

**Kol Nidre Sermon 5781:
Teshuvah & Reconciliation**
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When Rabbi Zeira was offended by someone, he would find ways to spend more time in their presence. When I am offended by someone, I usually do the opposite—I find ways to stay away and avoid the person. I worry that they may offend me yet again! But not Rabbi Zeira. He would walk around wherever the offender could be found, trying to encounter them yet again, by making himself noticeable. In so doing, he hoped that this individual would notice him and apologize.¹ He was willing to make himself vulnerable in order to give someone else the opportunity to do *teshuvah*. His ultimate goal was reconciliation.

In many ways, the same can be said about the State of Israel. Despite its often disgruntled neighbors, Israel always seeks reconciliation. Like Rabbi Zeira, Israel is willing to take risks and be vulnerable for the sake of peace. Since its founding, its Arab neighbors have sought ways to undermine, delegitimize, and in some cases, destroy it. But seventy years have shown that such efforts are doomed to fail. In 1979, Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel and normalized relations, making it the first Arab state to officially recognize Israel. In 1994, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan did the same. And in the decades since those agreements were signed, both Egypt and Jordan worked closely with Israel on matters of regional security, and on various issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With the exception of the United States, no two countries aside from Egypt and Jordan have been able to wield power in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They have been able to keep both parties in check and ensure that a two-

¹ Talmud Bavli, Yoma 87a.

state solution is still a viable option. The reconciliation between Israel and these neighbors has led to a mutually beneficial relationship, one that not only benefits their own people, but also the entire region. The parties have built a relationship of trust and respect.

Recently we saw new developments in Israel's attempts to reconcile with formerly antagonistic, or at best, ambivalent, Arab neighbors. On September 15, Israel signed the Abraham Accords with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, brokered by the United States. This was not a peace treaty per se, since Israel is not at war with either of these countries, but it is a step in the right direction. The Accords normalize relations between the parties, and begin the process of reconciliation, building a relationship from a place of trust, with great opportunity for collaboration and partnership. Israel has agreed to suspend its plans to annex portions of the West Bank. Bahrain and the UAE agree to recognize Israel as a legitimate state in the world.

The deal is not without its critics. There are those who have dismissed this as just a political stunt noting that, after all, Israel has had informal relations with these countries for years. But I assert that there *is* something powerful and important about making it official. The Accords send a message of hope for the future, not only for the parties involved, but for the entire region, including the Palestinians.

David Makovsky, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, son-in-law of our members, wrote about this in *The Washington Post* before the signing of the Accords. According to Makovsky, proponents of the two-state solution need not worry. He writes, "The Palestinians are not going anywhere, and the reality is that Israel cannot retain its core character as both a Jewish and democratic state if it ignores the Palestinian issue." In other

words, the goal must still be two states, and that goal is not hindered by the normalization of relations between these countries. On the contrary, this creates an opportunity for the UAE and Bahrain to weigh in on issues related to the conflict. When Israel's neighbors are its allies and partners, the entire region becomes a more stable place, where conversations over thorny issues are easier to navigate.

Reconciliation works best when both sides anticipate tangible gains by coming together, and have more to lose by remaining apart. This is true of the power of reconciliation within our own communities too. We know that there is a divide between American Jews and Israeli Jews. We know that Jews in America are divided. We know that Jews in Israel are divided. In all scenarios, there are opportunities for reconciliation, for the rebuilding of a fractured relationship.

I have seen this happen within our Jewish community here in the United States. I am a part of a Facebook group, "Dreaming Up High Holidays 5781." The group included clergy, lay leaders, and congregational staff from synagogues across the denominational spectrum. Together, we brainstormed programs, collaborated on projects, shared valuable resources, and, most importantly, provided one another with *hizuk*, strength that we would get through this very unusual High Holiday season. We did not all agree on everything. We privileged different values and had different understandings of Jewish law. But the point of coming together is not to agree on everything—it is to agree on enough that we can be in relationship, and to know how to work through that which would otherwise divide us.

We are also working to bridge the divide between Jews in our country and Jews in Israel. Our very own Jewish Federation of Greater Washington supports the largest network of

community *shlichim*, Israeli emissaries, in partnership with local synagogues from across the denominational spectrum. This initiative offers an opportunity to build a relationship with an Israeli, not with the amorphous “State.” We are fortunate that our *shlicha*, Netta Asner-Minster, shares with us her passion for Israel with all of its various complexities. In building a relationship with her, we are bridging the divide and helping to strengthen the relationship between our two countries.

Reconciliation means that we not only gain from the relationship, but that we are acutely aware of the costs of remaining apart. We have a tremendous amount to lose if we walk away. If we pull back from our Israel engagement, then we lose our voice. Earlier this year we participated in the elections for the 38th World Zionist Congress. Since the last election in 2015, the number of participating voters more than doubled, and voter turnout was at its highest in 30 years. In the end, Mercaz, our party, did not garner as many seats as we would have hoped, but there is something encouraging in the record high voter turnout. We care about Israel and our relationship to it.

What else can we do as individuals to demonstrate that we care? We can do what we call upon you to do each year at this time—fulfill the *mitzvah* of *binyan Eretz Yisrael*, the building up of the State of Israel, by purchasing an Israel bond. Typically, we ask you to pledge your bond purchase tonight, but, like everything else this year, this will be done differently. I encourage you to visit IsraelBonds.com after the holiday.

Tomorrow, at mincha, we will read the Book of Jonah. It is one of my favorite readings of the year. In her book about Jonah, Dr. Erica Brown writes,

Teshuva in its broadest sense is the capacity to build or rebuild a relationship that transcends singular hurdles and labeled pitfalls. The crimes are still there but, with repentance, they do not serve as a barrier to the human/Divine relationship.²

In context, she is writing about the relationship between God and the people of Nineveh, to whom God offers forgiveness after they repent. But in our context, *teshuva* is the ultimate form of reconciliation. Of course, there are problems with the relationship, of course there are challenges, of course it is fragile and fraught. If these things were not true, then there would be no need to reconcile in the first place! But we know that not all relationships are perfect. We all have complicated and difficult relationships: with friends, family members, God, and ourselves. The challenge that is set before us is how we respond. Do we end the relationship, and turn away? No, we reconcile, we do *teshuva*, we forgive, such that we transcend the challenges of the past and build a better future together.

When safe and possible, we are encouraged to seek reconciliation. We see how that can be done at the macro level, with Israel's willingness to reconcile with its neighbors. And we know that it can be done at the micro level, with the example set for us by Rabbi Zeira. May we enter 5781 with a passion for the rebuilding of complicated relationships, with the desire to work together, and with aspirations for a better future for us all.

G'mar hatimah tovah—May you be sealed for a year of health, happiness, and reconciliation.

² Eric Brown, *Jonah*, p. 214.