

*At services last Shabbat morning, Rabbi Peltz spoke about Israel's new government and its potential impact on policies and issues for our Conservative Jewish community in particular and Israel and the Jewish people in general. This message is adapted from his remarks.*

In the opening verses of the book of *Shemot*, Exodus, all is well. Jacob and his family have moved to Egypt, and though their generation has passed, their family is growing and thriving. And then, because of this, everything turns when a new king is crowned in Egypt. That Pharaoh notices the growing influence of the Israelites. The Torah says, “Pharaoh said to **his nation**, “Look, there is **another nation**, the people of Israel, that are much too numerous for us.” He goes on to lay the groundwork for enslaving and persecuting the Israelites. Many commentaries have noted that this all begins with Pharaoh identifying the Israelites as an *Am B'nai Yisrael*, the nation of the people of Israel. It is ironic that the first person to define our people as a people in the Torah is Pharaoh, who does it out of a sense of fear and hatred. This, of course, is not the first time that we have been defined by those who seek to destroy us. It happens again and again throughout history: the Babylonians, the Romans, the Nazis, antisemites today, and many others. But is this the way we want our nation to be defined, by those who seek to destroy us? Of course not. There are other ways to define a nation. What really defines a people? And what do you think it is that ought to define us, as the Jewish people?

There are many answers to this question. We are defined by our shared history, by our practices, by our culture. Most importantly, we are defined by our values. Jewish values guide our lives by helping us to set our priorities and determining right from wrong. Values of *Talmud Torah* (studying Torah), *Avodah* (service to God) and *Zakhor* (Remember!) help us honor our traditions. Values like *Hesed* (kindness), *Tzedakah* (helping those in need), *Mishpat* (Justice) and *Tzelem Elohim* (being created in the image of God) teach us about our responsibility to others. There are also values like *Klal Yisrael* (Jewish peoplehood) and *Ahavat Yisrael* (love of Israel, both the people and the land) that give us a sense of belonging. They teach us the importance of being connected to, and responsible for, Jews around the world.

It is these values of *Klal Yisrael* and *Ahavat Yisrael* that I have been thinking about a lot lately. A new government has been elected in the state of Israel, led again by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's longest serving Prime Minister. This government includes some politicians who not so long ago were considered to be too extreme to be serious candidates, due to their views on religious pluralism, relations with the Palestinians, LGBTQ rights, and restructuring the judicial system and others. Their views have not moderated, but they are a part of Prime Minister Netanyahu's governing coalition. This has led many in Israel and in the Diaspora to worry.

Now, Jews worrying is not news. That is an old story. But the fact that the stated goals of this new Israeli government conflicts with Israel's stated values, is indeed news, and very very worrisome. And it's a big deal. We care deeply about Israel, and work hard to imbue that value of *ahavat Yisrael* in our community and especially in our students. Just two weeks ago we just heard last week from four of our teens who just returned from our annual two-week Confirmation class trip to Israel. Additionally, we will soon be announcing more opportunities to travel to Israel with our community in conjunction with our celebratory weekend for Israel's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday April 28-30. We are congregation that is deeply, deeply, committed to *Ahavat Yisrael* and *Klal Yisrael*. And it is because of this we wonder: what we should do at this moment? What do we say when leaders of Israel are working on legislation and policies that undermine what we understand to be our Jewish values, and the values of [Israel's own Declaration of Independence](#)?

If you haven't read it lately, or ever, click on the link. It's a power document. To paraphrase a bit, Israel's Declaration of Independence lays out a vision to develop a country “for the benefit of all its

inhabitants...based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel...[to] ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex... [and to] guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.”

These values underlie Israel’s compact with its citizens, as well as with world Jewry. And many of them, it seems, contradict the direction that this new Israeli government is heading. So what do we do, what should we do, as people who care about Israel? I’ve been thinking a lot about this these past few weeks, and reading and listening to many people whose views on Israel I deeply respect. People like Yossi Klein HaLevi and Matti Friedman, both of whom spoke at TBS about Israel last year. Additionally, Rabbi Donniel Hartman and Dr. Ilana Stein-Hain, as well as others that I got to study with in Jerusalem this past summer with the Hartman Institute, have helped me reflect on this moment. Taking all this in, let me suggest three thoughts on how we should respond to this moment:

1. **All deep love involves not only support, but also worry, fear and criticism.** When our children need guidance, we give it to them. We don’t tell them that everything they do is perfect. The same goes for any healthy relationship with a family member, friend, or co-worker. Our tradition teaches that love without criticism is not real love. It is ok to be critical of policies and positions that Israel takes, as long as it comes from a place of love, and from real desire to offer what we can to help Israel live up to its values.

Additionally, we need to recognize that one of our biggest challenges in connecting people with Israel today is apathy. Even with Birthright and all of the Israel trips that we run, too many Jews have never been to Israel. We know from surveys that interest in Israel is troublingly low among American Jews, especially younger Jews. Israel belongs to the Jewish people, and we need to own it. We cannot let the contradiction between Israel’s leaders and Israel’s values lead to more people throwing up their hands and signing off from all things Israel. Apathy is also a threat, and one we must not be apathetic about.

2. **We should be concerned, and we should find our voice.** As people who live outside of Israel we can’t determine Israel’s policy, but our voice is still important. Here is one example: About two weeks ago, the heads of the Jewish Agency, Jewish Federations, the World Zionist Organization and Keren Hayesod – the top international organizations that speak for the organized Jewish community, sent a letter to PM Netanyahu expressing their deep concern that “certain members of the incoming government want to alter the long-standing status quo on religious affairs that could affect the Diaspora.” They were most concerned about altering the Law of Return, which now allows anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent to make Aliyah, to requiring that both parents be halakhically Jewish, as defined by the Ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate. It was an important and powerful statement that was noticed by PM Netanyahu. We don’t have to be the head of an important organization to express our concern. Through our own advocacy, *tzedakah*, and visits, we will continue to give voice to the need for religious pluralism in Israel, including equal rights and funding for Masorti/Conservative Judaism, along with the other issues that are important to us.
3. **Religion and Zionism can mix.** Just because much of these new policies are coming from the Religious Zionist parties doesn’t mean that their politics is Judaism’s politics. Just because someone identifies as Orthodox doesn’t mean that their positions represent all of Judaism. My Judaism is not synonymous with corruption and provocation. My Judaism is not intolerant of LGBTQ individuals, nor does it discount the dignity of Israel’s non-Jewish citizens. My Judaism does not have to be everybody’s Judaism, for it respects each stream of Judaism to live in the way

that it understands our ancient and multi-layered tradition. There will always be contradictions and disagreements about what our tradition means, we are Jews after all, but Israel is the homeland for all of us, just as Israel's own Declaration of Independence states. Whether we live in Israel or live here, we are all responsible for defining what Judaism is and what it stands for. Just as there are those who advocate one understanding of Judaism, we too have the responsibility to advocate for our own understanding of Judaism. And this we will continue to do.

The same goes for how we understand the idea first presented in our Torah reading of *Am B'nai Yisrael*, the nation of the people of Israel. We cannot be defined by Pharaohs, by the people who seek to oppress us, nor should we be defined by the most extreme among us. Our voice matters. Our support for the people and the organizations that fight for our values in Israel matters. Our continued commitment to Israel matters.

As concerning as things are, it remains to be seen how many of these extreme proposals will actually become policies. I don't want to assume everything will be terrible, but I also don't want to assume that everything will be ok. What I do know is that we want an Israel that thrives. We don't want an Israel that divides the Jewish people, we want an Israel that embraces all Jews. We need Israel's help, and Israel needs our help. We are all part of *Am B'nai Yisrael*, and we each have a role in defining who we are, and who we will be.