

Introduction to Prayer for Israel, Rosh Hashanah 2023

This week, Yedida Perlman, age 100, passed away. Yedida has been out at the demonstrations in Israel with a sign that reads: "I, a fighter in the Hagana, in my 100th year, once again am fighting to defend the homeland."

Most of the protesters at the weekly Israeli demonstrations are too young to have fought in the hagana, which was the main pre-state Zionist paramilitary organization during the British mandate, and was integrated into the Israel Defense Forces in 1948. But they share Yedida's sentiment, they are fighting to defend their homeland. They are fighting to make sure Israel literally has a future, worried that it is currently putting itself in both military and economic risk. And they are fighting to make sure Israel continues to be a state based on the values of her declaration of independence, committed to both Judaism and democracy.

I too have been out protesting fighting to defend Israel, both in Jerusalem when I was there earlier this summer and here in the greater seattle area. I too feel deeply committed to Israel and passionate about her thriving and have lots of thoughts about what values I think should drive her policies. And I share real fears about the current kneset where there are a number of extremists, zealots, racists, corrupt members pushing forward their own personal agendas, appearing not to care about the pain and divisions, and damage that is being created, and setting Israel on a different cours. The rabbis teach that it wasn't the Romans, but this same convergence of zealotry, hatred, and corruption of leadership that led us to lose our sovereignty, the last time there was a Jewish sovereign state, 2000 years ago.

We can't afford to be quiet or sit on the sidelines now. This is the time to speak up

And while I believe there are many reasons to be concerned and we need to be politically active now, I also have optimism and am moved and touched by the incredible organizing and mobilization of the

demonstrations. We are now at week 36, yes 8 months, of demonstrations - every sat night and most weeks, many other days of the week, from early morning shaharit demonstrations to marches to evening protests. The most extensive, inclusive and enduring set of demonstrations that I have ever heard about.

Flags waving everywhere. Quotes from the Israeli declaration of independence and images of it hanging and signing on to it again. Singing hatikvah. Week after week, in huge numbers, throughout the country - totally unprecedented. Folks from a wide variety of backgrounds, secular and religious, men and women, younger and older, Israelis and diaspora Jews, longtime activists and folks who had never attended a rally before this government was elected, folks affiliated with a variety of political parties, folks from every socio-economic group and profession, Jews and even a few Palestinians - all coming together from a place of both deep love for the state of Israel, deep commitment to Israel, and deep and existential angst about its future. The Jerusalem rallies are organized under the umbrella of Shomrim al HaBayit HaMeshutaf, being translated in English as Safeguarding our home, but translates more accurately as Protecting the Shared Home. That is what these demonstrations are about: safeguarding and building a shared home. These demonstrations and organizing are very Jewish. For instance, this past tuesday, one of the messages on the group was about Rosh hashanah, reaching out to see if anyone was planning to be alone for Rosh Hashanah meals and saying that in Jerusalem, they will not allow anyone to be alone for the holidays and had a link for folks to sign up to be hosted or to host others, and ask about your religious background and if you wanted to host/be hosted with someone from a similar or different religious background - really building and protecting a shared society.

Israelis all over the country, and all over the diaspora, are leaning in to fight for their Israel, coming out of the woodworks, protesting, striking, dialoguing, praying, doing whatever they can to not have Israel descend into an extremist, factionalized state, maintaining Israel's commitment to both Judaism and democracy, and its core founding principles. This

political crisis is not a debate over particular policies but a struggle over the fundamental identity of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. They are holding firm against what they see as red lines, that will have Israel become a state without checks and balances on power, without safeguarding of human rights, where racism and bigotry are in power, where Israel's financial stability and military strength are threatened and solidarity splintered, where the fundamentalist rabbinate will have a say in all areas of life, excluding any other expression of Judaism, where there will be a curtailing of free speech and academia, where Palestinians will have even less protection and Jewish settlers turning to violence will have less restraints and consequences.

So what does it have to do with us, here sitting comfortably in Seattle? First, if we believe we are a shared Jewish people, which I do believe, we must be engaged. Israel is wrestling and we need to lean in and be a part of this. This is one of the most important moments of Israeli history. I have heard this moment compared many times to the Yom Kippur War, when it wasn't clear what the outcome would be and Israel needed all the help, including from the US and diaspora Jews that it could get. We are needed now just like we were needed 50 years ago.

Israelis are asking us to join them and to be engaged and to partner and calling on us to take a stand. They want our involvement and they want to not be alone in this fight. They want us to engage together on how best to balance Judaism and democracy. They want to connect. This is an opportunity instead of growing more distant between Israel and the diaspora, to actually come closer and learn new ways of partnering.

Let's not kid ourselves, issues similar to what are taking place in Israel, can easily take place here. We have already heard all sorts of threats by candidates for the next set of elections. And I worry we don't have the organizing capacity that Israelis have in protesting changes. We might be needing to learn from Israel how to protect our democracy.

So what can we do here? First of all, we can show up to community gatherings and demonstrations here in Seattle in support of a Jewish and democratic Israel, like the one coming on wed sept 27th. We can reach out to the Israelis here and in Israel and let them know they are not alone and ask them how we can partner. We can keep learning and understanding what is taking place, and we will continue to have learning opportunities here at Beth Shalom, with our first on the Monday evening of sukkot. We can amplify the voices of those fighting for our values and financially support the organizations doing the work. We can choose to lean in and fight for our values, rather than give up hope, or defer. This is a moment of potential renewal and reshaping what it means to be a Zionist and I urge us to be part of this critical moment.