

Rabbi Leora Kling Perkins - Tazria-Metzora

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Rachel Ofra Eliyahu Schattner grew up on Kibbutz Ein Harod in the 1930s. She remembers the struggles that her parents and their fellow founding kibbutz members went through as they battled the swamp, endured malaria and other illnesses, and learned to farm. She grew up in a time of scarcity, without sweets for the children, just a little bit of sugar water, and lots of grapefruit. She also remembers the time in 1946 that British soldiers came to the kibbutz searching for hidden weapons, and that the kibbutz cooks prepared a gigantic pot of tea for them, in hopes of being treated kindly in return. And she remembers her father excitedly preparing how he would write his signature, as he set off to sign Israel's Declaration of Independence, a culmination of decades of devotion to the yishuv, the Jewish community in Israel.

I heard Rachel speak as part of a series celebrating 75 years since that document was signed. Reporters from the podcast Israel Story tracked down descendants of every one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and spoke to them about their ancestor, and about their own relationship to the state. They asked how the person thought their ancestor would have felt about the state now, and how they themselves understood that person's legacy. I was particularly struck by hearing the ways that they expressed their own complicated feelings about the country their parent or grandparent had helped to create.

At the end of Rachel Ofra Eliyahu Schattner's interview, she reflected that for her parents, Israel was of supreme importance in their lives. Her father, Mordechai Schattner, was a member of Moetzet Ha'am, the provisional state council of the Palestinian Mandate before independence. He was an ardent believer in Zionism and an energetic builder of Zionist institutions. For him, the State of Israel represented a secure home and the next stage of Jewish self-actualization, and he spent his life working to build and strengthen it.

Today, Rachel has some mixed feelings about Israel. For example, she objects to the way the country has treated Palestinians. She said, "If we don't want anyone to be our boss, why are we the boss of someone else? It's so wrong. The way of thinking is not good, not good at all." And yet, when her daughter suggested leaving, she couldn't imagine it. "Israel," she said, "Is a part of me and I will not leave it until I will go to heaven."

On the one hand, Rachel pushes back against what she says was her parents' conviction that Israel comes before anything else. She feels that some of what Israel has done goes against her values. On the other hand, Israel is her home in a deep way, that goes beyond her opinions about specific laws or policies that her country enacts. And that will never change.

My guess is that many of us can relate to the experience of having mixed feelings about our home, whether we are talking about our home-away-from-home in Israel, or about our own home country of the United States. We all understand that disagreements with particular policies, laws, or even cultural phenomena don't have to lead to disaffection from our country,

but there may be times of deep hurt and resentment that may lead us to feelings of betrayal or despair. How do we make peace with what we find troubling in a country that is our home?

In some ways, if we are feeling disappointment, resentment, or indignation about a particular place that we call home, it is a sign of progress. Why would I say that? For millennia, Jewish communities have had a very different relationship with the countries they have lived in than most of us do today. After the year 70 in the common era, every Jew lived under a foreign regime, with perhaps some autonomy about how they ran their own communities, but generally without much power or sense of investment in the country as a whole. If you're not expecting a country to look out for you, if you're not expecting that your voice or your experience matters to those in power, then even harmful things that the country does aren't going to carry with them a sense of betrayal. Certainly the phenomenon of Jews feeling any sense of identification with the values of any country is a fairly recent phenomenon.

It was in that context that the concept "dina d'malkhuta dina," the law of the land is the law came about. This is the idea that Jews are obligated to follow the laws of the place they are in, even if we disagree with them, and think they are silly or misguided or even exploitative. This principle would say that it is wrong to cheat on your taxes, to speed, or even to jaywalk, because following the law is the right thing to do.

This idea was encapsulated by a statement in Pirkei Avot by Rabbi Hanina "Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear it inspires, every person would swallow their neighbor alive." In this view, governments were valuable in preventing anarchy, regardless of the wisdom of their laws.

That concept, of course, has limits. The rabbis hold up as an example the Israelite midwives, Shifra and Puah. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, and Pharaoh was trying to destroy them, Shifra and Puah disobeyed Pharaoh's command to kill the Israelite baby boys. According to a midrash they didn't just not kill the boys, they actively took steps to insure their health and safety. The midrash explains that their fear of heaven was greater than their fear of Pharaoh, and that in breaking the law of the land they were complying with God's law.

Today, of course, we have the blessing of the existence of multiple countries where we feel that they are governed by principles much loftier than preventing a "Lord of the Flies" type of chaos. We are in an age of Declarations of Independence, democracy, and free speech. This change is reflected, in fact, in our liturgy. For hundreds of years, Jewish communities had in their prayerbooks a prayer for the welfare of the leader of their country. They would pray for God to protect that country's leader, whoever it was. In fact, one version of the prayer, found in a Russian siddur from the beginning of the twentieth century, speaks of praying for the Czar, the Czarina and the entire royal family. The point is, that these prayers were very much in the model of, this leader is who we have, and having some laws, and stability, is better than nothing, so let's pray this lasts.

Once Jews started living in democracies, however, those prayers changed. In America, we have had several versions of this prayer. Each of them lifts up certain values, and prays that our country continues to live by them. Instead of praying that our leaders live a long life, we pray that they be guided by wisdom. We reflect in our prayers an investment in our country, and a wish for it to be a place that we can continue to feel proud of.

At the same time, that very sense of investment, and belonging can make it that much more painful when our country disappoints us. There may be times when we don't feel like saying a prayer for our country, or for Israel. We may not feel like saying it because we are angry, or frustrated with the decisions that particular leaders have been making, so much so that praying for them to have wisdom and be guided by certain values may feel disingenuous to us.

And yet, by saying those prayers, we encourage ourselves to have hope. We remind ourselves that this is a place that we are invested in, and a place where we have a voice, no matter how small it may be. Most importantly, we remind ourselves of the emotional connection we have with the place, that connection that makes our frustrations feel so personal.

My father told me a story that took place when he co-led a trip to Israel with a group of ministers, through the JCRC— Rabbi Lerner has done something similar as well. They visited a community center in Haifa, where they learned about the Ethiopian Jewish community and about the center's services in support of that population. A young Ethiopian woman, who was working at the center, had immigrated to Israel as a child. She spoke about the discrimination that many Ethiopian Jews experience and their many challenges in integrating into Israeli society. One of the American ministers, an African-American who leads a church in Roxbury, innocently asked her, do you ever think about going back to Ethiopia? She paused and looked at him as though he were crazy. Her response was compelling: "Absolutely not. This is my home." There were many changes that she wanted Israel to make, but none of that impacted her sense of belonging.

Like Rachel Ofra Eliyahu Schattner, this Ethiopian woman loved her country. There were things about it that she found hurtful, and yet it was her home, and a place that she was invested in improving. As we approach Yom Haatzmaut, when we will celebrate Israel's 75 birthday, let's be inspired by that sense of love and commitment, and willingness to help her home live up to its potential, and to the values expressed in its founding document.