

The *unetaneh tokef* prayer, a highlight of the Musaf service on the Days of Awe, describes this season as a time of judgment, when the fate of individuals is determined for the coming year, and recorded and sealed in the ledgers of human destiny. “Who shall live and who shall die...who shall grow rich and who shall be impoverished, who shall be brought low, and who shall be exalted.” One does not have to understand this Medieval hymn in its literal sense to intuit the anxiety that underlies the words. Life, as the idiom expresses it, turns on a dime. Change is the law of life. Our health, our security, and our prosperity cannot be taken for granted and can be lost to us in a moment. Doubtless, the composer of this hymn, as well as those who have recited it over the ages were fearful of what changes might lie ahead in the New Year and sought reassurance in the prayer’s concluding words (“penitence, prayer and charity can annul the evil decree”) that they might be able in some measure to influence their destiny.

Change on the personal level can happen (or seem to the one experiencing it to be occurring) in the blink of an eye. Changes, on the other hand, that occur on the communal or societal level – economic, cultural, technological, demographic and social changes – are the consequence of long-term trends, the cumulative result of a multiplicity of factors and of the actions and decisions over time of countless individuals. Sometimes, the changes, when they are perceived and understood are so significant as to constitute a revolution.

My remarks this morning deal with some of the changes that have been affecting Jewish life over the past decades and that will continue to affect us in the years to come, changes that pose challenges for committed Jews who are concerned about the Jewish future. The Israeli journalist Amotz Asa-el in a series of articles now appearing in the *Jerusalem Report*, has described these changes.

There is, first of all, the expectation that within the next fifteen years the Jewish population living in Israel will constitute the majority of world Jewry. Secondly, (and this comes to me as a major surprise) there is currently no Jewish population anywhere in the world, even in those countries most hostile to Israel or most affected by anti-Semitism (from the political left or right), where Jews are officially discriminated against, where they are not free to worship or free to travel. As he analyzes the history and the implications of these changes, Asa-el is concerned

that in the near future we will see a loss of Jewish unity and solidarity and a weakening of the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora.

The contemporary issue of relations between Israel and the Diaspora has a historical background going back 2500 years, to the Babylonian destruction of the First Temple and the deportation of many Judeans to Babylonia. Initially, Diaspora Jews, whether in Babylonia, Egypt or Asia Minor still looked to the Temple that was rebuilt in Jerusalem under Persian rule as the center of Jewish life, but by late antiquity, after the destruction of the Second Temple, Jewry in the Land of Israel was significantly outnumbered by Jews living outside the Land and arguably overshadowed culturally as well. Think of the Babylonian Talmud, the Hebrew poetry and philosophy from the Spanish-Jewish Golden Age, or the flowering of Jewish autonomy and Talmudic scholarship in the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth. In more recent times, Diaspora Jews who had experienced the benefits of emancipation and of liberal democracy enjoyed enormous success within their countries of residence as entrepreneurs, artists, scientists, and shapers of both popular and highbrow culture. Despite the loss of the Temple and of the homeland, Diaspora Jewry remained remarkably united across national borders by the sharing of common rituals and religious texts. The upside of Diaspora Jewish life, however, was counter balanced by a downside. Jews as a minority were politically weak, often regarded as a foreign or subversive element and subjected to hostility, discrimination and persecution.

Israel today with six and a half million Jews already constitutes 45% of world Jewry. The growth of Israel's Jewish population is attributable in the first instance to immigration, from the Arab and Muslim countries of the Middle East and from among the survivors of the European Holocaust in the early days of statehood and, more recently, from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union. Perhaps less recognized, however, is that Israel, compared to Diaspora Jewry, has a very high birthrate – 3.1 children per married couple, which is unprecedented among the countries of the developed world. That statistic takes into account not only the ultra-Orthodox community but also secular Israelis and reflects, despite the challenges of living in Israel, a high degree of optimism and satisfaction with one's life circumstances.

Diaspora Jewry by contrast, Asa-el observes, is shrinking, assimilating and losing its vitality. He recalls the title of Alan Dershowitz's book written several decades ago, *The Vanishing American Jew*. With a birthrate of less than 2.1 children per married couple, the current

generation of Diaspora Jewry is not reproducing at a rate that will maintain its numbers. Population surveys of the Jewish community conducted in recent years do tend to report higher numbers than earlier ones did, because they often count individuals who have a Jewish family background or live in a household with a Jewish family member. The rate of intermarriage in the Diaspora has risen over the last half century to 58% of all Jews getting married. The upside is that, in contrast to previous generations, when intermarriage either reflected a desire to sever one's ties with the Jewish community or resulted in being shunned by the community, many children of intermarriage today proudly identify as Jews. The downside, according to Asa-el, is that children of intermarriage tend to be less Jewishly educated and less Jewishly involved. That, of course, is a generalization, and there are, to be sure, exceptions. Moreover, I believe that what he describes is really less a consequence of intermarriage and more a characteristic of being a millennial. The 2013 survey by Pew Research reported that 22% of American Jews regarded themselves as Jews "of no religion" and that less than a third were affiliated with a synagogue.

The Israeli counterpart to children of intermarriage are the several hundred thousand individuals, mainly from the former Soviet Union, who, because they have a non-Jewish mother, exist in a *halachic* limbo. They are rejected as Jews by the Israeli rabbinate and yet, socially and culturally, by virtue of their service in the Israel Defense Forces and their adoption of Hebrew as their primary spoken language, are part of the Israeli Jewish population. In America, Asa-el point out, the situation is reversed: at least in the more liberal denominations, children of intermarriage are accepted religiously, but culturally and socially they have little Jewish involvement. Here again, I would apply his observation more to the age cohort rather than to parentage. Asa-el's conclusion (and it is a sobering one) is that while Diaspora Jewry is not going to disappear, its strength, its influence and the vitality of its communal life will diminish.

If the shrinking of the Jewish Diaspora represents a revolutionary moment within our history, no less revolutionary is the absence of persecution. Crusades, pogroms, expulsions, and forced conversion to the faith of our persecutors were always part of our story as a people from the rise of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire down to our own time. Until the dawn of modern times, Jews living in majority Christian or Muslim lands suffered from legally sanctioned discrimination and could never be full citizens in their places of residence. Even after emancipation in the West in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, at any given time, somewhere

in the world, there were Jews who were not free to practice their faith or who were virtual prisoners, denied the possibility of emigrating from a situation of oppression to lands of freedom and opportunity. All of this has changed in the past three decades with the airlifting of Ethiopian Jews to Israel and the collapse of the Iron Curtain, which allowed a flood of emigration from the former republics of the USSR to Israel and to the West.

This is, of course, to be welcomed, and yet Asa-el observes that there is a downside here as well. Jews through the ages had seen themselves as guarantors of the well-being and security of fellow Jews, wherever in the world they might be residing. There was persecution, but there was also a tradition of Jewish solidarity. Jews paid ransom for fellow Jews who were being held captive, extended financial aid to endangered Jewish communities, helped resettle and absorb refugees who emigrated from lands of oppression, organized mass protests, made use of the media, and wielded diplomatic pressure to benefit fellow Jews in need of assistance or rescue. American Jewry came of age and began to play the major role in the efforts in behalf of persecuted and endangered Jews in the aftermath of World War I. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee was established then to alleviate the immense suffering of European Jews who had been living in zones of combat or whose lives had been devastated by the upheaval of postwar revolutions. Now, some one hundred years later with the waning of persecution, we wonder whether the sense of solidarity and shared destiny will also erode and disappear.

If there are few if any persecuted or endangered Jewish communities, there is of course still Israel, located in a dangerous and unstable region of the world and facing the unremitting hostility of terrorist groups on her borders. Israel's well-being and struggles for security have been a long-standing focus of concern for Jews worldwide. Diaspora Jewry, according to Asa-el, understood and accepted its responsibility to assist in the economic development of the newborn Jewish state, whose residents were, in the initial years of statehood, by and large impoverished. But that aid came with a condition. We will help, Diaspora leaders said, but don't intervene in our communal affairs, don't preach to us about making *Aliyah*, and don't tell us that we're in *galut* (exile). Nonetheless, the solidarity that existed between Israel and Diaspora Jews was strong and became even stronger following the Six Day War and the sense of Jewish pride which it conferred. The nature of the relationship, however, may now be changing. Israel is not the poor

country it was in 1948, desperately in need of assistance; it is far more prosperous and self-sufficient and has one of the fastest growing economies in the developed world.

The Soviet Jewry movement in which I participated was a shining example of Jewish solidarity in behalf of an oppressed Jewish community, but its climactic moment – the massive demonstration on the Capitol Mall in Washington, D.C. – occurred thirty years ago. The passage of time (an entire generation) from then to now means that young Jews in the Diaspora have no grown-up memories regarding oppression and persecution of Jews (although events in our own country recently may dispel their complacency and demonstrate to them that hostility to Jews still flourishes even on these shores). And when you have no memory of Jews being persecuted and of communal activism in their behalf, you quite possibly may not understand why the world Jewish community needs there to be an Israel. Furthermore, those coming of age in the Diaspora have no personal recollection of the struggle that accompanied the establishment of the state on both the diplomatic and military fronts and of Israel's years of austerity in the late 1940's and early 1950's and may tend to take for granted what for us in the older generation is a miracle – the reestablishment of Jewish sovereignty in the land of our ancestors. The result is indifference and apathy on their part as well as estrangement from Israel.

It's not all one-sided, however, and some of the blame for the estrangement can be laid at the foot of Israelis. One of the pillars of classical Zionist ideology is *sh'lilat ha-golah*, negating the viability of Jewish life outside of the Land of Israel and looking upon the very existence of a Diaspora as something unnatural, unbefitting a people seeking a condition of normality. These attitudes were expressed by some of the giants of modern Hebrew literature and by leading Israeli historians and have begun to reemerge in recent times on both the right and left of the religious-political spectrum in Israel. A noted Israeli novelist, identified with the political left, has long held the view that Jews living in Israel are full Jews, while those residing in the Diaspora, no matter the degree of their involvement in Jewish religious and communal life, can only be "partial Jews" at best. On the right, a prominent figure within Israeli Orthodoxy in effect told Diaspora Jews that, since they don't reside in Israel, their complaints about how space for prayer is managed and allocated at the Western Wall need not be taken into consideration. Although Asa-el barely touches on this, Israel's policies are in large part determined by the exigencies of coalition politics. The views expressed by representatives of the ultra-Orthodox

political parties on such matters as conversion to Judaism and prayer at the Kotel are listened to, because their presence within the governing coalition is necessary in order to maintain a ruling majority in the Knesset. So too the views of those who advocate for expanding settlement in the occupied territories, who constitute a significant political bloc. Needless to say, some of these views are incompatible with the beliefs and values of a large segment of American Jewry, particularly among our young people.

Because of my age, my upbringing, my experience as a rabbinical student in Israel in the 1960's, and my understanding of the bigger picture of the need for and the moral legitimacy of a Jewish state, I will always be a supporter of Israel and work for her survival and well-being. But I would be untrue to myself if I did not express my concerns about the occupation of the territories and its effect on Israel's character, the erosion of democracy and of respect for such independent institutions as the media and the judiciary, the damage that the settlement enterprise has done to Israel's moral standing, the obscurantism of the Orthodox religious establishment, and the danger that Israel might not be able to maintain itself as both a Jewish and a democratic state. You might argue that every nation (America included) has its flaws, and that the Palestinians bear equal or greater responsibility for the failure to implement a peaceful solution (and I would agree with you on both counts). You might tell me that as one who lives outside of Israel, my opinions and concerns don't count or that they shouldn't be expressed at all, because neither I nor my family will have to live with the consequences of the policies which Israel adopts. However, no one has ever been able to restrain Jews from voicing an opinion, and those Diaspora Jews whose views are the opposite of mine certainly don't hesitate to express what they believe. I'm not seeking to vote in Israeli elections, and I recognize that my views carry less weight than those of the citizens and residents of Israel. I am simply voicing concerns based on what I believe to be fact and out of a genuine sense of caring, which I don't consider in any sense to be a betrayal. I do not at all feel alienated, but we would be burying our heads in the sand to believe that the concerns I have articulated here have nothing at all to do with some of the apathy, indifference and estrangement to which Amotz Asa-el refers.

He concludes, quite rightly I believe, that such estrangement to the extent that it derives from the attitudes of Israeli leaders and citizens is both wrong-headed and dangerous for Israel. We here may not be able to live as full a Jewish life as Jews in Israel can, but the depth of our

emotion and the integrity of our identity as Jews should not be disrespected. If Israel seeks recognition as the nation state of the Jewish people, shouldn't all of the Jewish people have the right to worship at the Wall in a manner that reflects their religious convictions? While philanthropic giving on the part of Diaspora Jews might be less significant now than it once was, tourism and economic investment from the Diaspora as well as the feeling of solidarity with Israel that still exists are crucial assets for Israel. What Asa-el does not say, moreover, is that Israeli high-tech innovation and its fast-growing economy can co-exist with poverty and income inequality and with an educational system that is experiencing serious problems. Solidarity with and support from the Diaspora are still needed.

Estrangement from Israel is also a danger for Diaspora Jews, because Israel has been such a focus and bulwark of Jewish identity for us. We can acknowledge, as I have, that Israel is not without flaws, and yet the story of the return to Zion, the Jewish people's regaining independence, the reassertion of Jewish pride and dignity, and the rebuilding of lives after the horrors of the Shoah and the indignities and humiliation suffered in countries where we were oppressed is an enduring inspiration. For Diaspora Jews, travel and study in the Land have long served to strengthen and reinforce identity, particularly among our young people. I think of the words we say whenever we conclude a book of the Torah – be strong and let us strengthen one another. We, Jews in Israel and Jews in the Diaspora, must acknowledge that we are connected and recognize that the connection is a mutually beneficial one, enabling us *l'hitchazek*, to strengthen one another.

There are other schisms in contemporary Jewish life as well (topics for future sermons) – between Jews who have differing opinions regarding Israel's politics or between religious liberals and traditionalists, and there is the fear voiced by Asa-el and others that we, the Jews, are in danger of becoming two peoples rather than one. That would be a great tragedy.

How do we renew the vitality of Jewish life in the Diaspora? How do we preserve, despite our sincere and passionate disagreements, despite the different circumstances in which we live, the sense of *achdut*, of unity that is our most precious asset? These are the great challenges in Jewish life as we embark on a new year. From what I read, no one really has the definitive answer. Jewish education and cultural literacy as well as building a sense of Jewish community are crucial, but we are all still groping in the dark trying to find our way.

The High Holiday season is about overcoming estrangement and alienation between ourselves and God, ourselves and our fellow persons. May we succeed in that endeavor, and may we all be blessed with a happy and healthy New Year.