

On Jewish Unity – Kol Nidre 5780

Rabbi Michael Safra

Did you hear about the *yeshiva* that decided to start a crew team. No matter how much they practiced, they could not win a single race. Eventually, they decided to send one rower down to the nearby prep school as a spy, to see if he could discover the secret of their success. After a day of reconnaissance, the scout came back with an explanation. “Listen!” he told his teammates. “I learned how they do it. On their team, they have eight guys rowing, and only one guy screaming!”

The 22nd Knesset was sworn into office on Thursday. In his remarks, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin said, “We are facing a time of crisis for the House of Jacob, an emergency for Israel’s security and for Israeli society, an emergency for Israeli democracy.” Those are strong words, considering that Israel is not at war. This crisis is not created by our enemies. It is borne out of Israel’s democracy, in the aftermath of the election.

As quick background, Israel’s is a parliamentary system; you don’t vote for prime minister, but rather you vote for a party, which has an ordered candidate list. However many seats the party wins, that many people from the list join Knesset. There are 120 seats, which means a majority is 61. After the election, the President of Israel – and this is one of his only actual jobs – invites the party he feels will have the best chance of forming a majority coalition to try to form a government.

In this election, Blue and White, the party headed by Benny Gantz, earned 33 seats; Likud, headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, earned 32 seats. If you combine the natural blocks, there is a potential for 54 seats on the left with Gantz, and 55 seats on the right with Netanyahu, which, of course, is still not 61.

Three seats belong to an Arab party committed to serving in the Opposition. Avigdor Lieberman’s party won 8 seats; but he has a problem with both sides.

President Rivlin invited Netanyahu to try first to form a national unity government, with the prime minister rotating between Likud and Blue and White. But so far he has failed because Gantz refuses to join a coalition with Netanyahu as prime minister and facing the likelihood of an indictment; and Netanyahu insisting on serving as prime minister first so he can lead Knesset in passing an immunity law. The religious won’t join with Blue and White, which has pledged to reform laws regarding Haredi service in the army, egalitarian worship at the Kotel, and civil marriage. Everyone has made promises, and some will have to be broken in order to avert yet another election.

In his address to Knesset, President Rivlin called the current stalemate a “red card” from Israeli citizens to their elected officials.” Israel cannot sustain “a political system that feeds on picking away at the differences between us and that sees all our fears, each of the other, as something to exploit,” he said. Calling elections “the most expensive reality show in town,” one that with “each season, the

ratings are likely to drop while the result remains the same,” Rivlin called on elected leaders to set aside their differences and focus on the “wide range of challenges that we can all agree to tackle.

President Rivlin was speaking to Israel’s political class, but his words resonate for the worldwide Jewish community too. The things that divide us are real:

- Foreign policy on how best to deal with the Palestinian issue, the threat from Iran, and relations with Presidents Putin, Trump, and other foreign leaders;
- Religious issues like who is a Jew and who is a rabbi and how to balance the divide between religion and state;
- Domestic issues like the allocation of funds to Israel’s four national educational systems, and who must serve in the army do not affect us directly, but they speak to our sense of justice.

There are real differences between Americans and Israelis, and within our communities as well. But during this time of crisis, the Jewish people needs us to focus on the more fundamental values that unite us.

It’s tough. You may have heard the story of the elderly man whose systems were failing. It had been his wish to die in Israel and be buried there, and so his children made all the arrangements. Low and behold, when the man arrived in Israel, his condition began to improve. Soon they were ready to release him from the hospital, and the man asked his children to arrange for his return to the States. “But we don’t understand,” they said. “You told us you wanted to die in Israel.”

“I know,” said the man. “I want to die in Israel. But to live here?!?”

We read in Proverbs: “*b’rov am hadrat melekh*, The Sovereign is glorified by multitudes of people.” The Midrash adds that even though there are thousands of angels who offer praise all day long, God prefers the praise of Israel. As Rabbi Shimon taught, “When is God exalted? Whenever Israel is gathered in synagogues or study halls and offering praise and acclaim to their Creator.” God is glorified when we are together, as we are tonight, and when we find common cause.

Even in polarizing times, we can agree that Israel is the legitimate realization of the national destiny of the Jewish people, a longing for 2,000 years to return to the land of our ancestors, to be a free people and a normal nation among the community of nations. It is antisemitic to deny the legitimacy of our national enterprise.

We can agree that the State of Israel is the world’s only national Jewish homeland. There is a vibrant Jewish community in this country, and others around the world; not all Jews want to live in Israel, but we all share a responsibility to support our Jewish state. Never again will a Jewish community find itself in harms way with no place to go. We in America are safer and freer today because of the existence of a strong Israel that can defend itself without relying on the others.

We can agree on the foundational principle as described in Israel's Declaration of Independence that the state "will be based on the precepts of liberty, justice and peace taught by the Hebrew Prophets; will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens, without distinction of race, creed or sex."

Israel today boasts the largest Jewish community in the world, and within a generation its population will encompass the majority of world Jewry. That reality was unimaginable a generation ago. Israel is the cultural homeland of the Jewish people, the largest source for Jewish scholarship, Hebrew literature, music, and the arts. We are witnessing the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, *ki mitziyon tetze torah*, that Torah, in its broadest sense as the complete repository of all things Jewish, shall emerge from Zion.

These are sacred values. Politics represents the responsibility of any citizenry to debate how best to realize those values; but politics is *not* a referendum on the legitimacy of the state or our foundational obligation to support, engage, visit, and otherwise connect. Politics is not an excuse to abandon the core principle that God is glorified when the Jewish people is united.

We have to **visit** Israel. If you've never been or it's been a while, now is the time to plan a trip. Birthright is a fantastic opportunity for college students and young professionals. But you don't have to wait. Go as a family, send a teen for a summer or semester; make Birthright the second or third trip!

We have to **engage politically** in a way that works for us as individuals. Aipac, JStreet, New Israel Fund, ZOA, Jinsa, Israel Forever – each of these groups is worthy, except when they engage in malicious battle against other Jews. Israel is a bi-partisan concern. The Democratic establishment, the Republican establishment, liberal Jews, conservative Jews all support Israel's right to exist and thrive. There are extremists on both sides who question Israel with antisemitic tropes; but to question the sincerity of entire parties or movements or groups of Jews with whom we disagree is to threaten our only Jewish state. To walk away because the wrong person was elected is akin to fratricide or suicide.

We have to **support** the ongoing work of building the Israeli society we dream of. It is unfortunate that so much of the talk about pluralism gets confused with "Orthodox bashing." There is an element of the fight that goes up against the exclusivity of the Israeli Rabbinate. But the bulk of our work is apolitical, as it responds directly to Israelis' needs and wants. The Masorti movement supports more than 70 congregations throughout Israel, which host nursery schools, classes, and social groups, in addition to offering the egalitarian services we expect and Israel's only special needs b'nai mitzvah program. The movement operates with a budget less than half of ours at B'nai Israel.

Machon Schechter, which was featured on one of tonight's collection boxes, trains Conservative Rabbis in Israel, but that's only the start. Its MA program, with over 500 students, is the largest Jewish studies program in Israel. Professional educators from all over the country and across the religious spectrum travel to Jerusalem weekly and bring back Jewish ideas and pluralistic values to their

communities. Their Tali program offers pluralistic Jewish education in secular public schools, reaching 46,000 children in 300 communities. Israelis choose these programs voluntarily, and they make a difference.

This year, we have a once in five years opportunity to vote in a worldwide election for the World Zionist Congress. Our party, Mercaz, supports pluralism and secures millions of dollars in allocations – based on the proportion of votes it receives – to support the programs I’ve described. Pay attention when you receive voting information; the elections begin in January; minutes of your time will generate millions of dollars for our values.

And of course, you can **invest** in Israel. As we do every year at Kol Nidre, I ask you to look at the envelope on your seat from Israel Bonds and consider a purchase. Israel Bonds are not *tzedakah* – that would be giving your money away. This is a safe and meaningful investment in Israel.

And it is easy. Bonds can be purchased online, for different terms and amounts. They make great gifts, much more meaningful than cash. The money is important; but even more, we need purchasers. Israel needs to know who its friends are. Israel needs to know that in spite of our differences, in spite of our concerns, in spite of Israel’s detractors, we are eager to invest in Israel’s future. We are eager to invest in Jewish unity. We are eager to participate in the *mitzvah* of building the land. If you’ve never made this investment before, consider it tonight.

B’rov am hadrat melekh, Our God is glorified, our people is strengthened when we stand together as one united community. Rabbi Saul Teplitz, a gifted rabbi of the last generation, once said that “the miracle of Israel is that it has changed Jewish theology from one of waiting for God to one of acting for God.” In the midst of a political crisis, in polarizing times that threaten Jewish unity, Israel needs us to pray; Israel needs us to act; Israel needs us to recommit ourselves to the value of sustaining the world’s only Jewish homeland.

On this holiest night of the year, let us respond to the holiest of our sacred obligations. *G’mar hatimah Tovah*, may we be inscribed and sealed for good in the Book of Life.