

Israel 2023
Parashat Shemini
April 15, 2023
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Today is truly a banner Shabbat. Difficult, thought-provoking parsha, first Kiddush lunch after Pesach, an intriguing Kiddush Conversation to look forward to, and two notable and notably joyous, celebrations.

We celebrate the aufruf of Emily and Zak, a couple just on the precipice of a lifetime of love and adventure and building a family. (Their parents did not push for that one.) We're excited to see Emily and Zak because though they've known each other for some time, their love is new and fresh and some of us remember ourselves at that moment in our lives when everything was ahead of us and we were bursting with excitement of young love.

And — on the same day -- we celebrate the 50th anniversary of Elaine and Seth (who look like they got married when they were 8). Witnessing this love also brings us a special joy. This is a love that is mature, that has seen sickness and health, that has produced children and grandchildren. This is love that is not sparkling new but is rich in experience and appreciation and the comfort that



comes from knowing one's partner and how she or he might respond to any number of curveballs the world might throw your way.

We are so lucky that in one day we witness the arc of a loving relationship—from the early days to wisdom that is only gained through the passage of time.

It is in this context that I want to declare my love for Israel, and to trace its arc, from earliest days of infatuation, (so even before the place Emily and Zak are), when Israel could do no wrong, to a more mature love, that has seen good days and less good days, but that endures nonetheless.

Please know that this is not a political analysis. If you want to ask me privately what I think about the proposed judicial reforms, or whether settlements on the West Bank should be opened or outlawed, or whether Bibi is the most or least qualified of Israel's Prime Ministers, you can do just that – ask me privately. I expect I would learn a lot from that conversation.

You might say that I have not opined publicly about any of these Israeli political issues out of an abundance of timidity. Israel sermons have become the third rail of pulpit rabbis: We call it Death by Israel sermon. So I'm a little nervous to share these remarks with you. And frankly, I'm just talking about talking about Israel. After all, there is plenty to inspire Jews worldwide to strongly held opinions in the past years, and it has only heated up since the most recent election. You may

despise and fear Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich or you may believe they give voice to the only path to Israel's existential survival as a Jewish State.

Likely there is some outrage in one direction or the other. Actually, I hope you do feel if not outrage, then impassioned, deeply deeply engaged in developments as they unfold on an almost daily basis (Gallant is out as Defense Minister. Now he's back in.) But I will not weigh in on politics in Israel. Most critically because I expect we have all learned is how very possible it is to love a particular nation or people without being so crazy about a particular administration or government. I am happy to maintain this bimah as free from partisan opinion.

This is not that. This is a statement, perhaps overdue, that I am a Zionist, that I believe in the existence of a Jewish homeland in the land of our ancestors. More than thinking that intellectually, I feel deep my bones a connection to and hope for Israel. I can not suggest what Israeli policy should be; but I can, I must speak of my love for her even in days of crisis; even when she stumbles, even when I do not agree with Israeli policies.

For the record, I have stood on this bima and spoken about my frustration with the stranglehold the rabbanut has over the governance of daily life of even the most secular Israeli Jew. I consistently affirm that an insular cadre of Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox rabbis should not be the only voice that defines Jewish life in Israel. Israeli Jews should be able to marry, to educate their children and to be

buried in accord with their own rabbis' teachings. I have called government funding of Hareidi schools, synagogues and rabbis' salaries unconscionable while Masorti and Reform institutions and professionals must scrape by on donations. All of this seems fair game to a Jewish communal leader.

This is a simple statement. I love Israel even when I disagree with policies or administrations. I will speak out when she is attacked by rockets or by words of one-sided condemnation.

Here is the arc of my relationship with Israel –to date: Israel was the stuff of dreams.

I used to think that I fell in love with Israel the first time I visited. I thought it was the hills of Tzfat where I could see the Kabbalists sing L'cha Dodi in their flowing white robes. Or the sudden shifting of gears in Jerusalem from the moment the siren sounded the beginning of Shabbat. Or the unbridled dancing in the streets on Yom Ha-atzma'ut. My first shwarma.

But in fact I was in love with the very idea of Israel long before my first visit. In my psyche, long before I ever set foot there, Israel was a safe haven for all Jews.

A beacon of democracy.

The homeland of hearty pioneers who reclaimed deserts and drained swamplands.

Without a doubt my early love, my infatuation really, was fueled by Leon Uris' novel *Exodus* and other romantic tellings of the return and rebuilding of the homeland. It was fed by the JNF boxes we contributed to and the image of a mighty forest half a world away with a row of trees that carried my name. Horas and Jaffa oranges and songs of love for a plot of land that were exotic and romanticized. This was not a mature love; I was smitten.

And then things got complicated: Not just the bureaucracy and terrible driving. It was the political corruption. The refugees from decades ago that have not just disappeared. A more nuanced understanding of how and why Arab villagers disappeared during the war of independence.

When we first see the flaws on our beloved we can walk away and look for a more perfect specimen. But that isn't really love, is it? That's infatuation.

Whatever criticisms I have had of Israel over the years, whatever angst I have about the fragile democracy that has never even been able to write a Constitution, they are all based in love. {I have seen Israel in spasms of pain, like the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, by a religious Jew who was inspired by his religious and patriotic zeal to cut down a Prime Minister. I have seen political leaders tried and convicted and sentenced for corruption. I have witnessed the *heshbon hanefesh* – that is still in process – for the relegation of Israelis from Morocco and Iraq and Ethiopia to second and third class citizens. The contortions

of conscience and pragmatics resulting from a tract of land disputed for over 25 years} And so I love Israel for what she was intended to become, what she has been on the path to becoming, even when she veers off her path. I love that she has a path to democracy to equal justice, to peace within her borders and beyond. I love Israel because her citizens yell and carry signs and protest – almost always without violence – for whichever version of democracy they find most tenable.

I love Israel because the land is so very beautiful. Because Avraham and Sarah began a family there; and after 430 years of servitude, it is the home to which their children returned.

I love Israel because her citizens are considered overbearing and too rude to be bothered with social niceties, but when a woman with a baby carriage boards a bus, half a dozen hands reach out to help her lift her stroller up the stairs, and dozens of passengers smile and coo at her baby. I love Israel for making miracles, even when they are inconvenient: In 1956 she airlifted the entire Jewish population of Yemen and brought them finally home on Operation Magic Carpet. Once I got on a bus from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem behind an elderly woman who wasn't sure she was on the right bus. "Liy'rushalaim?" She asked the driver. "Er HaKodesh," he replied, rolling his eyes. Even that I loved. Here you board a bus and get to more than a town; you could get to yerushalaim, er ha-kodesh, a site of

holiness and history and belonging. And a crotchety bus driver would take you there like it was nothing.

And I love Israel because she is mine. I remember hearing my beloved grandmother saying to me: “Leslie Ann,” (Uh-oh. Middle name.) “You are mine and I will always love you. I might not like what you are doing right now, but I will always love you.” I remember her saying it to me more times than I wish, but her wisdom still rings true for me.

A mature love is willing to see the beloved with all its foibles. To love someone even while not condoning a practice or policy., “even when I don’t like what you are doing.” It does not crumble to dust when its object turns out to be very, very human. I think we are all capable of a love this mature, and I think Israel merits such a love.

Some of my colleagues have chosen to stop reciting the prayer for Israel as part of Shabbat services. In the words of one, “The extremism of Israel’s leadership means the words no longer apply.... ‘I couldn’t just say, “God please guide our leaders well”’ he said, referencing particular politicians who were now government ministers and who would thus be the beneficiary of such prayer. ‘The things that they’re saying cannot possibly represent the Israel that I want to support.’”

I understand his despair. But I think when someone I love is on a path that I don't like I need to double down. I need to connect more. I need to proclaim my truth more. I need to pray more.

שאלו שלום ירושלים ישליו אהביך.

יהי שלום בחילך שלוה בארמנותיך

Pray for the well being of Jerusalem. May those who love you be at peace.

May there be well-being in your ramparts peace in your citadels.

למען אחי ורעי אדברה נא שלום בך

For the sake of my kin and my companions I pray that peace be yours.