreme fundamentalists under the guise of Judaism. Israel is alive but in a disappointing way when the gap between the "haves" and "have nots" within her own borders is growing so rapidly. Israel is alive, but in an isolated and ultimately damaging way when she fails to inspire in Jews living in the Diaspora a strong sense of loyalty and love. Israel is alive, but in a precarious way when her friends are only those who agree with her every decision and those who do not are lumped together with her sworn enemies.

How could we expand our thinking about Israel and how might this help Israel and us? A good place to start might be to examine our own inflexible classifications. Thinking in mutually exclusive categories can be expeditious. However, it is rarely helpful for finding solutions to complex problems.

We tend to get stuck in our positions and resist thinking about things in new ways. Maybe we fear that if we pursue a more nuanced perspective we could slip into moral relativism or worse yet defection to the enemy's camp. Or perhaps this kind of approach might be perceived as weakness and used to our disadvantage. Although these dangers may seem real, they should not deter us, as we venture out of our comfort zone to explore our relationship with Israel today.

Our neat little boxes get messed up right from the start. For example, sitting here in this auditorium we are mostly American citizens, not Israelis; we live here, not there. We do not vote

in Israel, nor do we serve in her military. Therefore, what right do we have to comment or even care about another country's policies and procedures?

The answer lies in one word- peoplehood, or in Hebrew "*Am Yisrael*" - the people, Israel. Peoplehood is more than religion, or ethnicity. It transcends race or creed. It is much deeper than citizenship or nationality. It is a messy term that does not fit well with modern geographic boundaries and nationalistic thinking. It seems too ambivalent or archaic. And yet it is because we see ourselves as part of the same people that we care about what is happening in Israel. And because we care, we voice our concerns and our opinions. We seek information and share ideas. Dialoguing in this way is the quintessential Jewish experience. Doing it with civility, intelligence, humility and open mindedness is our tradition's ideal. Judaism has always taught that respectful disagreement can lead to greater wisdom.

And there is certainly much to disagree about and much need for greater wisdom these days. Today Israel faces a danger that is very difficult for most Americans to fully grasp. The threat of a nuclear armed Iran is not on the forefront of most of our minds. But it should be. Today we have the luxury of time and the comfort of distance to examine this issue. But who knows for how long.

I do not have any inside information or know any more than all of you do. I am not a nuclear scientist or a politician. I am only a rabbi and one who is very concerned about the situation Israel is facing and equally concerned about how we here perceive that situation. Let's start with the good news.

The good news is that there is no disagreement about what Iran is doing. Iran is building a nuclear weapon to destroy Israel and possibly to use against other people with whom it disagrees. That is what Iran's leaders say, that is what all intelligence reports affirm, that is why UN observers are not allowed in and that is what those with the most information, including Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama understand is happening.

There is also complete agreement that this is an objective that will not be tolerated. We should pause here for a moment. These words should not just fade into the next sentence. I believe with every ounce of my being that both these statements are true and thus we are on a collision course.

Now for the bad news, remember that was the good news. The bad news is that very smart people, people who love Israel very much, people who are Israelis and Americans, people who are in complete agreement that Iran must not achieve this goal - disagree on one key element - time.

Is there time to continue diplomatic means, economic sanctions, and other interventions or are we out of time? This is the question and frankly no one in this room knows for sure. But here is what we do know. Israel is a sovereign country and has the right and will exercise the means to protect herself. We know that the United States, under any administration, has been and will continue to be Israel's closest ally for strategic reasons and because of our common values and interests in the region. A nuclear Iran is a threat not only to Israel but to the U.S. and the rest of the world as well.

There are a few other things we know- there is a difference between words and actions. This too is one of our earliest childhood lessons. Words are important- they signal intentions, create relations, they have the power to heal or to hurt by soothing or inflaming emotions. But in this situation, action is what matters most. As I was recently reminded by Mr. Oren, Israel's Ambassador to the United States, Israel is a one bomb country. She is so tiny and her population centers so close that all it would take is one bomb to wipe out a crippling majority. It is that one shot that cannot happen.

We also know that although this state of affairs is an existential threat and therefore first and foremost a security issue, it is not devoid of political posturing, on both sides of the ocean, especially in an election year.

Two governing assumptions when it comes to the topic of nuclear weapons are obsolete in this particular situation. The notion of Mutually Assured Destruction, with the appropriate acronym M.A.D. is not relevant. This Cold War philosophy was based on the supposition that if both enemies have nuclear weapons, neither will use them. All involved would suffer such intolerable losses that the idea of ever pushing the button would be, frankly mad. However, it appears that Iran's leaders are prepared to suffer those intolerable losses for the chance to destroy Israel.

Another antiquated concept regarding nuclear weapons is containment. Under this policy, nuclear stockpiles, both the amounts and types of weapons, were controlled by international treaties and monitored to ensure that these agreements were honored. Together, countries negotiated what was acceptable nuclear development for the whole global community. However, Iran does not seem to care about international isolation or cooperation. Under the current Iranian leadership, there isn't a willingness to work towards a peaceful agreement. This situation almost makes one nostalgic for the Cold War days.

But at the dawn of a new year, it is not wistful glances looking backwards that we need, but clear vision looking forward. The clarity we seek is not that of a military commander or even a politician. We are not asked to play those roles. Our job may sound simple in comparison, but it is not easy for everyone. Our role is to stay engaged with Israel.

Interest in Israel has been waning in the American Jewish community, especially amongst the younger generations. Although there has been much data collected on this subject and many reasons suggested explaining why this is so, each of us must search our own hearts and minds and see if there is any truth of that trend within us. We cannot disengage from Israel, especially now. We are one people. Some live in Israel and some in Connecticut, but Israel belongs to all "*Am Yisrael.*" We are not asked to move there. We are not asked to bear arms for her. We are simply asked to care.

We can express our concern in financial gifts, in a broad spectrum of political support, in cultural appreciation, in visiting the country, in being attuned to current events, in reading, writing, talking, lobbying, arguing. All of that is fine. What we cannot do, what we absolutely must not do, especially at this critical hour is to disengage, to be so indifferent or distracted as to not care what happens to Israel. *Immo anochi b'tzara.* We stand together in trying times.

Some may feel cynical. We have heard “wolf” cried before in the Middle East. We are still paying the price of the whole WMD story. The consequences of that misrepresentation have left many people immune to any allegations of the sort. Understandable, but again we must not allow stubbornness to oversimplify our thinking. Sometimes a clear and present danger is a misnomer and an excuse. But sometimes it is the one shot that cannot be allowed.

We need to evaluate each scenario and not get locked into meaningless categories, like hawk and dove, Democrat and Republican. This is not a child’s sorting game; we are facing the alive and not alive distinction on a much higher level.

Cramped into a tiny classroom chair, I listened patiently as my daughter carefully explained how a butterfly was alive and an airplane was not - even though they both have wings and can fly.

She peered into my face, “OK mom, got it?”

Alive/Not Alive - Pray to God we get it right. *Besefer chaim tovim, tikateyvun*. With anguished hearts and steadfast faith we pray - Inscribe us in the Book of Life!

THE END