

Israel and You, Sand and Stars
Delivered by Rabbi Joshua Heller
Congregation B'nai Torah
Rosh Hashanah 5770, Day 2

One of the lesser-known stories of Sherlock Holmes: Holmes, the master of deduction, and his sidekick, Dr. Watson go on a camping trip. Late at night, they retire to their tent and go to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakes up and nudges his faithful friend. "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see."

"I see millions and millions of stars, Holmes," replies Watson.

"And what do you deduce from that?"

Watson ponders for a minute.

"Well, astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Theologically, I can see that God is all-powerful, and that we are a small and insignificant part of the universe. What does it tell you, Holmes?"

Holmes is silent for a moment. "Watson, you idiot!" he says. "Since we see the stars, we can deduce that someone has stolen our tent!"

Our Torah reading today also has us looking to the heavens, looking to the stars- and maybe we too can use that as an opportunity to realize what is missing, and to see a bigger picture.

The centerpiece of our Torah portion this morning, Genesis 22 is the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. God tells Abraham to bring his son up as an offering. There is that remarkable climax- that moment in which God's angel tells Abraham to stay his hand. Instead, he substitutes a ram. Then God's angel calls out again with a special promise for Abraham:

Genesis 22:15-18: "I have sworn by my name, says God, that because you did this thing, and you did not hold back your only son, that I will bless you and multiply your descendants like the **Stars in the Heavens**, and the **Sand** on the shores of the sea."

It's a beautiful blessing, to be sure. Did it come true? What does it mean for us today as a

Jewish people, descendants of Abraham in the modern world? What does it mean for us as individuals who are searching for meaning in an ever-more complex universe?

We understand today that stars, which seem small and far away, are really gigantic boiling balls of gas, exploding in space. How are we like the stars? My wife reminds me that I am also a source of hot air, and frequently take up space. However, I think we can use this blessing to understand some important lessons about the Jewish world and the state of Israel this year, and also learn some eternal truths about ourselves.

First of all, it's worth noting that this is not the first time that Abraham was offered this blessing. In Genesis 15, God had already made the same promise- they will be like the dust of the earth, the sand of the shore and the stars of the heavens. In Chapter 26, he repeats it to Isaac. And that blessing has already come true, to an extent, even before the end of the Torah. Moses declares (Deuteronomy 1:10, 10:22) that the Jewish people "are like the stars of the heavens in their multitudes") In fact, we are told elsewhere that there were 603,000 males of military service, and many more women, children, and elderly- a population of millions . Moses also warns (Deuteronomy 28:62) that they will not be like this forever, that the Jewish people will be diminished by tragedies. That there were times when we would be ground up into dust under the heels of our enemies, that of those stars, some would wink out, or be extinguished in flames.

That imagery, of our Jewish people as sand and stars, would have been particularly moving to our ancestors. We live in cities where the stars are washed out by the bright lights. In which stars are seen on TV, or in pictures snapped by satellites. But it need not be that way. If you have ever visited the land of Israel. If you have ever walked the land of Abraham, tread the paths of Isaac, or laid out under the stars like Jacob, with a stone for a pillow. Then perhaps you can picture the experience: sand stretching in every direction around you, and the stars, so bright in the cool desert air, in constellations and galaxies and countless winking multitudes. In such a place you can't help but feel small and alone, and reach out for God's presence.

Of course, today the land of Israel is not quite the same as the land that our ancestors walked. It's a country of bright lights and big cities. It's a country of vibrant cities and agriculture, of stunning technological advancement. It's also a focus of contrast, conflict and controversy.

Israel represents, in real terms, the vision that God gave to Abraham. What does it mean to

speak of Israel, the modern country, as a sign that we are becoming like the sand, and the stars of the heavens? Like the sand, Israel is a place that is practical, down-to-earth. It is facing serious challenges and threats- from its immediate neighbors, from its more distant neighbors, and even from itself.

First of all, but in some ways least important, you have the Palestinians. I believe that the Palestinians have the right to live in peace, to have a state. After all, they too are descendents of Abraham. In Genesis 15, they too were promised their share of sand and sky. I've spoken in the past about the need for Israel to make concessions, I've said that making tough sacrifices and offering Palestinians territory and self-governance would lead to peace. And perhaps I had stars in my eyes. Because I think we are learning from bitter experience that whatever concessions Israel makes, whether they are ethically mandated or go beyond what is right, may not be enough to bring true peace. Pulling out of Gaza may have been ethically proper, but it brought no prosperity to the Palestinians, no plaudits to Israel on the diplomatic stage, and no peace to the children of Sderot. Indeed, it's a reminder that sometimes no good deed goes unpunished.

I know that answer from a different kind of star. Hollywood stars have said that they will protest, and in a few cases, boycott, the Toronto Film Festival, because it is saluting Tel Aviv. You have some well-known names, and some bit players. You have Viggo Mortensen, accusing Israel of a history of violence. David Byrne and other talking heads making a fuss. Stars like Danny Glover. (Great, between him and Mel Gibson now I have two reasons not to watch the lethal weapon movies. Joe Pesci- watch yourself). And then there is Jane Fonda. After being criticized for signing it, and being defended by members of our Atlanta community, she backed down, claiming that she is not anti-Israel, and didn't really understand what it was she was aligning herself with. Maybe she didn't mean it. This is not the first, or even the second time she didn't understand what she was getting into- think about the Viet Cong and Ted Turner. This petition says "Tel Aviv was built on violence," ignoring the "suffering of thousands of former residents and descendants." The stars are wrong- Tel Aviv was built not on Arab suffering but on sand. Tel Aviv was built by and for Jews, and is holy to no one (not even Jews).

You can have an argument or a negotiation about other lands, settlements and territories. There are places in Israel that were built on suffering. There are places where Arabs used to live

where Jews now do- stately homes in Jerusalem that used to have Arab owners, and Jewish villages built where Arabs used to be. And vice versa- my father is here today, and you can ask him the story of one of his cousins, murdered in 1929 in Hebron. In 1929 all of the Jews of Hebron were murdered, and the city where Abraham walked, and where he, Isaac and Jacob were buried, became “Jew-free “ and stayed that way until after 1967. To say nothing of the other places throughout the Middle East from which Jews fled or were expelled. So there’s room to negotiate. Town for town, house for house.

But Tel Aviv?. If Tel Aviv is not legitimate place for Jews to live, if you are negotiating over Tel Aviv’s right to exist, then there’s really no place left to go. You might as well close up shop and make a go of it Atlanta or Los Angeles. There is no other country in the world whose very legitimacy of existence is so challenged. If I can refer back to the story with which I began my remarks- you can’t really look to the stars if someone refuses to give you a place to pitch your tent.

Israel is also like the stars- and not just in that it flag proudly displays one. In a way, the way that the world relates to Israel is like the worst type of astrology- those who believe in horoscopes deflect responsibility for their own situations. They blame the faraway stars for their luck, whether good or bad. Similarly, nations throughout the world blame Israel, no matter how distant or irrelevant, for all kinds of troubles and misfortune.

If only Israel didn’t exist, suddenly democracy would break out across the Middle East. Dictators would surrender and literacy rates would skyrocket. Women would be given the right to drive and wear pants. All that, and "next Thursday you will meet a mysterious stranger." This threat against Israel’s legitimacy was most recently expressed in the Goldstone report, a document created by a United Nations Human Rights Commission Tribunal. This commission has condemned 33 countries for human rights violations 26 of them Israel, seven were in the rest of the world. This tribunal, which convened with some of its members having publicly prejudged the result, engaged in a stunning display of moral relativism that calls for war crimes tribunals for accidental civilian deaths in "Israeli-occupied" Gaza, while largely ignoring the role of Hamas in using its own population as human shields and firing indiscriminately against Israeli populations. Israel can do no right, no other nation can do wrong.

And yet, this is not the greatest threat that Israel faces. Earlier this summer, some of our members worked together to create a moving Tisha B'av program. We heard from Ambassador Brad Gordon, of AIPAC, about Iran's plans to create nuclear weapons. Actually building a bomb is easy. You can get the plans off the internet, more or less. The hard part is getting the uranium. Iran has put a tremendous effort into creating centrifuges needed to purify uranium- the most difficult step in making a bomb. It now has over 7000 spinning. Right now, as you hear this, or read this, they are spinning, spinning, spinning. Soon enough, Iran will have the ability to unleash the destructive power of the sun and stars themselves. There are efforts afoot in the US government to institute sanctions. We know that Iran is sensitive to economic pressure:- even though Iran has enough oil to last 50 years, it **imports** gasoline. It relies on outside countries to refine it to produce gasoline and other fuels.

But economic pressure is harder to apply than it looks, and goes both ways. A few weeks ago, Scottish authorities released a Libyan man named Abdel Baset al-Megrahi. He was the only man convicted of the bombing of a Pan Am jet over Lockerbie, Scotland, murdering over 270 people. The Scottish government, claimed it was releasing him "compassionate grounds." Being forced to eat haggis might be cruel and unusual, I'll grant you, but he returned home to a hero's welcome, and just a few days later, British Petroleum was awarded a major oil drilling contract in Libya. Economic pressure works, but only if the rest of the world realizes that Iran, with the power of the stars, is not only a Israel, a pesky country that apparently "doesn't deserve to exist anyway," It's a risk to other nations as well. Every other country in the Middle East is working to create its own bomb, and as a result, we're all a little less safe. When people who provide weapons to terrorists get nuclear technology, it's only a matter of time until they share- and if they can't get to an Israeli target, another Western target will do. So, negotiations will be held, and the West will be put off a little longer while the centrifuges spin. After all diplomacy was described by Mark Twain as the art of saying "nice doggie" until you find a rock.

Israel may have to stand on its own to protect itself and the rest of us. Israel is the star that does not fit easily into any other constellation- it may not have the support and friendship of many countries in the world. One traditional commentator suggests that the reason that Israel is compared to sand is that sand withstands the mightiest waves and storms- the waves may lash the

beach, but ultimately the sea is always defeated. Israel has been successful, so far, in delaying that which I hope is not the inevitable. We don't know what's going on behind the scenes. A bit over a year ago, the Israelis bombed a site in Syria, which has a strange radioactive signature. Syria's response was "what bombing?" A few weeks ago a Russian ship the "Arctic Sea" bound for the Middle East vanished and then reappeared without its cargo of "timber." Was it hijacked by ... Pirates? Or was this "timber" cargo whose owners didn't seem to want any help looking for it possibly something more sinister, even weapons bound for Iran?

Oddly enough, even that is not the greatest risk to Israel. Greater than the risk of being attacked by Iran, is the risk of **becoming** Iran. The divide between religious and secular Jews in Israel grows ever deeper. Riots over whether parking lots can be open on Shabbat (here at B'nai Torah we know from riots over parking) There are battles over whether synagogues like ours will be able to function there. Whether Jews will be able to choose how they wish to be married and buried. It's worth realizing that like the stars, Israel looks very different to us from afar than it does up close. From a distance, it looks cold and orderly, but up close it is hot boiling, tumultuous.

With all this Tsuris, why do we need Israel? Why bother? Why not adopt a less stressful country, like New Zealand, with Kiwis and hobbits and funny guys named Brett. Israel is a country of contradictions- the earthly Israel, built on sand, stretches seamlessly into the heavenly Israel, which shines among the star. It is a country with real social problems, like illegal immigration, prostitution, bribery and corruption. Israel's former president is on trial for rape, its former prime minister investigated for various types of fraud.

And yet, like the stars, it is our source of inspiration. It serves as our polestar, our source of direction in a world that is dark and confusing. It's a source of spiritual illumination- inspiration to every faith. There is nothing like study in Israel. Talk to anyone who has been- an eighth grader or highschooler on a school trip; a 20-something on birthright. Last week, I was talking with a Catholic priest who had that experience of studying in Israel and how it affected his own faith. When the time is right, I hope that our synagogue will bring a trip.

Israel provides physical illumination as well- it's a leader in science and technology, and research into green energy. You may like your Priuses and so on, but the first mass-use truly

electric car is already being tested in Israel. Israel is proof that democracy can work, even under difficult conditions. Yes, some political leaders are being investigated, but that's also the beauty of it- for in how many other countries of the world do leaders commit the gravest of offenses with impunity, without fear of charges or consequence? Look at the movies being shown and protested at the Toronto film festival. Several of them are very critical of Israeli social ills and military policy. That's something I can be proud of. Israel's light may flicker and twinkle, but it still shines amidst the darkness.

And we can help it shine. We can tell our friends, our neighbors, why Israel should have the right to exist. Whether you are a Republican or a Democrat, whether you are supportive of settlements or opposed, you can lobby your elected officials to remind them that Israel shouldn't be asked to act unilaterally. You can work with advocacy organizations that multiply your individual voice- we have many in our congregation who are active in AIPAC, but of course there are others as well. Outside this room there is a copy of a letter from the Israeli Ambassador that we have been asked to distribute, asking for your support. But support for Israel is not a one way street. You can invest in, and earn, from Israel's strength and vibrancy by purchasing an Israel Bond- our bonds dinner in October is a chance to learn more. You can support groups and organizations in Israel, like Masorti, that fight to make Israel a more just society, to mend the divides between secular and religious.

I've shared with you a taste, a vision, of the earthly and the heavenly Israel. But the truth is, God's vision, God's promise to Abraham, was not just of one country, of one place, in one generation, but of the Jewish people as a whole. Let me close with a thought about a question that each of us has the chance to answer for ourselves in the coming year. What does it mean to say that we, as Jews, are like the sand of the seashore, like the stars of the heavens?

There is an ancient tradition that we do not count Jews by number. At minyan, we count "not one, not two not three not four"- hopefully we get up to "not ten." Or instead we count based on the words of a verse with ten words "*hoshia et amecha*" and so on. No matter how you do it, even if you count us all up, there are perhaps 14 million Jews in the world. Which means that we have 14,000,001 opinions. But it means that we are a miniscule fraction of the world. We are a rounding error. We are just a grain of sand on the beach.

We too, are a mix of sand and stars. We must constantly be reminded that we are capable of tremendous lows and highs. One of the Chassidic masters teaches that in one pocket, we must have a slip of paper that says "I am but dust and ashes." We shouldn't think that it is all about us. In the other pocket, we must keep a paper that says "for my very sake the world was created."- the world would not be the same without each one of us. We understand the balance of our place in the universe. Of course, I have third piece of paper in my back pocket "Inspected by number 1." that too is important- that God cares deeply about our individual actions, and we are all inspected by "number 1."

We live in a society that is focused on very different types of stars, stars of stage and screen. Stars that stand out because they shine from the reflected light of flashbulbs and twitters and tweets. Stars that run up on stage to steal the spotlight. Who are we if we do not have notoriety, fame, or the infamy that makes us outshine the daylight? We can feel very lonely, very purposeless. What difference does one grain of sand make on the beach? What difference does one star make in the heavens, no matter how brightly it may shine?

In our daily prayers we read Psalm 147: "He is the Healer of the broken-hearted, and the One Who bandages their sorrows. He counts the number of the stars, to all of them He assigns names." (Psalm 147). Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld suggest that there is a connection between these two verses, that I would note applies to each of us, each of you, just as it applies to Israel, a grain of sand among the nations of the world. If God counts each and every of the myriad stars, then we need not be broken-hearted, because he counts and cares for each of us as well. If God can count each of the billions and billions of stars, then why not us?

You should not be broken hearted, because you are like the stars. You need not feel that you are alone in the universe, because even if you are one among nations and multitudes, even if you are not sure of your place among the constellations. Even if you feel like you are light-years away, you still count, you count very much before God.

You should not be broken hearted, because you are like the stars. Some stars burn red hot, others are cool. Some burn brightly for a short time and burst into a supernova, others know the secret of burning dim, but lingering in their glow. Your light may burn brightly or dimly, for a long or a short time, but it burns and glows all the same. Even if your light seems dim in

comparison to that of the moon, your light still shines.

You should not be broken-hearted, because you are like the stars. Some stars shine in isolation, and it may be years, or decades, or millennia, before that light reaches another. You may feel, on a given day, like you are not having an impact, that you are not changing the lives of your family, your friends, your students, your co-workers, your clients. The strangers you bump against each day. But you may never know how your light reaches another: today, tomorrow, in a month, in a year, in a generation!

You should not be broken-hearted, because you are like the stars. You may never know whom your light touches. Is your light the light upon which a young child makes her innocent and fervent wish? Is your light the light that guides a lost and grateful soul into port. Is your light the light that twinkles over enchanted lovers?

We should not be broken hearted- because we are like the stars. Because we are lucky enough to live in a land whose flag is full of stars, because we are lucky enough to have an Israel that shines alone like the single Jewish star upon its flag, because we are descendants of Abraham, who was blessed that his descendants would be myriad as the stars. And so may it always be.