

Purity / Impurity
Yom Ha-Shoah to Yom Ha-Atzma'ut

Every few weeks, gay Arab men from all over Israel gather for a party at a rented nightclub on Tel Aviv's Herzl Street. The highlight of the evening is a drag show, with heavily made-up amateur performers dressed as sexy, pouting Arab pop stars. They are followed by Raafat, a performance artist from Jaffa, who lip-syncs old-fashioned Palestinian nationalist songs. Nearly all these men lead double lives; if they were to reveal their sexual orientation in their conservative communities, they would risk ostracism or even death. But in Tel Aviv they are free to celebrate their Palestinian, gay identity — at a club located on a street named after the founder of modern Zionism.¹

This, I am sure, is what drives people like President Ahmedinijad crazy. He shed crocodile tears over the Palestinians in his cartoonish speech this week in Geneva. We all know there are real issues between Israel and the Palestinians, but with friends like Ahmedinijad, the Palestinians don't need enemies. Demagogues like him would love to aim their missiles at the nightclubs of Tel Aviv; their aims have nothing to do with justice.

And the timing of his speech was spot-on as well. Coming on the eve of Yom Ha-Shoah, he gleefully added to the deep anxieties that underpin – and sometimes undermine – the politics of Israel. The annual two minutes of silence were observed in Israel, knowing full well that there are those who really do want to wipe Israel off the face of the earth, and Israel's right-wing leaders are sure to exploit all the unease such threats provoke.

This week's Torah reading is the double portion Tazria-Metzora. These chapters have to do with rules and procedures that the priest must follow in determining whether a scaly affliction on skin, clothing, or walls renders the afflicted ritually impure, and if so, what must be done to bring things back to the proper order – the state called purity. One does not have to be a chemist

¹ Lisa Goldman. *Forward*, Published April 01, 2009, issue of [April 10, 2009](#).

to know that most things exist in mixed states - true purity abides mainly in theory, or in the minds of great mathematicians (or, in a perverse way, in the minds of Nazis). One knows that life is a mixture just from living.

As Primo Levi teaches us,

In order for the wheel to turn, for life to be lived, impurities are needed, and the impurities of impurities in the soil, too, as is known, if it is to be fertile. Dissension, diversity, the grain of salt and mustard are needed: Fascism does not want them, forbids them, and that's why you're not a Fascist; it wants everybody to be the same, and you are not. But immaculate virtue does not exist either, or if it exists it is detestable."²

So we are at this “impure” moment of the Jewish calendar – “impure” not in the sense of unclean, but in the sense of mixed, suspended in the tensions of politics and history, between commemoration of the Holocaust and celebration of Israel’s independence. In Israel it is called Shabbat Tekumah, the Sabbath between the commemoration of catastrophe and the rising up to life.

Tuesday was Yom Ha-Shoah. Last Sunday the new Holocaust Museum was dedicated in Skokie. I look forward to seeing it when it is not so crowded. In the meantime, its motif of black and white halves appears like a wish for clarity – purity, if you will – in marking the absolute distinction between good and evil. In Hyde Park, Susan and I once again heard survivors and children of survivors share memories – in some cases recently discovered family letters – from those horrific years.

But even here, in the face of what comes very close to “pure” evil, there were those – too few, always – who stood out. The *hasidei umot ha-olam* – the righteous among the nations, those non-Jews who stood up at the moment of greatest risk and greatest need, are spark of holy light flickering in the darkness. And the survivors themselves have become remarkable. As Michael Berenbaum writes:

Survivors transformed victims into witnesses, dehumanization into a plea to deepen our humanity.

² Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, p. 34

The survivors leave the rest of us who are not survivors or descendants of survivors with an important legacy and significant responsibilities.

We were not witnesses; we have lived in the presence of witnesses. Future generations will not even be able to say that.³

And so, from the commemoration of catastrophe to the rising up to life – Wednesday will be Yom Ha-atzma'ut, Israel Independence Day. It is a day of rejoicing: an independent Jewish state after 2000 years is still cause for amazement, even at age 61. But in this world of mixed states, no rejoicing can be completely pure. Just as we spill 10 drops of wine from the Seder cups to acknowledge the cost to the Egyptians of our liberation from slavery, so we are aware of the deaths and displacements that both led to and accompanied Israel's creation. The recent war in Gaza, for all that it may have been justified by the requirements of self-defense, dramatized once more the ongoing cost – on both sides – of this continuing struggle. Just as history is never pure, neither is it ever fully settled.

This year also marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of Tel Aviv, the true Hebrew City. Jerusalem is the ancient capital, loaded down with the baggage of all the monotheistic faiths. The air over Jerusalem is heavy with prayer, as Yehuda Amichai liked to remind us. Haifa is a beautiful port city, a mixture of Arab and Jewish culture. Beersheva is the gateway to the Negev Desert, Abraham's encampment. Eilat is a beach, a coral reef, a resort. But Tel Aviv arose from a deserted sand dune, willed into citification by Jews from everywhere.

Newly available online from Stanford University is an extensive collection of material on the history of Tel Aviv. It summarizes the beginnings:

This year marks the centennial of the city of Tel Aviv. In the spring of 1909, when Palestine was still under Ottoman rule, sixty-six Jewish families purchased lots in Karm al-Jabali, on the northern outskirts of the ancient port city of Jaffa near the Mediterranean coast amidst dunes, vineyards, and orchards. The Ahuzat Bayit (literally, Housing Property) “garden suburb”

³ Michael Berenbaum, *Forward*, April 15, 2009, issue of [April 24, 2009](#).

soon had its name changed to Tel Aviv, or Hill of Spring. This was a scriptural allusion – the prophet Ezekiel [3:15] mentions a place in Babylonia called Tel Aviv – that also possessed a contemporary political resonance: The Hebrew translation of the book *Altneuland* (Old/New Land), in which the Zionist leader Theodor Herzl outlined his utopian vision for the Holy Land, bore the title *Tel Aviv*.⁴

It is interesting to me that the name Tel Aviv is a name imported from the Diaspora: Ezekiel was in Babylon, and Herzl was in Vienna!

Anyway, as the Forward article I mentioned at the beginning goes on to comment about the Tel Aviv nightclub and its cross-dressing patrons:

This scene probably wasn't exactly what Tel Aviv's founders had in mind when they envisioned the first Hebrew city. But when one recalls that their intention was to build a truly modern city, informed by the ideals of 19th-century European liberalism and of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, it makes perfect sense. They laid the groundwork for the Middle East's most forward-looking and culturally vibrant metropolis.⁵

It is not pure, and that is the point – it is a mixing together of every conceivable variation on Jewishness, plus foreign workers, tourists, and world culture. I recently came across a book published on the Tenth anniversary of Israel, photos of Israel's first decade. Habimah Theater was staging a production of Eugene O'Neill in Hebrew. It was a mixture from the start. Tel Aviv is the cultural capital of the eastern Mediterranean, and one of the most gay-friendly cities in the world.

“In order for the wheel to turn, for life to be lived, impurities are needed, and the impurities of impurities in the soil, too, as is known, if it is to be fertile.” It has indeed been a Tekumah, a bringing to life, over the past 100 years, of an exciting and complicated place – impure in the very best and most human sense of the word.

⁴ <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/sulair/web/eliasaf-robinson-tel-aviv-collection/introduction>

⁵ Lisa Goldman. *Forward*, Published April 01, 2009, issue of [April 10, 2009](#).