

Rabbi Mark Miller
Temple Beth El
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Israel as a Mirror to Ourselves

I'm a little hesitant to ask this ... but please raise your hand if the word "Fortnite" means anything to you! Keep your hands up if you have ever played Fortnite.

For the vast majority of us in this Sanctuary, allow me to explain. Fortnite is a video game that has become a cultural phenomenon – a military-style game where you parachute onto a virtual island with 99 other players and try to become the final survivor. It is a technological marvel, enticing lots of people into spending lots of time with it. I don't want to brag, but according to at least one 12-yr-old boy who happens to live in Birmingham and shall remain nameless ... I just may be the world's best Rabbi-Fortnite player!

Enter a guy who calls himself Ninja, considered the best <non-Rabbi> Fortnite player. He was one of the first to take advantage of new social media platforms to skyrocket in popularity and influence. His real name is Richard Tyler Blevins, a 27-yr-old kid from Illinois who spends more than 12 hours/day sitting in front of his video game console. He probably weighs a scrawny 130 pounds, has pink hair, and he is also – according to some commentators – the most popular athlete in the world.

I realize this is only one measure, but Ninja has garnered the most social media interactions of any athlete on the planet ... more than soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo, more than LeBron James.

Oh, and by the way, he is earning approximately \$500,000 ... a month. He's done it by building a vast online community, filled with dialogue and collaboration. Relationships.

I would surmise that many of you are sitting here thinking Fortnite sounds exciting, or Ninja sounds ridiculous. You may believe it's worthy of conversation, or that it's just another fad. But I mention this – specifically on Rosh Hashanah – because fads tend to reflect the spirit of the times. In other words, it doesn't just happen to be popular, there are reasons behind it. What is it about America in the year 2018 that provided such fertile ground for the Fortnite craze?

First, we already know that technology has made it possible for people in the 21st century to enjoy social interactions from the comfortable confines of their own homes. You don't even need to go out any more, your friend Ninja is right there talking to you!

Beyond that, most action games are presented in dark, foreboding colors, with the requisite gore to make them "realistic." Fortnite chose to employ bright colors and impressive, but still cartoonish, graphics that feel playful rather than disturbing. And when I look at America, I wonder if kids (and their parents) were ready for some relief

from the constant cascade of troubling images that surround us – TV and movies, 24-hour news, the internet ... we can't escape it.

It would be easy to judge Ninja, or blame Fortnite for some of the woes around us. Spending too much time in front of a screen, failing to build “real” relationships, minimizing violence. More challenging would be to recognize that the game is not causing these issues, but is a result of them. Understanding why Fortnite is so successful can provide a window into our collective national soul at this precise moment. A way to understand something about ourselves.

And this Holy Day is supposed to be about understanding ourselves. We spend our entire lives building an identity, a sense of self-worth, a healthy ego. And those things are vital to our ability to wake up in the morning, walk outside with confidence, and exist productively in the world. But these Holidays demand that we dig a little deeper.

Rosh Hashanah encourages us to look in the mirror and pay attention to the self underneath that may have a few blemishes, that may need some minor adjustments. Nobody really wants to focus on those parts of ourselves. So if we want to be honest, but gentle, with ourselves, perhaps a glancing blow is easier to absorb than the direct assault that Rosh Hashanah seems to expect.

The reason I bring up Fortnite is that it offers us a way to explore some of our society's faults or identify less-than-constructive habits, in a way that isn't quite as invasive as simply baring our souls. But I know, I know ... it's just a game. What about something more consequential? What might we learn, for example, if we use this idea of looking in the mirror and apply it to the way we treat Israel?

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In 1941, our Temple went through a massive transition. Rabbi Leo M. Franklin, who had guided our growth from a relatively small, parochial congregation in 1899 to one of the largest and most prominent synagogues in the country, was retiring. Choosing his successor would define the future of our proud institution. One issue rose to the top, not only the largest concern, but the most explosive topic related to our next Rabbi.

Anyone dare to guess the singular issue? Israel!

Many of the finest rabbis from around the country sought this position. The first finalist was Maurice Eisendrath, from Holy Blossom in Toronto – a phenomenal rabbi who went on to become long-time President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations; the second was our own B. Benedict Glazer, from Temple Emanu-El in New York. Both men had impeccable credentials, national support, and big ideas for the future. There was only one crucial difference.

During this time, Rabbi Franklin exchanged a remarkable series of letters with a prominent Rabbi (Wolsey) from Philadelphia about the situation at Temple Beth El. *(SHOUT OUT to Laura Williams, our Temple Curator, for helping me find so many*

great resources in our Archives!) See if they give you a taste of the battle that was erupting here:

May, 1941: “I am informed and staggered this morning by [another Rabbi] who claims that [Eisendrath] is an ardent Zionist ... your successor should definitely have the same type of ideology on the subject of nationalism as you. There should be no capitulation, for that would be a body blow to religion ... [if (a Zionist) were elected successor] it might be destructive of the Judaism of the whole State of Michigan, and I would look upon it as a calamity.”

And “calamity” was just the beginning. Their letters included such colorful phrases as, “saving the soul of the Jewish people,” “I loathe and despise Jewish fascism,” “They are undemocratic and definitely un-American,” and “I think the day is done when Beth El could continue as a united group.”

It may sound a little dramatic to us now, but at that time, most Reform Jews were anti-Zionist. According to Rabbi Franklin, writing again in 1943, “I am entirely sure that [a rather influential group who happen to be Zionistically minded] do not understand the distinction between being Anti-political Zionism and Anti-Palestine.” Remember, this is pre-1948, so he means there is a difference between supporting a formal State of Israel and supporting the Jewish community who live and struggle in what was still called Palestine.

On the surface, the discussion was about supporting or rejecting Israel. But holding it up as a mirror, we can try to understand what was behind it. This powerful angst grew out of the deep and enduring connections we had made right here in America. In the wake of many centuries of brutal oppression in Europe, Jews had finally begun to make inroads in this land of opportunity. A “Golden Medina” where, nonetheless, we still fought for acceptance. Exclusive clubs, professions Jews could not enter, neighborhoods not far from here where we couldn’t live – but pogroms felt like a thing of the past, and we could finally see the brass ring out there in the distance, within reach for the first time.

So why should anybody create an outright Jewish nation, when it might undermine our ability to remain happy and proud right here in this great nation? Our forebears felt threatened and reacted strongly to that fear. Of course, only a few years later, our prized anti-Zionism evaporated when the extent of the Holocaust became known, and we ran headlong into the reality of a radically changed Jewish world. So we can probably forgive them for something that sounds as terrible as anti-Zionism, when we better understand what led them to feel that way in the first place.

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By the 1970s, our Temple had changed significantly. There was a broad but cautious sense of support for Israel. Which is why Phyllis Loewenstein, a Board member at the time, approached Rabbi Hertz after returning from her own trip to Israel to inquire why we

didn't have an Israeli flag at Temple? Well, that's not quite right – there was one. It was in a small case on the wall over by the bathrooms.

But the idea of a formal display was terribly acrimonious, and the Board tabled the issue over and over. Eventually, it was resolved by a one-vote margin, which only confirmed how fragmented our Temple was on the issue.

Once again, how can we explain such a fierce reaction? It turns out that nobody was saying that they didn't like the Israeli flag or didn't support Israel ... the comment was that they didn't want to be accused of dual loyalty. We had achieved a new level of acceptance since 1941, but it still felt tenuous. This was stunningly abnormal given the previous 2000 years of Jewish experience, and deep in our bones, we didn't quite believe it would last.

Which is why the conversation wasn't only about the Israeli flag. Incredibly, it was literally the same Board meeting in which the Worship and Program Committee presented their recommendations about the Israeli flag and about allowing people to wear a kippah or tallis in the Sanctuary. It had all been brewing for years.

One prominent Temple member wrote a letter insisting that “Speaking Hebrew won't [make us better Jews]; neither will Israeli dances, wearing yarmulkes, chanting, or any other traditions of the ghetto.” Another showed up at a Board meeting to say, “We were shocked, disillusioned, and dismayed at [a recent Friday night service] that was like a Baptist revival meeting done in Hebrew.”

Holding up our mirror once again, where did all this emotion come from? A tallis makes us look different. Hebrew makes us sound different. What happens if our friends see us wearing these bizarre items, or chanting those ghetto sounds? What happens if the neighbors drive by and see the flag? These were the conversations in the halls of this Temple, and they reflected an honest fear that the entire house of cards would come tumbling down if America noticed that we weren't quite like the rest of them.

Except that it wasn't a house of cards. Our position in society was and is much stronger than they realized, and for us, the flag right behind me probably feels perfectly natural. So perhaps we can forgive those who, 40 years ago, may not have cared about Israel any less, but weren't ready to embrace a public symbol that they feared might undermine all we had accomplished.

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Fast forward to the present day. My entire premise this morning has been that just like Fortnite gave us some clues to where we are as a nation, our responses to Israel give us some insight into the status of Beth El. You've heard me describe two different times when our Temple's reactions to Israel might sound surprisingly non-supportive to us, times when those opinions reflected the deeper struggles of our community. In both cases, I suggested that perhaps we can forgive them once we understand them better ... and I hope we might be able to do the same thing for ourselves.

I would dare say that Israel today enjoys strong support from just about all corners of our community. Sure, there are outliers, but I am confident that the overwhelming majority of Jews worldwide, in America, and sitting here in our Sanctuary, would tell you that they support Israel.

And I am just as confident that a lot of you might be thinking – that’s not true. The problem is not a lack support, the problem is that we can’t even agree on our definition of what support is, in the first place. More and more, I hear people question the very legitimacy of someone else’s support for Israel, and public discourse about Israel has become so contentious and polarizing that many rabbis have stopped bringing it up at all.

The disheartening truth is that the defining feature of our community’s reaction to Israel in 2018 is a deep distrust and open antagonism toward the “other” position. So yes, we are divided on Israel. But the truth is, we are just divided.

When we hold up that proverbial mirror to ourselves, we see a Jewish community that is terribly fractured on many levels. We can all see the lack of respect, read about the different factions, feel the tension when Israel comes up in polite company. Not good.

But I have been focusing on the community here, what about us as individuals? Most of us tend to know what we think about Israel, but I suspect we rarely contemplate why we hold that position. For example, if you support the way Netanyahu is guiding Israel, what does that say about you – your priorities, your hopes, your fears? By the same token, if you liked Obama’s stewardship of the US-Israel relationship, what does that mean about your unique history or perspective?

We need to abandon the damaging idea that one assessment is right and the other is wrong. There are many paths up the same mountain, and we desperately need to put some faith in those who are climbing along with us.

What will it take for you to view someone with different opinions from yours as a product of their own unique experiences, worthy of respect and care? If you can do it for someone who was an anti-Zionist in 1941, or someone who fought against the Israeli flag in 1975 ... why not today?

The ultimate goal of looking in the mirror on Rosh Hashanah is realizing that each one of us is a human being who tries our best, who responds to fear, who holds onto dreams. Each one of us – especially at this season – is worthy of forgiveness. So when you can look at yourself, with all your virtues and shortcomings, and see someone worthy of forgiveness ... perhaps you will also be ready to treat your neighbors the same way.

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Israel was meant to bind us together, not tear us apart. For nearly 2,000 years, Israel was merely a dream, something to pray for and then get back to reality. But on the eve of

Israel's founding, some very perceptive leaders adopted HaTikvah as our national anthem.

But it doesn't make sense. HaTikvah means "The Hope" – so how can it be that the anthem we sing to honor our very real national home is still referencing those days when Israel was merely a dream? Those nation-builders brilliantly realized that for Israel to succeed, for Israel to be everything they wanted it to be ... it had to remain a hope. A symbol.

Israel was never meant to define us. Israel was always meant to be a sacred representation of who we want to be. What we yearn for. What we should strive to accomplish. Just as Rosh Hashanah is not about who we are, but who we yearn and strive to be.

On this Rosh Hashanah, my prayers are in Jerusalem, and in Tzfat, and in the Negev. They are with farmers and tech magnates, with men in black hats and secular families who will drive to the beach next week on Yom Kippur. They are with Jews and Christians and Muslims, they are with soldiers and settlers, they are with my relatives and with complete strangers.

But most of all, they are right here in this Sanctuary. With my own Temple family. Jews who may passionately disagree on Israel, but who have the capacity to unite and forge a future that we can be proud of ... just like they did at this Temple in the generations before us.

May each of us, with God's guidance, find within us the potential for hope, the ability to forgive, the confidence to accept forgiveness, and an unwavering belief in the transformative power of this day.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon – May this be God's will ... Amen!