

Susan Brooks
Yom Kippur Afternoon
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I have been asked for my reflections on these passages in the prayer book as they relate to the future of Jews and Israel. After I got over the initial panic of feeling like who am I to speak about this topic I began to look around myself, at the people in our synagogue, at the people I interact with in the greater Los Angeles Jewish community, and to a few books that I have read in the last several months.

First let me start locally with my own family and with the families in our synagogue community. What I see now and even more so in the future of the Jewish people is diversity. When my grandparents escaped the pogroms in Russia to come to the U.S., Jews in America were from either Germany or Eastern Europe and along with achieving the great American dream, fear of assimilation was an issue.

Show up to our own religious school and look at the faces of the children during break time. You'll see in their faces Asian, Latino and even African American ancestry. My kids count amongst their Jewish friends children of Moroccan, Persian, and even Japanese descent. Some of these kids come to Judaism by birth and some through marriage or adoption. No matter how or where they come from, they are all being raised Jewish despite the fact that a large percentage have one non-Jewish parent.

My experiences have convinced me that when Jewish communities create a warm and accepting environment like we have here at Temple Beth El there is less risk of losing Jews to assimilation. When a non-Jewish spouse is welcomed, as my husband has been, it's much easier to raise children in a Jewish environment. My sense is that isn't the case in most Conservative communities and certainly not in Orthodox. Assimilation is still a concern, but to keep Judaism alive and relevant it will take communities like ours to keep our own in the fold and attract others whether they are non-affiliated or perhaps interested in conversion.

Look further out to the greater Los Angeles Jewish community and it becomes even more clear that greater diversity is in our future. In Los Angeles we have the largest concentration of Persian Jews as well as the most Israelis outside of Israel. There are new Russian immigrants along side Ethiopians. I have taken my kids to "Let My People Sing" programs where we have heard an African American cantor known as the Prince of Kosher Gospel, we stood side by side with Israelis and Orthodox Jews to witness the raising of the Israeli flag at the LA consulate, and we've attended a multicultural Purim event at a gay and lesbian synagogue when they hosted a rabbi and his family from Uganda as part of an organization called *Bechol Lashon* (in every tongue). These efforts, I believe, go a far way to revive and renew the Jewish people as the Ezekiel 37 text speaks of.

After telling of reviving the Jewish people, the text reads "It is too small a task for you to be My servant merely to preserve the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel:

I will make you a light to the nations, that My salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” Earlier this year, I was selected to participate in the New Leaders Project that is run through the Community Relations Committee of the Los Angeles Jewish Federation. In this program designed to bring about civic engagement, I have had the opportunity to work in a microcosm of the greater community. My fellow participants come from all denominations of observance from non-affiliated to Modern Orthodox, as well as different countries of origin. The commonality we have is a deep concern to better our entire community. During these last months my colleagues and I have met with community leaders to explore topics such as secondary education, food instability, and the changing Los Angeles political landscape. The benefit of a program like this is two fold. One is to engage Jews in finding solutions to the problems in our communities, but the second very valuable benefit of this program is the image projected to those outside our community. The impressions we give to these leaders that they then carry forward with them helps build goodwill in the outside community.

Along this same vein of social action, I have served as our synagogue rep for Jewish World Watch. In addition to program planning, I’ve also given several presentations on the Darfurian genocide. On occasion people have asked why we as Americans or we as Jews should be worried about people so far away when there are so many problems at home or even in Israel. I tell them that I could not face my children if I knew there was something I could do to make a difference and chose not to. In this case, “Never again” is more than a catch phrase, it has become an integral part of our Jewish soul. It is that sense of being a light unto nations.

With regards to the future of Israel, as my friend Debi Rowe so aptly pointed out to me, the diversity of Jews has been there since the beginning but the adaptations have not. Perhaps it is time for Israel to look west for help with its future. So next time you have a chance, spend some time with the kids in our Torah School or dare I say, brave a drive up the dreaded 405 freeway and check out some of the events offered in the greater community. You could also do both at the same time and come to the Jewish World Watch iWitness Awards on November 16 at the Long Beach JCC where our very own Temple Beth El Youth Choir will perform.