

Kol Nidre 5778

A Space for Me to Lodge

Rabbi Michael Safra

You may have heard the legend about how the site of the Temple was chosen on Mount Moriah. There were two brothers, each with a farm on opposite sides of the same hill. One had a family; the other was a bachelor. During the harvest, the farmer with a family said to himself: I have a wife, sons and daughters to help during the harvest, but my brother must do all the work by himself. Late at night, feeling badly for his brother, this farmer would sneak onto his brother's property and leave bags of grain for him.

At the same time, the brother who was a bachelor said to himself: I have no one to care for but myself, while my poor brother has all those mouths to feed. Late at night, he would sneak into his brother's farm and leave bags of grain for his brother and his family.

This went on for many days until, one night, the two brothers ran into each other during their midnight excursions. Realizing what was going on, they embraced in love. And it was on this hill that the Temple was built.

It's a beautiful story, updated more recently with a sequel:

Once there were two brothers, each with a farm on opposite sides of the same hill. One had a family; the other was a bachelor. During the harvest, the first said to himself: I have a wife, sons and daughters to feed, while my happy-go-lucky brother has no one to care for but himself! Late at night, he would sneak into his brother's farm and take bags of grain for his family.

At the same time, the second brother said to himself: Here I am doing all this work alone, while my lucky brother has a wife, sons and daughters to help! Late at night, he would sneak onto his brother's farm and take bags of grain for himself.

This went on for many days until, one night, the two brothers ran into each other and realized what was going on. They beat each other senseless. And it was on that hill that the Israeli Knesset was built.

Disagreements are nothing new. The idea that two Jews have three opinions is cliché. But sometimes it feels like this is different. We are living in an era of extreme polarization. American, Israeli, conservative, progressive, Republican, Democrat, sometimes it seems like we can't get together on *anything*. And in the Jewish community we have to ask ourselves: which set of brothers do we want to emulate?

Go back to June 25, 2017, a regular day in many respects, but a disturbing one for the Jewish people. That's the day that Prime Minister Netanyahu's cabinet suspended the Kotel Compromise, an

agreement that was supposed to create “One Wall for One People.” The compromise was reached in January 2016, after three years of discussion and negotiation spearheaded by Natan Sharansky, head of the Jewish Agency for Israel. Non-Orthodox groups, including Women of the Wall, agreed to formally designate the Men and Women’s sections at the Kotel as Orthodox prayer sites and that public prayer or singing would not be allowed in the Women’s section. In return, the Orthodox agreed to allow for the expansion and realignment of the Robinson’s arch area for egalitarian worship. It was a historic compromise to turn the two traditional sections into three. And, almost immediately, the ultra-Orthodox parties in Knesset vowed to fight it. And they won, at least for the moment, on June 25.

Their argument: There is only one legitimate way to practice Judaism; they are the guardians of truth. Or, as Member of Knesset Moshe Gafni put it, “Reform Jews are a group of clowns who stab the holy Torah.” Kapow! The unity of the Jewish people is under threat.

I don’t need to tell you about the other disagreements over settlement policy, a stalled peace process, the Iran deal, the issue of who is a Jew. We’ve reached a point where the relationship is threatened. There are rabbis who are afraid to talk about Israel from the *bima* for fear that it is divisive. And we cannot accept that. There is only one Jewish state, only one Jewish homeland, and we must be unified in love and support.

But with an important caveat. Unity in support does not mean unity in thought or unanimity in perspective. Unity does not mean sweeping aside our differences. Unity means recognizing the legitimacy of those with whom we disagree. Unity means celebrating differences while coming together in the support of a sacred value:

The State of Israel is the legitimate expression of the Jewish people’s historic right to live as a free people in its own land.

The rest, in the words of the great sage Hillel, is commentary. Go and learn.

Pirkei Avot lists 10 miracles that occurred at the time when the Temple stood. Among them: No person ever said to another, “There is no place for me in Jerusalem, לא אמר אדם לחברו צר לי המקום, שאלין בירושלים.” Today we have Air B&B and Bookings.com; there is plenty of hotel space. But we need a slightly updated version of that miracle, that no person should feel that his view doesn’t count; no person should sense that hers is not a legitimate expression of Judaism; no Jews should ever feel that they are not represented at the table. To quote the late Prime Minister and President of Israel, Shimon Peres: The State of Israel belongs not only to the citizens of the state, but to the Jewish people at large.”

And the challenge of polarization extends the other way too. It’s ironic that it was also June 25 when tens of thousands gathered in Chicago in support of gay and lesbian pride at the Chicago Dyke March. There were many Jews at the march because this is a cause that matters to a lot of us. But three of the marchers were told that there was no place for them. They were asked to leave because their pride flags had Stars of David on them. It seemed natural. A similar flag flies outside the DCJCC; the Tel Aviv Gay Pride Parade is a huge annual event; it had to be a misunderstanding, right? But, no. Given the chance to apologize, march organizers stood by their position, saying in an official statement, “The Chicago Dyke March Collective is explicitly not anti-Semitic. We are anti-Zionist.”

Too often, liberal Jews are being told that they can be progressive or they can be Zionist, they can support Israel or they can support liberal values or liberal religion, but they cannot do both.

And that is not a fair choice. We cannot stop loving Israel. And we dare not check our values at the door. The left needs Israel as much as the right. Israel shares values with the left and the right. And in terms of American politics, Israel needs Democrats as much as it needs Republicans. Each party is going to control government roughly 50% of the time, and Israel needs us 100% of the time. We have to be both.

Over the summer, Marla Schulman and I signed on to a letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu urging him to change his stance on the non-Orthodox movements and to implement the Kotel agreement. Conservative Judaism is every bit as authentic as Orthodoxy. But we did not take the step of some synagogues to cancel our annual Israel Bonds appeal. We must unite in our love of Israel even as we recognize that that means different things for different people.

We had a special visitor to our synagogue on the first Shabbat after June 25. He didn't come for the service; he was JFK (Just for Kiddush). Avi Arielli, at the time the Shin Bet's representative in Washington, *davened* that morning at Beth Sholom; he is an Orthodox Jew. But he was so upset by the government's decision to back away from its agreement that he felt he *had* to visit a Conservative synagogue. I was touched, and I arranged to meet him for coffee. He was passionate about pluralism and unity and his fears about the widening fissures. Now back in Israel, Arielli is determined to start a new organization to support change. This is a high-powered person – a former diplomat, intelligence agent, and high school principal. People are noticing.

Our Jewish Federation has noticed as well. In November, the community is bringing Rabbi Esteban Gottfried as a featured Israeli "changemaker." Rabbi Gottfried leads weekly, secular Kabbalat Shabbat services at the Tel Aviv port, and his spirited service has been duplicated throughout Israel. He will speak at Routes: A Community Day of Learning. And he is going to spend Shabbat at B'nai Israel. I hope you will meet him because he isn't just bashing the rabbinic establishment; he is reaching real people and demonstrating through his actions the power of pluralism. We have to support the Masorti movement. We have to make religious pluralism a part of the community agenda. We have to assert that we Conservative Jews – some conservative, some progressive, some moderate – we all have a voice when it comes to building and sustaining the character of the Jewish state.

We have to visit Israel. I have a congregational trip in July, but this is not a commercial. If you've never been, you have to go – with me or some other way. There is no better way to understand Israel than to be there; and there are few destinations that can rival Israel in the way that it combines tourism with spirituality and Jewish identity. If you've been to Israel but it's been a long time, or even if you just got back, find a way; it's time to return. There's always a place for you there.

And we have to support Israel. I'm not talking about a "party line." I'm talking about making a statement that your destiny is connected to Israel's destiny. And specifically tonight, that means pledging to purchase an Israel Bond.

An Israel Bond is not *tzedakah*. You aren't giving your money away. It is an investment. It is a statement of trust in the Jewish future and the future of the Jewish state. And it is a top-rated, safe investment.

Our push this year, as it was last year, is to increase the number of purchasers of Israel Bonds. It's not just about the money. Israel has many ways to raise capital when times are good. But we also have to plan for the future, if there were to be a crisis and other avenues were to be shut off. Israel wants to know who its friends are; and that's why the database of purchasers is so important.

For families celebrating bar or bat mitzvah, we have a matching program. If a bat mitzvah celebrant purchases a bond, the synagogue will purchase another bond for her. That's free money to teach an important value. If you are competitive about it, our synagogue led the Washington community last year in both number of purchasers and total dollars raised. You can help us do that again.

So I ask you to take a moment to look at the envelope on your seat and consider what you can do to support Israel in this tangible way. There's a space for you, and Israel needs you.

The ancient rabbis imagined that God wears *tefillin*. Forget for a moment that God doesn't have a body; that's a different discussion. But, they ask, what is written inside of them? Our *tefillin* contain the words of the Shema. But God already knows that He is one, so what is written in God's *tefillin*? The answer is a verse from Chronicles: There is no people like the Jewish people, גוי אחד בארץ, a unique people, a diverse but unified people, one nation in the land."

On this sacred night, Jews everywhere are united in prayer. Some are more observant, some less. Some lean to the right, some to the left. We have different ways of voting and different styles of worship. But we are all Jews. It doesn't matter if we are American or Israeli or AshkeFardicUltraRefConservaDox. We must be united not in our opinions, but in our belief that we are one people with one homeland. When it comes to Israel, let each of us affirm in as many ways as possible that there is always a place me, and I am ready to fill it.

Gemar Hatima Tovah, may each of us be inscribed for good in the book of life.