

Kol Nidre Derasha 5782: Israel
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“All vows.” The translation of the name of this service, *Kol Nidre*, and the name of the prayer sung and played so beautifully earlier. On Yom Kippur we pledge to try to keep all vows, but we acknowledge there may be exceptional circumstances. We might be stymied by duress beyond our control. *Kol Nidre* says that then, and only then, might we be freed from full liability. Why recite such a peculiar prayer? The idea is that we pledge to speak the truth and keep our promises. *Kol Nidre* reveals the mindset of a people at our best, as we reach for honor and virtue. And *Kol Nidre* highlights our recognition of the danger of corrupted language. Though expressed as an archaic formula, the prayer’s insights are certainly immediate. Words matter and their misuse can be devastating.

Of course, there are a host of examples, but I’d like to focus on last spring’s warfare between Israel and Hamas. Though the violence had been initiated by a terror group indiscriminately firing rockets at civilians, Israel was held responsible. News images and opinion-makers amplified false charges leveled at the Jewish State including genocide and apartheid. It was ironic since as military operations go, the IDF minimized loss of life while eliminating the attacks. Should that somehow sound callous or wrong, consider context. The hostilities last may took the lives of 110 Palestinian civilians, along with 124 Palestinian combatants. This tragedy must give us pause. Every life is precious; we mourn the death of every innocent. Since 2008 around 6,000 Palestinians civilians and combatants have lost their lives. Is this genocide? By way of comparison, in Syria some 500,000 people have died over the past decade. Syria has also employed chemical weapons. Not only is Israel negatively affected by the mischaracterization, so are the victims in Syria or Yemen, the Uyghurs in China or the Rohingya in Myanmar.

The accusation of Israeli apartheid is also absurd albeit increasingly common. Israelis are derided as “European colonizers” and faulted for “White privilege,” even while the Jewish majority in Israel are long-descended from the same Middle Eastern countries as the Arabs. It’s also rather strange to advance an acceptance of immigrants – except when it is applied to Ashkenazi Jews. Israel is likened to South Africa, that nation that under apartheid systematically and cruelly disenfranchised its majority Black population. Yet that’s a poor and obscene analogy. The Arab minority in Israel not only votes, the current government rests completely in the hands of an Arab Islamic political party. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza don’t vote but that’s because their leadership fears elections. Last spring the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, now in the 16th of his 4 year term, cancelled Palestinian elections. Crackdowns such as his security service’s beating to death of a political critic, Nizar Banat, even made front page news in *The New York Times* – only they didn’t make the front page, because those articles were buried in inner pages.

What’s bedeviling, of course, is how some of the same people who champion progressive values here – Feminism, Egalitarianism, racial and LGBTQ+ inclusion – give the enemies of democracy and liberty a free pass elsewhere. On Tuesday the city of Burlington, Vermont narrowly voted to withdraw a boycott of Israel. Yet the sad results in Afghanistan demonstrate

that reactionary forces like the Taliban can't simply be wished-away. These forces exist throughout the region, and the struggle is most dangerously manifest in the current shadow war between Iran and Israel over Iran's efforts to attain nuclear weaponry. News reports reveal Iran's nearly there.

Iran and Israel constitute two very different systems. Iranian influence has led to terrible destruction and despair in Syria and Lebanon, two failed states. Iran continues to pledge to wipe Israel off the map. The Holocaust teaches us to take such threats seriously. I'd suggest their new public faces exemplify the contrast. Ebrahim Raisi was elected Iran's new president after the nation's supreme leader disqualified his opponents. Raisi cut his teeth in the 1980s sentencing political prisoners to death. Israel also has a new president: Isaac Herzog. His career highlights involve seeking negotiations with the Palestinians and inclusive outreach to American Jews. His is the Zionism that has rescued endangered Jewish communities across the globe, from Russia to Ethiopia. Speaking the truth we ask: in what moral universe are the two sides comparable? President Biden correctly frames the challenge of our age as preserving democracies. Is it not grotesque and sheer folly to reject Israel's legitimacy with imprecise or false sloganeering?

But an unreal yet influential version of the present is taking root. Israel continues to be criminalized. Perhaps you saw that Mayim Bialik, a Jewish actress and candidate to permanently host the game show *Jeopardy*, was denounced by *The Daily Beast* for her support of Israel's "genocidal military." Outrageous? Maybe you also read the recent poll suggesting 25% of American Jews agreed that "Israel is an apartheid state," 22% said "Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians," and amongst voters under 40, 20% agreed with the statement "Israel doesn't have a right to exist." What an overwhelming failure of Jewish education in America! One in five: what an indictment of the American synagogue as a revolving door, and the low rates of synagogue affiliation! One in five. Hillel taught: "If I am not for myself who will be for me?" Yes, history is complex and multifaceted. For example, we now recognize the centuries of systemic racism in our own country – should America exist?

Admittedly, there was always an anti-Zionist segment within Jewry but their voices grew mute after the world's disregard or complicity in the murder of our Six Million, and then calls to drive the Jews into the sea. It's nearly unfathomable that decades after the Holocaust a sizeable portion of us Jews should want to re-embrace powerlessness, putting fellow Jews in the only democratic country in that region at the mercy of genocidal killers in Syria and Iran as these Jews call upon Israel to unilaterally disarm and disband. They see rising anti-Semitism in America but are blind to it elsewhere. We have much to atone for.

I'm old enough to remember the Oslo accords in the 1990s, the failed Camp David summit in 2000, and the fruitless negotiations in 2016 during the waning days of the Obama administration. Time and again the Palestinians said no. That's why we're left with this untenable status quo. Yet however elusive, two states for two peoples *is* the only viable path forward. Any alternative is an even greater pipe dream, further endangering the survival of the

only other significant Jewish population remaining on this planet. And recognition of Israel by many Sunni Arab nations and the recent Abraham accords at least provides us some hope.

Yet in our honest soul-searching we must confess that Zionists aren't perfect and Israel doesn't always help itself. We were slow to appreciate how Jewish nationalism created Palestinian nationalism; they, too, have a narrative. A more recent self-inflicted wound concerns Israel's last government's decision to place its bets on the Christian right instead of the Jewish left. Their politicians also read polls, and former ambassador Ron Dermer bluntly explained the position: Israel should prioritize the "passionate and unequivocal" support of evangelical Christians over that of American Jews, who he said are "disproportionately among our critics." Not surprisingly, favoring this constituency along with ultra-Orthodox Jews only further alienates progressives.

Israel's new leaders, themselves a broad coalition from across the ideological spectrum, grasp the implications of such short-sightedness. Reversing past calculations, they seek to repair relations with Reform and Conservative Jews and American liberals and progressives. They even pledge to at last keep the promise for egalitarian prayer at the *Kotel*, the Western Wall. *Kol Nidre* will hold them accountable.

We, too, must not give up on progressive Jews, including our youth. They watched in horror or perplexity last May, amidst streams of uncomfortable images and double-standard postings. Their schools and campuses are replete with misinformation. Their influencers blithely dismiss how Zionism, equality and inclusion are all inextricably connected.

The good news: we've already begun the work right here. Our Israel Advocacy Committee is one of the Jewels of this congregation. Working with the Federation, AIPAC and now with an exciting new partnership with the Jewish National Fund, last year we hosted a number of educational events on Zoom showing the real Israel. "Special in Uniform" presented how persons with disabilities are respected and incorporated into national service. "Living on the Edge" explained how bomb shelters used by children on the Gaza border are being decorated to help with trauma. "The Partnership in Cyberspace" revealed how the two countries seek to contain hacking threats against us. We met Israelis and discussed tough issues, inclusion and equality.

The sobering news: we're not nearly impactful enough. During 5782 I invite you to participate in and spread the word of our outreach, so opinions of Israel's successes and challenges and failures – both justified praise and deserving criticism – might be grounded in depth of knowledge, as opposed to shallow soundbites or images.

Jewish identity is a tricky thing. As Jews we defy typical categorization as we're both a religious expression *and* a people. Yet as Mayim Bialik's *Jeopardy* troll reminds us, all our fates are linked and we are accountable for action and inaction.

Inspired by the beauty of *Kol Nidre* and this season of return, what might we earnestly vow tonight?

- Let us take an oath of solidarity with the Jewish People, and promise to protect the vulnerable.
- Let us pledge to maintain and further our synagogue and the Federation's Zionist educational and advocacy efforts.
- Let us promote honor and virtue and reject falsehood, calling-out double-standards.
- And let us reach out to the many in our ranks increasingly estranged from Zion.

There's no time to wait. Let atonement commence now. Let's pray that as we do the Holy One will shield us and all Israel from exceptional duress.

Cain yehi Ratzon. Be this God's will.