

Kol Nidrei 5784
Israel Wrestling
Rabbi Karen Citrin

50 years ago this Yom Kippur, in a coordinated surprise assault on October 6, 1973, forces led by Egypt and Syria attacked the State of Israel. They had picked a day when virtually every Jew in the country was either at home or at synagogue - Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year. Due to the sanctity of the day, television and radio stations had ceased their broadcasts. The internet, of course, had not yet been invented. This made it all the more terrifying when Israel's air raid sirens started blaring. Young men in prayer shawls rose from their seats, embraced loved ones, and headed for the front. As Arab forces advanced from the north and south, Israelis feared for their lives and for the soldiers who were defending them.

It took several weeks for the tide to turn, and a ceasefire put in place. More than 2,600 Israeli soldiers had been killed. Nearly every forest, park, promenade, and nature reserve in Israel contains at least one commemorative monument to a fallen soldier or entire army unit, such as the Jewish National Fund memorial on the battleground which came to be known as the "Valley of Tears," "*Emek Ha'bacha*." Our own temple member, Avi Glaser, who served in active army service in Israel from 1971 to 1974, conveyed how hard this year is for him.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War. The recent film, *Golda*, documents Prime Minister Golda Meir's leadership during this dark, troubled chapter in Israel's history. When Golda was Prime Minister, the idea that Israel would be so vibrant 50 years later would have seemed like a dream.

In the last 50 years, Israel has become a technological leader, a Start-Up Nation, renowned for innovation and a thriving economy. Israel is on the cutting edge of culture, with world-class theater, art and cuisine. Israeli vineyards produce excellent wines—and no, Manischewitz is not Israeli. And Israel's diversity can be seen most vividly in her people. The same country that holds Jerusalem, home to many strictly religiously observant people, also holds Tel Aviv, which *Out Magazine* called "the gay capital of the Middle East." Walking on the same beach, you can see secular Israelis in their bathing suits playing paddleball, men with black hats and beards accompanied by women with hair covered pushing baby carriages, an Arab family enjoying a picnic, children of all skin tones splashing in the waves, a lesbian couple holding hands as they lie on their towels, tourists bathing in the Mediterranean sun. Jews from all over the world have made *aliyah* to live in Israel. And not only Jews: Israel is home to Muslims, Christians, Druze, Baha'i, Bedouin, among others.¹ When 80 of us from Temple Beth David travelled to Israel a few years ago, we experienced this colorful vibrancy of Israeli society. The fledgling country survived and turned the tide with progress.

Now, 50 years later, Israel is facing its greatest crises since that moment. However, this time the threat is internal not external. For 38 weeks in a row, protestors have been marching in the streets. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis are standing up and speaking out against the current government's assault on democracy. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition, which includes far-right extremists, put forth what they called judicial reforms, in essence, to remove the check and balance of the Supreme Court to overturn legislation that threatens the civil right of all Israelis, especially minorities.

¹ With gratitude to Rabbi Kenneth Carr, Rosh HaShanah 5784 Sermon

75 years after the creation of the State of Israel, its existential survival is once again in question. Yossi Klein Halevi, veteran journalist, thinker and no leftist, calls the present government, “morally illegitimate.”² This government has normalized institutionalized racism, misogyny, occupation and oppression. With a weakened Supreme Court, extremists can push for continued expansion of West Bank settlements that make a two-state solution all but impossible. The most basic norms and rights are being challenged, especially toward women, the LGBTQ community, Arab Israelis and Palestinians, and Reform Jews.

As Israel’s biblical namesake suggests, today’s Israel is mired in a wrestling match between competing visions of what a Jewish state should look like, and the values that guide it. Protestors spanning multi generations are claiming a new sense of responsibility for shaping the future of Israel. Protestors chant “*demokratia, demokratia*” in Hebrew in the streets. And the demonstrations have spread here in America including Boston.

It is telling that the face of the protests, the initiator, Shikma Bressler, is a mother of 5 young children and a particle physicist at a lab near Tel Aviv. Dr. Bressler describes the marches as a spiritual experience, a biblical pilgrimage with miles of demonstrators waving Israeli flags. And thousands coming out to pass out food for the marchers, and shoes when her own shoes broke. “It’s rare that you recognize you are in a real-time historical moment,” she said. “It’s amazing to be living it as it happens and to be taking on some responsibility for this story.”³

The shofar has sounded. The time is now, for us to take responsibility in shaping the story of Israel. In the words of the Reverend Dr. King, “There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution.” It is incumbent upon us to consider our own relationship with Israel. It is easy to feel despondent, to lose hope. I, too, have gone through a process of assessing my relationship with Israel, and am still in process. From the first time I landed in Israel during college and kissed the tarmac of the Ben Gurion airport (it was somehow ingrained in me to do that); to my Israel year in rabbinical school where I learned to barter at the *shuk* (open market), to navigate the buses, to love Hebrew, to question what felt confusing, to meet Arabs who held similar values, and to feel part of *Am Yisrael* - the Jewish People; to barely being able to join our Beth David group at the Kotel due to my anger about the ultra-Orthodox monopoly and gender exclusion; to my desire to lead us on more trips to Eretz Yisrael. I encourage you to join our next trip, hopefully soon.

The late Israeli novelist Amos Oz once said, “I love Israel even at times when I don’t like it.” There is much to love, and much not to like. Yet, isn’t our world better with an Israel to love even as we wrestle with the things we don’t like? In the spirit of hope, in addition to the recent protests, I would like to share a few glimpses tonight into positive efforts, where non-governmental people are coming together for good in Israel.

The first is Women of the Wall. Anat Hoffman, founding member and current chair, spoke to us here at Beth David last March. Committed to gender equality at Jerusalem’s holy site, the Kotel, Anat has dedicated her life to the pursuit of *tikkun olam*, repair of our world. I have personally

² <https://www.hartman.org.il/this-israeli-moment/>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/02/world/middleeast/shikma-bressler-israel-judicial-protests.html?searchResultPosition=9>

participated with the group on many occasions. I love to wear their *tallit*. Their latest initiative, a Women of the Wall choir, made up of professional singers, raise their voices to counter the bull horns and loudspeakers from the men's side of the wall, which aim to drown out women's voices in prayer. The choir's melodies and harmonies are exquisite. I am excited for the continued partnership between Temple Beth David and Women of the Wall. The group stands for religious equality. Women of the Wall is the spirit of Reform Judaism, wrapped in a tapestry of Jewish pluralism as it brings together women and supporters from across the Jewish religious spectrum.

The second is the Society to Protect Nature in Israel (SPNI). My father-in-law, Rabbi Paul Citrin, has been a board member and advocate since 2020. Something we can all agree on and support is the topography, climate, flora, and animal species within the land of Israel. A big challenge in the Middle East is water. Arab citizens of Israel participate in the work of SPNI, and Arab students in the West Bank participate in environmental seminars. Jordanians have worked with SPNI on common concerns over water and Dead Sea maintenance. What politicians have been unable to achieve in people-to-people contact, SPNI does. SPNI creates and maintains the national hiking trail system. I have loved my hikes in the land. An online program for Israeli and Diaspora communities connects us to the ecology of the land, including bird migration and preservation against environmental damage. Rabbi Paul Citrin speaks of "healing the land, and, being healed by the land."⁴ When the politics of Israel bring us down, we can connect through our innate, ancient relationship to the land of Israel. I am delighted that a local representative from SPNI, along with Paul, will join us at Beth David this spring.

A third glimpse into positive progress is *Yad B'Yad* – Hand in Hand, a network of Jewish-Arab integrated bilingual schools. Starting with fifty children in one school, there are now six schools and communities throughout Israel bringing together thousands of Jewish and Arab children. In a region where different people live in fear and separation, *Yad B'Yad* offers a vision and reality of coexistence. There is no better place to start than with children, the next generation.

Anat Hoffman urged us that "Israel is too important to leave to Israelis alone." Just when we might feel inclined to turn our backs, Israel needs us more than ever. Israel especially needs our vibrant American Jewish vision of democracy and religious pluralism, our questions, and our love. Rather than have Israel tear us apart, let us find renewed relationship to bring us together. In addition to supporting Israel's Religious Action Center, the Reform Movement's social justice arm in Israel, I will email resources [below] about how you can help and get involved.

Israel's Declaration of Independence aspires to the highest standard of Jewish values - to be a nation valuing human rights for all its citizens and inhabitants. I quote, the State of Israel "will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex," will "guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture," and "will be based on the freedom, justice and peace envisaged by the prophets of Israel." (1948)

We come from a long line of prophets and visionaries. Today's prophets have spoken. "*Od lo avda tikvateinu*. Our hope is not yet lost." This is no time to abandon the Zionist project. Our

⁴ "Healing the Land; Healed by the Land," Rabbi Paul Citrin. CCAR Journal Summer 2023.

tradition teaches, “*Kol Yisrael aravim zeh ba’zeh* – All of Israel is responsible for one another.” (Talmud) Let us resolve to critique, to wrestle with, and to stand together with Israel.

Perhaps the greatest source of pride and hope for any people resides in its music. How music has the incredible ability to express what words cannot. About love. And fracture. And hope. About human journey. About a small country fighting for its very existence. Music has this incredible way of binding people together.

A song has been sung in the streets of Israel each week when Shabbat concludes as an anthem of the protests. “*Ein li eretz acheret* – I have no other country,” by Ehud Manor:

אֵין לִי אֶרֶץ אַחֶרֶת
גַּם אִם אֶדְמָתִי בּוֹעֶרֶת

It has been voted time and again as Israel’s favorite song, written in response to the Lebanon war and retaining its power through the years. Manors' wife recalls singing the song in November of 1995 minutes before Rabin was assassinated. Over the years, this song has become a rallying cry for despair, hope, and peace:

Ein li eretz acheret - I have no other country
even if my land is aflame
Just a word in Hebrew
pierces my veins and my soul -
With a painful body, with a hungry heart,
Here is my home.
I can’t keep silent in light of how my country has changed her face, won’t quit trying to remind her. In her ears, I’ll sing my cries until she opens her eyes.

President Chaim Herzog wrote these words on a napkin for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi following the January 6th attacks at the U.S. Capitol, at a moment when her faith in America was dwindling. The words capture the sadness and also inspire hope.

A new generation of singer/song writers has arisen, and I want to end with their words tonight. Ishai Ribo sings of a people wounded but not defeated, a people that is tired from failure, but just like us tonight, calling out to God in the streets, a people fighting for its life, seeking the God of Yom Kippur, who in mercy, helps us to overcome. *Hoshieinu* – you will recognize the Hebrew from the prayer, *Avinu Malkeinu*. It is the age-old hope that this modern experiment in an ancient land can be sustained from generation to generation. You are part of this song.

(*Nechake Lecha* by Goshen/Ribo)

Resources:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/an-open-letter-to-israels-friends-in-north-america/>

<https://www.irac.org>

<https://arza.org>

<https://womenofthewall.org.il>

<https://natureisrael.org>

<https://www.handinhandk12.org>

<https://www.nif.org>

<https://www.boston4democracyinisrael.com>