

Sermon | Kol Nidrei
יום כיפור תשפ"ב | September 15, 2021
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I have a vivid memory from one of my first days in rabbinical school. I was sitting in the *beit midrash* with some classmates, surrounded by bookshelves filled with the greatest works of Jewish law and literature. The High Holidays were approaching, so one of my classmates suggested that we study Rambam's *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, the Laws of Repentance. One of the early selections in his *Mishneh Torah*, the Rambam's Laws of Repentance represent the first codified approach to the laws of *teshuvah*. Prior to this, the customs and laws around offering our apologies and seeking forgiveness were scattered throughout rabbinic literature. But as he did in other areas of Jewish law, the Rambam brilliantly collected the various components and arranged them systematically to create a sort of guidebook for one who seeks atonement.

In the second chapter of the Laws of *Teshuva* (2:9), the Rambam makes an important point that we often overlook: The rituals of Yom Kippur only atone for wrongdoings that a person commits against God, such as eating forbidden foods or neglecting the Sabbath. But for wrongdoings that we commit against one another, such as cheating in business or spreading rumors, those wrongdoings can only be forgiven if we make restitution with the person whom we have wronged and receive forgiveness directly from them. Making restitution is not enough—the person we have wronged must grant us forgiveness, and that requires us to admit our wrongdoing, apologize, and ask for their forgiveness. Not an easy task. It is both our actions, and the sincerity that animates them, that count when we seek forgiveness.

A few weeks ago, Israel's Minister for Diaspora Affairs, Nachman Shai, published an opinion piece reaching out to the Jewish communal leaders of the diaspora. He has asked us to do the following: "Share with your congregants that we in Israel are slowly but surely taking

responsibility for our side of the relationship in a way that you have never seen, that we realize we have disappointed you and are doing *teshuvah*, repentance, with a sincere desire to make things right in the future.”¹ When an Israeli government minister writes this, just a week before the onset of the Yamim Noraim, how can I possibly ignore their words? So tonight, as we approach the end of these *Aseret Yamei Teshuvah*, these Ten Days of Repentance, let us consider how we might respond to Minister Shai’s overtures.

Minister Shai knows that American Jewry has ongoing concerns about issues of religious pluralism in Israel, and especially about the Ultra-Orthodox hegemony that reaches beyond the four walls of the synagogue and into the private lives of Israeli citizens seeking marriage, divorce, and other lifecycle events. He knows that American Jewry was dismayed when the Kotel Compromise was tabled by the previous prime minister and his coalition, pausing the construction and full integration of an egalitarian prayer section at the Western Wall.

I want to emphasize his language: “we have disappointed you.” We are disappointed when someone fails to reach our expectations. We are disappointed when someone lets us down. We are disappointed when we love someone, care about them, and want to be in relationship with them, but find it difficult to do so. In other words, we can only be disappointed by someone with whom we are in relationship. And when disappointment strikes, all we want to do is repair the relationship and reconcile.

There was a time this year when these squabbles about the Kotel and Jewish pluralism were momentarily set aside. This past May, more than 4,000 rockets were fired indiscriminately from Gaza towards civilians in Israel. It was an incredibly tense and challenging time for our brothers and sisters in Israel. The violence spilled over into the streets of Israeli cities with

mixed Jewish and Arab populations, and even to the streets of the United States where Jews were randomly attacked in overt acts of antisemitism. In a sermon that I gave at that time, I declared that just as I will never apologize to anyone for being a proud Jew, so too I will never apologize to anyone for being a proud Zionist. Zionism is inherently and inextricably part of Judaism and Jewish life. I am a proud member of AIPAC's Washington Club, and I have missed not being able to gather with you and thousands of others at Policy Conference. I am a proud member of the Israel Bonds Rabbinic Advisory Council, on which I have served for the past two years. I cannot disentangle my Zionism from my Judaism, and nobody should be asked to do so.

At the same time, it is also important to acknowledge that thoughtful criticism of the State of Israel is not inherently anti-Zionist. On the contrary, constructive criticism is precisely what Minister Shai invites us to offer as American Jews in order to mend the relationship between the Jews of Israel and the Jews of America. And there is no denying that this is a relationship in need of repair. But criticism must come from a place of love; it must assume that affirming the relationship between the parties is the ultimate goal. And that is why anti-Zionism *is* antisemitism. Anti-Zionism is an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the relationship between the Jewish people and their ancestral homeland. Real connections cannot be built if the parties do not acknowledge one another's legitimacy.

This is where the opportunity for *teshuvah* comes in. As the Rambam teaches, the relationship cannot be healed by simply making restitution. It is not enough to just move forward with the Kotel Compromise, or to just move forward a few pieces of legislation that will bring about greater religious pluralism. Those actions must be coupled with a sincere desire to improve the relationship and to regain trust. And Minister Shai, on behalf of Israel's governing

coalition, has committed to doing just that in the year ahead. He writes that Israel, “is committed to learning and understanding how our actions impact your communities. Tell [your communities] that we believe in you, and that we are ready for both your critique and your ideas.” That is a fair ask. If we are going to offer our criticisms, then we must come prepared to offer some counterbalancing ideas. In a loving relationship, we are willing to name the problems, and we are also prepared to offer help with potential solutions.

What, then, is our response to this invitation to work on our relationship with the State of Israel? I found inspiration to answer this question from a colleague, Rabbi Ashira Konigsburg, who writes, “This is the purpose of *teshuvah*—actively assessing who we want to be. This, of course, includes our support for Israel as American Jews. Simply asserting this support is not sufficient. We owe it to ourselves to re-engage with the core beliefs that underlie our support and to reconsider how we demonstrate them.”² Rabbi Konigsburg is building upon the themes presented by the Rambam in his Laws of Repentance. Saying the words “I support Israel,” is necessary but insufficient. There must be more to the relationship than an occasional post on social media. We must ask ourselves what steps we can take to help Israel thrive, to demonstrate how those core beliefs animate our actions, and how those actions bring about real change in the world. If the State of Israel is willing to open up the possibility for change in our relationship, in this push and pull between Diaspora and Homeland, then we too are duty-bound to do the same. We must also step forward, acknowledge that we desire reengagement, and then find a way to demonstrate that tangibly in the world.

This is one of the other guiding principles in the Laws of *Teshuvah*: a person should not be cruel by refusing to be appeased by their fellow’s apology (2:10). When someone

approaches us to offer their apology, we should grant them forgiveness (בְּלֵב שְׁלֵם וּבְנֶפֶשׁ חֲפֻצָּה) “with a full heart and a willing spirit.” *Lev Shalem* also happens to be the title of our *mahzor*, a reminder that on these days we stand before God, and before one another, with a full heart, prepared to forgive. If you feel that Israel owes it to you, accept the apology of Minister Shai, step forward to grant forgiveness, and begin the process of rebuilding this relationship.

When the situation permits, we should aim to travel to Israel, to be in the land of our ancestors and the land of our brothers and sisters. We should advocate for Israel by building relationships with government officials who can help to maintain strong support of the Jewish State. We can lend our support and gratitude to those who made possible the historic Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act, which invests in people-to-people peace-building programs between Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans. We can invest our own funds in Israel Bonds, and participate in *binyan Eretz Yisrael*, the building up of the State of Israel. Tonight, you have the opportunity to do just that by utilizing the cards placed upon your seats.

When Israel reaches out to us, we must respond by reaching out to Israel, by demonstrating our commitments to our ancestral homeland and to all who have chosen to make it their home. In so doing, we respond to the invitation to reengage through *teshuvah*, for us to come together, fix the fractures, and find new ways to help this relationship flourish.

On this night of Yom Kippur, may we rekindle our relationship with our homeland, may we reengage with the State of Israel, the Land of Israel, and most importantly, the People of Israel. And in so doing, may we demonstrate our strength and resilience when we stand together, united as one people. *Am Yisrael Chai. G'mar hatimah tovah.* May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life.

¹ Nachman Shai, "Diaspora Minister: Has Israel let you down? Talk about it," in *The Jerusalem Post*, September 2, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/diaspora-minister-has-israel-let-you-down-talk-about-it-678426>.

² Rabbi Ashira Konigsburg, "Heshbon Hanefesh: Re-Engaging with our Zionism," in AIPAC's High Holiday Reader 2021, p. 46.