

Start delivering sermon not visible to the congregation, after placing “Warning” Poster.

G’mar Tov and Shanah Tovah.

Warning: This is about to be a **difficult sermon**. **Difficult** – and **necessary** at this time, to speak about **our connection with Israel**... For 900 years, Jews have quoted the poet Yehuda ha-Levi, declaring, “*Libi ba-Mizrach*” – my heart is in the East, yet I am so far away, in the West.”



I will **confess**: When I proclaim that **my heart is in Israel**, but I am **here** – I worry: How I can **balance** my **HIGH** level of investment in the project of a Jewish homeland... and **yet** also know that I am **not a citizen** of that state? How can I *claim* to be **highly invested**... yet admit that I did not serve in the IDF... that my children, now approaching that age, will not go to serve. I consider myself a **HUGE stakeholder** in what Israel has done for Jewish Peoplehood and self-determination, our ability to confidently determine and chart our path as a Jewish People. But **what is my standing**, my **legitimacy**, my **cred** – to be a stakeholder, yet... **at a distance?**

It’s a hard sermon. Because that **distance**, my **absence** from you right now – it **doesn’t feel good**, does it? To **feel so far apart?**

That’s **not how friends**, how loved ones – how we **communicate**... how we **build trust**... how we **express our love** and care for one another. No – love – even, *especially*, in moments of pain – is **best expressed face to face – intimately, vulnerably**. That’s how we show our care of one another. When Yehuda haLevi cried out, “*Libi BaMizrach*” – my heart is with Israel, but I **feel far away**.... I know that there are people in this room who are **feeling distanced** from Israel. And that, too – **breaks my heart**.

And **for Israel**, *Libi baMizrach* – my heart is also breaking, for the **division**, the **turmoil**, the **upheaval** that is afflicting Israel right now. I *understand* how some people here might feel distanced from Israel right now – with **values of democracy** and security and stability, all in question....

It’s a little **counterintuitive**, yes – but it’s true of *any relationship* with **high stakes** and **high investment** – it’s true of *any relationship of love*: When we feel most hurt, most uncertain – that is *precisely* the moment not to distance ourselves, but to **pull closer**.

Today – I am going to **acknowledge the pain**. I’m going to acknowledge the **miracles** that exist, *with and despite* the pain. I’m **not** going to **pull punches** – and for some of you, that’s going to feel like a punch, to hear this pain. But I hope you can **hear it as more** than that – I hope you can hear it as **love** – and as a call to us all to **hold Israel close** in the very time that Israel may feel distant.

So first, briefly, to **catch us all up**: Israel is going through some **difficult times** – **societally-defining times**. The elected, governing coalition is the **most right-wing** in Israel’s history – and especially given the liberal leaning of most American Jews, this **may feel** like we’re “**out of sync**” – perhaps more distant, more absent from one another.

All that said, **democracy** in Israel is **not dead**. At times over the past eight months, about a million Israelis have gathered to protest, **for or against** the government and its judicial changes. **This IS democracy**. It would be the equivalent of *35 million Americans* taking to the streets – and in those protests, there have been almost **no injuries** or crime... Crowds in the hundreds of thousands part to **allow ambulances** to get through on the roads.... Can we boast that, here in America, of our popular protest movements? An **unfettered opposition** is one of the hallmarks of a **healthy democracy**. In this sense, we are **witnessing democracy in action**.

Democracy is not dead – *however*, some of the **proposed judicial changes** *could threaten* some of the **protections** of that democracy – *especially* because Israel does **not** have a **constitution**. *Especially* because of

the rhetoric of some **government officials**, who seem to forget that *while* democracies exist through **majority rule**, **democracy survives** and thrives because **that majority** is **bound, obligated**, to **advocate** and ensure the **human rights** and **dignity** of the **minority**, the less-enfranchised....

Why are people upset? Because the rhetoric makes people **feel uncertain** about the government's will to protect the unenfranchised.... Because both the **government** on the **far right** and the **far-left wing** of the **protest** movement **gain politically** by a refusal to create consensus. This breeds **cynicism** and **anxiety** across the broad swath of the center – who **overwhelmingly agree** that *some* **judicial reform** is **needed**, and **overwhelmingly agree** that it can be reached through **uncomfortable consensus**, *rather* than political maneuvering, opportunism, and Machiavellianism. We **could have BOTH** judicial reform **AND** **unity, compromise**, at least a shaky consensus.

I get it – for some people here, who see Israel as a **critical ingredient** to Jewish continuity and survival, who may or may not see **Israel's faults but forgive** them because of *how* **tenuous Israel's existence** has always been, and because of *how* **critical Israel** is for World Jewry – you may be **squirming** right now.... Because **you know** that Israel has **enough enemies**, and *worry* that our own criticism of Israel plays right into those enemies' hands...

To **that group** – in this room, and beyond: I'm going to **ask you to HEAR** the **opposition**, the **protests** at this moment – from within Israel, in large numbers – and recognize that it is a **gross oversimplification** to just **dismiss** those who are protesting the judicial changes as “**anti-Israel**”... to see that, whether you agree with it or not, this **protest movement IS** a **big part** of the **Israel you love**... These are *not* people who seek to **undermine** the existence and strength of a Jewish state. They are, **disproportionately**, the people who **HAVE, patriotically, built the country** – its security, its defense, its army, its high-tech success, its **light-onto-the-nations values** and **entrepreneurial spirit**...

AND **I also get it** – for some people here, who may or may not choose to see Israel's miracles and may or may not feel moved to vocally support the Jewish State: It is all too easy to throw up your hands... to say that this moment demonstrates a **divergence** from historically-shared values, to say “**Dayyenu**, enough” – to **distance** ourselves – **emotionally, politically, advocacy-wise** – from Israel.

But I'm going to ask you to do the **opposite** of that. However **counterintuitive**. I'm going to ask you to **hold Israel closer**.

EVERY country has its **challenges** – Israel is no exception. We should be **gentle** with a country like Israel that has **never** had a **peaceful moment to breathe**, to **navigate** its challenges of **identity**, the **diversity** of its people.... When people say, “Should we **criticize Israel more harshly** than China and Iran and North Korea and Russia and even Hungary and Turkey and others,” I'm going to **agree** with you, that we should **hold Israel** to a **higher standard**, a higher ideal – just like with our loved ones, we **cling to aspirations** that **they are better** than the average person on the street.

And *yet*, Israel is a **country run by humans**. And **humans make mistakes**. And just like when we see our **loved ones** on a path that feels like a **mistake**, or has **costs**, or **risks**, or fosters **division** among those whom we love – do we **reject** those loved ones? Do we **turn our back, absent** ourselves, hold them at arm's length? NO: We **hold them CLOSER**.

That's the **reason** I'm going to ask you to hold Israel closer. It comes down to **two words**: [**POSTER**] **Acheinu hem**.

Acheinu hem – They are our **brothers and sisters**. They are **family**. It's hard for other people and communities to understand: Judaism is **more than a religion** that we practice. It's a **lifestyle**, a **culture**, a **language**, an **identity**, a **shared history**, shared PTSD-fueled **neuroses**... It's **PEOPLEHOOD** – **across borders, across generations** and politics and ethnicities. It's a **feeling**, it's in our *kishkes*. It's **so much deeper** a connection than our **faith** and our religious **practices**. That's



tough for people to get – because *no one* talks about the worldwide “**Presbyterian People**.” *No one* says, like we say that something has a flavor of **Yiddishkeit** – that something has the flavor of “**Buddhist-keit**.”

Acheinu hem - That’s it. So I am asking us to **look** at the people of Israel and say: Those are my **brothers and sisters**. When they feel **existentially**, life-and-death **threatened** – I get that, and I **feel** it. **Acheinu hem** – When they **WANT** to let that **ambulance pass** that check-point or that concrete shipment go through to Gaza, but they **KNOW** that a certain, *not insignificant* percentage of the time that ambulance is smuggling explosives or that concrete will be used to build terror tunnels to kidnap kids from border towns within Israel... when they know that their nephew is playing in a **gan** just a few kilometers away from the border – *acheinu hem* – We **feel** that.

I’m asking us to say, *acheinu hem* – they are our brothers and sisters. And yes: **Even when** they make choices that we **disagree** with... *even when* they act in ways we find **troublesome, irritating**, against our shared values – *acheinu hem*.

Because **that’s what love is**. That’s how we **know** that **love exists** – **not** in the **easy** times, when we agree on what to eat and how to be and what our future will be together. Love is truly tested – and therefore love is truly **strengthened** and **affirmed** – when it’s **NOT** easy. When we **push ourselves** to love this other person – **with and despite our differences**.

With and Despite – we love them, we are with them, **with and despite** the things that bother us, anger us. We love them – **even when** we **don’t LIKE** them. Come on: You all have **relatives** like that. They **tick us off**... they make Thanksgiving dinner uncomfortable...

But **if anyone else** criticizes them – even if we **agree** with that criticism – look out! Judaism teaches this – “*Omrim miktzat shiv’cho shel adam b’fanav v’chulo shelo b’fanav*” – that **internally**, in the presence of a person, we say **some nice things**, but also **some critical things** – but when **not in the presence** of that person, perhaps when talking about them to other people – we **pile on the public praise**, build them up to outsiders. Indeed, that is a type of love: We **praise publicly**, to **build a personal confidence** and **trust** that we have our loved-ones’ backs... so that we **CAN ALSO** then **offer personal critique** – sensitively, kindly and honestly – but **privately** – we can critique in this way, hoping that **they will hear** what we don’t like, what **hurts** – and **we can grow, together**, lovingly.

There is a midrash that kinda laughs at this idea of **loving someone** – **even when** we **don’t like them**. The midrash speaks of our relationship to God, saying, “You’re **like a brother** to me!” – and then snaps back, “Oh yeah – **like a brother** – like Jacob and Esau?! Like Isaac and Ishmael?! They **hated** each other! Like Joseph’s brothers?! They sold him away – to outsiders, no less – and told their father he was dead! No, the midrash says – we should love **not like** Joseph’s brothers toward Joseph, but like Joseph toward his brothers at the end of the story: He **loves them, he embraces them**, he brings them in and saves them and refuses their money and loves them again – **with and despite** their past, their frustrations. The midrash concludes by asking us to say to that relative who has broken our heart and frustrated us, “**You are the head, and I the body** – we can’t live without one another.” THAT is what “**Acheinu Hem**” means.

When it comes to **Israel**, we *all* have to figure this out – **how to love, with and despite our differences** – an ability to **critique with love**, without any fear that we will give up on our loved one, **without turning away, without absenting** ourselves.

People across the spectrum – from the **far right** to the far left – **agree on very little** – but they **agree on this**: **Israel**, at its soul, is **sick** right now. There are the **chronic sicknesses** [*Al Chet*]: How to deal with a **growing Haredi population** that does not serve in the Army and exercises an unapologetic, anti-democratic, and disproportionate control over the lives of secular Israelis.... How to find a **humanitarian, demographic, and SECURE solution** for the **Palestinian** people living so close, used as **human shields** with rockets stored in and under schools, homes, mosques, and hospitals... extremized as pawns by their own corrupt leaders who are in the **19th year of a 4-year term**, who are billionaires from stealing the relief supplies intended for the impoverished people...

And there are **acute sicknesses** [*Al Chet*]: Real questions about **military readiness... socio-economic gaps....** Russia and Syria and Iran uniting and supporting the terrorists on Israel's borders.... **hateful speech and bigotry....** **Divisiveness** that threatens the wholeness of the People of Israel – across Israel and the Diaspora, **across the political and religious spectrums...** that **minimizes or explains away** violence by both **Palestinian** terrorists and **extremist Jews**, such that people vote, knee-jerk for a “law and order” party that then, once part of the coalition, uses **rhetoric** that **tears the nation apart** and drags it into violence.

Israel, *acheinu*, our brothers and sisters – may be **vulnerable** right now, **sick, suffering** in their innermost soul. And so again, I ask: **Is this the moment** we **abandon** or turn our backs or **absent** ourselves from that relative who is suffering?

Or is **this the moment** to **re-up**, to **lean in**, to hold Israel closer, to feel like we have “**skin in the game?**” It would be **too easy** to throw up our hands and say, “***They made this mess.***” It's like when **God and Moses** are having this intense, loving moment on Mount Sinai – until word of the Golden Calf comes, and God says, “Moses – go deal with that – **YOUR people, YOUR kids**, caused that trouble!”

How different would that moment have been **if** God had said to Moses, with **pain** and **high-level investment** and **heartbreak**: **OUR People** are hurting right now. We can't survive without them. We are **each other's head and body**. We love them – and **that's WHY** we are hurting, when they are hurting – **because we care so much**.

Now, is there a **limit** to this **insistence on loving** someone, even with and despite the negative parts of them? Of course – when a relationship becomes **abusive**, when that **relationship endangers** us or **corrodes** us – of course, the **distance** becomes **protective, and necessary**. But that is **NOT** our relationship with Israel. Israel, on the whole, has **empowered** us and **raised us up** as a Jewish People – in **ways unimaginable** even a decade before its birth, seventy-five years ago.

Zionism is the **liberation movement** for the **world's most enduringly persecuted people**. It is **NOT partisan**. It is **not one party**, one government, one leader. **Zionism IS the story** of the Jewish People – either as a **two-millennial hope and dream**, or as an **as-yet-imperfectly executed approximation** of that **dream**, realized. In that way, it is no different than **any national ideal** – the **American Dream** here, the hope for a better future fueled by Jewish ideals of social justice. It functions (or can function) **with and alongside** the national aspirations of **others**, *including* the Palestinian People (that is NOT a contradiction).

Israel, when it asserts our right as Jews to have power and self-determination of our fate as a People – **Israel is the ONLY answer**, the last bulwark to global **antisemitism** – here in the United States, especially on **college campuses** (even as we saw this weekend at Penn), and especially again in Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere. **Israel is the only answer** to **Jew-hatred** and terrorist acts against Jews, as a **threat from the outside...** And **looking inward** to the threats to not only Jews but to Judaism - Israel is **ONE of the only answers** to **assimilation** – because it has fostered **Jewish pride and identity** in a way that is almost unprecedented in the past two thousand years. Whether as a **world leader** and **critical US partner** in water ecology, start-ups, high-tech, cybersecurity, LGBTQ rights, a haven for **Jews still fleeing hatred** from France and elsewhere in Europe – we have **much to be proud of, with and despite** our differences and discomforts. The fact that nowadays we **take for granted** that Jewish self-assuredness that did not exist among the strongest Jewish leaders in the 1930s and 40s – that this pride and **confidence is so obvious** and taken for granted, **shows the success** of Israel in instilling that strength of purpose and character.

This is the **miracle** of Israel – *Acheinu*, our brothers and sisters, that, *because* of our kinship and connection, can bring us **pride, confidence, hope** – **with and despite our critiques**, provided they are expressed with affirming love and care, **with and despite the tough stuff** that we may be feeling at this juncture.

And why should we **not give up** on this Zionist project, on Israel, *especially* now? Because **one government does not define a state....** Just as one presidential administration does not define a country. These are **deeply-ingrained values and ideals**, with too much at stake to **shrug and dismiss** Israel as an historic “good try” at Jewish self-determination and strength and progress and hope and innovation.

Because if Jewish history, **with and despite all our trials**, has **taught us one thing** – if the Zionist dream has taught us **one thing** – it is **that NOTHING is inevitable**, despite concerning trends. Theodore Herzl, whose 120th *yahrzeit* we will mark this year, said, “**If you will it, it is no dream.**” - And David Ben Gurion, whose 50th *yahrzeit* we mark this year, once said, “In Israel, to be a **realist**, you **must believe in miracles.**”

In some ways, this is my “**in case of emergency, break the glass**” Israel sermon – asking you to **love Israel even when you don’t like** some of what is coming out of Israel right now... Asking you to **support Israel**, and **remember Israel “l’tovah”** for its best qualities and miracles and benefits, *even when* you may be most mindful at the moment about its challenges. For **some** of you, it’s **so obvious** that you don’t know why I have to give this sermon, and you’re **frustrated** at those who need to hear it. For **some** of you, you **need** to hear this sermon, and you’re **challenged** by it, maybe even frustrated with me because of it. Know that I believe we can love one another, **with and despite** those **frustrations**.

But I want to **close** with a real-life, “**only-in-Israel**” story that I hope will bring a smile. It was from the end of my sabbatical, when I was **in Israel** for a Shabbat before I met up with the Federation Israel 75 Mission. I was meeting friends at their apartment for Shabbat lunch, and they told me before Shabbat that they were going to get home late, so I should **read a book** on the bench outside their apartment, and they’d get me when they got back.

I was reading **[SHOW]** Israeli journalist **Matti Friedman’s new book** about how the musician Leonard Cohen went to Israel to play for Israeli soldiers during the Yom Kippur War. I was reading it to prepare for a **book club** I was running (*figured I should do my homework*)... and a guy came up to me and asked, “**Are you enjoying** that book?” I said I was, and he responded, “Good thing – because **I wrote it.**” Matti Friedman introduced himself to me on Shabbat, we talked about the book, about Israel, about everything going on, the unrest and uncertainty.... (*I told him it was a pretty big swing to ask me if I liked the book before he identified himself...*)

That Shabbat, I got to the part where Leonard Cohen came back from the Yom Kippur War, and wrote in his journal these words: He wrote, “There is **no question** that **the moon will survive the clouds.**” He had gone to Israel during the War because **HE was in despair**, he had announced the end of his music career... He hadn’t even written “**Halleluyah**” yet. And he wrote, “**...the moon will survive the clouds.**” Even if it’s cloudy tonight, and we can’t see the stars and moon, I promise - **Yom Kippur will end....** and usher us into a **cathartic, more hopeful new year** – because we **know** that the **light** is there, because we have faith that it’s there.... Because the light outlasts the clouds.

People change. Our stories of those people change. People **S** change. Nations change and evolve and seek to be better, and sometimes fail, and sometimes pick ourselves back up, and dust ourselves off, and try again. And they are **more likely to improve, if and when we love them**, as *acheinu*, warts and all, **with and despite** the challenges.

That is **the hopeful, aspirational, Jewish way** – *especially* at this moment of Yizkor. We **remember** our people. Of course, **if we look closely enough**, we **KNOW** that some of these people ticked us off at times, during their lives. But **now**, that they are **NOT in our presence** – we **speak their praise more loudly** than we speak their faults. Yes, our *mahzor* (p. 292) has a prayer for remembering difficult relatives. We **don’t sugar-coat** or **deceive** ourselves – Maybe it’s a lot of work to **find that ONE thing** (even if it’s something they taught us to avoid, because of their **negative example**) – ONE way to love them, to hold them close, even with and despite the difficulties. But we find comfort and strength and healing and wholeness, when we affirm our love, with and despite our differences.

Because **love is stronger than death. Memory is longer than life.** And our **presence** here is **more comforting than our absence** or our **distance** could ever be. May we feel **closer**, more **affirmed**, and **more hopeful** in the presence of this gathering, praying that our loved ones, **however imperfect** in life, will be *zichronam liv’rachah* – remembered for a blessing. Amen.