

Kol Nidre 5780
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B'nai Israel

I would like to begin at the end, at the end of the Torah, that is. There, God speaks to Joshua, Moses' successor, and says, *hazak ve'ematz*, be strong and resolute! God tells Joshua that the Divine Presence will now abide with him, and that he should rely upon God's Presence to maintain his strength in the task of leading the people into the Promised Land and re-establishing it as their ancestral home. Then, at the beginning of the Book of Joshua, God repeats this phrase (and does so a few more times). Why does Joshua need to hear God's message of reassurance again? Because it never hurts to be reminded. The same is true for us. Each year we at B'nai Israel are reminded to engage in the mitzvah of *binyan eretz Yisrael*, the building up of the State of Israel, and do this through an investment with Israel Bonds. We remind ourselves, and all who have assembled here this evening, of the great importance that Israel holds for us as members of the Jewish community, and the significance of demonstrating our commitment to this idea through the concrete action of investing in Israel.

A couple of weeks ago, on a humid Saturday night, we began the recitation of *Selichot*, penitential prayers that are customarily recited on the days leading up to the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, these High Holidays. As a precursor to that evening of prayer, we heard the story of Dr. Itzhak Brook, an adjunct professor of Pediatrics and Medicine at Georgetown University. That evening he shared with us his story about being a battalion physician during the Yom Kippur War, which began 46 years ago today on the Jewish calendar.

Dr. Brook offered a nuanced and articulate understanding of the historical context for the war. But for me, the most stirring part of his lecture was in his description of that particular

Yom Kippur morning. The year is 5734. The date is the 10th of Tishrei—Yom Kippur. He knew something was wrong when his phone rang early that morning—even secular Israelis avoided making phone calls on Yom Kippur. He was told to report to the meeting place for his army unit. As he made his way there, he passed crowded synagogues, bustling with the fervor of penitent souls on Yom Kippur. The young men who walked out of the synagogues held their tallitot in one arm, and their army packs in the other. They, too, were heading to their meeting places to report for military duty.

For thousands of years, when the Jewish people were threatened, we relied upon the goodwill of our neighbors. We trusted that the governments of the places of our dispersion would be our protectors in times of distress. Our only hope in those most trying moments was to pray, to hope that indeed God would protect us. But that was not the case on the morning of Yom Kippur 5734. Yes, we offered our prayers, and we had another option. In that moment, Dr. Brook realized, for the first time, that the Jewish people had a choice other than prayer—we could stand up and defend ourselves in our own homeland.

What a beautiful realization to have on Yom Kippur! On a day that is typically spent in prayer, beating our chests, petitioning God for forgiveness, seeking atonement, Dr. Brook realized that something fundamental and existential had changed for the Jewish people. No longer would we be the wards of some other sovereign people. No longer would faith be our only refuge. God had finally helped us to realize our yearnings and aspirations of the past two thousand years. Now, we would combine fervent faith with self-determination.

That is, for me, the ongoing miracle of the modern State of Israel. Many peoples established sovereign nation-states in the past few hundred years. Some of them have succeeded, and

others have faded from reality and into the annals of history. The State of Israel, however, is not only a nation-state of the Jewish people—it is the beginning of the realization of our people’s longest-held aspirations, ראשית צמיחת גאולתנו.

Nearly five decades since that fateful Yom Kippur, there is yet another important development which we must consider. David Makovsky, director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, recently reflected upon the relative peace that Israel has enjoyed with its neighbors, especially with Egypt. He mentions a striking statistic: “In the 1970s, approximately 40 percent of Israel’s GDP went to the military or servicing military debt; now, that figure is approximately 5 percent. In today’s terms, this amounts to a savings of over \$125 billion annually, which Israel can invest in education, health care and infrastructure.”¹ Yes, the Jewish people have been able to proudly defend themselves and their homeland, and the resources put towards that end are not nearly what they once were, relatively speaking.

So much of the conversation about the modern State of Israel is wrapped up in the conflict, but the financial resources of the State are not so heavily burdened by it. Rather, Israel has found ways to protect itself from the threats it faces on a daily basis, while simultaneously investing in other aspects of state-building—by educating its people, caring for their health and well-being, and building up the infrastructure required for a flourishing economy. This, too, is part of the miracle of Israel. A country that faces threats from within its borders and from beyond them *could* be wholly consumed with self-defense and self-preservation. But Israel is

¹ David Makovsky, “Reflecting on Peace in a Season of Reflection,” *AIPAC High Holiday Resource Guide 5780*, p. 31-34.

different. Israel has enabled its citizens to learn, to thrive, to excel, to achieve, and to surpass all expectations of what a small state might accomplish in just seven decades of life.

At the same time that we celebrate Israel's unlikely achievements, we are also conscious of the challenges. Like in America, political partisanship in Israel is threatening its core democratic values—the most recent round of elections has yet to yield a government, with the prospect for a third round of elections looking evermore likely. Leaders struggle to see beyond their own career. Bold, courageous leadership is sorely lacking.

Despite these contemporary challenges, our support for Israel should not falter. In fact, the challenges should be a catalyst for us to redouble our efforts, to commit to building an Israel that is a religious and national homeland for all of world Jewry. Each morning, when we recite the *Ahavah Rabbah*, we say, וְהִבִּיאֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם מֵאַרְבַּע כַּנְפוֹת הָאָרֶץ, we pray that God “gathers us peacefully from the four corners of the world.” The State of Israel must aspire to be that place where Jews from all over the world come together peacefully, and where that diversity is looked upon as a gift and an opportunity, not a roadblock or an impediment. In America, Jewish life flourished because of the pluralistic opportunities afforded to the American Jewish community. Each denomination and stream of Judaism has learned from the other in some meaningful way. Now, perhaps more than ever, there is fluidity from one denomination to another. The exchanges and interactions that result from this fluidity have led to innovations and transformations within American Jewish life.

And we must also acknowledge that there are individuals within Israeli society who are trying to bring about a more pluralistic approach to Jewish life in the Jewish state. The Masorti movement works to bring about these changes by supporting Masorti *kehillot*, communities

across Israel that engage Israelis in a traditional and progressive form of Judaism. Machon Schechter trains Israeli Conservative rabbis, and also educates hundreds in its secondary degree programs for educators, helping to bring pluralistic Jewish life to Israel's secular schools. These movements and institutions are working towards that ideal vision of an Israel that feels like home for all Jews, and thus they are deserving of our support and assistance. That is why we collected tzedakah this evening to support Machon Schechter, and that is why we advocate for support of the Masorti Movement.

Binyan eretz Yisrael, the building up of the State of Israel, is a great mitzvah, and we are given an opportunity to fulfill that mitzvah tonight through the purchase of Israel Bonds. Participating in this mitzvah is not akin to giving tzedakah. It is not a charitable contribution, but rather it is an investment in Israeli society and the furthering of our aspirations for a better future. It is a demonstration of our well-wishes not just for Israelis, but for Jews around the world. It is our reassurance to all that we believe in this project of establishing a state for the Jewish people in our homeland.

For weeks now we have been reciting Psalm 27, which appropriately describes the fears, the hopes, and the wishes we typically hold during the High Holiday season. The psalmist concludes with words that mirror God's reassurance to Joshua, 'קְוֵה אֶל ה' יִצְחָק וַיֵּאמֶץ לְבָבוֹ וְקִוְוֵה אֶל ה' , "Place your hope in God; be strong and of good courage, and place your hope in God." May we all place our hope in God, may we be strengthened and may we be granted the courage that we need to continue the work of *binyan eretz Yisrael*, establishing a State of Israel that is a homeland for Jews from all four corners of the world. May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life for a year of health, happiness, and success. *G'mar hatimah tovah!*