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Barnert Temple  
Yom Kippur Morning

## ***Be a Reform Zionist***

In July I traveled to Israel for the first time in 15 years. You may have read my letters home to Barnert during this quick solidarity mission, which was sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey. After the two-week conflict with Gaza this past spring, and with what turned out to be a short window of respite from Covid transmission, it was a relatively easy decision to join. I went with open eyes and an open heart, holding both my love for our spiritual Jewish home and my concerns about certain practices and policies woven into life there.

I'd like to talk with you today about deepening, or cultivating, your relationship with Israel through the framework of Reform Jewish Zionism. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany, Reform Judaism came to be as an alternative to the binary that existed about how to live as a Jew: what we would now call Orthodoxy, or nothing. Reform Judaism invited folks into a new premise – the opportunity to learn and then to make meaningful, often nuanced, choices about how to live as Jews, while fully immersed in their secular worlds. It is an “and” way of living – in our case as Jews **and** Americans.

Being reminded of our Reform Jewish “and” way of living as a Jew offers a framework to help us nurture our Reform Zionist love of Israel. Reform Zionism is a continuation of the early Zionist dream to foster a living, breathing national culture that represents the highest ideals of Jewish peoplehood. Reform Zionists believe that a Jewish state must be a democratic state<sup>i</sup> that celebrates the pluralism of Jewish practice and identity. We reject the “either/or” binary (of Israel as either “Jewish” OR “democratic”) and instead use our Reform Jewish principles to shift the paradigm. We Reform Zionists can care about Israeli lives **and** Palestinian lives. Reform Zionist organizations and congregations in Israel work on behalf of pluralism in Israel for **all** citizens, and lift up the right to dignity and quality of life for **all** people, engaging with the complex realities that entails, without abandoning our support for Israel as the Jewish State.

It is with this lens, my identity as a Reform Zionist, that I traveled to Israel – as I wrestled with what is complicated and allowed my soul to be filled with the particular magic and holiness of our spiritual home. I'll share with you a few of my most significant experiences and learnings **in areas of life in Israel**, and then invite you to join us to further connect with Israel as Reform Zionists throughout the year.

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Beautifully painted bomb shelters punctuate the landscape all around the region known as the Gaza envelope. These are the Jewish communities around the perimeter of Gaza – they form the shape of a business envelope and, given their proximity, are also

the most at-risk to missile and rocket fire from Gaza. These bomb shelters are in locations about 15 seconds apart by foot, as this is about the amount of time one would have to find cover when the warning siren goes off. And parents who send their kids out to play or to pick up milk, direct them on the route with the most accessible bomb shelters. Just think about that.

Under the auspices of the Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey, we visited a few different organizations in this region, learning about how these communities dealt with the confluence of war and COVID. It won't surprise you to know that the burden was heavy for everyone. We learned about resilience centers, which are not actually physical places. A resilience center is a concept, it's about building support networks to navigate trauma. It is not about teaching people to bounce back or move on. It is about moving forward *with* our experiences. This spring's violence spread, as you know, to parts of Israel that had previously been spared sirens and rockets. All of a sudden, the professionals who had been working for years in building resilience centers in the Gaza envelope were in high demand throughout the country, providing support to Israelis, Jewish and Muslim alike.

At one site visit, I asked the director if there was any opportunity to offer this kind of support to children in Gaza, also living through trauma. She told me that she had once been contacted by a Palestinian child psychologist, who had been hoping to learn and bring back some of this methodology to his community. Unfortunately, it became clear that his Palestinian community would not keep him safe if he were collaborating with Jews in Israel. The answer to my question was no, there was no opportunity to support the children of Gaza. No opportunity to intervene in a cycle of anger and violence, no tools to deal with the helplessness and fear that the children on the other side of the border experience, as well. As a Reform Zionist, I am angry that so many people live anxiously, waiting for the next siren, the next missile, and that there is no partner in Gaza with whom to imagine a different reality. I am awed by the resilience of all who live there and proud that our Federation supports this work.

It's worth pausing for clarity here to make a note of the different words I am using. Israel is home to people of multiple faith traditions – Jews, Muslims, Christian, Druze, and more. Israeli citizens of different religions can vote in national elections. There are also areas, territories, where residents are just that – residents but not citizens. They can vote in local but not national elections. And in many cases, they have no desire to become Israeli – they are Palestinian Arabs who happen to reside within Israel.

We had the opportunity to talk on multiple occasions with a woman named Hiba, a Palestinian Arab who works for the American Joint Distribution Committee, and who lives in East Jerusalem, as a resident but not a citizen of Israel. Hiba shared what it was like to grow up and raise children in East Jerusalem – the poverty, the inequality, the treatment she received and the occasions when she was unable to easily return home to her children after a day at work in West Jerusalem. She is an exception: a university-

educated woman who speaks Hebrew and works in West Jerusalem. She spoke honestly about the lack of social services available to the residents in East Jerusalem. When Covid arrived last year, this community had to create, on its own, the facilities to care for their sick. Ironically, this urgency made it possible for health directors there to meet with health directors in West Jerusalem – an important moment of coming together. Like many Arabs and other minorities throughout Israel, she felt directly the pain of limited access to Israel's considerable resources, including first-world health care. Unfortunately, it is usually the Jews who live in "first world Israel" while non-Jews continue to struggle.

Hiba is a smart, articulate, courageous, feminist – a trend setter in her community. She was honest with us. She is not particularly interested in talking about two states or shared societies, a phrase I will return to in a bit. She has a different mission in mind. I asked her what she wanted me to share with you about the work we – our Jewish communities here in the States – could do to move toward a different tomorrow. Hiba wants us to learn about the gaps that exist in these neighboring areas. It is most important, she shares, that residents of East Jerusalem are given the opportunities to have the hope, *tikvah*, of living with dignity, *kavod*. When we give people this opportunity to participate in the Israeli community by, for example, improving and expanding education, individuals will be able to go to universities, join the workforce, and more organically change their own understandings of, and connection with, the State of Israel. For me as a Reform Zionist, Hiba's words are a reminder that we need to be open enough to learn and to listen and to advocate for the opportunity for each person to live with dignity and hope, whether that person is a Jew, an Israeli Arab, or a Palestinian Arab in East Jerusalem. Israel needs us to be such advocates.

Hours after arriving in Israel we made our way to the Knesset, where we met with Member of the Knesset, MK, Idan Roll, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. (It's worth noting here as a point of Reform Zionist pride that MK Roll is a proud Israeli Reform Jew, one of a growing number in positions of leadership in Israel.) There is an unprecedented coalition in place right now in the Knesset in Israel – the most diverse group of leaders ever to lead, including representation from an Arab party. One message we heard clearly from MK Roll, is that their work right now is in building relationships internally, listening to the voices of people newly empowered to speak, and staying focused on what is possible to achieve. For MK Roll, a gay man, this includes working within a Knesset that will not champion the causes of the LGBTQ community.

Our voices can help Israel become more pluralistic, more representative and accepting of the many different ways we know people can live as Jews. In the prior government, then Prime Minister Netanyahu broke his promise to enlarge and formally establish an egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall. At this time there is a large men's section and a smaller women's section, separated by a *mechitza*, a divider. This space is governed by Orthodox rules for religious practice and is often filled with Jews who are

hostile to women's full participation in worship and ritual, or any kind of egalitarian service. The only way for liberal communities like ours to be fully included in religious practice at the Western Wall is to create this third place. It has been mostly undeveloped for a long time now. MK Roll was optimistic that this Knesset would make good on the promise to connect and complete this space. There will be other issues, too, around pluralism in Israel that need our attention – like treating rabbis equally, regardless of denomination, and thereby recognizing non-Orthodox conversions and marriages. As Reform Zionists, we know that any whole vision for the Israel of our *tikvateinu*, our hope, requires that all Jews can practice equally.

Which brings me to our opportunity to learn, build relationships, and support progressive Jews in Israel. For years now we have had a relationship with a Reform congregation called Kehillat Yozma, which is in Modiin, a suburb of Jerusalem. The sister relationship is important for both congregations. In addition to much needed financial support we provide, our connection makes it possible for Israeli Reform Jews to learn about life here – they also want to support us, as we navigate anti-Semitism and search for language to live as Reform Zionist American social activists.

Like American Reform congregations, Israeli Reform congregations are pivotal to the work of dialogue and community building. They are leaders in cultivating relationships with neighbors, Jews or Arabs, and working to address inequality and inequity in Israel. “Shared society” is a concept I was introduced to on this trip. It refers to building relationships between, and equity for, Israeli Society at large – Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druz, and all citizens of Israel. Rabbi Nir Barkin, the Senior Rabbi at Yozma, wrote that they are committed to doing their part to ease the ongoing conflict by continuing a dialogue with Israeli groups who are interested in finding common ground and a joint future.

After the fall holidays, we will be engaging in two different and important conversations. The first will be scheduled Zoom gatherings with Rabbi Barkin. He and I will invite you into conversation on varied topics, allowing our communities to get to know each other and to build, anew, our long-standing relationship. Yozma also invited us to be their partners in a program sponsored by the World Zionist Organization called Beit Ha'am, Films from Two Sides of the Lens. Over the course of the year, Barnert and Yozma will view three Israeli films that present different perspectives on Israeli society, and then join together in discussion and learning. This program sounds fun and worthwhile, and I am so glad that Yozma invited us to be their partners! Just imagine, how wonderful it will be to spend Shabbat with our sister congregation, Yozma, when we are finally able to reschedule our trip to Israel!

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You know the saying: two Jews, three opinions. As a Reform Zionist, I am proud that we come from a tradition that lifts up multiple opinions. The Talmud is meticulous about

recording the varied voices of our tradition as they work to resolve answers to tough questions. This is why we are taught that we must have within us a “heart of many rooms,<sup>i</sup>” a way to make space for multiple opinions and also the discomfort that often comes along with them. Reform Zionism embodies this necessary way of living in the “and.” We have space in our heads and our hearts-of-many-rooms to stay connected with, and to support, Israel right now, while also focusing on how we can help to realize the Israel of our collective dreams.

Is this Israel a utopian pipe dream? I’m not sure it matters what the answer is to this question. Rabbi Marc Rosenstein recently wrote that “Utopias [are places that can never be fully realized.] They help us keep our gaze on what we want and not on what we have; on what we want to do and not on what we feel compelled to do; on dreams and not on resentment and revenge; on taking responsibility and not on assigning blame.”<sup>iii</sup>

On one of our longer bus trips, our tour guide told us about the white barn owls. These predatory birds were introduced by an Israeli scientist to help control a rodent problem in kibbutzim in areas that happened to border Jordan and the Palestinian territories, toward the North of Israel. But owls don’t know from borders, and when they flew out of Israel they were being inadvertently poisoned by rodenticides in fields outside the kibbutz, on Jordanian and Palestinian fields. The Israeli leader of this project sought out and cultivated partners in both places to launch a cross border program that would benefit everyone. Like the timeless white dove, these white barn owls became a reminder that one way to build coexistence is to pursue work that supports the lives and livelihoods of all peoples.

In this new year, I invite you to dream with me, as Reform Zionists, of this utopian “not yet place” where all human life is revered, where all Jewish practice is respected, and where leaders and civilians collaborate in the pursuit of wholeness and peace. Our Israel needs us to be messengers of possibility, and of *tikvah*, of hope. And this *tikvah* is at the heart of the dream of Reform Zionism realized in the very name of Israel’s national anthem, *Hatikah*, the hope. Recall these familiar words: *Kol od balevav p’nimah, nefesh Yehudi homiah...od lo avdah tikvateinu* ~ As long as the hearts within Jewish souls yearn...our hope will not be lost. Our hearts are open. Our Reform Jewish souls yearn for what can be. Let’s embrace the Israel of our timeless *tikvah*.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/israel-reform-judaism/what-reform-zionism-0>

<sup>ii</sup> Being Jewish Today, Tony Bayfield. Perhaps a man might imagine: ‘Since the House of Shammai declares something unclean and the House of Hillel declares it clean; this one prohibits and that one permits’--he might then ask, ‘why should I continue to learn Torah?’ All the words have been given by a single Shepherd. One God created them, one Provider gave them... So make yourself a heart of many rooms. Bring into it the words of the House of Shammai and the words of the House of Hillel, the words of those who declare unclean and the words of those who declare clean. (Toseftah Sotah 7.12)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/choosing-vision-over-victimhood>