

Sermon | Kol Nidre 5783
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I Was Wrong About WeWork

Back in July, eight *New York Times* Opinion columnists penned articles with the same premise, “I was wrong.” Bret Stephens was wrong about Trump voters. David Brooks was wrong about capitalism. Gail Collins was wrong about Mitt Romney. Admitting our wrongs is precisely what these Days of Awe are all about. We beat our chests during the *AI Chet* and *Ashamanu*, proclaiming our collective wrongdoings. So, in the spirit of Yom Kippur, tonight I offer you my own version of “I was wrong.”

I was wrong about WeWork. Four years ago on Kol Nidre night, I celebrated WeWork and the company’s Israeli cofounder, Adam Neumann. WeWork, for those who may not know, rents shared office space to individuals and other companies in chic, modern offices with free-flowing coffee by day and beer by night (at least once upon a time). In 2018 I lauded Adam Neumann and his company’s success, which at the time amounted to “more than 280 locations in 23 countries, managing ten million square feet of office space.” Once upon a time, WeWork’s success was so rare and seemingly magical that venture capital investors included it on their list of *unicorns*—privately held startups with valuations of over \$1 billion—putting it in the same league as Uber and Zoom. At its peak, WeWork was valued at \$47 billion, but as of this May it was traded at a valuation of merely \$5 billion, with nearly \$3 billion in losses last year alone.

The story of WeWork’s rise to fame and subsequent fall from grace has been covered in multiple places. There was a podcast called *WeCrashed*, which turned into an Apple TV+ series starring Jared Leto and Anne Hathaway. There are multiple books, including one that I read this

summer, *Billion Dollar Loser*, by Reeves Wiedeman. When I spoke about WeWork in 2018, I noted that their cofounder, Adam Neumann, often drew upon his Israeli identity as a source of inspiration for WeWork. He said that his company was “Kibbutz 2.0,” a Capitalist Kibbutz. He was motivated by the ethos of the kibbutz movement. Israeli kibbutzim were, at least in their origins, values-driven and community oriented. This is precisely what Adam Neumann tried to achieve with WeWork. Adam was not able to successfully realize that vision. So I admit that I was wrong about WeWork, but I maintain that I was right about Israel. Four years ago I also said, “It is my hope and prayer that the ethos of the kibbutz movement...will permeate the global Jewish community’s culture as well. I hope that all Jews...will recognize the incredible potential of a community that works together.”

This past May I had the opportunity to visit Israel on a rabbinic mission with our Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. There I witnessed the incredible strength of communities that work together, that collaborate and cooperate because they desire to achieve something together. If I had to articulate a theme for the trip, I would say that it was about shaping Israeli civil society, and the great challenges and the incredible potential thereof. For just a moment, we can set aside politicians and their parties, the never-ending cycle of elections and stories of coalition-building in the Knesset, and talk instead about the people, their communities, the groups which seek to work together to build a stronger Israeli civil society—not only for Jews, but for all those who live within Israel’s borders.

We met with our very own Avi Meyerstein to learn about his organization, ALLMEP, the Alliance for Middle East Peace. We met with residents of Ramle and Lod, two of Israel’s “mixed cities,” where a significant percentage, albeit still a minority, of the cities’ populations are Arab

Israelis. In Lod we met with Anton Goodman, Director of International Development at The Abraham Fund Initiatives, which aims to create widespread positive social change in the field of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel. Their mission is not an easy one, but the goal of one community working together holds great promise for the future of a shared Israeli society. I delivered a sermon earlier this year about the remarkable cooperation amongst the citizens of Ramle, bringing together the diverse voices of its residents—Muslim, Jewish and more at the Ramle Mediation Center—to learn about one another, understand each other’s needs, and build coalitions of cooperation to create a city that can be a home to all of its residents.

We also learned about the thousands of Jews of Ethiopia who have made aliyah to Israel, and those who are still waiting and hoping to return home. We met with Penina Agenyahu, a familiar face for many in the B’nai Israel community. She served as the community senior *shlichah* years ago, and now works for the Jewish Agency, trying to bring more of Ethiopia’s 6,000 Jews to Israel. She told our delegation her story: She arrived in Israel at the age of 3, after trekking through the desert from Ethiopia to Sudan with her mother. They stayed in a refugee camp for eight months before they were brought to Israel.

After speaking with Penina, we visited the Memorial for Ethiopian Jews who perished on the way to the Land of Zion – Jerusalem. Beginning more than forty years ago, the Jewish community of Ethiopia set out on foot towards Sudan, where thousands would wait in refugee camps until the covert Operation Moses brought 8,000 people to Israel in November 1984. But nearly 4,000 are said to have died along the journey and awaiting rescue. Finally, in 2007 their story was made part of the Israeli national narrative with a permanent memorial built atop the State’s most sacred site: Mount Herzl, the cemetery for members of the armed forces, and

those who have died in terrorist attacks and in defense of the State of Israel. Building the memorial there is a powerful statement about the thousands of Ethiopian Jews who lost their lives in search of a better future for them and their families.

At the entrance to the memorial, a large wall of Jerusalem stone tells their story in English, Hebrew, and Amharic. It begins with the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE and subsequent exile. It notes the community's decision to depart from Ethiopia in 1979 and journey towards Israel. The memorial recounts, "Hundreds of members of the community perished and were buried along the way and many others are missing to this day...The people of Israel remember the heroes of the journey, the many and the good, who gave their lives in the yearning for Jerusalem and the love of Zion." This Jewish community, this significant minority population in Israel, finally has their story included in the Israeli national narrative where it rightfully belongs. I said it years ago, and I maintain it today: We are all stronger when we work together, when we amplify each other's stories, and when we work together towards creating a better community and society wherein all can thrive. It is true that the story of Israel's absorption of the Ethiopian Jews is a complicated one, and reveals some challenges that Israel has had to confront in recent years. The memorial is, however, an example of movement in the right direction. We do not face challenges by turning around and walking away. On the contrary, we reengage and try again. We walk towards it, not away from it, just as the Jews of Ethiopia walked towards the Land of Israel with hope and dreams, despite very real challenges.

During this mission to Israel, we saw how various subsets within Israeli civil society are earnestly working together to create a better future for themselves and for their children.

Globally, we must work together, too. The Jewish communities of Israel and the United States

must find more ways to collaborate, cooperate, and work together towards the creation of something greater than ourselves. Here at B'nai Israel, we believe deeply in making this a reality, and we demonstrate that in various ways.

This is our fifth consecutive year participating in the *shlichim* program in partnership with the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. Our new *shlicha*, Uriel Lin, arrived in August, and has already become deeply enmeshed in synagogue life. If you have not yet met Uriel, she is leading a breakout session tomorrow at 1:30 PM about her family's incredible story and their journey to Israel. I encourage you to attend, to get to know Uriel, and to make her story a part of yours.

And if you have not yet seen the banner, then you will hear it here first: In June, Rebecca and I will lead a congregational multi-generational trip to Israel. From June 18-29, we will travel in Israel to visit some of the most important sites, as well as less-frequented spots. It has been nearly 5 years since our last congregational trip, and we are thrilled to return to Israel in June. If you are interested in joining us for this trip, please see the banner in the Margolius Atrium, visit our website, or send me an email for more information.

Finally, we demonstrate our commitment to being in relationship with Israel through an investment in Israel Bonds. As is our tradition on Kol Nidre night at B'nai Israel, tonight we have the opportunity to concretize our commitment to Israel through the purchase of an Israel Bond. This is our opportunity to make a personal commitment to being part of Israel's story. It is an opportunity for us to demonstrate that we, too, yearn for Zion and Jerusalem. You may do this now by indicating your pledge on your Israel Bond pledge card. There are some newer options for investments, such as the eMazel Tov Bond with a lower minimum subscription, and the new

Shalom Bond, which you can purchase in the name of an organization of your choice and thereby fulfill two mitzvot at the same time—investing in Israel and giving *tzedakah*. B’nai Israel is typically the leader amongst synagogues in both the number of purchasers and the total bonds purchased because we are a community that is truly committed to Israel. If you have not yet purchased an Israel Bond, this is a great year to start as we will soon celebrate Israel’s 75th year. And if you purchase often, then I encourage you to continue this year.

May we affirm our commitment to working together, to building an Israel that embodies all of our stories, and to participating in this great *mitzvah* of *binyan Eretz Yisrael*, building and sustaining the Land of Israel, so that we may merit to be inscribed for a good year, a year of health, happiness, and success. *G’mar chatimah tovah!*