

Rosh Hashanah Day Two 2016  
**The Straits of Abraham Revisited**

The day is blazingly hot. The air around me is still, but I can feel it pulsating with energy. Even in the quiet of the early morning, the noise just beneath the surface is deafening. I am standing at Ground Zero.

No, not THAT ground zero. I am standing at the site that Jews and Moslems have always considered being the navel of the world. I am standing at the entrance to the City of David, under the shadow of the Temple Mount, right outside of the Old City walls, in the middle of the Silwan Arab neighborhood of East Jerusalem. It is very hot.

**I wrote those words in 2010. So much has changed-and nothing has changed since then. In 2010 I wrote:**

Silwan has become the Ground Zero of the current Israeli- Palestinian peace negotiations. The wording of the compromise declaration that brought about these talks calls on Israel to “freeze all settlement activity and to refrain from demolitions, evictions and other provocative acts in Jerusalem”. Mayor Nir Birkat, the mayor of Jerusalem, has been an evicting residents of this impoverished Arab neighborhood for the past year. Each Friday, there are protests of Palestinian and left-leaning Israelis who want to stop the evictions. The municipality of Jerusalem, backed by the settler movement, claims that Silwan was a Sephardic Jewish neighborhood up until 1929, and now needs to be integrated into Jerusalem as part of a new park and green belt surrounding the unified city.

On top of it all, (literally) archeologists in charge of the City of King David site tell us that ruins of important tombs from David’s time sit below the surface of this neighborhood awaiting excavation. To further complicate the situation, the settler movement has managed to obtain exclusive authority from the city of Jerusalem for the excavations. According to diplomatic sources, any destruction of the Silwan neighborhood would clearly be considered a “provocative act” and would probably lead to the abrupt conclusion of the peace talks. The consequences for the Obama Administration, as well as the future of the entire region are enormous. I am standing at ground zero, and it is very, very hot.

**It is still very, very hot. The predictions came true- the Peace Talks led by what was then called “The Quartet” failed, only to be followed up by further failed talks led by John Kerry. President Obama naively entered office ready to make “peace” and start a new page of Middle East cooperation. As we say ”How’s that working out for you”? To the north in Syria, Aleppo lies in ruins, and ISIS sits on Israel’s northern border. The settlements continue to expand, and increasingly, new housing permits for Israelis are issued for neighborhoods on the surrounding hills. The new park encircling the city in almost complete, and I must admit that it makes a lovely walking path.**

**Summer 2016. I am in Jerusalem with Richard, my son Eliam, daughter-in-law Sara Jane, and two year old grandson Lewis. Heaven! We have been staying in a beautiful Old Jerusalem apartment, with cool gardens and shade, near the Hartman Institute. In a rare moment of downtime, Eliam and I have made plans for an afternoon adventure. Eli and I have not been together in Israel since 1998. At that time, we roamed the Temple Mount freely (not today) but the Israeli excavations outside the walls in the City of David were just beginning. We only had three hours- no way can I miss the Hartman evening class- but we decided to make a run for it. We grabbed a taxi, and an Arab driver took us through the hot, simmering streets of Silwan. He left us outside of the gate to the City of David. Insipid harp music was playing over the loud speakers as we stepped up to purchase our tickets for a descent into history.**

**On the surface, nothing had changed. As I shared on Rosh Hashanah 2010:**

We began our tour at the visitor center, a Settler oasis in the midst of this hardscrabble neighborhood. Soothing.... No.... insipid harp music is playing everywhere, in sharp contrast to the political din of the neighborhood outside of its doors. We exit the back door, and descend in time, below the Settlers, below the Arab inhabitants of the city of Jerusalem, below the Ottomans, the Crusaders, the Romans, the Greeks, below the time of the Second Temple that stood from about 500 Before the Common Era until its fall in 72CE, down, down into the City of David.

King David, harbinger of the Messiah and the father of Solomon, who built the First Temple on the hill above, lived here in 1,000 BCE and this was his palace. Perhaps this cobblestone pathway was the very street where King David “Danced with the ark of the Lord” His wife Michal, looking through a window, “Saw king David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart.” It seems that his skirts were too short. We scramble up a mound, and gaze at the rooftops below. Was this the very spot where David was captivated by the sight of the beautiful Bathsheba taking her sunbath below? Few political sex scandals, in any age, can match that of David and Bathsheba, where the King sent Bathsheba’s much decorated warrior husband off to the front to be killed so that he might continue his liaison. For all of the lofty sentiments of the Psalms, and the droning harp music piped in by the Settler hosts, the carved stone toilet seat that is three thousand years old is most impressive artifact. Up until this point, the visit to this archeological site has been a fairly typical one.

But even ruins have ruins in Jerusalem.

**This time, I am standing in the sunshine with my son, reading a sign that points downward to Warren’s Shaft. One can choose the wet route- you must be 52 inches tall, or the dry route. How high is the water, I ask? The sign says up to the knees. Let’s go wet, I say to Eliam. How wet can it be? I remembered my earlier visit when I wrote:**

In the bible (2Samuel 6-10) we are told that King David set out from Hebron to Jerusalem to conquer the city from the Jebusites who inhabited the region, but was told “You will never get in there!” David captured the stronghold “by reaching the water channel”. In the nineteenth century, almost three thousand years later, a British archeologist named Charles Warren uncovered a water channel some 80 meters (262 feet) deep that ran from the surface of the city down to the springs below. The source of the Gihon springs lay outside of the city walls, and one theory is that David’s men breached the city wall through this tunnel that connects the source of the Gihon springs to the Jebusite city above. This tunnel is now is now called Warren’s Shaft.

I began my step-by-step descent, relying on faith, not footing or foresight, to get me to the springs below. Each day, the spring gushes forth water at set intervals, some six to eight hours apart. The water system was already ancient at the time of King David. King Hezekiah, who lived three hundred years after David, built the tunnel that brought this water within the bounds of what we now call the Old City of Jerusalem. Many of us have been visitors to the Hezekiah’s tunnel in the Old City that runs along side the Western Wall, above the City of David. During Second Temple times, when the Israelites returned from exile after 70 years, the great pools of Siloam were constructed. They became a place of mikveh and relaxation, a spa for the Jews, and later their for Roman conquerors. Christians honor this place as one where Jesus cured the blind and the lame. Crusaders built churches over its running waters. The Gihon springs continued to provide water throughout Ottoman times, and they are a source of water for Jerusalem today. Step by step, I crept closer toward the heart of the earth, descending towards the ancient spring.

As many of you know, I am greatly influenced by the nineteenth century tales of Rabbi Nachman. One of my most beloved tales, the story of the Heart and the Spring, flashes though my mind .The story begins with the words:

“There is a mountain. On the mountain there is a stone, and from this stone, flows a spring. Everything has a heart, and therefore the world has a heart. The heart of the world stands facing the Spring- the Source- and yearns to come to the spring. The spring also yearns for the heart, but they cannot come too close or the heart will die. Their yearning is strong, but at the end of the day they must part. At that moment, a “person of true kindness” ferries good deeds from the heart to the spring and back again, so that life may continue for one more day”. I feel like I am near the heart of the world, inching towards the spring – this is holy ground, indeed.

We go deeper still. It is very quiet- I feel as if I am in the belly of the earth. The conflicts and noise of the centuries above me fade away. I am left with only the sound of my own beating heart. Why am I here? What is my life really about in its bedrock essence? How can I do fulfill the mitzvot, the kindnesses that help to bring the heart of the world and its Source together? These are the questions of Rosh Hashanah. They seem the only questions worth asking as I lower into this earthly cocoon.

We reach a plateau. Here, there is yet another sign. We can stay here, or descend another hundred feet to a tunnel, which connects to a sewer system of the Second Bronze Age. It has just been opened for visitors. (2010) The ruins of the ruins have ruins.

I stumble down a treacherous path and find myself in a tunnel that is long, cool and just bigger than the width of my body. Second Bronze Age? I am standing in a tunnel from the time of Abraham. This is the sewer system of the city of Shalem.

In Genesis we read: “And King Malchei Tzeddek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God Most High. He blessed him, saying:

Blessed be Abram of God Most High  
Creator of Heaven and earth (Genesis 14:18-19)

The King of Righteousness- Malchei Tzeddek- of the City of Wholeness- Shalem, came out in the name of the One True God, a Priest of the God Most High. It seems that we were not the really the only ones to acknowledge God’s existence . The story of the Jewish people begins with a sharing of God and bread and wine on this holy spot.

Standing in this deep pit, under the city of Jerusalem, I feel that I have gone back in time, tied by an ancient umbilical cord to our father Abraham. Essential questions continue to surface: Why should this spot of land mean so much to me? What does it mean to live with the paradox of conflicting ideas and pressures that form a lifetime of test and struggle? What does it mean to be a Jew?

On one level, to be a Jew is to understand time travel.

“And God tested Abraham”... as we are tested, over and over again.

For much of our lives it seems that we are caught by inner contradictions, opposing values. We want freedom and we want stability. We want justice for all, and we want our family, our people, to thrive above all else. We want a Jewish state, and we want Democracy for all its inhabitants. We want peace, and are in constant turmoil. We want to believe in God, and are challenged in our beliefs at every turn.

The irony of standing in a 4,000 year old sewer does not escape me. Now, on Rosh Hashanah, we are asked to go into that dark subterranean place inside of ourselves, and to cleanse, to rid ourselves of that which no longer serves to nourish us. Old ideas. Old habits. Old angers and resentments. Flush it out.

“And the King of Righteousness-Tzeddek- came out of the city of Wholeness –Shalem. What does *Shalem*, wholeness really mean?

Wholeness means that as Jews, we learn to live with paradox. We are a Chosen People, and we are not special. We are a part of the Jewish people, with a history stretching back to Abraham, and we are Americans, citizens of a global world. We believe in a Creator, a distant God who judges our actions on this day of Rosh Hashanah, and we believe that

God is within, the still small voice inside. We believe in a God who hears our plea, and we witnessed the devastation of the Holocaust. This is a test, work it out.

Shalem means that we can completely believe our own story, and still honor the stories of others. Abraham is the father of Ishmael as well as Isaac, and we must acknowledge the existence of a story from another point of view. The vessel of Jerusalem must be big enough to hold the paradox. There can only be peace through a wholeness that includes all of its parts, and that peace must be achieved with Tzeddek- righteousness. The great challenge, the test, is for human beings to live in peace with those whose stories differ from their own.

“And God tested Abraham”... We are tested, over and over again. Jerusalem is a test. If we fail this test, the opportunity to live as Jews in the Sovereign State of Israel may not come around again for another 2,000 years.

I begin my ascent slowly... **It is here that the story diverges from my original narrative. In 2010, the only way out was to retrace my steps. Now, we can choose to exit under the Old City Walls next to Robertson’s Arch, at the Southern end of the Western Wall, or take an exit route and ride a shuttle up to the Old City. No, we are on the adventure, and go the water route. It is almost pitch black, and I can feel water edging up from my hips to my waist. Of course, I am wearing little white sandals. Nothing is vaguely waterproof. I just keep walking, following my son as he guides me through with nothing but one of those small click- on flashlights at the end of a keychain. “Are you OK Mom? Mom, are you still there?” “I’m here, Eli, I’m here.”**

**Deep in the source of the spring, my heart is filled with love for my son.**

**“Everything has a heart, and therefore the world has a heart. And when the man of true kindness ferries good deeds from the heart to the spring and back again...”**  
**My son is that man, always leading from his heart, a man of true kindness. Love.**

**We walked for what must be at least a mile, sloshing through the ancient sewers. We hit a few dead ends in the maze, but at last we literally could see the light at the end of the tunnel. We emerged from the tunnel and climbed the stairs to the exit at Robinson’s Arch.**

**In 2013, I visited the City of David again with some of you on our MJCS Israel trip. I took the easy route, waiting for you all to emerge as I sat with guide Julie enjoying an ice cream on the steps above. Not this time. And God tested Abraham...I was tested.**

**Finally at the top, I sprawled out on the ground, catching my breath. Eliam sat beside me. This was the exact spot where on our trip to Israel three years ago, a guard gave us a key-no one has ever heard of such a thing- just before Shabbat. Our group was left alone to pray, facing the Southern end of the Western Wall,**

**swallows swooping in and out of the crevices in the waning light. The Shekinah, the Sabbath Bride, wrapped us in her arms.**

**I started to tell the story, and Eli said “Shush! Mom, this place is so special. Let’s sit quietly for five minutes”. Really? He set the timer on his phone.**

**We sat in silence. A tourist guide passed with some bored tourists, explaining that this was the spot that the moneychangers were banished from the Temple. The stones of the destroyed Holy Temple are heaped before us. Birds flit in and out of the crevices. We sit silently in this place of peace, but know that but a few hundred of yards away, the Kotel, the Western Wall, is hardly a place of peace. Jews scream at Jews, as men and women, Orthodox and secular fight for a place at the ancient wall. Above, the Temple Mount is gripped by tension as Arabs and Jews struggle to dominate this holy place, “the navel of the world.” Very little bread is shared “ In the name of the God Most High.” We sit at the southern end of the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem. It is blazingly hot.**

**Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem. Pray for the City of Peace.**