

The Sin of Silence  
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50 years ago tomorrow, according to the Jewish calendar, Israel was caught off guard and on the verge of possible annihilation. In the closing hours of Yom Kippur 1973, Israel was attacked from the north by Syria and from the west by Egypt. And on that fateful Yom Kippur day, Jews around the world prayed for the safety of our fellow Jews in the land of Israel, fearful that Israel was on the verge of annihilation.

It was less than 30 years after the Holocaust, and only 25 years since the founding of the modern state, and during those intervening years Jews from Arab lands had fled persecution and sought safety in Israel. So that by 1973, the world's population of Jews had shifted so radically, that about 1/3 lived in the United States, 1/3 in Israel, and 1/3 scattered across the rest of the globe. Which meant that for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we risked losing a third of the Jewish people.

I am too young to have memories of the Yom Kippur War, and I have been blessed to grow up at a time where Israel seemed not only invincible, but truly a safe haven for the Jewish people. I have witnessed the miracle of Soviet Jewry being freed, and Jews from Ethiopia being flown to safety to our homeland. I've seen Israel be the country that provides assistance to other countries when natural disasters occur and become the safe-haven for Vietnamese fleeing persecution in the 1970s, as well as the Muslim refugees from Kosovo in 1999.

Because I grew up with the stories of my own family smuggling Jews out of Iraq and through Iran to find a home in Israel, I always believed that if something ever happened to me, because I was a Jew, it would be Israel that came to my rescue. I believed with all of my being that the Israeli government cared for the safety of each and every Jew, throughout the world.

While I was raised to be a proud American, and to know that this country is my home, I was also raised to understand that Israel is my homeland, a place where I also have obligations to protect and support its safety and wellbeing.

The Declaration of the State of Israel makes it clear that Israel was not created solely for those who live there, but for all of the Jewish people. And history shows that Israel was not created, or sustained, only by those who live there. Since the Israeli War of Independence in 1948, Jews from throughout the Diaspora have continued to volunteer both as combatants and non-combatants during wartime and peacetime.

And not to be dismissed, world Jewry has been raising money since the 1800s not only to rebuild the land of Israel, but also to strengthen the modern state by the building of hospitals, schools, neighborhoods, cultural centers and more.

In fact, our temple archives show that B'nai Israel was donating to the Jews in the land of Israel as early as the 1850s, contributing to the building of Mishkenot Shananim, the first neighborhood outside the walled city of Jerusalem.

And we should never dismiss the important impact that American Jews have had on Israel's well-being through our involvement in American politics. The American Jewish community has lobbied every US government since President Truman, asking the United States to support Israel through foreign aid, through trade agreements, in the United Nations, and as a broker for peace. And since its inception, American Jews have continued to be crucial and influential advocates on behalf of Israel.

For most of my life protecting Israel meant protecting it from external dangers. But in recent years it has become clearer and clearer that some of the most serious and urgent threats to Israel's future is coming from within.

As an American Jew of a certain age, I have been taught to be hesitant to engage in any public criticism of Israel. For most of Israel's history American Jews have been told that we have no right to criticize Israel, because we don't live there. And because we and our children are not in the military, we're told we should just keep quiet and simply support whatever government is elected.

Jews who speak out against Israeli government policies are often labeled as self-hating or anti-Israel. And rabbis have been fearful of losing their jobs if they speak out. Even here in Sacramento, about a decade ago, two pillars of our community, a past President of our Congregation and a past President of the Federation were vilified by some in the larger community because they sponsored a speaker who had been critical of Israel's actions in the West Bank and Gaza.

And about 2 or 3 years ago, our mayor was called self-hating by some in the larger Jewish community when he expressed compassion for Palestinians.

Even now, I feel nervous about speaking publicly about Israel's current government.

However, once again, many in the Jewish world, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, are deeply fearful of the Israel we love disappearing.

Starting this last September 12, the entire Israeli Supreme Court was impaneled to hear petitions that challenge a law passed by the Netanyahu government that would change one of the country's Basic Laws. Since Israel doesn't have a Constitution, the Basic Laws operate in a similar manner. This is the first time that an Israeli government has tried to nullify a Basic Law.

The law in question is one that is fundamental to protecting Israel's democracy. It is called "The Unreasonableness Doctrine." According to the Israel Religious Action Center this Basic Law enables the Supreme Court, and lower courts, to prevent cases of corruption, conflict of interest and bias. For a government that is riddled with corruption charges, from the Prime Minister down, it is not a surprise that they are trying to abolish this law.

The ruling government defends their position by saying that if the people don't like it, they can change things through elections. However, as Israeli Justice Groskopf says, this claim is problematic because with the proposed changes in the law, the Knesset can also change election laws, and without judicial review, so that it couldn't be challenged. Meaning that they could even suspend elections if they felt like it, and there would be no governmental oversight to stop it.

Just as with America's Supreme Court, the Attorney General is usually the one to represent the Government's side. However, Israel's Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara not only came out on the side of those opposing the change to the law, but she also said "[F]or the first time in the history of the State of Israel, the authority of the Supreme Court to judge and grant relief to individuals and the public, based on its independent judicial judgment, has been stripped away."<sup>1</sup>

What is being presented to the Supreme Court right now is just the first of many so called "reforms" by what is the most radical and racist government Israel has ever had. But these are not "reforms." They are not looking to improve, or correct or repair existing laws. They are seeking to overhaul the Israeli government, and by extension, the country, in such a way that it will become unrecognizable to us.

The current case before the Supreme Court is just the first of many cases to come. The other proposed laws were tabled for now because they were too extreme.

This government is seeking to institute wide ranging Shabbat Laws, create private militias and, coming up when the Knesset resumes, change the law of return to eliminate the grandparent clause, as well as eliminating nonOrthodox conversions.

With these proposed changes, and others to come, Israel will no longer be the Jewish homeland, it will be a militarized ultra-Orthodox theocracy.

This is a government that sees half of its population as the enemy. In an interview last Tuesday, the Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu from the far-right Otzma Yehudit party disparaged the peaceful anti-overhaul protesters, calling them "evil" and "wild anarchists."<sup>2</sup>

Likud minister May Golan accused the Israeli citizens who are protesting guilty of "propaganda terrorism" and saying that "not only have they joined forces with enemies of Israel — they themselves are enemies of Israel."<sup>3</sup>

Members of this coalition include proudly racist and homophobic terrorists like Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben Gevir and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich who encourage

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<sup>1</sup> [https://forward.com/fast-forward/560579/everything-you-need-to-know-about-todays-supreme-court-vs-netanyahu-government-drama-and-whats-at-stake-for-israel/?utm\\_source=lterable&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=ForwardingtheNews\\_7669964](https://forward.com/fast-forward/560579/everything-you-need-to-know-about-todays-supreme-court-vs-netanyahu-government-drama-and-whats-at-stake-for-israel/?utm_source=lterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ForwardingtheNews_7669964)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.timesofisrael.com/deputy-knesset-speaker-anti-overhaul-protesters-in-us-are-worse-than-iran-plo/?utm\\_campaign=daily-edition-2023-09-19&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=The+Daily+Edition](https://www.timesofisrael.com/deputy-knesset-speaker-anti-overhaul-protesters-in-us-are-worse-than-iran-plo/?utm_campaign=daily-edition-2023-09-19&utm_medium=email&utm_source=The+Daily+Edition)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.timesofisrael.com/deputy-knesset-speaker-anti-overhaul-protesters-in-us-are-worse-than-iran-plo/?utm\\_campaign=daily-edition-2023-09-19&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=The+Daily+Edition](https://www.timesofisrael.com/deputy-knesset-speaker-anti-overhaul-protesters-in-us-are-worse-than-iran-plo/?utm_campaign=daily-edition-2023-09-19&utm_medium=email&utm_source=The+Daily+Edition)

settler violence, who rant against Reform Judaism, and who display anti-Arab hatred without hesitation.

And in the backdrop of all of this is that we are now in the 56<sup>th</sup> year of the Occupation of the West Bank, with no possibility of peace with the Palestinians in sight.

When asked by a fellow rabbi what we should say to our congregations about the judicial crisis in Israel, Rabbi Haim Shalom, a Reform rabbi in Jerusalem said:

“I want you to make clear that democracy is not just the tiny thin majority enforcing its will on the minority and that is true wherever we are. There are universal moral truths which we cannot turn our backs on.

We turn to each other as fellow members of the people of Israel to remind each other of the oneness of creation - we are all in this together. Whenever one part of the human family falls, it affects us all.

And so yes - we all have a piece in this tragic outcome [he says] but not equally. The people who will suffer most are those who are already weakest. Palestinians, LGBTQ Israelis, women, the poor, the disadvantaged. These are the people who have lost their protection.”

Israel is in the 9<sup>th</sup> straight month of weekly protests that have been in response to the proposed judicial overhaul and government reforms. This type of ongoing mass protest is unprecedented in Israel, and perhaps in the world.

But what can we do from here? I know that for many their urge is to basically say “feh! They don’t care about American Jews, and especially Reform Jews, why should we care about them?” But we can’t do that. And we shouldn’t do that.

We are all part of the same Jewish family. We, as much as they, are all B’nai Yisrael, all of the children of Israel. And we cannot turn our back on family. Even the ones we’d rather not sit down with for a holiday dinner.

Like many of you, I have been wrestling with anger, frustration and profound disappointment because of the actions that the current Israeli government has been engaging in. It would be so much easier to turn away from the corruption and hatefulness that is coming out of that government, than to feel heartbroken and helpless. It is a government that has hardened its heart against so many of the people who live in the land of Israel, as well as the Jews of the Diaspora.

But the Jewish imperative “Kol Yisrael aravim zeh b’zeh” doesn’t mean only Israelis are responsible for each other. It doesn’t mean Jews are responsible for only the other Jews who they like. It means, all of the Jewish people are responsible, one for the other.

Like many American Jews, I feel so helpless and frustrated, feeling like there is little that I can do to stop Israel’s self-destructive trajectory. But on the other hand, I am also in awe of the

hundreds of thousands of Israelis who have been coming out, week after week, month after month, desperately trying to save their democracy, through the courts and in the Keneset, as well as by protesting on the streets. And I want to support them any way that I can.

These Israelis are speaking out for women's rights, Palestinian lives, for the LGBTQ+ community, for religious pluralism, and most of all, for democracy, a real democracy where everyone's rights, everyone's lives, are valued.

For too long American Jewry has been mostly silent on Israel's struggles. However, for many of us, the imperative of "Kol Yisrael aravim zeh b'zeh – All Jews are responsible for one another" means that right now, we must speak out and act while there is still time to do something.

If we let democracy die in Israel, then we have forsaken the generations that established and fought for the modern state. And we will have squandered our children's and grandchildren's inheritance.

Israel was not established just for the Jews who live there, but for all Jews, and for all the people who live there, Jewish or not. And if you don't believe me, take a look at their Declaration of Independence, where it is written:

THE STATE OF ISRAEL ...will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions...

Now is when we must stand by those in Israel who truly seek to protect an Israel that reflects the values outlined in their Declaration of Independence.

If American Jewry were to stay silent in response to the outrageous acts of the current Israeli government, then we become complicit with their actions. And like many rabbis, of all denominations, I can no longer be silent. I cannot turn my back. I cannot harden my heart. There is too much at risk.

Just as the creation of the State of Israel necessitated world Jewry to come together to create our shared dream, Israel's future requires us to come together now to protect it.

We must do more than pray for Israel. We must contact the Israeli Consulate in San Francisco and let them know how upset and angry we are at the ongoing attacks on democracy, on minorities, on religious freedom and the erosion of women's rights.

We must demand that the settlers in the West Bank who engage in what are essentially pogroms be held accountable for their violence.

We must caution them of the lasting damage that will be done between Israel and the Diaspora by putting ultra-Orthodox Judaism above all others.

And we must reach out to our own members of Congress, our Senators, and the White House, and do so as people who love Israel, and let them know that we support a truly democratic Israel and ask that the United States continue to warn the Israeli government of the damage it is doing to its own people, and to the US-Israel relationship, and with their standing in the world.

We can also help by continuing to build up and support Reform communities in Israel, like Cong. Kodesh v'Chol, helping them fight for the values that we hold dear. As well as support the IMPJ – the Reform Movement in Israel, and IRAC – the Israel Religious Action Center which fights for pluralism and equality through the court system.

In addition, we should be reading Israeli papers, and staying up to date with what is happening there. And we should join the Israeli and American Jews in the United States who are protesting in the unXeatable rallies throughout the US.

That is “UnXeatable” spelled: UnXeatable. It is a grassroots movement launched by Israel expats in support of a democratic Israel. They are calling on world Jewry to come together and preserve the democratic identity of Israel as the home of all Jewish people.

On Yom Kippur, the Jewish people stand together to atone for our communal sins, both the sins that we have committed knowingly and unknowingly, sins that we have actively engaged in, and the sin of standing idly by, the sins that we have personally committed, and the sins committed by our community.

But what we cannot do, what we cannot afford to do, is commit the sin of indifference, of turning and walking away from Israel, thinking that what is happening there doesn't matter to us, doesn't affect us too.

We may live in many different places, speak different languages, pray – or not pray – in different ways. But we are all B'nai Yisrael, we are all the children of Israel, with a shared history and an intertwined destiny.

And the sin of indifference towards the State of Israel would be a sin that we commit against ourselves as well.