

Yom Kippur Sermon

September 25, 2023

“ תשרי שנת תשפ”ד

A Nation Divided

Abraham Lincoln once said, “A Nation Divided cannot stand.”

If that is truly the case, how will Israel continue to stand as it is becoming increasingly divided?

It is perhaps an understatement to say that many of us are deeply concerned about what has been happening in Israel over the past year and equally concerned about how divided we have become as a People over the current crisis. I say the current crisis, because there is always some crisis happening in Israel... yet, this one feels different. Why is that? Is it only the perceived threat to Israel’s democracy to Israel as we know it? Or is it also because we sense the existential threat of being a nation so divided? Pause What is really going on here?

On the surface, it seems like there is simply the highly contentious matter surrounding the powers of the judiciary and a balance of powers in the government around the proposed Judicial reforms. And yet, the pro-democracy protest movement has been drawing hundreds of thousands of individuals to the streets for almost 40 weeks! While the stakes of the current judicial reform are very high, I sense that something even deeper is dividing us. While it is admittedly impossible to speak about Israel without

being at all political, what I would like to **focus on** today, in the spirit of Yom Kippur, is the disunity, the fissure, the rift that is now dividing Israel and even tearing families apart. Of course, this division extends to the greater Israel, which includes the global Jewish community, where protests also have been held including in Melbourne and three other cities in Australia. Is our unity being shattered? What are the ramifications of an Israel divided and what can we do about it?

As I have just mentioned, not only has the larger Jewish family become divided, but individual families are also being torn apart, and it goes beyond the issues of the judiciary...

The following story appeared in the Musaf section of the *Calcalist* (an Israeli business news source). It is Tal's story; a young Israeli woman:

"My brother voted for Itamar Ben Gvir, a Kahanist who has been arrested and indicted dozens of times (and was even convicted once for an act of racism), a Jewish racist [now Minister of National Security]. My brother decided that the one who would protect him from all harm was Itamar Ben Gvir. My brother is not stupid, which is why I am so angry with him.

At first, I (tried to) swallow the "strange" laws being passed in the Knesset [regarding the Judiciary], I tried to swallow the fact that Aryeh Deri, [a criminal who has served time], has been allowed back into the government after being barred, I tried to swallow the hametz law (not allowing Hametz

into public hospitals), I was willing to try to swallow the Western Wall dress code, until the moment I realised that they intended to create a dictatorship here in Israel.

"The judicial reform issue made the tension between us palpable, and the last time we spoke it ended in a screaming match around the Shabbat table. Since then, we simply don't talk about politics at the dinner table with our parents. If the topic comes up at the Friday night table, I just keep my mouth shut for fear of being attacked. "I don't dare call my brother or even talk to him, and it tears me apart. And (to be honest) I no longer feel like talking to him about anything, not even the trivial and everyday things we would always share with each other. I miss talking to him, but It's so hard for me not to feel anger and resentment when I do."

Tal's story is not unique, as this tension and division, even within families, has become commonplace. On this Yom Kippur, this time of self-reflection and repentance, let us consider how these issues, that are even dividing families, pose an even greater existential threat to Jewish Unity worldwide. We are witnessing the greatest internal crisis in the history of the modern State of Israel. How can we stay united as a People? Let us turn to the Torah for answers.

In Vayikra Kedoshim chapter 19 v. 15-18:

לֹא-תַעֲשׂוּ עִוְלָה בְּמִשְׁפָּט לֹא-תִשָּׂא פְּנֵי-דָל וְלֹא תִהְדָּר פְּנֵי גָדוֹל בְּצִדֵּק תִּשְׁפֹּט עִמִּיתְךָ:

Do not cause any injustice: do not favour the poor or the rich; with *tzekek* judge your peer(s).

The Torah begins by charging us to judge fairly (this is meant within the context of our judicial system) apropos to the crisis at hand. The next few lines in the Torah allude to a source of injustice that prevents the implementation of justice and sows the seeds of corruption within the judicial system:

לֹא-תִשָּׂא אֶת-אַחֶיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ

Don't hate your family members in your heart.

לֹא-תִקֶּם וְלֹא-תִטַּר אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמְּךָ וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה:

Do not hold vengeance (in your heart) nor bear a grudge against members of your people. Love your neighbour as yourself: I am יהוה.

This text speaks right to the heart of these holy days, the days of judgement, where we seek compassion from the Judge of All; and links together the idea of justice with loving your neighbour and with the importance of harbouring neither hatred, grudge or vengeance in our hearts in the very next verses in the Torah. This Torah text first and foremost stresses that hatred, grudges and vengeance cannot be present for justice to occur. We can extrapolate from the Torah's call to keep hatred,

grudges and vengeance from our hearts to insure a just society — that the growing divide; the US vs. THEM mentality; poses the very same danger, only now we are talking about - against half of our own People!

How does one become identified with a “side”? The Torah, in demanding justice, informs us that “us” versus “them” politics will corrupt a just society because it is the cultivation of enmity. To what extent are identity politics taking over and doing just that—dividing us? To use a term coined by James O’Brian, this is simply the *footballification* of politics, a term he first used in his description of how English society has split over Brexit. He said, “I coined the term 'footballification' to describe the way that the blind, unquestioning loyalty of football fans has been transferred to political figures & parties.” Sometimes we choose a team and stick to it, even if it is no longer winning!

Which reminds me of a story. When we first moved to Australia, we were having Shabbat dinner at Jeremy and Adele Stowe-Lindner's house, when Jesse asked me which footy team I barrack for? “I don’t have one,” I replied, “do you have a suggestion for me and a cogent argument for why I should support them?” “You don’t choose your team, you inherit it,” Jeremy retorted. Footy, I understood then, is an extension of your tribal affiliation; it is possibly also hereditary! Perhaps this phenomenon is familiar to you? Who does your tribe barrack for? Carlton? Collingwood? St. Kilda? Melbourne? Essendon?

Footballification of politics...blind, even hereditary loyalty at times.

Do people even understand the issues of the judicial overhaul or do they just know which team they are on? One aunt of ours in Israel, whom we love, kept saying to us when we were there over the summer: “I admit that I don’t understand this whole judicial overhaul thing, but of course I know it is the right thing to do, so why are people protesting and threatening the future of our country?” To her, she knows who her team is! Her family, by the way, has always been on the same team - a traditional Jewish family that votes Likud. Here is the crazy thing: what do you think happened when one of their daughters decided to head out to the protests and join the “other” team!!? (pause)...the family fortunately realised that the love of family was the most important thing of all and decided not to make it an explosive issue. This, of course, was not the case in many families, such as Tal’s, whom I read about earlier, or another related family we know in Israel where the children and parents are not speaking to each other and didn’t come to Shabbat dinner as a result!

In thinking about all of this footballification of politics, consider that, according to research, Israelis have never actually been closer in their political views but, at the same time, never more emotionally (and politically) divided – so, we must ask why? We know, for example, that the left-wing parties (Meretz and Labor) have all but disappeared from the political scene in Israel which may not be good but indicates a society less divided by opinion. If so, why are we so divided, if we are actually closer in our opinions? To understand in depth the phenomenon of the *footballification* of politics, we must understand the way identity politics

drives people's "opinions", who they listen to, which media outlets and particular leaders they follow, many times, loyally and unquestioningly. So what does identity politics mean? According to journalist and writer Gabriel Power, identity politics generally refers to a subset of politics in which groups of people with particular shared racial, religious, ethnic, social or cultural identity seek to promote their own specific interests or concerns. In terms of single-agenda identity politics, the Knesset itself has a number of parties whose main agenda are issues of identity: Charedi, Arab, ultra-Nationalist Jewish and the list goes on. Other groups that people strongly identify with in Israel that are fueling the emotional aspect of the divide are religious vs. secular, *yamin / smol* l/r division. We need to understand this because it reflects a divide that is highly emotional, is about identity (who am I and where do I belong, who are my people, who is my family, who is in and who is out).

Identity, according to Human Needs Psychology, is the most powerful force in our lives—so it is no wonder that issues that threaten our identity divide us and lead to polarisation. What is at stake is a sense of, who am I and where do I belong? Divisive leaders understand the power of identity and play on people's fears that threaten their identity; they do so for their own political gain. For example, last week, Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu was quoted as saying, "anti-overhaul protestors [abroad] are joining forces with the PLO and IRAN". This, of course, demonises legitimate political protesters and labels all protestors, enemy collaborators, further stoking division inside and outside of Israel between Jews. Such a statement is

unacceptable; whether it comes from the right or the left, we must not become divided.

Media outlets on all points of the political spectrum, as well, play to their audience's identity politics, in order to keep their ratings up and keep people in an echo chamber of their own opinions, rather than offering a more complex and nuanced view. We live in an era of tribal identification, *footballification* of our lives and politics; an era of **non-listening**. But we don't have to be swayed by any of this propaganda, we can choose to begin listening to all voices and especially listening to each other.

How can there be compromise, understanding or progress if no one is not listening, but instead retreating to their own tribe or camp?

Listening is so central to our tradition and to these Holy Days and we are called upon to LISTEN. There are a significant number of calls on us to Hear or Listen on these days. The Shema Koleinu prayer, urges God to hear our voices and the Torah portion for Shabbat Shuva urges Haazinu V'adabera—Listen, and I will tell you, I will explain it to you...The sound of the shofar is also called a voice, a KOL, and calls us to listen. We are exhorted to hear it many times during these days...Our most central prayer begins, Shema Yisrael... Listen Israel...what are we supposed to listen to? That very same line tells us that God, who has more than one name, Adonai i.e. Y_H_V_H and Elohim, are one. We, too, are one, we are also connected as individual expressions of the divine –but only when we are able to listen, not when we artificially separate ourselves into warring

factions, identified with some group or team. If we cannot listen, but insist on our unquestioned righteousness, there can be no understanding, no unity or peace and according to the above Torah text, there can be no justice!

I was really trying to listen with compassion to family members in Israel who had very different opinions than mine. I really wanted to try to understand them better. What I understood was their pain and frustration at their beloved Israel becoming so divided. I understood their fears, their pain, their anger and frustration over those who, they felt, did not respect Jewish tradition; I understood their deep love of Jewish tradition and their vision for the kind of government that would protect the country's Jewish heritage, that holy treasure. It is important for many of us to understand this because while we may not agree with issues like the Hametz law, that forbids people to bring Hametz into public hospitals, it touches upon a deep concern of some about the protection of the Jewish soul of Israel. I understood that the biggest divide between many of us is our capacity, or lack of, to think more broadly and openly about what Judaism might mean to different people, and how to understand and respect each other's Jewish identity. We all really just want to feel like we belong to something. We have so much to learn from each other and when we don't close ourselves to hearing other perspectives, other ways of thinking about what it means to be Jewish or to be a patriotic Zionist— We can build bridges rather than walls.

This is why the Masorti Movement's focus on Jewish pluralism is so essential to the unity we seek. Our pluralistic approach helps to bridge the divide in our people which can only be united in our diversity. We strive to transcend these divisions and offer an ideological, but also a practical approach of pluralism, that is, unity strengthened (and not threatened) by our diversity—and an openness to others.

The most important thing for us now is to remain committed to loving our brethren and listening to them, even when we don't agree and even when it is painful. We must be curious and we must **LISTEN**, Shema! While we may need to protest, we must do so peacefully and we must never see ourselves as the enemies of the "other side" - for they are our brothers and sisters. We hear the call of the Torah loud and clear: We will not become haters, we will not become those who harbour grudges, resentments or vengeance in our hearts. For the Torah tells us that it is exactly those things that stand in the way of true justice.

Justice Justice shall you pursue צדק צדק תרדוף ,

Remember, underneath all of this footballification of politics, we all just want to find somewhere where we belong, where we feel we know who we are within the broader context or vision of being a Jew.

I would like to share an experience I recently had on 9 B'AV in Jerusalem. This story really exemplifies today's message, which is a call for unity, a call for the end to the footballification of politics through a love of our fellow Jews and human beings, a willingness and desire to listen compassionately to try to understand others and celebrate rather than fear our differences . The service was held at the Masorti (Conservative) Kotel, at the moment the only part of the Kotel where egalitarian prayer is allowed. This area has now been called Kotel *Hamishpachot*, the Kotel, the Western wall for families, families that sit together, are not divided by gender, and rather span the spectrum of Jewish life and belief, young and old, together.

Neshama Carlebach sang *kinot*, sad religious poetry and one of my former rabbinic interns, Rabbi Nava Bernstein, led us in prayer, meditation and song. We sat on the ground, with candles burning, maybe 3-400 of us, lamenting not so much the Temple that was destroyed thousands of years ago, but the brokenness of the soul of a divided nation. There were a few Charedi people who showed up there at the end of the service. One Charedi man surprised me and came up to me to talk at the conclusion of the service. He shared that he feels like an outsider in his world, and felt that, perhaps, we had something to offer him. Of course, there are many who by necessity, need to hide their true selves in the Charedi / ultra-Orthodox world and he confided that he had to hide his true identity but did not elaborate. The Kotel Hamishpachot is a place for everyone, I told him; we all need a place where we are loved and accepted for who we are; a place where we belong. Before I walked off, I shared a d'var Torah, a word of Torah.....as I recited by heart the words of the prophet Isaiah:

וְהֵבִיאֹתִים אֶל הַר קְדוֹשִׁי וְשִׂמְחֹתִים בְּבֵית תְּפִלָּתִי ... כִּי בֵּיתִי בֵּית תְּפִלָּה יִקְרָא לְכָל הָעַמִּים.

I will bring you to my Holy Mountain, and you will all rejoice in my house of prayer, for my House will be called a house of prayer for all humanity.

Now this is a vision for Israel that includes us all! – may this prophetic vision too, come to pass—Can Yhi Ratzon—Shana Tova END