

Only Together

Rabbi Michael Safra, B'nai Israel Congregation

Kol Nidre 5781; September 27, 2020

Rak yachad, Only together.

This was President Reuven Rivlin's message to the citizens of Israel on the eve of Rosh Hashanah last week. Israelis are observing Yom Kippur this year, as they did Rosh Hashanah and will Sukkot, in national lockdown. A country that, back in May, was acknowledged as a leader for conquering the virus with technology and strong leadership, suddenly found itself as a leader in another sense – with the largest rate of infection of any country in the world. And people are none too happy. This three-week period is usually a joyous time. Schools close, business slows, and many Israelis travel to visit family or experience the land. But not this year.

President Rivlin began his message with an apology. When Israel locked down in the spring, the president was caught having guests at his residence for the Passover *seder*. He apologized for giving the impression that his loneliness might be different, or the rules might be different for ordinary citizens versus people in power. This time, he promised, things would be different. *Rak yachad, Only together.* That's the only way to beat down this virus. United we stand.

You could call it the national mantra of the Jewish people. The way the Bible describes it, the beginning of the end was sparked by division – hundreds of years before the Assyrians and Babylonians dealt their military blows. It was shortly after King Solomon's death, and his son Rehoboam was having trouble solidifying his rule. The people felt they were being overworked in service of the king and they asked him to lighten the burden. But Rehoboam refused. He wanted to prove his meddle; he wanted to demonstrate his strength; and so he decided to make their burden even greater.

But the people revolted. Jeroboam ben Nevat, who had been somewhat of an opposition leader, saw an opportunity. He rallied the people of the north, convinced them to break away, and created the Kingdom of Israel, leaving Rehoboam to rule the much smaller Kingdom of Judah. The two kingdoms never reconciled. In 721 BCE, the Assyrians conquered the Kingdom of Israel. Its people were exiled and assimilated into their host populations. They became the Lost Tribes. And ever since, it has been our people's hope to someday be reunited. We read about it in the Haftarah on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, when Jeremiah promised:

I will bring them in from the northland, gather them from the ends of the earth. ... In a vast throng they shall return here ... and with compassion I will guide them. ... The one who scattered Israel will gather them and guard them as a shepherd guards his flock (Jeremiah 31:8-10).

Fast forward almost 2500 years. Zionism was reborn as a political movement. And there were factions: Labor Zionists who dreamed of a socialist utopia, Cultural Zionists who imagined a rebirth of

Jewish cultural life, Revisionist Zionists who wanted to fight in a new way for a new generation, Religious Zionists who wanted to protect Judaism from secular influence. There were waves of *aliyah*, our people was decimated in the Holocaust, remnants fought the British mandate, and then the opportunity for statehood suddenly emerged. But it's one thing to dream and quite another to try to make the dream a reality.

The leadership of the Yishuv debated until the very last minute. Just hours before David Ben Gurion was to declare the establishment of the state on May 14, 1948, Moetzet Ha'Am, the Provisional Council, were meeting to iron out important details in the Declaration. The borders had not been defined, there was a question of whether or not to mention God in the document, and then the name: Palestine, Ever (as in *Ivrit*, the land of the Hebrews), Zion/*Tziyyon*, Judea, or Israel.

Ultimately, the Council chose Israek – because the name Israel symbolized restoration. This was a chance to return. This was the fulfillment of our hope, a chance to restore a divide that had lasted almost 3,000 years. Not just a state, but a re-unified Jewish people. *Rak yahad*, Only together.

But that's not exactly how it happened. I'll spare you the jokes about two Jews and three opinions, a people built to argue. Because we know it too well. J-Street vs. Aipac vs. ZOA vs. Peace Now. Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Secular, Ashkenazic, Sephardi. And we don't just disagree, but we do it sometimes in the most uncivil ways. People who hold different views are sometimes called *son'ei yisrael*, Enemies of Israel. We call them dangerous. Their ideas are delegitimized. And it hurts.

Back to the pandemic. It happens that the ultra-Orthodox communities are among the hardest hit. This may be because many in that community have large families and live in small apartments; and it may be because they kept many schools open and continue to gather for large funerals and weddings. But they are also part of Prime Minister Netanyahu's fragile governing coalition. A lockdown implemented only in areas with high infection rates would disproportionately affect them and appear like discrimination. So, the lockdown was instituted across the board ... and with a host of exceptions that secular Israelis think discriminate against *them*. Orthodox women can go to the *mikvah* and *lulav* and *etrog* are considered essential items that people can travel greater distances to purchase. Many synagogues are allowed to open, but secular Israelis are not allowed to go to the mall or the hairdresser. The coronavirus (or "Karon" as Israelis call it) has exacerbated festering resentments. And President Rivlin tried to address that: "We must refrain from blaming other parts of the society as if one sector is 'responsible' the virus," he said. "We have no other land, we have no other country, we have no other people, and we have no other way." *Rak yachad*, Only together.

The pandemic also exacerbates inequities between Israel's Jewish and Arab citizenry. Healthcare, education, and other infrastructure have long been deficient in Arab communities, and the pandemic makes it worse. And we know about Israel's "regular" challenges with the Palestinians and a divided political map that may send Israel back to elections yet again. The divisions are troubling.

But there are some opportunities, too. You may have seen the video of an Israeli ambulance stopping so that the two medics on board could pray – an Orthodox Jew *davening* Minha facing Jerusalem and an Arab Muslim kneeling on his prayer mat facing Mecca. It turns out that 25% of Israeli

doctors, 30% of nurses, 50% of Israeli pharmacists are Arab. So maybe this virus will offer a chance for that community to become more connected to their Jewish neighbors. Maybe that will positively impact some of the inequities. There is a lot of work to do, but ours is a country founded on hope.

Rak yahad, Only together.

And then there is the new peace. It came as a surprise to nearly everyone when Israel and the United Arab Emirates announced on August 13 their intent to normalize relations; and then on September 11, to hear that Bahrain would join too. Technically, the agreement signed at the White House on September 15 was not a peace treaty because the UAE and Bahrain were not at war with Israel. Neither Bahrain nor the UAE even existed in 1948 or 1967. But these treaties are extremely significant.

The UAE did get Israel to agree to suspend indefinitely its plan to annex territories in the West Bank. Bahrain insisted on language to support a just and favorable outcome for the Palestinians. But on the whole, this agreement represented a giant strategic shift. For decades, it was assumed that the road to peace went through the Palestinians. Negotiate with the Palestinians, create a Palestinian state with a peaceful border, and the region's other states would follow and normalize relations. But this was the opposite – normalize relations first and then use those relationships to create a broader Middle East peace. These countries are attracted to Israel's strength – military strength to protect against Iran, and economic strength bringing together the region's strongest success stories. Maybe this initiative will bring Palestinians back to the table, but right now that dream seems a long way off.

Still, the excitement is justified and real. As are the divisions. People want to know: will this strengthen Prime Minister Netanyahu? And what about President Trump? Will more Evangelicals be drawn to the voting booth? Will more American Jews who have been critical of the Trump administration change their minds? Moving the American embassy to Jerusalem, peace – it's a big deal.

I'm not going to answer these questions – because they are the wrong questions. Those questions that everyone wants to ask are rooted in the divisions of politics. The Jewish community – like any other demographic group – is not a monolith. There are legitimate questions about the future of Israel's relationship with the Palestinians – a looming demographic threat, prospects for a two-state solution, finding a workable path forward. There are a host of real issues over which American Jews and Israeli Jews, conservatives and progressives, Democrats and Republicans disagree. But political disagreements on those issues should not mask the larger principles, value statements on which we all agree.

- The Land of Israel is the birthplace and spiritual homeland of the Jewish people.
- The State of Israel is the legitimate realization of a national dream that had been suspended for 2000 years.
- The State of Israel belongs to all Jews. We have a voice, we have a role, we share in Israel's destiny. All of us. Together, *b'yachad*.

This is a time to rise above the politics, to re-engage and reaffirm our connections to our Jewish State.

In a normal year, I would be asking you now to take out a pledge card and consider an investment in Israel Bonds. It's a tangible way to affirm the relationship and invest in Israel's future. But this is not a normal year. The pledge cards are now virtual, and after the holiday you should visit Israelbonds.com to learn more.

In a normal year, I would be suggesting it is time to make plans to travel to Israel. There is no better way to understand, no better way to celebrate the miracle of a modern state in an ancient land, than to be there. It is notable that Nativ, the Conservative movement's gap year program in Israel, is running at full capacity; but for most of us, this is probably not the year to travel.

And so we have to take advantage of the other opportunities. We are so fortunate that Netta Asner-Minter, our *shlichah* extraordinaire, is back with us for another year. Anyone who has met her or been part of her classes knows – she is special. Don't miss the opportunity to engage and connect through her. And to thank our Jewish Federation for supporting the program in a significant way.

In a normal year, I would be asking you to think about attending the Aipac Policy Conference – to be inspired by what is easily the largest Jewish event of the year and to support the bi-partisan US-Israel relationship. That conference has been cancelled this year, but we can still affirm the basic truth that, regardless of party, Israel and America are better together.

In a normal year, I would ask you to support the Masorti movement and its work for religious pluralism in Israel. And I would remind you that tonight is a night of Jewish unity – not because we all agree or practice in the same way, but because this sacred holiday transcends our differences. In Israel, everybody celebrates Yom Kippur. They don't all go to synagogue, but everybody stops. Everybody knows. On Yom Kippur, everyone is together. *Rak yachad*.

In a few days, it will be Sukkot and we will gather the four species – *lulav, etrog*, myrtle and willow. The Rabbis of the Talmud talk about the importance of that bundle. A person does not fulfill the obligation until all the species are bound together *ba-agudah ahat*, in a single bundle. *V'khen yisrael b'heartza-ah*, And so it is with the Jewish people when they fast and pray for acceptance by God, their prayers are not answered *ad she-y'hu kulan ba-agudah ahat*, until we are all bound together in a single bundle.

In a pandemic, before an election, when celebrating the tremendous accomplishments of our tiny little country or navigating the realities of war and peace and economic recession, people may debate. Reasonable minds will draw different conclusions. But we can rise above the rancor. We can, we must reach out, connect, engage with our people and our land. Because on Yom Kippur night and every night, there is only one imaginable future for the Jewish state and the Jewish people. *Rak yachad*, Only together. Gemar Hatimah Tovah. May we all be inscribed and sealed for good in the Book of Life.