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Congregation B'nai B'rith, Santa Barbara CA

L'shana tova. I painted myself into a corner last Monday by announcing in the weekly email that I would be speaking about Israel and the Palestinians. Since then, I have been receiving suggestions, articles, points of view and one joke, which would not be appropriate to share. Here goes.

I believe that Israel's war this summer was a just war, a war of self-defense. The thousands of rockets launched against Israel's civilian centers would have killed and injured hundreds, had it not been for the Iron Dome, and even so they made life in Israel untenable. And the tunnels, dug by Hamas in anticipation of a massive terror attack against Israel...those tunnels, I believe, completely justify Israel's ground war. The sixty-six Israeli soldiers who died in the terrifying work of destroying those tunnels, gave their lives protecting their families and their country.

By Israel's own count, over one thousand innocent civilians in Gaza were killed, many of them children; tens of thousands were maimed and injured. Could some of those civilian casualties have been prevented? Surely at least one, or two, or ten, or more. And the thought that those children, those innocents, were killed by the Jewish soldiers of Israel should leave us trembling. We know that the Israeli army took great precautions, more than any other army in the world would, sending text messages and fliers warning civilians in advance of attacks. And we know that Israeli soldiers often put their own lives at risk to avoid endangering civilians. And we know that Hamas deliberately launched its attacks against Israel from homes, schools and hospitals, using those children as human shields. Fair-minded people realize that Hamas bears the responsibility for the deaths of Gaza's children. But still we tremble before all those innocent deaths.

As for the international criticism of Israel, from Mahmoud Abbas' absurd charges of genocide to the massive street protests in Europe this summer, and the BDS movement now mobilizing on college campuses, my own feelings are best captured by the video of the United Nations interpreter who, while unaware that her microphone was on, turned to her colleague after the sixth straight anti-Israel resolution in the General Assembly in a single day, and said: "you know there's other really bad s**t happening in the world and nobody says anything!" I say God bless the elf that turned her microphone on, allowing the entire General Assembly to hear her tell them the truth. The obsession with Israel, the demonization of the only democracy in the Middle East, looks, tastes and smells to me like the same old, age-old hatred of the Jews.

As to what Israel should do next, I will always hope for a new round of peace talks. Both the Israeli and the Palestinian leadership have emerged from the summer more popular and their people more united, as a result of the war. That may be good for negotiations, since it takes a strong leader to offer a compromise. President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu blasted away at each other at the United Nations, but they don't have to like each other to do business. On the other hand, the wild new volatility in the region, and the nuclear threat from Iran, and the

thorny problem of the West Bank settlements all make it difficult to see Prime Minister Netanyahu or his Palestinian counterparts striking a deal anytime soon. Sadly, with all the death, the devastation and the terror, it feels to me that not much has changed.

Except, one big new thing happened this year, something that I think might have profound and far-reaching consequences. A book came out with a new point of view. More importantly, the book became a New York Times bestseller, and won a National Jewish Book Award. I'm referring to *My Promised Land: the Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*, by Ari Shavit.

Actually, the big new thing in this book is one chapter, titled Lydda 1948. In this chapter, for the first time that I am aware of, a Zionist tells the story of the Nakba, which is Arabic for "The Catastrophe." The Palestinian name for the establishment of the State of Israel.

It is not easy reading.

I am certain that for Shavit, it was not easy to write. Throughout the book, he makes it abundantly clear that he loves Israel. He is proud of everything that has been accomplished, and is grateful to his great-grandfather for uprooting the family from England and bringing them to settle in Palestine. Shavit loves Israel and argues repeatedly the necessity of Israel after the Holocaust, and for Jewish survival. He is a passionate Zionist.

He is the first passionate Zionist who has been willing to tell the story of 1948 from the Palestinian point of view. The story of the *nakba*.

He sets the stage with the United Nations vote in November 1947 to partition Palestine into two states—an Arab state and a Jewish state. That partition plan, he reminds us, was rejected by the Arab League and by the Arabs of Palestine, and when the British left completely in May 1948, the new state of Israel was invaded by the armies of Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. And the Jews fought for their survival. So far, we know this story.

A few years ago a taxi was taking me through the beautiful old village of Ein Karem outside of Jerusalem. The driver said to me "do you see those beautiful houses? Those were Arab houses." Then he added simply: "*hem barchu*. They fled." That is our Jewish narrative.

Now listen to Shavit: In July, 1948, the war came to Lydda, a large and strategic Arab city in the center of the country. On July 11, late in the afternoon, Regiment 89, led by Moshe Dayan, formed into an armored column and sped into the city, firing at anything in its way. In forty seven minutes, more than a hundred Arab civilians were dead. Women, children and old people. By nightfall the Jewish army had conquered the city. Thousands of civilians were ordered to gather in three buildings: the small mosque, the large mosque, and St. George's Cathedral.

Commander Yigal Allon assigned Shmaryahu Gutman to be the military general of the city. Gutman says that he asked Allon, "What should I do about the Arabs? Do you have anything to say to me?" and Yigal Allon replies to him: "I have nothing to say to you. You will see how things go, and as things go, you'll act. Do what you think you must do."

He arrived in Lydda on the night of July 11 and found thousands of Arabs assembled in the Great Mosque. Inside, it was hot, and crowded and stifling with no

food, no water, no air. No room to sit or to lie down. At midnight Gutman, the military governor, released the women and children. Then he released the flour mill and flour shop owners and bakers to bake pita bread. He released water well operators to provide water. By morning he released most of the teenagers. Thousands of men remained in the mosque.

Then in the middle of the morning, the military governor is in St. George's Cathedral negotiating with the dignitaries of the city, and suddenly hears gunfire outside. Then all hell breaks loose. Thirty minutes of non-stop shooting, and then silence. Word arrives that a Jewish soldier has fired an anti-tank rocket at close range at the small mosque. The Jewish army had killed seventy more civilians.

He returns to the assembled dignitaries of the city and tells them that a great war is coming, and that as they have just seen, anything can happen. Terrified, they ask what will happen if they ask to leave. He does not give them an immediate answer. Finally, in a state of immense agitation, they ask permission to leave Lydda...the entire population, but they ask him: what will become of the prisoners detained in the Great Mosque?" He replies "we shall do to the prisoners what you would do had you imprisoned us!" They plead "please, no, don't do that! We beg you, do not do such a thing!" So he says "Don't worry, we will not do that. Ten minutes from now, the prisoners will be free to leave the mosque, and leave their homes and leave Lydda along with all of you and the entire population of Lydda." And they replied "Thank you master. God bless you."

Gutman climbs to the top of the minaret of the mosque, and watches as the town descends into chaos. He has given them ninety minutes to gather their possessions and to leave their homes. People are rushing everywhere, grabbing bread, vegetables, clothing, mattresses, jewelry.

Shavit concludes his story with thirty-five thousand Arabs with all of their possessions on wagons, donkeys and mules, marching out of Lydda into exile; and Gutman standing, watching, and thinking of the Jews walking into the Babylonian exile.

There is more in the chapter, some even harder to bear. Stories told by Jewish men of their own descent into savage brutality. Ari Shavit has written the first Zionist book to tell the story of 1948 the way the Palestinians remember it. Yes, they fled from Lydda, but only under great pressure. Only after the Jewish army had come to their city and left several hundred civilians dead. This was their catastrophe, and they had done nothing wrong.

The Jews in this chapter are, for the most part, men with a conscience, who in their ferocious drive to build a new country, caused the Arabs of Lydda a devastating, catastrophic loss. And they are haunted by their memories.

Other Israelis have told this story, and others like it, about 1948. We have heard this narrative before. But we have never heard it told with such empathy, and joined together with a genuine Jewish patriotism and love of country. The two narratives of triumph and tragedy have never seemed possible to hold in one heart. Ari Shavit has shown us that it is possible. And thousands of people have read his book. That feels new to me, and profoundly significant, because our conflict with the Palestinians is not so much over the land...which can be divided. Our conflict is at its core over narrative. We have been killing each other for sixty-six years over

the story, and over whose version is more true. Ari Shavit may have begun to show the way to tell a story that we Jews and Palestinians can share. Maybe.

3,000 years ago, every Yom Kippur, the entire people of Israel gathered for an annual ritual of liberation from sin. Two identical goats were brought. By a lottery one goat was designated for God and the other for Azazel, whoever that was. The goat for God was slaughtered and sacrificed as a burnt offering. Then the goat for Azazel was brought before Aaron, the High Priest, who set his hands upon the head of the goat and, in the words of tomorrow morning's Torah portion, "confessed all the iniquities and transgressions of the people over the head of the goat." He placed the sins of the people onto the goat, which was then led out into the wilderness where it was set free.

Like all ritual, the Yom Kippur performance with the goat was sacred theater. A symbolic drama. **The liberation from sin came from the confession.** It's still true. Telling the truth about something we have done wrong may be excruciating. But it sets us free. In my own life, I have learned that real apology and forgiveness require telling the story of what happened...as specifically as possible. Forgiveness requires remembering, and telling, and then we can make a new start.

I do not know if we as a people are ready to hear the story of the *nakba*, but I feel certain that there will never be peace between us and the Palestinians until we do. So I pray that one day we will learn to listen to that story, and then to tell it, as Ari Shavit has done, with empathy and with honesty and with eloquence.

Then, perhaps every year, on Yom Kippur, we will sit and converse with our Palestinian friends and neighbors, and remember together all the terrible things we once did as well as the awe-inspiring miracles that we performed in the land of our ancestors. And we will both beg each other for forgiveness, and we both will give each other that gift.

Then God's promise to Abraham will at long last be fulfilled: *L'zarecha eiten et ha-aretz hazot.* To your descendents will I give this land.

Gmar chatimah tova. May you be sealed in the Book of Life for a good, healthy, peaceful year.