

***Heshbon Nefesh HaAm: An Accounting of the Soul of the Jewish People***  
**Kol Nidre 5767**

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In my first semester of college, Khallid Muhammed, the spokesperson of the Nation of Islam, was invited to speak on campus. I was eager to hear what he had to say, particularly because the talk was billed “The Life and Death of Malcolm X” -- from everything I knew, it was the Nation of Islam that assassinated Malcolm X, so I was genuinely curious to hear his perspective on the story.

As I approached the Student Union that evening, I remember feeling a growing discomfort hearing chants of protest outside the building. That discomfort morphed into embarrassment as I had to walk past nearly a thousand Jewish students, yelling, waving signs and verbally excoriating everyone who entered the building. *Khallid Muhammed is an antiSemite! No more campus hatred! Not with my tuition \$\$\$!* Reporters and photographers captured the scene. *How provincial*, I remember thinking. Don’t they understand that diverse perspectives are *essential* in an open academic environment? They probably hadn’t even read Malcolm X’s autobiography, I remember thinking, indignant and disdainful.

The worst fears of the campus Jewish community were realized that night. I sat in the third row, wide-eyed, paper and pen in hand for notes, as this toxic antagonist raged against the Jews and our “so-called Holocaust,” the strangle-hold that the Jews have over Jew York City, etc., etc. I had never heard such vitriol in my life. I finally got up and walked out when it became clear that Muhammed had no intention of even mentioning Malcolm X in the hallowed halls of Columbia Jew-niversity.

It turned out to be a formative evening for me. I left the room shuddering at the reality of a living, breathing anti-Semitism that I had only previously read and heard about. (“Bye bye Jew” he shouted at me as I scrambled all the way down the long aisle and out the back door. “If you can’t take the heat, get out of the kitchen.”) I was tortured by the image of thousands of my classmates and friends sitting quietly, listening as this man spewed his hatred, not standing up to argue, and not even having the courage to walk out. And I was deeply troubled by my own reaction to the Jewish community, which had at least had the foresight to protest his presence on campus.

Things got a bit more complicated for me a couple of days later. A Jewish student, whose name I don’t remember, wrote an open letter to the Jewish community of the University, sticking it in the mailbox of every single person with a Jewish sounding last name. I, of course, did not receive one, but Ari Goldberg let me read his. “Shame on us” the letter said, “that 950 Jews found the time and motivation to rally against an anti-Semite on campus this week, but two weeks ago, when we celebrated Simhat Torah, only 4 Jews and a Torah could take the time to go out and celebrate. It’s not Khallid Muhammed who will destroy the Jewish people -- it is our own indifference to our Judaism that will.”

It is on Yom Kippur, the culmination of the most intensive period of inner-wrestling, of contemplation and consideration, of *teshuvah* and reconciliation, that the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest is instructed to atone for his personal offenses and those of his family, and then for the entire people Israel. "I have committed offenses: *Ani u'veiti, uv'nei Aharon am kedoshkha* -- I and my family and the descendants of Aaron, Your holy people" (M. Yoma 4:2). We began this High Holy Days with *heshbon hanefesh* -- an Accounting of the Soul of the Individual: What am I doing with my life? In what ways have I let my insecurities, my self doubt stifle me? What pain have I caused? We continued with *heshbon nefesh ha-mishpaha* -- an Accounting of the Soul of our Families: What would it take to break painful family patterns, to infuse new life into our old, damaged relationships? And now we come to do *heshbon nefesh ha-am* - an Accounting of the Soul of the Jewish people, tomorrow completing the journey with *heshbon nefesh ha-olam*, an Accounting of the Soul of the Whole World.

Where is the soul of the Jewish people?

Jewish identity in the 20th century was predicated on the century's two dominant historical events: the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. Together, these served as a two headed giant -- the *raison d'etre* for many, if not most Jewish institutions and communal organizations, offering the clarion call to secular and religious Jews alike: Why get involved in synagogue life? To deny Hitler a posthumous victory. Why give money to Jewish organizations? Because Israel's enemies abound, and if we don't fight anti-Semitism, who will? Jewish defense efforts became the gauge through which Jewish identification was measured. Synagogues were designed as virtual shrines to the ravaged communities of Eastern Europe -- sanctuaries decorated with barbed wire and inscriptions of the names of extermination camps, making supremely clear the message: *this* is why we pray. The 20th century was characterized by ethnic cohesion among American Jews, who felt bound to one another by the horrors of the destruction of European Jewry, the joint commitment to protect and defend the bold yet tenuous new Jewish State, the terror of the ongoing threat to Jewish life around the world, and the fear of demographic suicide through assimilation.<sup>1</sup>

The messaging was not new. Every generation, as Simon Rawidowicz so perceptively put it in 1967, "considered itself the final link in Israel's chain. Each always saw before it the abyss ready to swallow it up, and was filled with the deepest anxiety lest it be fated to stand at the grave of the nations, to be buried in it."<sup>2</sup> Particularly in the generations immediately following the destruction of European Jewry, the threat of anti-Semitism, the crises in Israel, and the dangers of intermarriage and assimilation served as quite a galvanizing force.

But as we enter the 21st century, a monumental shift is taking place among American Jews. Our community's fear-based, reactive agenda has led to a growing Jewish isolationism and insularity -

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1 See Cohen and Wertheimer's article "Whatever Happened to the Jewish People" in *Commentary*, June 2006, and the response I wrote with Daniel Sokatch, which appeared in *Commentary*, October 2006.

2 Simon Rawidowicz "Israel: the Ever Dying People," p. 54.

- a focus only on what we perceive to be distinctly Jewish concerns -- that is more and more untenable to many in our community, especially as conditions in the rest of the world deteriorate. At the same time, this insularity has led many of us to a deep skepticism of the Jewish community. That's why *Jewishness*, for so many of us, is about bagels, lox and the New York Times rather than synagogue affiliation and Super Sunday giving.

The reality is that no longer is the fear of another Jewish genocide or the global threat of anti-Semitism a driving force in many of our religious or spiritual lives. Young Jews in particular reject the connection, previously seen as a *given*, between sitting through interminable Shabbat and holiday services and the survival of the Jewish people. A Jewish identity predicated on "they wanted to destroy us then, they want to destroy us now" neglects to posit a proactive, purpose-driven, sustaining approach to Jewish life.

The use of fear as an organizing principle has truly taken a toll on the soul of our community. Experiencing the world through the trauma of the Holocaust, the most brutal and tragic episode in our people's long history, has negated the Jewish legacy of questioning and dissent, leading to a narrowing of perspectives such that anyone seen as challenging conventional Jewish "priorities" is seen as disloyal at best, a mini-Hitler at worst. And such vulgar language has been allowed to enter the mainstream with unmatched ferocity over the past several years. So a Jewish civic leader who warns against the denunciation of moderate Muslims is called a "Nazi" and a devoted Orthodox rabbi who calls for empathy for Palestinian refugees is called "Kapo." Several years ago I joined a group of men and women who came together to celebrate Shavuot at the Western Wall, quietly and unobtrusively davening at the back of the Plaza. When a group of raucous ultra-Orthodox men saw men and women praying together, they began to attack us, physically and verbally. I could bear the rocks, bottles, and -- yes -- the feces that they threw at us, but the image that scarred me for years was the face of young *haredi* men, pais and black hats, screaming in my face "NAZI traitor!" and "Hitler should have finished off the job!" The absurdity of the comments was not lost on me -- to them I was at once a Nazi -- trying to destroy the Jewish people, and a Jew -- but the kind of Jew they wished Hitler would have taken care of.

A Jewish identity grounded in fear precludes creative and responsible dialogue, allowing hatred to fester, stifling open, nuanced discourse in our community. If we experience the world only through the lens of our enemies' attempts to destroy us and the world's silent complicity, of course we should shun those Jews who have the audacity to suggest, for example, that our hearts also break for the innocent Lebanese victims of this summer's war. I, myself, struggled over the most responsible way to respond after the war -- should we devote ourselves entirely to reconstruction efforts in Israel -- if we don't, who will? Or do we have a moral obligation to *also* work toward the reconstruction of southern Lebanon, where there was also massive human suffering and loss? Is there a way to fund cross-border rebuilding efforts without bolstering the position of Hezbollah in Lebanese society? How do we give and think and feel about the destruction wrought by this war? But vocal elements our community silenced legitimate debate over these and other questions. A group of young Jews in Jerusalem who came together to awaken compassion and raise funds for all of the war's victims -- Jewish and Arab -- were castigated in the mainstream Jewish press for their "ethics of universalism" and called "irresponsible" adherents to a "junk-food Judaism" that would ultimately be responsible for the

demise of the Jewish people.<sup>3</sup> How tragic is the loss of thoughtful disagreement! We should all be concerned: the fact that our community so rigidly defines the contours of Jewish conversations, obviates the possibility of real, honest dialogue and debate.

Before going any further, let me be very clear about what I am *not* saying:

I am *not* saying that the memory of the Holocaust need not be of critical and central importance to us as a people. Memory of our suffering is core to Israel's existence. As Heschel wrote: "The shrieks from the gas chambers, such as have never been uttered by man, somehow resound in our depths... Every one of us alive is a spark of an eternal candle and a smoldering ember snatched from the fire."<sup>4</sup> It would be unconscionable to minimize the catastrophe we have survived. But the memory of the Holocaust, like the memory of our enslavement in Egypt, must lead us not to insularity, particularism and triumphalism, but rather to bold, affirmative universalism ("Our people suffered the worst horrors of history because nobody cared about the Jews, so now it is the Jewish mission to care about all the most oppressed and degraded people." "Our people suffered the worst horrors of history because there was no State of Israel to protect us. Now we must do whatever we can to ensure that Israel -- free, democratic and peaceful -- is there for our children and grandchildren."<sup>5</sup>)

I am also *not* saying that anti-Semitism is a fantastical claim that needn't be a critical concern for us as a people. The murder of a woman who had the misfortune of being a Jew working in a JCC in Seattle this summer should have disabused all of that possibility. The new wave of anti-Semitism in France, and the increase in anti-Semitic incidents throughout Europe attest to the need for real vigilance. Jews around the world face real danger, which must neither be ignored or diminished. Years ago my brother spent half a year living in Japan. When he visited a bookstore in a rural part of the country where literally nobody had ever before met a Jew, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, translated into Japanese, was perched in the front window -- a best seller. With our history it would be naive and irresponsible to diminish the reality of anti-Semitism.

Finally, I am *not* saying that Israel and the serious ongoing threats to the State and its inhabitants need not be a central concern for us as a people. After this summer, there is no denying that there are enemies of Israel -- well resourced and deeply committed to undermining the stability and security of the Jewish State. They will use brazen and vulgar tactics in their fight for Israel's destruction. When Ahmadinejad, Iran's president, leader of a country on the verge of procuring nuclear weapons, can repeatedly question the historicity of the Holocaust and call Israel "a disgraceful blot" that should be "wiped off the map" -- to ignore or downplay the seriousness of the threat to the Jewish State would be reckless.

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3 ARIEL BEERY, *Breach in the Dam*, Jerusalem Post 9/06.

4 Heschel, "The Individual and His Obligations," in *The Insecurity of Freedom*, p. 189.

5 See MJ Rosenberg's beautiful piece from IPF Friday 9-29-06.

*As Jews it is our responsibility to remain truth-bearers to some of the most brutal atrocities in the history of human kind, to remain vigilant to the ongoing threats to Jewish safety and security in the world, and to support Israel with a love and commitment befitting of family. But we simply can no longer afford to root our identities in our fear of some ongoing existential threat to the Jewish people.*

What would it take to transform the Jewish experience of the previous century from one that stifles nuance and silences dissent into a stimulus to change, growth and development of Jewish ideas, an outburst of creativity -- a “flowering of Jewish thought and life?”<sup>6</sup> We must articulate a more robust understanding of Jewish life -- one that captures the deepest aspirations of our past and allows us to move forward purposefully and vigilantly into the future. The time has long passed for us to redefine the pillars of a Judaism with the capacity to nurture the soul, to bring healing to a world of chaos and suffering, to challenge us to become the best of ourselves, to lay out a path of purpose and meaning.

To uncover the secrets of that vibrant, vital, compelling Jewish religious life, we need to look no further than our calendar:

On PASSOVER, we reenact and reaffirm the core Jewish commitment that the world doesn't have to look the way that it does -- that human beings are created in the image of God, with innate dignity and worth, that oppression cripples the human experience. We celebrate the possibility for a people -- even one that has been enslaved and abused for centuries like Israel in Egypt -- to reclaim its dignity and move from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light. “עבדים היינו לפרעה -- *We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, but then God took us out of there, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.*” We learn that we must never despair -- that hope persists, even in the darkest of times.

With the revelation of Torah seven weeks later on SHAVUOT, we are compelled to understand the implications of our slavery, abuse and ultimate redemption -- the formative experience of our people -- as a mandate to resist all forms of slavery and abuse in the world. Torah forces us to recognize that our particular path has universal implications: וְגַר לֹא תִלְחֹץ וְאִתָּם יִדְעֶתֶם אֶת־נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר: כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: *You must not oppress the stranger, because you know the feelings of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt* (Ex. 23:9). We learn on Shavuot that the deepest aspiration of our tradition is a world in which all human beings -- not just all Jews -- live free from injustice and persecution. Our freedom comes at a price: we must forever devote ourselves to working for other peoples' freedom.

Our oppression leaves us with the charge to fight to end *all* oppression.

Our degradation leaves us with the obligation to oppose *all* degradation.

And this is far more than a theological abstraction. On Shavuot, we are given the blueprint. It is not enough to wander aimlessly in the desert, glowing in the promise of freedom. On Shavuot we receive Torah -- a careful and specific articulation of the tangible steps that we need to take in order to achieve the world we dream of.

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6 Rawidowicz, p. 57.

Several months later, we celebrate SUKKOT. It's one thing to be a people of great commitment to ideals when we are basking in the glow of our new found freedom, or trembling in the fire of the divine revelation. But what does it mean to live a purposeful, driven, directed life when we are deep in the desert, struggling with the mundane demands of day to day living? It is one thing to be wildly in love beneath the *huppah* -- it is quite another to wake up every morning with a heart full of devotion to your partner. Sukkot is the "festival of continuous fidelity"<sup>7</sup> -- the time in which we find the strength and courage to persevere, to reaffirm our core principles and work doggedly toward the realization of our dreams. And, critically, to do so with real joy -- because Sukkot is, afterall, זמן שמחתנו -- -- *the time of our joy*.

In this way our calendar spells out for us the core, fundamental promises of Jewish existence:

Imagine the impossible -- a world in which *nobody* suffers under ruthless oppression, nobody controls another's destiny, nobody is subjected to another's will -- liberation is possible. Understand that you have concrete obligations in turning the tide of history, in making manifest the reality of our aspirations. And understand that your obligations extend beyond you and your people -- your experience in the world necessarily opens you up to empathically work toward the realization of the dignity of *all* people. And finally, the work of our world will not be done in majestic, sweeping, Divine gestures. Rather, things will only change when people direct themselves, with dedicated perseverance, to realizing the dream. And so we work, tirelessly, to bring about the dream of a world redeemed -- a world of universal justice, dignity, honor and peace.

ROSH HASHANAH and YOM KIPPUR come in the middle of this drama to remind us that we are not only living a Jewish national story. Our journey as a people is the same journey that we take as individuals, navigating our way through our own personal stories, constantly aspiring to a different reality, taking responsibility for transforming our lives, and working, with persistence and perseverance, to realize the dreams we set out for ourselves.

Imagine if Jewish life in the 21st century were motivated by and grounded not in fear, but in *purpose, direction, perseverance* and *joy*. Imagine:

...a Jewish life that, prompted by the enduring memory of the Holocaust, motivates us to work tirelessly for an end to all oppression and degradation.

...a Jewish life that, while alert to the danger facing us as Jews -- in Israel, in Europe, in the US -- enriches our lives with learning, spiritual challenge, song, dance and prayer.

... a Jewish life that calls on us to work unapologetically to alleviate the suffering of Jews as Israel is under attack, but at the same time compels us to have true compassion for those who suffer as a result of Israel's efforts to protect the State.

...a Jewish life that is resolute in the pursuit of justice -- for Jews and for all people.

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7 Rabbi Shai Held on Sukkot.

I have learned a lot since my encounter with Khallid Muhammed in college. I now understand the Jewish obsession with self-protection, particularly in the half century following the murder of 6 million Jews, as the world did nothing to intercede. I understand why so many of our community's resources are devoted to protecting our people from destruction. *To pretend that there is no danger -- either to Diaspora Jews or to the State of Israel -- is to live in denial. But to persist in making fear the cornerstone of our identity as a community is to risk becoming victims to our own worst fears, and at the same time to diminish the promise of a rich and vigorous Jewish life.* Our obsessive concern with all of the ways in which we have died and are still are dying, and with all the people who want us dead, must not stifle our ability to live.

Heschel says that the audacity of Judaism is that "it makes the individual the mirror of the people."<sup>8</sup> To issue a claim on the soul of the Jewish people, we must first issue a claim on our own souls. We must not give up on our Jewish lives simply because we don't find resonant the old community agendas. "This is the hour" Heschel says, "for the rediscovery of the grandeur of our tradition."

Let us commit ourselves to enter a new chapter in Jewish history -- one driven not by the politics of fear, but by the politics of hope.

Let us move beyond the paralysis that comes from a defensive agenda to the openness and -- yes -- vulnerability, but also potential, that comes with a positive articulation of Jewish life and purpose.

Let us demonstrate that we can respond as well to privilege as we do to persecution.

Let us visit, connect with and fall in love with Israel not because we're afraid that if we don't it will disappear, but because we celebrate it as the spiritual, cultural and intellectual center of the Jewish world.

Let us be guided by a distinct sense of purpose -- with the courage and clarity to universalize our particularist commitments -- and with the strength to persevere as we traverse the long, arduous path to the Promised Land.

And let us do it with joy -- let's read and write great literature, let's build vibrant, vital communities, let's celebrate the reality that "a people dying for thousands of years means a living people."<sup>9</sup>

Let's daven, sing, celebrate, create and imagine with all our strength.

And let's dance our hearts out this *Simhat Torah*.

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<sup>8</sup> Heschel, *The Individual Jew and His Obligations*, p. 192.

<sup>9</sup> Rawidowicz, p. 58.

