

Yom Kippur Morning Sermon 2021

“Troubled/Committed”

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Every year on the High Holidays I like to devote one sermon to Israel. As you can imagine, it's not a simple task, especially the last few years. In the context of a politically and ideologically diverse community, I've asked myself many times -- what is the Diaspora rabbi's task when it comes to Israel? To defend and to advocate, at a time when Israel has so many enemies? To admonish and critique, like the ancient prophets? To inform, even while knowing that my congregants have ready access to the same sources of information that I do? Or is my job perhaps to referee, among congregants who have different stances, in an effort to hold us together in one community? I have at various times during my career attempted all of the above, even while knowing that some of these goals contradict the others.

Israel has become such a loaded and polarized subject in the Jewish community, such a minefield, that it is tempting to avoid the topic altogether. There is certainly no shortage of other topics that I could address during these precious few minutes that I have your attention on our holiest day of the year, and this one is so very hard. But Israel holds such an important place in my own Jewish identity, traveling to and reading about Israel was so formative in my own personal journey to Jewish engagement, and Israel is such a central topic on the contemporary Jewish agenda, that I just can't let it go, I feel I can't avoid it. But what do I have to offer the community in regard to Israel? There are countless books and op-eds and websites on Israel out there, approaching it from every conceivable angle. What can I add? I'm not a pundit, I'm a rabbi. My "lane" is faith, God, spirituality, Torah. And this is Yom Kippur. So what's a message about Israel that is appropriate from me, for this day, with this community?

In thinking about what I wanted to share with you about Israel this year, I was informed by a lecture I heard by Rabbi Donniel Hartman earlier this summer that I found very helpful¹. Rabbi Hartman divided the Diaspora Jewish community into four categories based on axes of how committed they are to Israel, and how troubled they are by what they see as Israel's shortcomings. He calls his four categories: Untroubled-Committed. Untroubled-Uncommitted. Troubled-Committed. Troubled-Uncommitted.

If I had time I would go into more detail about each category. But of the four, the group that Rabbi Hartman focused on most in his lecture are the Jews he calls Troubled-Committed. This group feels very connected to Israel, is proud of many of Israel's accomplishments, has perhaps travelled there or has family there and believes in the idea of a Jewish state -- but is quite troubled by many actions of the Israeli government, particularly around the Occupation and settlements, but in other areas as well such as religious pluralism and the monopoly of the Orthodox chief rabbinate. Issues that trouble them about society here --such as inequity, racism, human rights, democracy, and the climate emergency, frame the way they think about Israel. The Troubled-Committed continue to believe in and support the Jewish state, but they are alarmed by some of what they read or hear about what's going on there.

¹ Hartman's argument is summarized in [Sources](#), Fall 2021 issue.

There have always been Troubled-Committed people. The problem Rabbi Hartman identified, and which I have observed as well as I talk with people about Israel, is that at this time, many Troubled-Committed Jews in the Diaspora are sliding into the Troubled-Uncommitted camp. They, young people perhaps more than most but really across the age spectrum, are feeling disconnected and disaffected by what's going on over there and they are unable to hold both their commitment and their troubledness in a way that feels coherent to them. Consequently, they make the decision, whether consciously or not, to let go of their commitment to Israel, to disengage.

Hartman's analysis has helped me frame what I feel my role is as a rabbi in regard to Israel. Especially after what happened last May in the latest Gaza war, and with the ongoing Sheikh Jarrah eviction controversy, at a time when there has been so much emotion about Israel in the Jewish community and the wider society -- I have come to believe that my rabbinate as it pertains to Israel is not about politics (there are plenty of experts on that), but about faith. It's about doing whatever is in my power to help Troubled-Committed Jews keep the faith, so that they don't disengage, don't become Troubled-Uncommitted.

But how to do this? One method, that I have tried myself over the years, is to articulate and repeat certain facts about the conflict. This method assumes that Jews who are troubled, if they just understood what was really going on, if they really knew the true facts, the history, international law, the offers made by Israel which were rejected, whatever, they would actually be untroubled about Israel's actions. The criticisms of Israel are all just a misunderstanding at best, anti-Semitism at worst. The persistence of the conflict and the Occupation really is the other guy's fault, for a whole host of reasons.

But here's what I'm finding about that approach -- most Troubled-Committed Jews I'm talking to don't hear these facts and then move into the untroubled category as a result. Either they dispute the facts (and we all know there's no undisputed set of facts about the Middle East or much of anything these days) or the facts just don't persuade them. So they stay troubled, especially at times of particularly high tension like last May. And the fact that they're still so very troubled means, again, that many are sliding into that Uncommitted category, they're disengaging.

But other than bemoaning this slide, and repeating the same facts and arguments, what else is there to say to the folks in the Troubled-Committed camp? If they're not going to somehow be persuaded to become Untroubled, is it inevitable that they'll slide into the Uncommitted camp - because the dissonance between their deepest values and what they read about what's going on in Israel is just too painful?

I hope and pray that this slide is not inevitable. In my eyes, the loss of commitment to Israel, even a troubled sort of commitment, would be a terrible blow for Diaspora Judaism. We as Diaspora Jews need Israel, for Israel reminds us of our peoplehood, our sense of Jewish connectedness across time and space. Jewish identity is complicated: as Jews by birth or choice, we inherit both a religion, and a membership card in the Jewish people. We can't have one without the other, because Judaism consists of a never-ending dance between belief and

belonging.² Medinat Yisrael is the nation-state of the Jewish people, it exemplifies diverse Jews belonging to and sacrificing for the Jewish people in a way that can teach so much to Diaspora Jews who aren't always so sure where they fit in to Am Yisrael, or how committed they are. Millions of people speaking a Jewish language and organizing their lives around a Jewish calendar and arguing about Jewish values in the public square in a land suffused with Jewish history. Even as we in the Diaspora conduct our Jewish lives here, thousands of miles away and in a very different context, it is a true spiritual gift for us to live in a time when there is a living, thriving Jewish society and millions of people living in it and together determining, however messily, through their actions and their aspirations what that exactly means.

I'm not going to repeat facts today. Rather I'm going to share a text.

One of the most powerful scenes in the Torah occurs in the Book of Exodus -- when the children of Israel, standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai while Moses was up at the top, decide to make the Golden Calf. God tells Moses what's going on down below and then says to him, "I see that this is a stiff-necked people. Now let me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them and make of you a great nation." (Ex.32:9-10).

This is an extraordinary scene, outrageous actually. God, the Almighty, the Master of the Universe, the Lord who had so recently brought this people out from their bondage with signs and wonders, says to Moses, *הניחה לי* "Let me be" as if it's in Moses' power to restrain God from doing whatever God chooses to do! Rabbi Abbahu in the Talmud picks up on the theological problem. He says *אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומר* "Were this verse not written, it would be impossible to utter."³ But it was written, and so Rabbi Abbahu decides to double down on the image: "This teaches that Moses grabbed the Holy One blessed be He, as a person who grabs his friend by his garment, and he said to Him: *Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I will not leave You be until You forgive and pardon them.*"

I read Moses' audacious message to God, both the original in Exodus and in Rabbi Abbahu's version, as being about: unconditional love. God's instinct after the betrayal of the Golden Calf was to divest Himself from the Jewish people, to start from scratch with a new people. Moses says no, God -- you've got to stay. The nature of the relationship is such that even though they've disappointed You, and even though You know and I know that they're going to disappoint you again, You've got to stick around. Don't give up on them. Don't BDS them. Centuries after Moses, the prophet Hosea, so aware of his countrymen's propensity to idol worship, imagines God embracing this same lesson, saying "I fell in love with Israel when he was still a child, I have called him "son" every since Egypt *אֵיךְ אֶתְנֶה אֶפְרַיִם אֲמַנְנֶה: יִשְׂרָאֵל* [Despite everything you've done,] How can I give up on you? How can I surrender you, O Israel?"⁴ The prophet Isaiah, in the haftarot of consolation following Tisha B'Av, explicitly rejects the metaphor of divorce as a description of the relationship between God and the people of Israel following the destruction of the Temple. No, the marriage is *not* over, he says. No matter what

² Gil Troy, *Sources*, Spring 2021, p.98.

³ Berachot 32a

⁴ Hosea 11:1,8

tzuris happened in the relationship, no matter the hurt, the anger, and the pain, on both sides, the bond and the commitment is still there.

Troubled- Uncommitted is what God almost became after the Calf – so angry, so hurt, that the relationship could no longer be sustained. God was on the edge. It was only Moses' intervention, Moses' grabbing God by the collar in Rabbi Abbahu's language, that prevented a divorce, an irreversible rupture.

I'm no Moses, but in regard to my work as a rabbi around the subject of Israel I see myself grabbing the Troubled-Committed by the collar and saying "Don't give up on Israel." Hang in there, in a stance of forgiveness and compassion and love, even though you're troubled.

Despite our different realities, Israelis and Diaspora Jews are family. Israel needs the partnership and solid support of Untroubled Diaspora Jews, but Israel also needs the support of Troubled Diaspora Jews – and here I think especially about those Israelis, and there are many, who are themselves troubled, and who are working so hard to make their country a better place from within. They're begging for support from Diaspora Jewry. I also know that as the Jewish state, Israel belongs to us Diaspora Jews -- for sure not in the same way it belongs to its citizens, but in some way hard to define – and as a result we do have a role to play in shaping the character of the Jewish state from afar. But only if we hang on to our commitment, and if Israelis feel that commitment from us.

I know that Troubled-Committed is a really tough place to be. Some might say incoherent. Some might say that after 54 years of occupation, if you're still committed, that means you're not *really* troubled, it's just words. This critique is why it's become so difficult if not impossible in the last few years for Troubled-Committed Zionist Jews in the Diaspora to work with allies on causes having nothing to do with Israel or the Middle East. Expressed commitment to Israel, even the troubled sort, can lead to ostracism or cancellation in certain progressive spaces.

On the other side, many people maintain that with all the anti-Semites and Israel -haters out there saying such awful and distorted things on social media and elsewhere, delegitimizing and criminalizing Israel as a means to undermine its very existence, then if you're still saying you're troubled by Israel, then you're clearly not really committed to Israel.

So centrifugal forces continually work on the Troubled-Committed, attempting to dislodge them in one direction or the other, to become Uncommitted or Untroubled.

But I continue to believe that the center can hold. I appeal to all my fellow Troubled Committed: hang in there, the way God hung in there with the Jewish people even after we disappointed Him at the Calf and on so many other occasions. That's what relationship is. That's what *selihah* is, forgiveness. That's what *hashlamah* is, acceptance of each other's faults. That's what it is to be *mishpacha* – family, even when the going gets rough.

On Yom Kippur we repeatedly confess our sins. And we also appeal to God אל תשליכנו מלפניך – "Do not cast us away from You, take not Your holy presence away from

us.” We confess repeatedly that we have been ‘insolent and obstinate, we’ve abused and betrayed and destroyed’ etc. And still, we have the nerve to say אל תשליכנו. Stick with us.

The going was rough in Israel in May, and in a different way it was also rough for Troubled-Committed Diaspora Jews. No rockets raining down on us, or reprisal bombing raids with civilian casualties. But lots of turmoil and anguish. And there will be more rough patches to come. The new government in Israel and the new prime minister doesn’t change that. There will likely be another tragic round with Hamas sometime. On the West Bank, the Occupation and its threat to Israel’s democratic character will continue for the foreseeable future – because of factors present on both sides of the conflict. These troubling problems, however, are not reasons to give up. I refuse to believe that the status quo is Israel’s destiny, Israel’s fate forever. Palestinian society is dynamic, Israeli society is dynamic. The smartest pundits in the world don’t actually know what’s going to happen. Let’s not succumb to cynicism and fatalism, and since we’re in shul on Yom Kippur let’s lift up our hearts in prayer for a better future for Israelis and Palestinians.

But in the meantime, how should Troubled-Committed Jews think about Israel? Moses didn’t make excuses for the people of Israel after the Calf. Moses knew that God had every right to be troubled by their actions. But Moses implored God to preserve their relationship anyway, despite the fact that the people had disappointed Him. We know that our most important relationships in life sometimes involve disappointment. Sometimes there’s so much disappointment and pain and hurt that the relationship cannot be sustained. But very often we human beings find the capacity to work through the disappointments and hang in, as God ultimately did, and what a gift it is when we can. Don’t give up, Moses said, don’t divest. Remember how much you love the people. Stay in there, help them to grow and change.

So what is my task as a Diaspora rabbi when it comes to Israel? I certainly want to foster an environment in which Jews of diverse opinions can feel at home in the Jewish community and the congregation. This is sometimes excruciatingly difficult because of the passionate views felt by the Untroubled-Committed, and the Troubled-Committed, and also the presence of many Uncommitted Jews in the community who really don’t want to talk about it. In some ways, the effort to manage this diversity of views on Israel over so many years as rabbi has prepared me for the current passionate debate in society about vaccines. Very different in so many ways of course, but it’s another polarizing issue with passions and emotions running high on both sides, and lots of people feeling one way, but some people feeling another way, and many people setting up litmus tests to determine if you’re on their side or not, and desperate to hear that their community publicly affirms and validates them and what they believe.

As in all things, I think ultimately all I can do is to be honest. My truth about vaccines is that I think everyone who is eligible should be vaccinated. If you haven’t done so yet, and you’re at all persuadable by your rabbi, please -- go get your jab, to protect yourself and others. It’s a mitzvah.

My truth about Israel, what I want to say to you as I grab you by the collar on this Yom Kippur, is: if you're Troubled but Committed, hang in there. Stay connected. Keep the faith. Support Israel, as you are able, in the way that feels right to you. There are so many different ways to do so that exemplify your values, what's important to you. Say what's troubling you, but also say what you're proud of. Nurture your own sense of compassion, yes for Palestinians who have suffered terribly, but also for our Israelis, our family, who have also suffered and face very complex dilemmas that are far from our own experience here in the Diaspora. We should be able to muster enough compassion for both.

And let's examine this Yom Kippur where we have perhaps been smug or self-satisfied -- and challenge ourselves to be better and do better, even as we agitate around injustices that are being committed by others. We've just marked the 20th anniversary of Sept.11 amidst the chaotic Afghanistan withdrawal, so we know that every possible response to violence comes with its own costs -- and it's certainly not only Israel which is susceptible to misjudgements and moral abuses. Anyone or any society with power is susceptible, but I'd rather live with the moral peril and dilemmas of having power and using power, than hang onto the nobility of perpetual victimhood. Let's continue to call it as we see it, but with as much humility as we can muster. And though this is not as much under our control, let's hope that our Israeli brothers and sisters will also hang in there with us, despite some of our faults and failings as Diaspora communities, which are perhaps not as strong or as Jewishly educated or as committed as we could be.

None of us can say צדיקים אנחנו ולא חטאנו – we are righteous, and without sin. May our commitment to Israel, our unconditional love, only deepen, even if we are Troubled and even when it's hard. May we find ways to transcend the thousands of miles between ourselves and Eretz Yisrael, as our ancestors have long done in all the lands of the Jewish Dispersion, transcend the miles physically if we have the opportunity and the means to travel there, or spiritually in so many of the ways Jews have devised to keep the connection alive in all their generations of living in the Diaspora. May we find ways to be both supportive and honest, and to stay committed. May we find ways to both learn from our Israeli brothers and sisters, and share our truth with them – not as a way of telling them what to do, that's not our place and we don't have that power, but rather as a way of showing that we care so deeply. That is the meaning of being עם אחד – one people.