

Below is a write-up of the *drasha* delivered at Congregation Shomrei Emunah, Baltimore, MD, on Shabbos, Parshas Ki Tisa, 5770 (3/6/10). Numerous beloved friends who were not in shul asked if they could read a copy of the *drasha* and, in response, I present these edited notes.

The two topics discussed - appreciating Shomrei and anticipating Israel - are both emotional for me and it is my hope that the *drasha* will be read in the same spirit that it was given, as *devarim ha-yotzim min ha-lev*.

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“We Have to Try”

It is so wonderful to be back in Shomrei Emunah this Shabbos. The beautiful *davening* and *kerias ha-torah* ring familiar and remind me of so many other wonderful *Shabbasos* we spent together. At the same time, however, the surroundings are new and unfamiliar – but I must say, wow! Pictures don’t do it justice; the new sanctuary is gorgeous. I am so glad that I finally have the chance to daven in this magnificent structure. *Yasher Koach* once again to all of those who worked so hard to make the final piece of this long awaited dream into a reality.

I would like to take this opportunity to once again thank all of you, as well as the leadership of the shul – Chaim Wealcatch and the entire board – for the special *beracha* of my Sabbatical. I will never forget your kindness and support.

Thanks as well to Rabbi Marwick for all of his efforts as Interim Rabbi – it’s not an easy position to fill but he has done so with distinction.

I know that not having a “permanent rabbi” and, especially, the initial uncertainty of my status, has been difficult, and I pray that, as Shomrei moves into the next phase of its glorious history, you are blessed with many years of continued success and inspired leadership.

While it really is a thrill to see the “finished product” of our multi-year building process, what has always made Shomrei special is not the building but the membership, and it is you that I am happiest to see. Ilana and I treasure the many relationships that developed over these past years and it is the daily interaction with good friends that we will miss the most.

Aside from the many special individuals in the shul, Shomrei also represents an ideal of *Achdus* and *Ahavas Yirael*. In this sense the whole is even greater than the sum of its many wonderful parts. I highlighted this special quality in my 1st *derasha* over 7 years ago and I appreciate it now even more than I did then. The fact that there are so many

different people from so many diverse backgrounds with so many divergent perspectives who can not only *daven* and learn together, but also celebrate with and comfort one another, is something that I have always been proud of and it is something that you should celebrate and cherish.

In addition to the many special members, Shomrei has always been known for its beautiful *davening*, serious Torah study, generous *tzedakah* and *chessed*, vibrant youth programming, and exemplary communal leadership. Shomrei is truly special home for special people.

As I look back on my time in the shul I am filled with so many emotions and there is so much I would like to say to you, but perhaps the most important thing I can say is “thank you.”

Thank you for believing in me when I was just a 29 year old Kollel student.

Thank you for welcoming me into the community and your hearts.

Thank you for pushing me to always think bigger, do better, and dream higher.

Thank you for sharing with me your *simchas* and *tzoras*.

Thank you for always supporting me and my family.

Thank you, thank you, and thank you for the honor of being the rabbi of Shomrei Emunah.

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One might wonder, with so much to be thankful for – a fantastic position, special friends – why would we leave it all for Israel. This is a reasonable question – you don’t have to be my parents or in laws to ask it, although trust me, they have. In fact numerous people have already asked me, in person, on the phone, or through email: Why? Why are you doing this?

For some that was actually a polite way of asking, are you crazy, have you gone *meshugah*? But for most people it was sincere desire to understand why we would give up so much and take such a risk for an uncertain future in Israel?

The truth is that *we asked ourselves* this question countless times and we agonized over the decision. We went back and forth and unfortunately, I am not one of those people who can’t eat when they are tense; I have the opposite problem.

We talked to each other and we *davened*; and we talked to *Gedolei Yisroel* and we *davened*, and then we talked to people we thought could be helpful and we *davened* some more, and in the end we decided: It’s Israel, we *have* to try.

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In the aftermath of the *Chet Ha-Egel*, when Moshe successfully pleads with Hashem to spare the Jewish people, he actually makes a number of different arguments; each is profound and each deserves careful study, but most relevant to our discussion is Moshe's final point (32:13): “וְנָחֳלוּ לְעַלְמִם” – Hashem, You can't annihilate them because you already promised our forefathers that their descendants would inherit *Eretz Yisroel*.

The logic appears straightforward and compelling: God cannot destroy the Jewish people because that would falsify His previous promise.

The Netziv (*Ha'amek Davar*), however mentions an additional factor. The final words, “וְנָחֳלוּ לְעַלְמִם,” imply that there is a perpetual and never ending relationship, namely, “אפילו בשעה שגולים ממנה,” even when *Am Yisroel* is no longer living in *Eretz Yisroel*, even when they are in *galus*, “הרי היא שלהם,” it is still theirs, “ולעולם עין ישראל תלוי” and “לשוב בה” and the eyes of the Jewish people are always focused on returning. Sometimes we see with our eyes and sometimes we see with our heart, but no matter when and no matter where they live – whether in a difficult *galus* or in a “*goldenah galus*” – the Jewish people yearn to come back to *Eretz Yisroel*.

“ולעולם עין ישראל תלוי לשוב בה.”

The Netziv's larger point is, in essence, that *Eretz Yisroel* is our true home – and home is where the heart is and home is where we always want to return.

To one extent or another, we have all experienced this feeling, even when we've been in Israel for a brief visit.

When we walk the streets we feel like we belong; when we breathe the air it just feels right; when we're there we feel like we're home.

During the first year that I learned in Sha'alvim I came back to America for the Pesach vacation. When I arrived in Cincinnati my mother was at the airport to pick me up and once I was in the car she gave me a hug and kiss and then – this was eighteen years ago, but I remember it like it happened yesterday – she said “welcome home,” to which I responded, “this isn't home, Israel is our home.”

Ouch! I cringe when I think about how utterly insensitive I was – the rest of the ride home was “a bit tense” after that – but that's really how I felt. Even though I never completely forgot that feeling, the truth is that after a while I didn't think about it too much either. Then, last year, one of our members told me that, over time, he had noticed that my most passionate speeches seemed to always be the ones about Israel – it's funny how sometimes other people can see what you cannot. After all of the trips and after

meeting so many special people and after all of the projects, little by little the feeling came back and I hadn't even realized it.

And then, over the last few months, the more Ilana and I thought about it the more it became clear that Israel is simply where we belong.

It's our home, we *have* to try.

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In addition to the feeling of belonging, it is also clear that we are living at a very special and exciting time in Jewish history.

While the *Benei Yisroel* were still enslaved in Egypt, Hashem famously tells Moshe that while He has previously appeared to Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov as “א-ל שקי,” nevertheless, “וּשְׁמִי יְקֹנֶךָ לֹא נִוְדַעְתִּי לָהֶם” (6:3). Among the various explanations offered for the symbolism of these names, Rashi suggests that “א-ל שקי,” refers to promises that will be fulfilled in the future and “יְקֹנֶךָ” denotes the “*amitut*” the true realization of these promises.

In other words, by switching to the name “יְקֹנֶךָ,” Hashem is telling Moshe that the time for the birth of the nation has arrived. The promise made long ago to the *Avos* is being realized and the future is now.

Similarly, generations after generations of Jews have lived nurtured by the hope that they too would experience the transition from “א-ל שקי” to “יְקֹנֶךָ” and that the promise of the final *geulah* would be realized.

Whether the establishment of the State of Israel is the beginning of the final *geulah* or not I can't be certain, nor can I predict how this chapter in Jewish history will end, but I am sure that we are living in historic, even prophetic, times.

We don't always think about, but we should. We have merited the return of Jewish sovereignty to our ancient homeland for the first time in 2000 years, the land – barren for so long – now brings forth fruit, and we have witnessed the fulfillment of *Zacharya's* famous prophecy (8:4-5), “עוֹד יֵשְׁבוּ זְקֵנִים וְזָקֵנוֹת בְּרַחוּבוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם,” old men and women have returned, and more importantly, “רַחוּבוֹת הָעִיר יִמְאֵלוּ יְלָדִים וְיִלְדוֹת מִשְׁחָקִים בְּרַחוּבוֹתֶיהָ,” thousands and thousands of boys and girls are playing in streets all throughout the Land of Israel.

And, perhaps most inspiring to me, the *Kibbutz Galiyos* that we *daven* for every day is gaining more and more momentum. It's not just the refugees from post-Holocaust Europe, Morocco, Yemen, Ethiopia, and the former Soviet Union, who all came to Israel for a safe haven, but it's also increasingly the home for Jews who, like many of those coming from the United States, are not running away from anything and are compelled by nothing more than the desire to be part of the slow and steady march of Jewish history.

The more Ilana and I thought about it the more it became clear that Israel is simply where we want to be.

It's our national destiny, we *have* to try.

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When the tribes of Gad and Reuven and half of Menashe came forward and requested permission to remain in “*Ever Ha-Yarden*” Moshe responded by asking them (Bamidbar 32:6), “הֲאֶחֱיָכֶם יָבֹאוּ לְמִלְחָמָה וְאַתֶּם תֵּשְׁבוּ פֹה,” should your brothers go to war while you remain safe and secure?

Moshe's question is a profound one – and it must be considered in our generation as well. With all of the challenges and threats facing the State of Israel, “הֲאֶחֱיָכֶם יָבֹאוּ לְמִלְחָמָה וְאַתֶּם תֵּשְׁבוּ פֹה” is a question that Jews of the Diaspora must ask themselves.

This is a hard, even uncomfortable, issue and it is not something that people like to talk or even think about. But I'm among friends, people I love and respect, and I want to be completely open and honest with you.

“הֲאֶחֱיָכֶם יָבֹאוּ לְמִלְחָמָה וְאַתֶּם תֵּשְׁבוּ פֹה” is a question that has haunted me for a long time. Every time there was a terror attack and during each war I thought about it. Of course every loss is a tragedy, but like most people, I think, certain ones affected me more than others. David and Nava Applebaum, Roi Klein, the *talmidim* of Mercaz HaRav, each time I asked myself, “הֲאֶחֱיָכֶם יָבֹאוּ לְמִלְחָמָה וְאַתֶּם תֵּשְׁבוּ פֹה,” my brothers are at war, can I stay on the sidelines?

Let me be clear: I do not believe that the *only* legitimate answer to this question is to move to Israel. The 2 ½ *shevatim* remained on the other side of the Jordan on condition that they help their brothers and there are other ways that we can – and have – helped Israel even while living in the Diaspora.

For many years these “other ways” were good enough for me, but not anymore. At this point I feel like I have to be there, standing shoulder to shoulder with my brothers and sisters.

The more Ilana and I thought about it the more it became clear that Israel is where we need to be.

It's our duty, we *have* to try.

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I have shared a few of the things that inspired our decision but ultimately, I must say, it's about a lot more than can be explained by any specific reason. The Gemara at the end of

Maseches Kesuvos famously describes the great love that various *Chachamim* had for *Eretz Yisroel* and like other great loves, this too cannot be reduced to specifics. When we think of our spouse or our children, we don't love them because of this or that reason, we love them because ... we love them. The same is true when it comes to *Eretz Yisroel*.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein once mentioned that he visited *Eretz Yisrael* for the first time in the summer of 1962. Over his time there he traveled and saw much of the country and, at one point, he went to see Rav Yitzchok Hutner who was also visiting at the time. Rav Hutner asked him about his impressions and Rav Lichtenstein replied with certain specific benefits or advantages he had noticed in the country. Each time, however, Rav Hutner was somewhat dismissive, explaining that the various things mentioned could be found in different places or times in *Chutz L'Aretz*. Finally Rav Hutner cried out, "Why don't you mention the uniqueness of being in *Eretz Yisrael*? Moshe and Aharon weren't *zocheh* to enter *Eretz Yisrael* but we are here!"

All of the specifics previously mentioned are no substitute for this essential truth: It's *Eretz Yisroel*, we *have* to try.

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Let me conclude where I started. We are excited about our move but the hardest thing, unquestionably, will be missing dear friends and family. The only thing that would be better than living in Israel would be if I could take you all with me and start "Shomrei Emunah East." Until that dream becomes a reality, however, I ask you to stay in touch and please say hello when you visit Israel.

And let us all pray that we merit the fulfillment of Yechezkel's words (36:24, 28):

וְלָקַחְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִן הַגּוֹיִם – I will take you from among the nations;

וְקִבַּצְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל הָאֲרָצוֹת – and I will gather you from all of the countries of the world; from Eastern and Western Europe, North and South Africa, Asia and Australia, and from the United States and Canada;

וְהֵבֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל אֲדַמְתְּכֶם – and I will bring you into your own land, I will bring you home;

וְיִשְׁבְּתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְאֲבוֹתֵיכֶם – And you will dwell in the land that I gave to your forefathers;

וְהָיִיתֶם לִי לְעָם – and there you will truly be My people

וְאֲנִי אֶהְיֶה לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים – and I will be your God.

May it happen speedily in our days.