I was so excited when the Amazon box arrived and there wrapped in tight plastic around a piece of cardboard was the newest Lonely Planet Israel tour book. I had just returned from the BHS 9th grade trip to Israel this past May, so happy and energized by the experience. And I could not wait to go back the following month to study and travel a bit. I do not often feel like I am a tourist when I am in Israel. So, why did I need a Lonely Planet guide, you might wonder?

The guidebook is my way of staying “in the know.” I have learned that even from year to year Israel changes. While classic tour sites remain the same, there are always new things to see (and eat.)

I chose the Lonely Planet Guide book intentionally. A few years ago while traveling with a friend I learned that Lonely Planet is a wonderful tool for activities and sight seeing especially if you are seeking experiences off the beaten path.

The 2012 Lonely Planet Guide to Israel and the Palestinian Territories did not disappoint. Not only did it provide me with many new things to do and see (and eat), it also captured my attention with the following statement:

“Today, the United States and Israel, each with about 6 million Jews, vie for Jewish cultural and religious pre-eminence, just as Babylonia and the Land of Israel did 17 centuries ago.”

This is a bold statement by a tour book.

And this morning, I want to explore its truth.

Do we as American Jews believe that we “vie for Jewish cultural and religious pre-eminence” with Israel? Meaning, do we feel that our Jewish culture and religiosity is superior to that of Israel’s? Do Israelis feel that way about us? Is this how the Babylonian Jewish community felt about the Palestinian Jewish community 17 centuries ago? What is Lonely Planet getting at? And why should we care?

In considering these questions this morning, I would like you to join me on a journey back in time...

Back to Babylonia, an ancient Akkadian-speaking Semitic nation state, based in central-southern Mesopotamia (present day Iraq). Jews began settling in Mesopotamia in 597 BCE. The Jewish population increased as more and more Jews found themselves exiled to Babylonia 10 years later, after the destruction of the 1st Temple.
As a result of the loss of temple Judaism, the Jews reformulated their concepts of community, faith, and politics. Despite exile, the Jews lived and prospered. The prophet Jeremiah recounts, “They built houses and dwelled in them; they planted gardens, and ate fruit off of them. They married and had families. They increased there and did not diminish. They sought the peace of the city.” (Based on Jeremiah 29:5-7)

While the exact numbers of exiles are unknown, we do know a significant portion of Jews lived in Babylonia during this time. Including some of our most significant biblical prophets: Isaiah, Ezekial, and Jeremiah. If you subscribe to the documentary hypothesis, meaning that the 5 books of Moses, had several different sources, that contributed to the text that we have today. Then it is also important to note that portions of the bible are said to have been written during this time in Babylonia.

Years passed and the Jewish community enjoyed its religious freedom and considerable autonomy. The Jews were well integrated into society and some even stopped identifying as exiles. The Jews seemed to prefer the life they lead in Babylon over the life they had led in Jerusalem. The prophet Ezekial confirms this, when he warns the people, “You say to yourselves: Let us become like the nations and tribes of other lands and worship wood and stone.” 1 While Ezekial seems to take issue with the people’s assimilation, he reveals that the Jews of Babylon desired to pursue lives similar to those they dwelled amongst.

50 years later, when the Persian King Cyrus conquered all of western Asia, he declared that the Jews may return to Zion. The journey back to Jerusalem was not easy and the economic situation there tough. Despite God’s promise to the people that a return to Jerusalem meant a hopeful future, 2 there was hesitancy and some did not go back. Those who did return participated in the building and life of the 2nd Temple period. Jerusalem once again is a city where Jews congregate, worship, and make pilgrimage. However, this period does not last forever.

In 70 CE when the 2nd Temple is destroyed, the Jews return to crisis mode, and most leave Jerusalem. Many flee to the northern part of Israel, where catastrophe leads to invention and advancement. Through the leadership of such rabbis as, Yochanan Ben Zakkai and Rabban Gamliel the Jewish community transforms itself from a temple cult into a community that connects with God through study and prayer. Our sages form their own courts and institutions, marking the beginning of the rabbinic period and the innovation of Jewish law. One of our most famous sages Rabbi Akiva, is credited with being one of the first Rabbis of this period to travel “down” to Babylonia. Soon after other rabbis followed, escaping religious persecution in Palestine. Thus, by the 3rd century Babylonia is known as the center for Jewish culture and study. While, Jews did remain in

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1 Ezekial 20:32
2 Jeremiah 29:11
Palestine and we have record of this through the Palestinian Talmud most scholars believe that during this time Babylon was the more happening place.

Does this mean it was pre-eminent or superior to Eretz Yisrael? The Rabbis were conflicted.

Just like Jerusalem years before, Babylonia was now the place where Jews congregated, worshipped, and made pilgrimage. The Talmud notes that when Rav, a great scholar came to Babylon he said, “we became there like the Land of Israel.”

Yet, even though it felt like the Land of Israel, many Rabbis believed that dwelling or settling in Eretz Yisrael, known in Hebrew as *yeshivat yisrael* was far more important than living anywhere in the diaspora.

The Rabbis explain their views in discussions about the laws of *yeshivat yisrael* in the Babylonian Talmud:

One law states that, “A person can force all the members of his household to go up to Eretz Yisrael to live there” even if it means moving from a good dwelling in the diaspora to a bad dwelling in Eretz Yisrael. When a husband and wife are in a disagreement over whether to move to Eretz Yisrael, the Rabbis determine that the person who wishes to go to Israel always receives the benefits of the ketubah. Meaning if the husband wants to go and the wife wants stay, even though he is leaving her, he can take all that was given to him in their marriage contract.

If the couple lives in Eretz Yisrael, and they are having a fight over whether to leave, the person who leaves Eretz Yisrael leaves with nothing, and the person who stays receives the benefits of the ketubah. The Rabbis rule that living in Eretz Yisrael is the better choice. A person should always dwell in Eretz Yisrael, they say, even if he has to dwell in a city with a majority of idolaters. And a person should not dwell outside of Eretz Yisrael, even if he would be dwelling in a city with a majority of Jews. The Rabbis are pretty extreme on this issue, Eretz Yisrael, at any cost. The Rabbis say this yet, they choose to live in Babylonia. Why? Because they wonder if “Eretz Yisrael” actually means the physical land or any place where you can study Torah and practice Judaism freely.

They wonder, “does the mitzvah of living in the Land of Israel supersede all other mitzvot in the Torah?” Is it the land that is holy? Or is holiness where you can freely perform mitzvot? The Rabbis teach, “whoever dwells in Eretz Yisrael is considered to be one who has a God and whoever dwells outside of Eretz Yisrael is considered to be one who does not have a God.”

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3 Bavli, Gittin 1:1
According to the Rabbis in this discussion, the relationship between God and the Jewish people seems to be contingent upon living in Eretz Yisrael. However, Rav Saadai Gaon another famous Babylonia scholar notes the opposite view. He writes, “The Jewish people is a nation by virtue of its Torah,” not its land or government.

This is the essence of the Rabbis ambivalence in Babylonia. The majority voice in this debate claims that living in Eretz Yisrael is the fundamental value. Yet, there is dissent. At the end of the whole discussion Rav Yehuda says, “Whoever ascends from Babylonia to Eretz Yisrael transgresses a positive commandment. As it is written in Jeremiah 27:22, “They will be brought to Babylonia and they will be there until the day that I attend to them—declares Adonai.”Rav Yehuda believes that the value of Torah study surpasses yeshivat Eretz Yisrael. For him, Talmud torah k’neged kulam, the study of Torah is equal to all of the mitzvot.

If the Rabbis read Lonely Planet, they would argue that Babylonia was the center for Jewish culture and religiosity, while there may be something intrinsically holy about living in Eretz Yisrael, Babylon was the pre-eminent center.

Seventeen centuries have gone by...Travel with me to America and consider with me our American Jewish history in the diaspora...

Similar to that of our Babylonian ancestors most of our Jewish ancestors came to America in order to escape religious persecution. Some would call this exile. Most Jews immigrated to America to find economic opportunity and religious freedom, and upon their arrival they acted similarly to the description that Jeremiah provided. They built houses and dwelled in them. They planted seeds for institutions and synagogues and reaped their benefits. They increased in numbers and they relished in the religious freedoms of America. Jewish life flourished. And we sit here today as participants in the narrative of the unfolding American Jewish experience.

Yet, do we struggle like the Rabbis did, with regard to how we define where Eretz Yisrael is? Is it the physical land that we call Israel today? Or is it any place where Jews live Jewish lives?

Early American Reform Rabbis were very ambivalent about this topic. For some, they saw Zionism as a rival focus of Jewish identity. In their eyes Jewishness, meant first and foremost, religion and not national identity. In a 1942 gathering of Reform Rabbis opposed to Zionism, a proclamation was written: “Jewish nationalism tends to confuse our fellow men about our place and function in society and also diverts our own attention from our historic role to live as a religious community wherever we may dwell.” They saw Zionism as a threat to their identity. Their nationality was American. Their religious identity was Jewish. They did not need to live in Eretz Yisrael in order to, study torah and have a relationship with God.
And neither do we. Yet, for most of us we believe the existence of the physical land and the Jewish sovereignty over that land is important. What that sovereignty should look like is a topic for another sermon...We believe that Israel is a needed Jewish center. Yet, I think we believe there can be multiple centers. And no one center is better than another.

And each one has a lot to learn from the other and that is how we differ from Babylonia, 17 centuries ago.

There are many examples of how our two Jewish communities have learned from one another. Israel is home for some of our most well-known Jewish scholars, thinkers, and institutions that provide us with new insight into our tradition and radical Jewish ideas. And we too are home to great scholarship, important Jewish institutions, and innovative worship. Both on our 9th grade trip to Israel and over the summer I joined Congregation Beit Tefilah Israeli for Shabbat services. The service was quite musical and incorporated several melodies that we use here at BHS on Friday evening. When I spoke to the Rabbi after the service I learned that he was inspired by Bnai Jeshurun on the Upper West Side to create Shabbat services similar to their style. Israel provides us with a Jewish identity playground. Our history as a people comes alive through all our senses. From being able to literally walk in the footsteps of our ancestors to hearing Hebrew as a living language and not just as the language of our ancient texts. We provide Israel with a myriad of ways to lead a religious life. From our spectrum of denominations to all the ways in which, we share our identity as Jews through arts and culture.

We are not in competition with Israel to be more pre-eminent as Lonely Planet proposes, but we are in a relationship. And I want to suggest to you this morning that the Jewish community of Babylonia could teach us more about developing a deeper relationship with Israel today.

As evidenced from the rabbis in the Talmud and before them our prophets, the Jews of Babylonia longed for Eretz Yisrael. While they had established lives in Babylon, Eretz Yisrael was a divine promise that they dreamed of.

We live similarly to the Jews of Babylonia, in a vibrant and thriving Jewish community. But, we don’t feel like we are in exile. And since Israel exists and we could go live there if we chose to, perhaps we don’t long for it. The Israeli historian and Jewish thinker, Yossi Klein HaLevi describes this assumption in the following way, “What happens when the generation of Moses that was promised the land, but never entered it is replaced by the Joshua generation, for whom Israel is not just a promise, but an actual physical home? What happens when we feel in-charge of our national destiny?”
For some, the yearning our ancestors expressed for thousands of years has been replaced by discontent, disengagement, and disillusionment.

For others, the yearning and the longing has been replaced by a sense of national mission, to protect the miracle of the establishment of the state of Israel and defend its legitimacy.

And then for others, the yearning has been replaced with a strong desire for a different kind of Israel. An Israel, that is no longer in conflict. An Israel, that supports religious freedom. An Israel, that reflects progressive liberal values.

HaLevi suggests another idea, which is that perhaps some wish that, Jewish longing be removed from our collective experience all together. Some Jews have shifted he argues, “into an individual mission for personal fulfillment. The national objective of rebirth has been met, but the quest for personal achievement, the pursuit of a rich and meaningful Jewish life within our families, communities and selves, continues.”

My sense of my own longing for Zion today is a mixture of all of these things. Some days I long for a different kind of Israel. Some days I am a protector of national mission. Some days I am disengaged and focused on my own personal fulfillment as a Jew. What is your own sense of your longing for Zion? Do any of these categories describe you?

I imagine that each one of us will find ourselves longing at some point during this High Holiday season. Longing to make change. Longing to fulfill our promises to ourselves. “This is the year!” we will say adamantly. This is the year we will not bury our longings with excuses. And this year let us not bury Israel into a blocked off section of our Jewish identity.

The Jews of Babylonia 17 centuries ago, were not afraid to be vulnerable when it came to Zion. They called out. They wept and they prayed. We too can call out. *Im eshkachhehah yerushalayim, tishkach y’mineih.*

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither;
let my tongue stick to my palate
if I cease to think of you,
if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory
even at my happiest hour.⁴

Each one of us will continue to make a choice about what being Jewish means to us and how we think ritual and study should play a role in our lives. Consider your relationship to Israel in that conversation. Have you ever been? Or have you been and has it been a long time?

⁴ Ps. 137:5
Is 5774 the year you can go?  
Do you feel knowledgeable about Zionism, modern Israeli history, and the political situation today?  
Is 5774 the year you can learn more?  
Do you long for a different kind of Israel?  
An Israel that is in line with your values and your politics?  
Is 5774 the year you can get involved in state building?  

While Lonely Planet is just a tour book probably geared more for the tourist then for the Reform Rabbi who has already been to Israel several times and lived there, I still care what it has to say because the way relationships are portrayed say a lot about the values deeply rooted in each participant.  
If the American Jewish community and Israel are in competition then there is little room for symbiosis. However, if we can see ourselves as partners in an unfolding narrative of Jewish peoplehood, then the possibilities for growth, evolution, and innovation are infinite.  

If I were to write to the editor of Lonely Planet, I would say:  

Dear Lonely Planet,  
Today, the United States and Israel each with about 6 million Jews see themselves as pre-eminent Jewish and religious cultural centers. Just like Babylonia and Eretz Yisrael 17 centuries ago they long for connection with each other and with God. They strive to see each other as both contributing to the advancement of the Jewish people and to the covenant made between G-d and the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai.  
Best,  
Rabbi Molly Kane  

Shanah Tovah.