

Where Shall We Locate Ourselves This Year?

Rabbi Gary Pokras
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Good *yontif*! You know it's hard to believe that an entire year has passed since we last gathered as a community in this magnificent sanctuary. Yet, it is very clear that our world is not the same. One year ago how many of us were thinking about a world nuclear agreement with Iran, or rising anti-Semitism in Europe, or a tsunami of human suffering in a rapidly expanding refugee and migration crisis? One year ago how many of us thought that the Supreme Court would legalize gay marriage, or that the clear Republican front runner for president of the United States would be Donald Trump?

We've even seen change right here in our Western New York Jewish Community. A few months ago members of three congregations traveled to Israel with three different rabbis together, with the help of generous support from Jewish Federation. The power of this trip as a community builder cannot be understated, and I certainly hope that this will only be the first of many such trips. By the way, we are planning a congregational trip for next summer to celebrate the *bar mitzvah* of Aiden Donahue in our ancient homeland! It's going to be fantastic, and we got a ridiculously low airfare to bring the price down. You can find more information about the trip on the tables in the link as you leave the sanctuary this evening.

Tonight, I'd like to share two old stories that took on new meaning for me during our community experience in Israel. They are familiar stories, but I had not thought of them in this way. Just out of curiosity, how many of you have been to Masada?

Great! Then you know the story of how two-thousand years ago the zealots held off the mighty Romans for months. Finally, when defeat and capture were inevitable, they chose to commit mass suicide rather than allow themselves to become Roman slaves. Yes? I can't even tell you how many times I've heard that story while standing at the top of the mountain, looking out at the remains of the Roman camps that surrounded it. Two generations of Israeli soldiers have been brought to the top of Masada to hear that story as they were inducted into the army. It became the rallying symbol of the fighting strength of the State of Israel, and the freedoms it promised our people.

This year, our tour guide Jeremy Aron, changed my understanding of this story forever. As we settled in at the top of Masada, he asked if we noticed that the only Israelis on Masada were the tour guides. Of course, the answer was 'no,' but as we looked around we could see that he was right. Israelis don't come to Masada anymore, at least not like they used to, because their understanding and interpretation of the story has changed.

Let's take a closer look at what really happened. The story as we know it was recorded by the Roman Jewish historian Josephus, who described a lengthy Roman siege during which a ramp was built up to the fortress at the top. Once the ramp was completed, the Romans attacked and began to breach the wooden walls using fire and battering equipment. Yet, just as the afternoon began to turn to evening, the wind changed, blowing the fire directly back into the Roman army. Knowing that the next day would bring certain victory, the Roman commander decided to retreat until dawn, leaving a guard detail to prevent any escapes. When the Romans returned the next morning, sometime in the Spring of the year 73 CE, they found 960 dead bodies and all of the buildings ablaze, with the exception of the food storerooms which were left untouched to show that the Sicarii (the Jewish splinter group at the top of Masada) were defiantly untouched by the Roman siege.

Later that morning, the Romans found two women and five children hiding in a cistern carved into the side of the mountain. They told the story of how during the night their leader, Eliezar ben Yair, convinced everyone that it was better to die free than accept a life of slavery. As it is against Jewish law to commit suicide, they decided that the men would kill the women and children and that from among the men they would draw lots to determine ten who would then kill the other men, and then one who would kill the last nine before killing himself.¹

Let's assume for the moment that the story is true (which, it turns out, may be a big assumption based on the archeology). How many people actually committed the brave act of suicide? Just one! Of the 960 Sicarii at the top of Masada, all but one were murdered at the hands of their own people. Our guide then asked, "Is this what we want for our soldiers today - that they kill each

¹ Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, Book VII, Chapters 8 & 9

other when they think the dangers are too great? Is this the 'ethic' which should define who we are as Zionists and Israelis?"

Then he went on to share a second story, equally famous in rabbinic circles. Three years before the fall of Masada, Jerusalem was conquered and the Second Temple was burned to the ground. When the destruction of the city seemed imminent, Rabbi Yochanan bar Zakkai, one of the great rabbinic leaders of his generation, decided to risk his life on an impossible mission. He told his students to declare that he was dead, and to take him outside of the city to bury him. However, once they were out of the city, they were to go straight to Vespasian, who commanded the Roman legions surrounding Jerusalem so that Yochanan could try to negotiate a peaceful solution. Yochanan first asked that Jerusalem be spared, but Vespasian refused. Yochanan then asked for the tiny village of Yavneh up in the Galilee, for the elders and scholars to live there in peace - promising not to revolt in the future. Amazingly, Vespasian agreed, and the rabbis established a new center of learning in Yavneh shortly thereafter.² Over the next two hundred years, these rabbis and their students eventually wrote the *mishnah*, which became the basis of the rabbinic Judaism we now practice today.

Let's consider these two stories for a moment. The Sicarii remained unbent, choosing death over capture and possible enslavement. Perhaps they were brave, but where are the Sicarii today? Two-thousand years later, we are here worshiping together in a land the rabbis never even dreamed existed, because of the enduring legacy they have left us. The rabbis chose creativity and flexibility over rigid absolutes.

I share these stories for two reasons. The first, is so that we can each ask ourselves, as part of our personal processes of *teshuvah*, whether we have been more like the Sicarii or like the ancient rabbis -- whether we have been unbending and extreme, or flexible and moderate --

and with whom ...

² Different sections of this story, and others that I have glossed over or did not mention can be found scattered throughout the *midrash*, appearing in texts such as *Genesis Rabbah*, *Leviticus Rabbah*, *Lamentations Rabbah* and *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, not to mention the *Talmud Bavli: Gitten*. For an excellent collection of all of these texts in English see *The Book of Legends*, edited by Hayim Bialik and Yehoshua Ravnitsky, pages 189-92. (Chapt. 10, section 2, segments 1 and 2.

and with what result?

This is not an easy task, and will require, among other things a level of self-honesty that we might find uncomfortable. Yet, when we consider the different kinds of futures that we might create or destroy for ourselves, it seems that our short term discomfort could have significant long-term benefits.

The second reason I shared these stories is to ask us to reflect on how we have been acting as a community regarding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or rather, the proposed Iran nuclear agreement. Now, I want to be clear. I have no intention of taking a stand on one side or the other tonight. My concern tonight, is not about which side is right, but rather, how we are responding to each other and to the people outside of our Jewish community. The question for me is not about the day of the vote (if it even happens), but the day after, and the day after that and so on and so on. No matter how the final days leading up to the deadline play out, there will not be a clear mandate either way. Congress is split on whether or not to support the agreement. The Jewish community is also split - and not across the traditional lines of division!

A few weeks ago I participated in a meeting between several leaders of our WNY Jewish community and Congressman Brian Higgins. Much to my surprise, there was no consensus among the Jewish leaders about whether to support or oppose the deal. I was not only surprised, but astonished! Each of us thought we had perfect clarity about the issue, and that our different answers were so obvious that any thoughtful person would have to agree. Yet, there we were, sitting around the table, thoughtful and intelligent people, completely disagreeing with each other.

While we are each passionate about our positions, we were able to maintain a baseline of decorum. The same is not true of our national debate. The President holds that the only viable alternative to the deal is war. I find that to be an unhelpful frame, not only because I think the world of diplomacy works with shades of grey, but also because it set the stage for the supporters of the deal to label those who oppose it as warmongers. Note that this terminology is no longer about the actual issues, but rather about the character of the people who oppose the agreement. On the other side, are those who passionately believe the deal will not only enable, but embolden

Iran in its desire to destroy the Jewish State. This has led them to declare that those in favor of the agreement don't care about Jews. This also is unhelpful, because it labels (either overtly or by implication) the other side as anti-Semitic. Again, please note that this too is about character, not about the issue. If we see each other in such stark terms, as either warmongers or anti-Semites with no room for anything else, then whose path are we following - the rabbis or the Sicarii?

The agreement will, by everyone's estimation, go forward - but the fight will continue about implementation, and enforcement, and more. Throughout it all, we must be one Jewish community. We must find a way to hear each other. We must find a way to bend enough so that we can find the common ground we will need in the year to come. We must not forget that we are, ultimately, part of the same family. I think we can all agree that we want to keep Iran from a nuclear weapon, and do everything possible to prevent the spread of extremism. I hope we can also agree that we want to do everything possible to ensure that the State of Israel survives and stays true to the Jewish values and ethics we hold so dear. Regardless of everything else, we will still share these goals.

This past year has not been easy, nor will the year come. And so we are left with a choice. In our own personal lives, and in an increasingly volatile and dangerous world, where shall we locate ourselves this year - Masada or Yavneh?

May God bless us and help us choose well.