

**“Connecting to Israel as a Reform Jew”**  
**Yom Kippur Morning Sermon**  
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**Congregation Dor Tamid, Johns Creek, Georgia**  
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A few weeks ago, the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta hosted a breakfast meeting with local rabbis and a number of members of the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, at the Temple downtown. It was a great opportunity for my colleagues and me to hear from representatives of the Israeli government and the opposition parties as they expressed their hopes and aspirations for mutual cooperation and understanding between Israel and the American Jewish community. This meeting was also an opportunity for these high-ranking Israeli official to hear our concerns, our issues, and our anxieties about the current state of affairs in the Jewish state. We all went into the meeting with a sense of encouragement, eager to listen to each other, share with each other, and build a relationship based on a mutual desire to strengthen our bonds to each other.

And yet, it was not surprising to me that I walked out of the meeting upset and with a feeling that I, along with my other colleagues, had not be heard.

As many of you know, there are currently a number of issues in Israel that are affecting the relationship between the State of Israel, specifically its government, and the non-Orthodox Jewish community in the diaspora.

First and foremost of these issues centers around the *kotel*, the Western Wall. While not always the case, the *kotel* is currently administered by the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, led by Rabbi Schmuel Rabinowitz. The Foundation receives a majority of its funding from the Israeli government and is tasked with administering the holy sites at, and around, the *kotel*. In doing this, they have set up the plaza in front of the wall like an ultra-Orthodox synagogue, complete with *mechitzah*, a barrier separating the men’s and women’s sections, and a strictly enforced dress code for women. Additionally, women are not allowed to read from the Torah, or even have a Torah on the women’s side, even though there are over one hundred scrolls reserved for the men. Due to pressure from diaspora Jewry as well as Israeli groups such as Women of the Wall, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asked the Jewish Agency, a pseudo-governmental organization, to collaborate with the Union for Reform Judaism, the World Union for Progressive Judaism, Women of the Wall, and other progressive groups to work out a solution. A deal was reached and an egalitarian section of the wall, to

be administered by non-Orthodox groups was planned. However, recently, Netanyahu's right wing government has gone back on the deal, and even this week has told the Israeli Supreme Court that it has no plans to implement the agreement.

Another divisive issue has to do with prejudice and a lack of access granted to the Reform Movement from the Rabbinat. For you see, in Israel, religious life is governed under the auspices of the Israeli Chief Rabbinat, which covers everything from rabbis' salaries to issues of kashrut, and from marriage to divorce. For Jews in Israel, only weddings in Israel performed under the authority of the Orthodox rabbinat are legally valid. Many who would like to get married in Israel are unable to due to stringent checks on the bride and grooms religious status. The Orthodox rabbinat requires written documentation proving Jewish lineage which is often difficult or impossible to obtain. And Reform and Conservative rabbis are not allowed to officiate at legally binding weddings. Many Israelis leave the country in order to have a legal and Jewish wedding. And in fact, more Israelis get married in Cyprus each year than Cypriots. Additionally, conversions overseen by non-rabbinat approved Orthodox rabbis are considered invalid, and while my conversion students are allowed to make Aliyah, to immigrate to Israel, they are not considered fully Jewish by the standards of the Israeli Orthodox rabbinat. Additionally, the chief rabbi of Jerusalem was just quoted as saying that we Reform Jews were worse than Holocaust deniers.

Ultimately, the real issue is not about the *kotel*. Neither is it about conversion, marriage, divorce, or even the Jerusalem rabbi's comment. No. The real underlying issue is that Israel, the state of the Jewish people has those in power that say to you and me each day with their words and their actions that our expression of Judaism does not matter. This has daily ramifications to the multitudes living in Israel who do not subscribe to an Orthodox way of life yet who wish to find another, more modern way to express their Judaism. And it has ramifications in the Diaspora, where countless Jews feel more disenfranchised every day and are beginning to lose their connection, or finding it unable to develop a connection in the first place, to the Jewish state.

For thousands of years, Jews have yearned for a homeland, for a state, for a place to call their own. And now that we have it, the government, rabbinat, and others with power are telling us that we are not Jewish enough to take an active role in the state which should be a home for all Jews, for each of us.

Addressing these issues, and responding to Netanyahu's claim this past week that there is no crisis, no rift between Israel and the Diaspora, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the president of the Union for Reform Judaism wrote an open letter to Netanyahu this week which appeared in Haaretz. He wrote:

Mr. Prime Minister there is a crisis. We heard it in our synagogues this past Rosh HaShanah, where our rabbis and our congregants - over a million and a half people in synagogues across North America - came together. A recent delegation of Knesset members from a range of political parties heard it when they met with Jewish leaders across the United States. Claiming to the press that there is no crisis doesn't make it so.

It is clear to the overwhelming majority of North American Jews, including prominent members of the U.S. Congress who recently spoke out, as the Israeli media reported, that the time is long overdue to seriously address the burning issues of religious pluralism so important to our community and to the integrity of a democratic state.”

Rabbi Jacob's letter conveys the thoughts of many American Jews, this rabbi included, that the Israeli government has turned its back on the Jewish community at large. And the Prime Minister, who touts himself as the Prime Minister for all Jews, has not done his job. In fact, he and his government have gone back on their agreement solely to garner the support of ultra-Orthodox parties within his ruling coalition in order to ensure the stability of his government and to maintain his seat of power. And yet, he speaks time and time again about the need for mutual understanding and cooperation. This was the message given by those members of the Knesset who are in the coalition at our breakfast: that we need to continue to work to support Israel and our concerns about the rights of the Reform community do not matter.

And yet, we have seen, even with all of this animosity coming from the ultra-Orthodox community and the ruling coalition, the Reform movement in Israel is actually growing. Many Israelis, who are starting to look for religious expressions outside of the world of the Orthodox have turned to the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism, also known as the IMPJ, which is the counterpart to Reform Judaism in Israel. Today, the IMPJ boasts a growing membership of both immigrants and native Israelis, with some 30 congregations around the country. Helping to ensure the movements future is a growing network of schools, educational and community centers, a youth movement, Hebrew and English Beit Midrash study programs, and the degree-granting and informal programs at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Also working to assure the movements advancement is the Israel Religious Action Center, the IMPJ's public and legal advocacy arm.

But what about us? What about the message that we are getting that Reform and other brands of non-Orthodox Judaism do not matter? Should that affect our commitment to the State of Israel?

Yes. It should. It should strengthen it. For even though the current government, which has proven to be hostile, and the chief rabbinate, which has always been hostile, continues to make statements and pass policies that undermine our relationship, we can truly see a need for a pluralistic Israel that is rooted in Jewish values and democracy. And it is up to us, as members of the largest Jewish community outside of the State of Israel to lend our voice to the conversation, to stand up and be proud Reform Zionists.

Reform Zionism is a belief system which implores us to continue the work of building and reimagining what it means to have a Jewish and Democratic State in contemporary times. Additionally, Reform Zionism means that Ahavat Yisrael, love of Israel, is core to our Jewish identity. Our Zionism requires us to seek our beloved Israel's evolution as a modern Jewish and Democratic state and is expressed in the dynamic interaction of Am Yisrael (the People of Israel), Torat Yisrael (the Torah and its traditions as handed down to each generation) Elohei Yisrael (the Jewish People's experience with the God of Israel) and Eretz Yisrael (the Land itself).

We are some of the few Jews in all of history who have been able to enjoy the existence of an independent Jewish state. Controversy should never cause us to take this for granted nor cause us to lose our connection to this state. Rather, it is important to be a vocal critic of Israel when the time is right. It is just as important, however, to know how to voice this criticism. Unabashed, naïve, unfiltered criticism of Israel is not healthy to the debate, and yes, I do believe that anti-Israel statements by some in the non-Jewish community are often thinly veiled attempts at being antisemitic without directly saying so. So, it is up to us, as Reform Jews, to guide the debate, disagree with Israel when her actions do not seem to fit with Jewish values, but disagree from a place of love, not animosity. For the Jewish people have always been sustained by three things: God, Torah, and Israel. Our belief in God as well as our knowledge of Torah and our yearning to fulfill our yearly cry of "next year in Jerusalem" is what has caused our people to flourish, even when we have not had a homeland that we could physically lay claim to. But, for the last sixty nine years, we have had the opportunity to have our own state: our own Jewish state, in our homeland, in Israel. We must not forsake it, nor may we criticize it without remembering our connection to it and its value to the Jewish people. Israel is a place that provides Jews the world over a safe haven, a home, and a sense of pride in its numerous technological, scientific, scholarly, and humanitarian accomplishments. Israeli pharmaceutical companies and hospitals are at the cutting edge in finding cures for many of the world's most serious health problems. Israeli companies, especially those in the technology sector affect our daily lives. Over 50 million people use Waze, an Israeli based GPS program, to

get around every day. Marni and I are extremely grateful to Waze, since every road in this part of town seems to have a different name every other mile. And, Israeli soldiers and aid were the first on the ground after the earthquake in Haiti, they are already in Puerto Rico, and Israeli hospitals have been secretly treating victims of the Syrian civil war. Secretly in order to protect the Syrians after they have recovered and returned home.

Additionally, we need to support Israel in more ways than just challenging its government and policies. Fight back against anti-Israel rhetoric and the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction, or BDS, movement through words as well as actions. Support Israeli companies and give tzedakah to Israeli causes, especially those connected to or supporting the IMPJ. Furthermore, support progressive causes in Israel by joining ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America. Utilize resources put out by the two main Israel lobbies, AIPAC and JStreet, as well as read Israeli newspapers in order to stay current on what is happening in Israel, both with her foreign affairs, but also culturally and politically. And, most importantly, we can all show our support for Israel by going there.

For Israel truly is the Land and State of the Jewish people. She may not be perfect, but it is through our love and support that she will continue to thrive. Sixty nine “years after its founding, Israel has returned to its core questions<sup>1</sup> [of identity]”. Can Israel exist as a modern democracy and as a Jewish nation at the same time? The challenges that Israel faces go well beyond that of occupation and the prospects of peace, well beyond Progressive vs. Orthodox Judaism. And it is through the determination of the Israeli people, and the support of all us, all of the Reform movement, and all of world Jewry that Israel will be able to face her challenges head on and continue to thrive not only into this New Year, but for years, and God willing, centuries ahead. May all of Israel, the Land, the State, and all the Jewish people, both within and outside of the physical borders of the state, continue to go from strength to strength. And may am, erez, and medinat Yisrael Chai. May the people, land and country of Israel live on. Ken yehi ratzon. May this be God’s will. Shanah tovah!

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<sup>1</sup> Shavit. p. xiv.