

Yom Kippur Morning 5784  
Rabbi Peter W. Stein  
Temple B'rith Kodesh

In 1902, Theodor Herzl wrote a book, entitled in the German *Altneuland*, Old New Land. It puts forth his vision of the Zionist dream, that we would...and must...reestablish our home in the land of Israel.

One passage contains this exchange: “At last, Freidrich put forth a question, and every one answered it in their own way. He said ‘We see a new and happy form of human society here. What created it?’

Necessity, said Littwak the Elder.

The reunited people, said Steineck the Architect.

The new means of transportation, said Kingscourt.

Knowledge, said Dr. Marcus.

Willpower, said Joe Levy.

The forces of nature, said Professor Steineck.

Mutual toleration, said the Reverend Mr. Hopkins.

Self confidence, said Reschid Bey.

Love and pain, said David Littwak.

But the venerable Rabbi Samuel arose and proclaimed:  
God!”

It might make sense to simply accept that final answer.  
After all, the Torah is filled with references to the Promised  
Land, the place that God intended for the people to live in  
as the fulfillment of the covenant.

However, the phenomenon of modern Zionism is only  
partly built on the foundation of God’s promise. The  
extraordinary achievement of 75 years of independence is  
rooted in the tragedies and triumphs of the European  
Jewish communities. The independent state was built by  
pioneers, as they say: by the blood, sweat, and tears of  
those women and men who established a new home in  
the ancient land.

Rabbi Talia Avnon-Benveniste, Israeli Reform rabbi and Director of the Israeli rabbinical program, offers this description of Israel. “Israel is a new and young project. Soft and fragile like a newborn baby. And bold, self-confident, with a burst of energy like an adolescent. But its best years are still ahead of it. Israel’s future rests on the scale of history. Another 2000 years of creativity are awaiting our country and 15 million Jews worldwide are entrusted with that future. So, what will our deed be that will dissolve into our old and new dream?”

I find this to be a powerful foundation for this Yom Kippur day. What will be our deeds, our choices, and our actions? What are our old and new dreams? Far beyond the physical place, how do we understand that there is a promise that we have inherited and need to pursue in our own unique way?

Israel is a place that is filled with promise and potential. Let me share one example with you.

The Israeli Reform Movement launched a program called Keren B’Kavod, in English called the Center for Social and Communal Activity. They offer a variety of important initiatives.

One is called Women's Circles. These are women's empowerment groups that operate across the country. They aim to empower and strengthen women dealing with complex economic and security situations, as well as personal stress.

Sasha is a single mother of two children, ages 5 and 12, who was forced to leave her home in Ukraine following the outbreak of the war, and decided to make aliyah to Israel. Today she lives in Jerusalem with her children, and has become an active member at the Reform congregation Kol HaNeshama. She participates in the empowerment and support programs offered there by Keren B'Kavod.

Sasha is quoted as saying "This workshop has changed my life. I have made friends and we are all supporting each other through this time. We help each other and now know what we can ask for and what we can receive to help us and our children get ahead...we have a sense of community now."

I had the privilege of spending considerable time at Kol HaNeshama this past winter, when I lived in Jerusalem during my sabbatical. It is a vibrant and caring congregation, one that shares so many of our ideals.

I am honored to share this story with you, but not simply as a way of painting a picture of Israel as a place where dreams come true. More broadly, I want us to think about how each of us understands the concept of promised land in our own lives.

Yes, it is the 75th anniversary of Israel's independence and the 50th anniversary of the grave peril of the Yom Kippur War. However, just as on Rosh HaShana I declared that anniversaries are most important not as a moment to look at the past but instead to look to the future, I hold a similar perspective on Israel.

Of course, 2023 is a significant milestone for the country. 2023 is also a moment of great challenge, as the fight for democracy continues in every part of Israeli society.

However, this time in history, and especially this Yom Kippur day, is a moment when we must ask critical questions about our identity and our responsibility. As Rabbi Avnon-Benveniste offered, "What will our deed be that will dissolve into our old and new dream?"

I believe that as a Jewish community, we begin with what we have inherited. Judaism has been passed from generation to generation for thousands of years. It involves lifelong learning, the pursuit of justice, and ritual activities that can sustain us through the celebrations and challenges of the life cycle. Our congregation, for 175 years, has focused on these three pillars: the study of Torah, deep engagement in tikkun olam, and the nourishment of the soul on Shabbat, holidays, and life cycle transitions.

And underlying all three of these is a connection to the land and people of Israel. While in the nineteenth century, Reform Judaism focused its attention on its diaspora homes—being *very* American—there has been a dramatic shift. I believe that a key part of our identity is the connection to the land and people of Israel. This means we are attached to and have a responsibility towards Jews around the globe, no matter how far away they may be.

And it means cultivating a relationship with the people living in the modern state of Israel. I don't believe the biblical name Promised Land implies that we are only temporarily living outside of the land.

I do believe, though, that there is extraordinary importance for all of us in understanding what happens there. It is part of the promise, the potential, and the possibility for what it means to have a Jewish identity. If on this Yom Kippur we have the courage to ask ourselves honest questions, I hope they will center on the promise, potential, and possibility in being Jewish in 2023. If on this Yom Kippur we have the courage to ask ourselves honest questions, I hope they will center on the actions we choose to take in the coming year...and whether those actions will make a difference in the world.

During the Yom Kippur War, the great singer Leonard Cohen went to Israel to support the soldiers with his music. During this afternoon's 3:00 session, I will share some of the images from a book that was written about his experiences. For now, let me offer one.

“An officer takes [Cohen and the other musicians] out in the desert at night in a truck. The front is close but he doesn’t know how close. They stop by a few big artillery guns clustered in the sand. Everything is completely black. Does anyone want to hear some music? Some dirty soldiers gather around. They build a stage of ammunition crates and arrange the truck’s headlights for illumination. They start singing. Suddenly, an artillery officer says politely, ‘Can you stop for a moment,’ and shouts ‘GUN THREE!’ The ground shakes and the air ripples with the force of the projectile. Everyone is deafened for a few seconds. They begin singing again.”

We sing, an explosion happens, and we sing again.

We sing, an explosion happens, and we sing again.

If we are in pursuit of our promise, this will happen again and again.

Over and over in life, let us try and understand our promise, our potential, and the possibility that our actions will make a difference.



Specifically in terms of Israel, we are in an explosive time. And the song of protest is offered up again and again. The courage of the dreamers is everywhere...hundreds of thousands raising their voices and resisting the abandonment of democratic ideals.

In connection to Israel and beyond, my prayer on this day is that we will come to a greater understanding of our promise and we will craft a path to pursue it.

From the moment You called forth Sarah and Abraham, we have had a sacred bond. Each generation going up to the land in their own fashion.

From the moment You called each one of us to continue the covenant promised to Sarah and Abraham, we have had a promise to fulfill. God, help us to understand the promise, the potential, and the possibility in our actions. What will our deeds be that will sustain and achieve the old-new dream?

When we gather one year from now for the Yom Kippur rituals, I pray we will have the satisfaction in knowing that we helped honor the ancient and brand new covenant and our actions brought us closer to the land and people of Israel and closer to a more perfect and peaceful world.