

**Kol Nidre Sermon 5784**  
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**Gaining Wisdom, Averting Destruction**

Later tonight we will chant the *piyyut Ki Hineh KaChomer*, which draws upon images of God as artisan and human beings as the raw materials. One way to read it is to understand that we, God's people, are fragile—easily crafted, and also broken at God's will. Alternatively, one could read it and conclude that we are the very building blocks of Creation itself—that God needs us to take certain forms at particular times to sustain the world, and that we need God to guide us and shape the path ahead. This latter reading is much more generous, and understands that there is a symbiotic relationship between human beings and God in the ongoing process of Creation. In a *midrash*, Rabbi Abbahu imagines that Creation truly began with God creating worlds and then destroying them (שָׁהָיָה בּוֹרֵא עוֹלָמוֹת וּמַחְרִיבָן), over and over again, creating and destroying, until this one was created. God said it was good, and the process ceased. How fortunate we are to be the inhabitants of this world instead of the previous ones that were destroyed! What happened to all of those created worlds that were then destroyed? What came of all that destruction? Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel, the Alter of Slabodka, said of them, "This is not really destruction at all, rather it is the way of wisdom." God learned from each previous creation, even if it ultimately failed, and thus a wealth of wisdom was generated from the process.<sup>1</sup> Without the wisdom born of those experiences, our world would not exist today.

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<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Rabbi Avi Strausberg, "Ha-Yom Harat Olam: We Are the Creators," in a Hadar High Holiday reader, quoting Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel, *Ohr Ha-Tzafun* Volume III, p. 71.

There are those who suggest that another destruction is approaching—the destruction of Israel’s democracy. Last fall, elections in Israel led to the formation of, arguably, Israel’s most right-wing and Orthodox coalition. These were fair, democratic elections, so I do not question the legitimacy of this coalition. What I take issue with, however, is that this coalition has threatened to impose judicial reforms that the majority of Israelis actually oppose. These reforms could transfer significant power away from Israel’s Supreme Court and into the hands of the ruling coalition, thus disrupting the balance of power in a moment when the coalition includes a rather problematic cast of characters.

For example, I spoke out last fall after the election when Betzael Smotrich was named as a future government official. Smotrich is, by his own admission, “a proud homophobe.” He wields real power in the government, and has done so with violence-yielding provocations. I spoke out when I was invited to a meeting with officials at the Embassy of Israel, along with presidents and representatives from major Jewish organizations and movements. I was there as President of the Washington Board of Rabbis, and I shared my concerns for the future of the relationship between American Jews and Israel, and how complex it is to be a rabbi in the community trying to build those relationships while it seems that the current Israeli government is doing whatever it can to unravel them. I spoke out when I sat beside the Ambassador to the United States, Michael Herzog, in a meeting that the Embassy of Israel hosted for members of the Washington Board of Rabbis. There, I borrowed the language of Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman and said that I am a “troubled committed Zionist.” I am committed to the Zionist project of building a Jewish state for the Jewish people in our ancestral homeland, and I am troubled when the values which appear to be espoused by the State of Israel do not align with the values

that I espouse. Israelis are also speaking out. The crisis today pits the independent Supreme Court against the Knesset's governing coalition, and the Israeli far-right against the Israeli center and left. Israelis are taking to the streets in protest, not protesting *against* Israel but *for* Israel. They want Israel to be the outstanding democracy that it has been for the past 75 years. They do not intend for its destruction.

Israel has experienced its fair share of creations and destructions. From 586 BCE until today, Israel has faced crises that bring it to the brink of destruction, and sometimes through destruction itself. This year is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, which for many Israelis did feel like they were close to being destroyed. Without the incredible statesmanship of Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir and the change in posture of our own United States government, it truly could have been the end of Israel's brief 20<sup>th</sup> century existence.

Israel was not destroyed. The crisis was averted. But going through such turmoil is not without consequences and long-term implications. In his book, *Who By Fire*, journalist and author Matti Friedman explores the Yom Kippur War through the experience of Leonard Cohen, who traveled to Israel in October 1973, somehow maneuvering around the country to play music for the IDF. Cohen traveled with an orange notebook, which Friedman had access to during his research. In that notebook was a draft of Cohen's hit, "Lover, Lover, Lover." That draft holds an incredible and unwritten story. There were eight lines under the title "Air Base" which were never published—a lost verse of the song. The lyrics go:

I went down to the desert to help my brothers fight

I knew that they weren't wrong I knew that they weren't right

but bones must stand up straight and walk and blood must move around

and men go making ugly lines across the holy ground.<sup>2</sup>

There are soldiers who have confirmed that Cohen sang these words. These lyrics were quoted by an Israeli reporter at the time, being so moved by them. But there is another layer of complication here. Cohen edited that first line of these lost lyrics: he struck out the words “my brothers” and replaced them with “the children.” No longer would they say, “I went down to the desert to help my brothers fight” but “I went down to the desert to help the children fight.” Two words that expressed a real connection, a familial bond, a timeless relationship, “my brothers,” replaced by words that put Cohen at a greater distance from the action, separating himself from his Israeli brothers and their experience. Cohen’s change in the lyrics demonstrate a shift from the familial to the apathetic.

This is the crisis that we now face here in the United States: too many American Jews have become apathetic about Israel. The current situation does not encourage connection, it only exacerbates the challenge and makes American Jews even more likely to just ignore the situation entirely. How easy it is to do that when the challenge is thousands of miles away. But we must remember that from destruction, or the existential threat thereof, comes wisdom.

It is clear that Israel learned from the trials of the Yom Kippur War, and many of its subsequent challenges. Trying and struggling, attempting and failing, led to gaining wisdom and a better understanding of the world. This is my hope for the internal crisis currently plaguing Israeli society, which threatens to fracture the country, both the state and civil society.

Early this summer, Rebecca and I had the privilege of leading a congregational trip to Israel. All of these challenges could have prompted us to change our plans, to turn aside and say

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Matti Friedman in *Who By Fire: Leonard Cohen in the Sinai*, Location 978-988.

“forget it,” but I actually felt a stronger pull to go to Israel, to feel what was really going on in our troubled homeland.

It was not the first time that we were in Israel together, but it was the first time that we had the opportunity to visit as a family. Anyone who has taken a long plane ride with two toddlers can relate to what it was like to prepare and actually take the eleven hour flight from Newark to Tel Aviv...But that was pretty much the hardest part. The tour itself was wonderful. We had a small, intimate group, so we bonded with one another and really connected throughout the ten days of touring. Time spent in conversation on the bus, at meals, walking through streets both ancient and modern, we formed special relationships and learned a great deal about one another. Perhaps one of the coolest places we visited, and I mean that both literally and figuratively, was the archaeological excavation at Beit Guvrin, a national park, part of which is even recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. There is an extensive network of caves, as well as the remains of the ancient city of Maresha. Our group participated in a dig in one of these caves. The temperature above must have been near 100, but as we descended into the caves the temperature dropped precipitously. First, you navigate down a crude wooden staircase built for the archaeological dig. Then you navigate through a cave or two, descending ancient staircases that are still intact, part of the cave structure itself.

At the bottom we were given tools, a few buckets, and some directions. As we sifted through the earth, we sorted our findings into the buckets: one for pottery, one for rocks, one for the earth itself. Some of us found ancient leftovers, like chicken bones. Some found pottery shards, and apparently they were the expensive, imported type that you might purchase from an ancient Bloomingdales, not just Target, which tells us that the community was wealthy.

Literally sifting through ancient Israel, I couldn't help but feel the irony of the whole thing. The weekly protests were still going strong. The night of our departure was when the protest movement basically blockaded the airport, adding an extra hour to our drive but I couldn't really complain—it was a peaceful demonstration all in the name of securing Israel's democracy. And while all of this is happening, while nearly one million took to the streets to protest what many feel is a government pushing Israel towards its destruction, I was sifting through ancient destruction, the rubble of someone's house in ancient Israel.

I care too much about Israel to allow it to be destroyed. I care because I cannot disentangle Israel from my Judaism; I cannot separate myself from 7 million fellow Jews, even if a not insignificant number of them disapprove of the way I practice Judaism. We have enough people on the outside trying to break us apart. I won't let people do it from within.

Where I find fault is in the extremism that currently permeates the governing Israeli coalition. But coalitions come and go—if and only if the democratic systems in which they operate continue to function as they are designed. That is why speaking out and participating in the conversation is essential. I may not have a vote in Israel, but I have a stake in whether Israel's democratic institutions continue to function, and there are those in Israel who are speaking out now, asking American Jews to get involved and voice their concerns. In a webinar this summer, three prominent centrist Israelis, Yossi Klein Halevi, Daniel Gordis, and Matti Friedman, appealed to their brothers and sisters in the diaspora. Halevi warned that the relationship between American Jews and Israeli Jews could wither and fade away, and that must not happen. We must continue to invest in the essential communal infrastructure of the Jewish people, including Federation and Israel Bonds. There are Israel Bonds envelopes at your

seats. We conduct this campaign every year, and B'nai Israel consistently leads the Washington synagogue community with our support. You can invest tonight with the card or online after the holiday. The amount you invest is less important than your actual participation, so consider whatever is meaningful for you.

Daniel Gordis, in what is really an unprecedented appeal on his part to engage Jews of the diaspora, asserted that the “Jewish State is flirting with...fundamental racism...and making it part of the foundation.” He appealed to us, Jews of the diaspora, to stand side by side with Israelis who are struggling to protect Israeli democracy in this moment. I know that we have partners in Israel. Real partners who are doing important work on the ground with Israelis and Palestinians, with Jews, Christians, Muslim, and Druze, and real partners in the Israeli government (not necessarily this coalition), partners like Ambassador Michael Herzog, who wrote in his High Holiday letter to the American Jewish community, “I believe that this painful debate is not only a test but also a testament to the strength of Israel’s democratic spirit.” Ambassador Herzog is aware of the challenges, and optimistic that the country will pull through, stronger than it was after enduring this challenge, gleaned wisdom from these trials and tribulations.

Israel needs to be a Jewish homeland for all of the world’s Jews—not just the ones that look a certain way, or hold particular political beliefs, or practice their Judaism in certain ways. At B’nai Israel we are investing in this vision for the future. Last fiscal year we supported 15 students who traveled to Israel for immersive experiences, investing more than \$20,000 in scholarship funds to make their dreams a reality. We are actively promoting and supporting a campaign of our Jewish Federation, Investing in a Jewish Homeland for All Jews. Federation has

committed up to \$150,000 in matching funds. Every donation by a member of B'nai Israel, up to \$500, will be matched and forwarded to the Masorti movement in Israel. Donations from other synagogues will be matched to support the other movements. Flyers will be handed out after the sermon, and they were also on the tables collecting donations before Kol Nidre. There is still time to participate and invest. We are not trying to beat one another in a competition; we are trying to support a plethora of Jewish expressions in Israel because all of us have a stake and we all want to build a stronger Jewish homeland.

Non-Orthodox Judaism likes to talk about *tikkun olam*, which is often narrowly understood as social justice work both within and beyond the Jewish world. But repairing the world also includes repairing ourselves. Regular maintenance and care can help to prevent destruction. We have learned from Jewish history and from Israel's history that there is wisdom gained in facing these challenges and somehow getting through them. Now is our moment to rise to the occasion, to offer a *tikkun* of our own, to speak out, to invest, to get involved and show our support for our Israeli brothers and sisters working to preserve democracy and protect the one and only homeland for the Jewish people. I invite you to join me, and to join them, in offering your generous support to do this.