

Declaration of Dignity for the State of Israel
Rabbi Matthew Soffer
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The Prophet Jeremiah lived in the 6th century BCE, at the time Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Leading up to that tragedy, he witnessed social depravity and the neglect of the poor and the weak. He rebuked corrupt leaders who worshipped idols.

In desperation, he spoke these words from God:

Hinei kol shav'at bat-ami... Ha'donai ein b'tzion?
Behold, the voice of My People's Daughter
cries out, "Is God not in Zion!"
Why did they torment Me with their idols...!
The harvest has passed, summer is over, and we have not been redeemed.
Because My People's Daughter is broken, I am broken.
I plunge in gloom; desolation has gripped me.
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no healer?
Why has no healing come to My People's Daughter?
(Jeremiah 8:18-22, *excerpted*)

Sometimes it's hard to translate the Prophets into "real speak." Who is Gilead, what's this healing balm (how can I get some?); And who is this "People's Daughter"? To decode Jeremiah's message, we need some context.

Gilead was a character in the Hebrew Bible, and he had a son named Yiftach. Jeremiah's grief speaks through to story of Yiftach. Yiftach lived in a brutal time, while Israel fought wars with different peoples, often outnumbered. He rose to power when the elders said to Yiftach: *if you lead us in battle and win, you will become our ruler.*

Yiftach was up to the task. He led Israel victoriously from battle to battle. His story culminates with a fight against the Ammonites. Just before going into battle, with momentum on his side, Yiftach made an impromptu vow to God—an oath. He said:

"If [God] delivers the Ammonites into my hands, then whatever comes out the gates to greet me on my safe return home shall belong to God, and I shall sacrifice it as a burnt offering." (Judges 11:30-31)

Yiftach defeated the Ammonites, handily. He returned safely to his home, and as he approached, he looked up and saw- walking through the gates- the face of his daughter, welcoming him home.

The Prophet Jeremiah knew this story, and he knew how it ended.

He knew that Yiftach fulfilled that vow of pure villainy, an oath which God never demanded in the first place; an oath that defied the laws of the Torah, which the Rabbis later clarify could rightfully have been annulled. The daughter's fate could have been healed. But he did the unthinkable; he sacrificed his own daughter. For Jeremiah, she was the "Daughter of God's People."

And Jeremiah knew that the rest of the reign of Yiftach was wretched, as he went on to slaughter 40,000 of his own men. Yiftach's story is one of child-sacrifice and self-destruction. All stemming from an oath—a zealous trade for a military "win."

And so, as Jeremiah witnessed Jerusalem on the brink of its own demise, all he could do was shout:

*The voice of My People's Daughter
is crying out, "Is God not in Zion!"
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no healer?"*

We read these words of the Prophet every year on Tisha B'av, the holiday when we remember the Destruction of the Temple, which Jeremiah witnessed with his own tearful eyes. This year, Jeremiah was more chilling than ever. Because in the very hours that his words wailed inside synagogues in Jerusalem and around the world, voices of mass protests filled the streets of the State of Israel.

Tisha B'av fell just two days after the ruling coalition of the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament), led by Benjamin Netanyahu, passed a law that drastically stripped the judiciary of its authority. This law inaugurated a broader campaign seeking to dismantle democracy in Israel.

It's hard to put into words the magnitude of the protests over the last 40 weeks. The Israel Democracy Institute estimates 21% of the Israeli public has participated. To put this in perspective, we can turn to the so-called "3.5% rule" – based on the extensive research of Erica Chenoweth at the Kennedy School. Chenoweth looked at nonviolent resistance campaigns throughout the 20th century and saw a clear pattern: that no government could "withstand a challenge of 3.5% of its population without either accommodating the movement or (in extreme cases) disintegrating." Again, in Israel today, 21% of the population is protesting this government.

As I shared with you on Tisha B'av, none of this judicial coup comes as a surprise. This is a coalition with ministers who idolize Jewish terrorists, who literally celebrate pogroms against Palestinians, and who proudly undermine the rights of minorities, including women, non-Jews, non-Orthodox Jews, and those in the LGBTQ community. As Maya Angelou once said, "when people show you who they are, believe them the first time."

They were believable "the first time," and no one is shocked now to see this clan of extremists advancing an anti-democratic, abusively clericalist scheme. If anything, what is surprising is how predictable this moment's been—from the very inception of the Jewish State, on May 14, 1948.

When negotiating the Declaration of Independence, up until the 11th hour the leaders were debating questions like, “what do we even call this State?” “Zion?” Well, Mt. Zion wasn’t within its borders. Most thought it’d be “Judea.” Has a nice ring to it. We know eventually they landed on “Israel,” which wasn’t Ben Gurion’s top choice, but they ran out of time! Beneath all these debates were arguments over the definition of the State itself—the irreconcilable tension between democracy and religion.

The most telling of these debates was over whether or not to mention God. Eventually, they compromised to the term, “Rock of Israel.” For a secular kibbutznik, the Rock of Israel was the land and safety. For a haredi rabbi, it was God and Jewish law. Ben Gurion pitched the compromise, saying to the Council: “Each of us, in his own way, believes in the 'Rock of Israel' as he conceives it. I should like to make one request: Don't let me put this phrase to a vote.”

The Council avoided a vote on “the Rock of Israel” so that the democratic ideals of that Declaration could win the day. But they also kicked the “rock” down the road, leaving the conflicts between “Zionisms” for their children to sort out. Or, at least, try.

Today, the word “Zionist” is even more multivalent than it was 75 years ago. When someone says, “I’m a Zionist,” do you know what they mean? Here are a few possibilities:

One can say “I’m a Zionist,” and what they mean is, “I support the State of Israel because history has made it brutally clear that without a safe-haven of a Jewish State we will not survive.”

One can say, “I’m a Zionist,” and mean, “I support Jewish state that provides refuge for anyone fleeing persecution.”

One can say, “I’m a Zionist,” and mean, “I support the State of Israel as a cultural center in which the best values of Judaism can flourish, to the benefit of all of humanity.”

And yet... one can say, “I’m a Zionist,” and mean, “I believe that God, the Rock of Israel, gave this land to the Jewish people, and it’s my duty to reclaim every square inch of it.”

One can say, “I’m a Zionist,” and mean, “I am here to burn your homes and schools to the ground,” as violent settlers did in February to the Palestinian town of Hawara.

One can say, “I’m a Zionist,” and mean, we have to “fix abominations” like homosexuality, transgenderism, women voting, or the evil of Reform Judaism.

And yet... one can say, as I do, “I’m a Zionist,” and mean, “I support a State of Israel that pursues the dream articulated in the Declaration of Independence, of a State “based on freedom, justice...[and] complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex.”

So, saying “I’m a Zionist” doesn’t really say much. So, I’d like to say a bit more.

Personally, I'm a Zionist who hears Jeremiah's call to never again take the oath of Yiftach—never again “cut that deal,” for God's sake. But the dreadful reality is that at this very moment, the governing coalition is willing to do just that—to take the oath of Yiftach, forsaking the Daughter of My People for the sake of a theocracy. This is why Israelis are flooding the streets, the prophetic *voice of My People's Daughter is crying out*:

“Is God not in Zion!”

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Is there no healer?

Within this movement there *are* healers, extraordinary leaders who have emerged from all sectors of society. Leaders, like Shikma Bressler, a physicist, and former basketball player, mother of five young kids. Bressler led thousands on an impromptu march from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. She is among many healers in Gilead.

So is Moran Zer Katzenstein, leader of Bonot Alternativa, who organizes the “Handmaids’ Protests,” riffing off Margaret Atwood novel and TV series. The Handmaids have become a symbol of the women who are at the forefront of this fight. Dressed in all-red, the Handmaids are brave healers of all ages, races, and ethnicities, including ultra-Orthodox women, walking with their heads down in red robes silently waking up the country to the reality that women's lives are on the line. One of the participants said she joined because she was terrified for her one-year-old daughter. Yes, there are healers in Gilead—fighting for “the voice of My People's Daughter”!

And these healers are crying out the Jewish community worldwide, especially in the United States. And they are united in asking us to see this moment as Israel's Second War of Independence. It's not just a rally cry. It's a prophetic declaration. A Second War of Independence.

It's shocking to hear, considering the constant external threats that keep lovers of Israel up at night—from Hamas and Hezbollah to the threat of a nuclear Iran, all of which are existential threats to the future of a Jewish State.

What does it really mean to see this moment as Israel's Second War of Independence?

In the War of Independence, there were about 650,000 Jews in Israel—less than 1% of Jews worldwide. Today, nearly half the Jewish population of the world lives in Israel.

If this is a Second War for Independence, then it's not just a war for Israel. It is a fight for the freedom and welfare of the Jewish people.

If this is a Second War of Independence, and if democracy falls, what becomes of Judaism?

Prominent Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, in a recent piece in Haaretz asked that dreadful question, “Can Judaism survive a messianic dictatorship in Israel?” The very fact that such a question is on the table, with plausibility, is chilling enough. This is what Harari sees for Jews of the Diaspora:

“In a world where a messianic dictatorship in Israel turns Judaism into a synonym for fanaticism, racism, and oppression, would Jewish communities in New York or Kyiv insist that ‘Hawara Judaism’ is just a monstrous mutation in our national DNA, which fails to represent the true spirit of Judaism? Some Jews may try to maintain in the Diaspora a liberal and sane Jewish alternative. If so, Judaism will have split into two rival religions, separated by an unbridgeable chasm, that will regard each other as sworn enemies.”

Judea Reform is a community of many voices. Some, like myself, express our Judaism through Reform Zionism. Some identify as non-Zionists or anti-Zionists. I’d venture to say that the largest cohort of us mainly sits on the sidelines, perhaps because of all the in-fighting; perhaps because it’s just too far away—geographically and socially.

This is a time to draw near; to get closer. Not closer to the conflict, but closer to the healing and the healers. You don’t need a degree in Israeli history; you don’t need to be a card-carrying member of a Zionist organization, like ARZA; you don’t need to label your relationship to Israel at all. If you are here, you already care enough to take one step closer.

Many in this community, more than we acknowledge, are already so close. Many have heard the “voice of My People’s Daughter” crying out. Among us there are healers of Gilead, leaders who are standing up for a democratic Israel, including those connected the grassroots movement called UnXeptable, launched by Israelis who live here in the States. More than 500,000 Israelis live in America, many of whom live here in the Triangle. It’s time to get closer.

During Sukkot, we’ll open our Sukkah for some conversations with Israelis—to talk about Jewish identity and their experiences as Israelis. As this “Second War of Independence” ensues, we can stand together, connected to a worldwide movement of Jewish healing.

Jeremiah is known as the “weeping prophet” because of all tears he sheds for our “People’s Daughter.” His story endures as one of moral outrage, and he witnesses what leads the people to exile. This Yom Kippur, may we become a people of return—of *teshuva*; of the radical belief that the future is not pre-determined, but one that we determine.

Jeremiah still asks:

“Is God not in Zion!”

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Is there no healer?”

The Prophet’s questions now belong to us.

The year 5784, come what may, *will* bear an answer—

a declaration for the Children of Our People.

May that declaration be one of dignity.

May the righteousness of our healers prevail.

Amen.