

EREV ROSH HASHANAH 2023
Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley
Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein

Shanah Tovah, Gut Yontif, and Shabbat Shalom.//

It is so wonderful for us to be together tonight,

both here at CBS and watching from home.//

It's always comforting to know we are not alone,

to see one another, to be present for each other.//

May this new year, 5784,

be a healthy, happy, & sweet one for each of us

and for our extended families.//

There have been ups this past year, and downs,

but through it all we have had each other,

to celebrate with and support each other—

and that is what community is all about.//

It continues to be my honor and my privilege

to be your rabbi at this time in world history,

and to journey through life with you, as your partner.//

The Israeli Supreme Court began meeting this week

to assess the lawfulness of recent Knesset actions.//

Earlier this summer, in what seemed like a grotesque

and tragic convergence,

the Knesset passed the first piece of judicial reform

that has ripped Israeli society apart.//

This occurred during the week of Tisha B'Av,

when Jews traditionally mark
the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem,
attributed by our sages
to *sinat chinam*, profound, bitter hatred among Jews.//

When the president of the Jewish state spoke publicly
about Israel being in what he called
“a state of emergency,”
it is not an exaggeration to assert that,
as the bill to limit *reasonableness* in judicial decisions
becomes law, Israel has crossed a tipping point.//

Sadly, perhaps tragically,
Israel is no longer the democracy it has proudly built,

fostered, & maintained for the past 75 years.//

There has been a very powerful & negative reaction
to this change,

both internally and externally.//

Elite and experienced Israeli pilots & soldiers
are refusing to serve in the reserves;

Israeli streets & squares are filled with protesters;
tech & other companies overseas & here in America
are rethinking their investments in Israel,
a young country

that was not too long ago called the Start-Up Nation.//

Some fear that an Israeli civil war
is becoming an all-too real possibility, a dire threat
to the security, economy, health, & diplomatic status
of the Jewish state
as well as a moral failure
& an affront to Jewish values
that could unravel support among diaspora Jewry
here & around the world.//

On this Rosh Hashanah, this new Jewish year,
the Jewish state is in crisis mode—
not because of the threat of terrorism
or an external enemy,

but because of a battle over its character & soul.//

My friends, we are in uncharted territory.//

On Tisha B'Av, Jews read Lamentations, a holy book
that describes Jerusalem in a state of mourning.//

And many observers this past summer

saw distressing parallels

between the government's new law,

the erosion of the authority & independence

of the supreme court,

& that ancient national tragedy.//

"Alas," the book of Lamentations begins,

“she dwelt among the nations but found no rest,
all of her pursuers overtook her in narrow straits.”//

The pursuers described in this biblical book,
the enemies of the Jewish people,
were the Babylonians,
who were determined to conquer the land.//

Today's pursuers are a small group of extremists
in the Knesset who are determined
to weaken Israel's judicial system—
a system that serves as the only real check
on the other branches of government//

This radical element is zealously committed

to remaking Israel into a religious state
with little interest in democratic values or citizens –
be they secular, gay or Arab –
who don't share their extremist, messianic views.//

Traditionally, the three weeks leading up to Tisha B'Av
are a solemn period of mourning,
which lead up to the saddest day of the Jewish year.//

This past summer, each of those three weeks
marked the passage in a Knesset committee
of requirements to move forward
in expunging "reasonableness" as an accepted standard
in Israeli law.//

In response & protest, television footage from the air
showed tens of thousands of Israelis
marching the 37 miles from Tel Aviv to the Knesset.//
For some it evoked powerful images
of the sacred pilgrimages that the Jewish people made
to Jerusalem in ancient times./

But the streets of Jerusalem today are not desolate,
as depicted in the book of Lamentations.//

They are filled with hundreds of thousands of Israelis—
left, center, & right, observant & secular—
who represent the majority of citizens

opposed to the rapid pace & dangerous extremism
of the current Knesset efforts.//

They are the hope for the future,
the vanguard of all those who are passionate about,
and committed to,
restoring & reclaiming the balance of Israel as *both*
a Jewish & a democratic state.//

According to American-Israeli author Daniel Gordis,
known for his loyal defense of the Jewish state,
if diaspora Jews do not sufficiently support
the current protest movement in Israel,
“we can no longer call ourselves one people.”//

Gordis goes on: “I am begging diaspora Jews
to be on the right side of history”
and not remain silent at this perilous moment. //

The tragedy here lies in the profound inability for Israelis
to achieve some sort of compromise,
when many of the critics of the new law
themselves *acknowledged* that reforms were in order.//

To their credit,
those critics of the Netanyahu government
were pleading for the process to be slowed down
so that they might reach a consensus.//

Some proponents of the bill admitted that it was extreme,

but felt the need to pass it while they could.//

The Bible tells us that Pharoah's heart was hardened
during moments of crisis;

Prime Minister Netanyahu,
following his pacemaker surgery, lacked the heart
to listen to the clear majority of Israelis & back down,
or at least slow down.//

Is that an unfair comparison?

Maybe, but the fault for this frightening scenario
can be attributed essentially to the man whose legacy
as one of Israel's most effective leaders

seemed assured just a few years ago.//

Regrettably and sadly,

the combination of his multiple years in power

and the prospect of facing time in prison

for alleged crimes of fraud & bribery

have resulted in Netanyahu forming a government

dependent on radical ultra-nationalist

and religiously ideological characters drunk with power

of their own.//

Many Israelis are deeply worried that this chaotic time

may well lead to a large emigration to the U.S.

and other Western countries

of Israelis no longer willing to bear the burden
of paying high taxes
and risking the lives of their children in the army
to support a burgeoning population
of ultra-Orthodox *charedim*,
many of whom are under-employed
and exempt from military service in the IDF.//

One Israeli commentator has observed that
“This would be the first emigration based,
not on economics, but on ideology,”
warning that the country could lose
some of its best & brightest young people,

disillusioned by today's realities.//

Still, with all of these dark signs,

it is critical to remember that at the core of Judaism,

and Jewish history,

there is always hope for a brighter future.//

Ironically, during this past year of national turmoil,

Netanyahu finally managed to unite

a significant majority of the country—

but in *opposition*, not in support.//

On the political side, he's united the left,

center, & moderate right;

on the religious side, all but the *charedim*

and religious nationalists stood firm for months
in opposing the rush to pass legislation
that could well lead the Jewish state to autocracy.//

The flag of Israel is waved by virtually everyone now,
not just those on the right;

we see it on television and in the streets.//

Leaders from every walk of life have stepped up,
and spoken out,

about the precious & fragile nature of democracy,
and how it must be protected & preserved,
no longer taken for granted.//

And the question remains for Jews around the world:

Is it too late?//

The Book of Lamentations, despite its vivid & horrific descriptions of the suffering of the Jewish people, ends on a positive note:

“Bring us back to you, Lord, and we shall return.

Renew our days as of old—

chadesh yameinu kekedem.”

The irony here is that both sides can lay claim to that statement, underscoring that the battle ahead is for the very future of the Jewish state.//

After 75 turbulent but robust years, its leaders are still grappling with the two imperatives

of democracy and Judaism.//

This recent Knesset vote was a defeat for democracy.//

If we are ever to learn the lessons of the past—

that extremism leads to chaos

and that nations are only as strong

as the bonds among their citizens—

it is *now*.//

Let us support our brothers & sisters in Israel

as they fight the good fight;

let us make our voices in the diaspora heard

in our own right;

let peace & justice take root in the Holy Land,

finally, and forever.//

Ken Yehi Ratzon – May it be God's will.