

ROSH HASHANAH DAY 2
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FOREST HILLS JEWISH CENTER
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It has been my practice, over many years, to devote one of my *High Holiday* sermons to Israel, but those of you who attend regularly on Shabbat during the year will surely have noticed that it's been quite some time since Israel has been the subject of a sermon. There have been so many pressing issues here, within our own country, that focusing on America and its current roiled state seemed more of an immediate priority.

This morning, however, on this second day of Rosh Hashanah, I'm coming back to Israel. More specifically, I want to address the ongoing, ever-more-fractious relationship between the government of Israel and the non-Orthodox Jewish world. It is, arguably, the supreme cliché for a Jew to say that what is going on in Israel is of concern to us, particularly in matters of defense, with the myriad threats that Israel faces on virtually all her borders. But this morning I'm not talking about Hezbollah, Hamas, and ISIS. I'm talking about Israel's government, its Chief Rabbinate, and the lamentable contempt that they have shown for so many of us, both in Israel and here in the Diaspora.

As I would hope that you know, this is a painful subject for me to address. Israel is an integral and beloved part of my Jewish sense of self, and it goes against a deep-seated instinct for me to voice criticism of Israel in public. I am an active and committed member of AIPAC, and wouldn't miss its annual Policy Conference. But this morning's Torah reading lends this second day of Rosh Hashanah a most appropriate backdrop for a wider view of Israel, and what role it plays in our lives.

In an episode that lasts just nineteen verses of spare prose, the Torah tells us the story of the binding of Isaac. The narrative basically screams for additional dialogue between Abraham and Isaac, words that might help us understand what's going through their hearts and minds on their way to Moriah. But it's not there. They hardly speak to each other.

In this painfully taut chapter, there is one phrase that repeats: וילכו שניהם יחדיו. "And the two of them walked together." When God commands Abraham, ostensibly as a test of faith, to take his beloved son to offer him as a sacrifice, the text reads וילכו שניהם יחדיו - "and the two of them walked together." And when

Isaac intuits what is happening, and says to his father “I see the wood and the kindling for the fire, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice,” and Abraham answers that God will provide the lamb, that same phrase repeats: וילכו שניהם יחדיו - “And the two of them walked together. It doesn’t take much capacity for empathy to imagine what must have been going through Abraham’s mind at that moment, and Isaac’s. One might fairly think that Isaac would drop back a few steps, if for no other reasons than abject terror and utter confusion. But the text, which offers no unnecessary words, repeats for us, not by accident: וילכו שניהם יחדיו . Despite the tension, despite the raging doubt that had to be pounding at their brains, they found the wherewithal to walk together.

For as long as the State of Israel has existed, that textual repetition has been interpreted to speak to the importance of Israel and Diaspora Jews staying together, even under difficult circumstances. *Halilah Va’has*... God forbid that I would suggest anything other. With Israel confronting the enemies at her border and American Jews confronting the resurgence of neo-Nazis and White Supremacists, we need each other more than ever. We *must* stand together. But it’s not only fair to ask- it’s also imperative to ask- how are we to do that when the issues pulling us apart are so strong, and so painful?

During my presidency of the Rabbinical Assembly a few years ago, I met heads of state, visited Jewish communities around the world, and had a real “seat at the table” where decisions that would affect the Jewish community were being made. But no single memory stands out for me more than a meeting here in New York with the leadership of all the Jewish denominations and Natan Sharansky, Chairman of the Jewish Agency and, of course, heroic Prisoner of Zion in the former Soviet Union. The terrible verbal and physical abuse of the Women of the Wall at their monthly Rosh Hodesh services at the Kotel, the Western Wall, had made it to the front page of the New York Times, and the story was a major public relations black eye for Israel. At long last realizing the need to address the issue, Prime Minister Netanyahu turned to Chairman Sharansky, a universally respected figure in Israel and around the world, and asked him to find a way to resolve the issue.

As if it were yesterday, I remember Sharansky coming into that meeting with architectural renderings of what he called his “One People, One Kotel” plan. I spoke about it here in this sanctuary shortly after he presented it. It envisaged one entrance to the Kotel area, with the northern, traditional Kotel to the left, preserved for Orthodox prayer, and the adjacent southern, Robinson’s Arch area fully developed and supplied by the government to the right, designated for the non-

Orthodox. It was a creative proposal and an inspired compromise, proven by the fact that no side really loved it. The Orthodox, particularly the ultra-Orthodox, didn't want non-Orthodox prayer groups anywhere near the Kotel, the Women of the Wall were being pushed away from the women's section of the traditional Kotel, and they again felt mistreated, many of the non-Orthodox groups felt like they were being made to feel "less than," by not being allowed to pray near the traditional Kotel... it was imperfect, but it was a real plan. Enormous energy went into selling it to all the parties involved. The professional leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements were flying back and forth to Israel, meeting with government officials... It went far enough that an elaborate protocol was drawn up for how the non-Orthodox space was to be governed and by whom, with the full involvement of the Prime Minister and his government.

I suspect you know how it played out. Every time the date of implementation got close, the deadline would be pushed back, because the more religiously right-wing parties in the Prime Minister's governing coalition threatened to bring the government down over the issue. Ultimately, the Prime Minister felt constrained to pull the deal off the table, leaving the prayer space at Robinson's arch a mere shadow of what the original plan envisioned, and the historic Kotel space still hostile to organized non-Orthodox prayer. As we speak this morning, Israel's Supreme Court, may it live long and prosper, is challenging the government to show cause for why it failed to implement the deal. As of earlier this week, the Prime Minister reiterated his disinclination to rescind the freeze on the project.

At the same time, in a parallel process, the Israeli Chief Rabbinate has persisted in its relentless efforts to totally control the process of conversion to Judaism, certainly in Israel, but also in the Diaspora, by deciding whose conversions it would accept. This is hardly a new issue for the non-Orthodox rabbinate. We've been the victims of the Chief Rabbinate's arbitrary and pre-modern animus for years. But recently, even some more modern Orthodox rabbis have found their religious authority questioned by the rabbinate, and they haven't liked it at all. We've known that sting for a long time; they're just discovering it. And because it's been happening to some prominent Orthodox rabbis, the Anglo-Jewish papers have decided that the issue is newsworthy.

As a Conservative rabbi, I have long resented the continued ability of the Chief Rabbis to wreak havoc with religious freedom in Israel. I resent having to explain this to good men and women who come to me to study for conversion. I was pained to have had to explain to members of our congregation who traveled with Robin and me to Israel why it was that we couldn't have our Kabbalat Shabbat

service in the plaza near the Kotel, for fear of abuse both verbal and physical. It is senselessly alienating to have to explain to USY Pilgrims and Ramah Seminar boys and girls why the State of Israel, which we try so hard to teach them to love, sees their religious practice as unacceptable. And in the category of senselessly alienating, we are facing a terribly difficult, uphill battle against BDS advocates and well-funded Palestinian groups on college campuses around the country, even here in New York. That battle is only made exponentially worse by having Israel throw fuel on the fire, transmitting the message to our college-aged kids and millennials that, beyond the Birthright trips, their brand of Jewish is problematic.

There may be those among you who regret that I have seen fit to say these things in public. You might be fearful of my transmitting a message that because Israel's political and religious house is so dysfunctional, and so often gratuitously hurtful to us, that we non-Orthodox Diaspora Jews ought to disengage and diminish our support. If that's what you're thinking, please stop; you couldn't be more wrong.

First of all, people who live in glass houses should be very careful about throwing stones. When it comes to political dysfunction and gratuitous insult, we here in the United States need only look to our own government before rendering a decision to disengage. On any given day during these unprecedentedly tumultuous times, we are in worse shape than Israel. And second, those who would withdraw support of Israel, or allow themselves to emotionally and financially disengage, because of frustration with some of her policies, are no better than BDS protesters, and arguably worse.

For all the frustration that I have with Israel's government and religious establishment, and I have a lot, I remind myself each and every day- and I urge you to do the same- that there is an irreducible, existentially critical importance to Israel's existence that transcends the arrogance and political smallness of its leaders, and the same is true of these United States. It took almost two thousand years for our people to restore their presence in our historic homeland, and we don't have a good track record with making these kinds of historical experiences last. The last one fell apart for more than a few reasons, but one of them was surely our inability to be civil to each other. We cannot afford to repeat that.

Jewish sovereignty in the age of Charlottesville matters. When Neo-Nazis and White Supremacists are marching to the chant of "You will not replace us," it is a glaring reminder to us to always be sure that our passports are current. Two transcendent truths were made eminently clear to us this summer. The first is that having a sovereign Jewish State, imperfections and all, is crucial to us, and Israel is

well within its rights to command our passionate connection. Whatever is wrong there and needs fixing, we must work towards that, not walk away.

The second is that America, which we love so dearly and has been, by far, the best of our historical Diaspora homes, is far less immune to historical trends than we might allow ourselves to believe. America is not Queens, not the Northeast, not California, or Illinois or Florida. I am no less committed to America because of the horror of Charlottesville. I am *more* committed to this country, because America can be and must be better than that, and needs our best efforts to fight hatred and bigotry. As I said yesterday, this is not the time to check out; it is the time to check in!

So there they are: two inconveniently contradictory realities. Israel's very real flaws impact us in hurtful ways, and we have every right to point that out. But- our hurt feelings cannot be allowed to obscure the larger importance of Israel's place in our Jewish world, an importance that cannot be overstated. Remember the words of our Torah reading- וילכו שניהם יחדיו – And the two walked together. How might we frame this tension so that we can live with it in real time, and maintain a relationship that we both need so badly?

Towards that end, I will conclude by sharing with you a portion of a poem by the late Israeli poet Yehudah Amichai, widely considered Israel's greatest poet of the late twentieth century. Amichai was prolific, and one of his great innovations was writing in vernacular Hebrew, often in free verse. This particular poem, titled *Tayarim*- Tourists- is tough to hear- like many Israelis, Amichai had more than a little contempt for American tourists, and I'm omitting some of the rougher parts- but it speaks in a meaningful and important way to the challenge that we face. I am of course reading the poem to you in translation, but the force of it comes through...

Once I sat on the steps by a gate at David's Tower. I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. "You see that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head." "But he's moving, he's moving!" I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them, "You see that arch from the Roman period? It's not important: but next to it, left and down a bit, there sits a man who's brought fruit and vegetables for his family."

As it is, we are at a tremendous disadvantage in Israel because there simply are not enough of us living there to constitute a serious voting bloc. For that reason, realpolitik dictates that our interests will always be politically expendable, whether the government is left-wing or right wing. The rightness of our cause will always be secondary to the efforts of any given Israeli government to stay in power. It's not that they don't get it. It just doesn't matter to them as much as it matters to us. It's all about staying in power.

You can rail against that reality- I often do- but we, in our persistent desire, or need, to see Israel as some kind of idealized society- we contribute to it. American Jews, particularly those of us in the non-Orthodox world, need to understand that Israel is not La-La Land. It is, in so many ways, a remarkable country, having become, in just under seventy years, a military superpower, a paradigm of technology start-up culture that is the envy of the world, and, of course, it remains our historic and spiritual homeland. To celebrate Shabbat in Jerusalem is to connect to the deepest roots of our culture. Despite all the slander to which it is regularly subjected, the Israel Defense Force is among the most moral fighting forces in the civilized world. Israel is all that. But it is also- like America- deeply flawed, and some of those flaws are going to impact us in ways that are deeply distasteful.

At your moments of greatest despair over those flaws- when you're asking yourself why you care, and why you should- I urge you to remember what I said earlier. The transcendent importance of Jewish sovereignty in the age of Charlottesville is impossible to overstate. As we must work to retrieve the luster of America's reality and promise in the wake of seeing its darkest underbelly, so, too, must we never surrender our commitment to realizing Israel's greatest promise, even as its rougher edges continue to manifest themselves. Just like America, even with its flaws, Israel deserves and demands our passionate involvement.

Od lo avdah tikvateinu! Our hope is not yet lost.