

**Sermon | Parshat Tzav**  
April 1, 2023 | "ניסן תשפ"ג  
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For weeks now we have been reciting the Prayer for the State of Israel with a little more *kavanah*, a little more intention. We saw hundreds of thousands of Israelis take to the streets to peacefully protest the coalition's proposed judicial reforms, which would have dramatically shifted the balance of power directly to the governing coalition, removing the checks and balances of Israel's independent judiciary. There are many who believe that a realignment of Israel's governing branches is in order, but not necessarily according to the originally proposed legislation. Without getting caught up in the details, suffice it to say that Prime Minister Netanyahu finally got the message earlier this week, and paused the legislation to create space for dialogue and compromise among the parties in Israel's Knesset. It was a victory for all of Israel, a victory for democracy, and a moment for us all to be proud of the Jewish State where citizens can freely make their voices heard when they protest their government's actions precisely because they love their country and care deeply about its future.

The initial reaction to Prime Minister Netanyahu's announcement was overwhelmingly positive. Everyone seemed to be saying, "This is great." There is reason to have hope for the only democracy in the Middle East. Bret Stephens of the *New York Times* wrote that Netanyahu "brought Israel to the brink of disaster," but then "blinked," and for that we should all have hope that Israel's democracy will hold.<sup>1</sup> Daniel Gordis, Senior Vice President of Shalem College in Jerusalem, wrote "You have just witnessed one of the most extraordinary weeks in Israeli

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<sup>1</sup> Bret Stephens, "In Israel, Democracy Still Holds," *New York Times*, March 28, 2023.

history.”<sup>2</sup> And Yair Rosenberg of *The Atlantic* wrote that Bibi’s “flinch...was a victory for the protesters.”<sup>3</sup> But coupled with all of their hope for the future, was also a healthy dose of skepticism. Stephens warned Israelis to “be wary” of everything Bibi says and does. Gordis said, “Let’s pray it holds.” And Rosenberg said, “The struggle for Israeli democracy is just beginning.” In other words, “This is great, but now what?”

Parshat Tzav has, unsurprisingly, a similar message for us. Within it we read about the ordination of Aaron and his sons as *kohanim*, priests who would serve in the Tabernacle as intermediaries between the people and God. The moment was a sign of incredible potential for the future, a hope that this wandering people would become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” In ordaining Aaron and his sons as their leaders, the people demonstrated their faith in the future, trusting Aaron and his family to carry out their rites and rituals. But the moment was not without anxiety and skepticism. Aaron participated in the making of the Golden Calf; he carried that weight around with him. He was skeptical of whether God had made the right choice. Should it really be me, Aaron, who serves as *Kohen Gadol*, High Priest?

In an effort to assuage Aaron’s concerns, the Torah begins the narrative of their ordination like this: “קַח אֶת־אֶהֱרֹן, Take Aaron along with his sons...and assemble the community leadership at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.”<sup>4</sup> According to Rashi, the Torah says, *kach*, take Aaron, to teach us that Moses had to convince Aaron to take the job. God knew that Aaron would be skeptical. Moses needed to win him over, convince him that he was in fact the right person for the job. From this we learn that even in great moments of celebration, it is entirely

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Gordis, “What you just witnessed was one of the greatest weeks in Israel’s history,” March 27, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Yair Rosenberg, “Netanyahu Flinched,” *The Atlantic*, March 27, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 8:2-3.

reasonable, perhaps even responsible, to bring a healthy dose of skepticism about what the future holds. We can be joyous and hopeful, and we must also be vigilant and cautious. Taken together, we set ourselves up for success, rather than risk being naïve and disappointed.

Today is Shababt HaGadol, the Great Shabbat which immediately precedes the onset of Passover. There is a custom of delivering a particularly long sermon focused on the laws of Passover, but don't worry—this is neither. But the themes of Passover are relevant. I imagine that as the Israelites crossed the Reed Sea and recognized that they were truly free from Pharaoh's clutch they must have had a similar realization: This is great, but now what? Our miraculous redemption was a moment to celebrate, to have hope for a future as a free people, but it must have also be incredibly overwhelming. What would the future hold? How would they coalesce as a nation, left to govern themselves and traverse the wilderness to the Land of Israel? They, too, must have been hopeful *and* skeptical about the future.

And today, the 10<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, is also Yom HaAliyah, Aliyah Day. This day honors and celebrates those who choose to make their home in the modern State of Israel. It is celebrated on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Nisan because, according to the Book of Joshua, it was on that day that the Israelites entered the Land of Israel,

The people came up from the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month...And Joshua set up in Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken from the Jordan. He charged the Israelites as follows: "In time to come, when your children ask their fathers, 'What is the meaning of those stones?' tell your children: 'Here the Israelites crossed the Jordan on dry land' (Joshua 4:19-22).

Arriving in Israel must have been another one of these moments, “This is great, but now what?!” Imagine the joy at finally arriving at their destination. But now the real work was about to begin. The future was bright, but also filled with questions and uncertainty. The same is probably true of those who make this journey today. What stands out to me about that moment in the Book of Joshua is that he uses it as a moment not only to celebrate the past, but to lay a foundation for the future. The stones that he sets up are a reminder of their ancestors’ journey and God’s miracles. We are grateful for the efforts of those who came before us, and we honor their legacy best when we harness it as our inspiration for the future, a future for which we have hope, *tikvah*, as well as cautious skepticism.

On April 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, the Shabbat immediately after the last day of Passover, we welcome Rabbi Mikie Goldstein to B’nai Israel for Masorti Shabbat. On Masorti Shabbat, we demonstrate our commitment to supporting our movement’s congregations and initiatives in Israel. Rav Mikie recently became the director of Masorti’s development department, and previously served as the rabbi of a Masorti congregation in Rehovot. I hope that you will join us for Shabbat dinner and a learning session that evening, and again on Shabbat morning for more. We will learn more about the impactful work of Masorti, and how they are working for greater religious pluralism in Israel. (And if you join us for Shabbat dinner, you won’t have to cook after just putting away all of your Passover dishes—it’s a win for everyone, so register by Monday at noon to take advantage of early bird pricing!) And in June, Rebecca and I are leading a congregational mission to Israel. There are still seats available on the bus, and I hope that you will join us. The trip is mostly empty-nesters, but all are welcome!

I share all of this because this is how we at B'nai Israel demonstrate our commitment to the State of Israel and the people of Israel. When we say, "This is great," we believe it and we mean it. And we should still ask the honest question: Now what? There is a lot of work yet to be done to make Israel a vibrant homeland for all of world Jewry. There is a lot of work to be done to secure Israel's democracy. Like the proud, Zionist Israelis who have marched and protested for weeks, I too believe that the best way to support Israel is to be engaged with Israel. Israel is the beginning of the flowering of our redemption, *reishit tzmichat ge'ulateinu*, we are God's agents in the world, and we have been entrusted with this sacred task of being both skeptical and hopeful for our future. Shabbat shalom.