

*I Love Israel – Kol Nidre Sermon 5779
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
Rabbi Howard J. Goldsmith*

[Lately a lot of people have been asking me about Israel. Why do I support it so strongly? Why don't I support it more strongly? They ask why their uncle doesn't talk about anything else. They ask why their niece doesn't care. And, people have asked why our programming this year focuses on Israel. And so, some thoughts on Israel.]

I love Israel.

I think I fell in love right away. On one of the first birthright trips ever run. Back in January of 2000 right at the turn of the millennium. The guide on our bus, a French ex-pat Renee Gutman, handed out dates and candied pecans and explained that we were eating the fruit of the land of Israel, that everyone we saw was Jewish: the drivers, garbage men, traffic police, bag handlers, business people, lifeguards, postal workers, bartenders, gardeners, soldiers... everyone. For the first time in my life being Jewish felt like more than family get togethers, more than my synagogue community. I felt a connection with Jews around the world and I fell in love. It was Israel through rose colored lenses. All the mess and troubles basically ignored. But hey, who tours the tough part of town when you're on vacation? No one I know. And, anyway, peace seemed right around the corner in January of 2000. And so, on that bus, I fell in love with Israel.

I love Israel.

Despite the fact that just months later the Oslo peace process broke down at Camp David and the second intifada started to rage. In the fall of 2000 I'd I read the Times before heading to my consultant job at 51st and 3rd, I knew the places where rocks were landing on people at the Western Wall I'd prayed at just weeks before. Now, seeing the horror of exploded buses I thought of my bus rides around Jerusalem, Tiberias, Akko, Tel Aviv. It didn't feel foreign, like the exotic violence in Sierra Leone or Somalia, it felt – personal. From the euphoria of almost peace to the devastation of places I knew and buses I'd ridden and a land that I newly loved riddled with violence and horror. All this while I consulted and learned Hebrew and taught 5th graders at Central Synagogue between meetings with consulting clients and applied and somehow got accepted to rabbinical school and – too afraid – chose not to go to Israel for my first year and instead to exile in Cincinnati home of skyline chili instead of hummus, Graeters ice cream instead of baklava or dates or candied pecans.

I love Israel...

... a love that only grew over my first year in rabbinical school in Cincinnati. Away from the land, as I learned about the land. I learned our לשון קודש, our holy language, as I delved into our sacred texts and their stories which took place in that ancient and faraway place. I learned the history of the Jewish state from Herzl in Basel to Ben Gurion to Ariel Sharon. Surrounded by like-minded lovers of Israel, lovers of Judaism, lovers of humanity, I prayed each day for peace while facing to the east as the poet said, "ליבִי בְּמִזְרָח" "My heart, my heart was in the east even as

I was in the furthest west.”¹ The headlines from Israel mingled with the texts of Isaiah, the stories of Jacob, the machinations of the kings from David to Herod and 1000 years of sovereignty in between. When I’d throw up my hands in frustration with Ehud Barak or Olmert or Sharon I’d go study the reigns of Rehoboam or Jehu or Uzziah and realize that sovereignty was no easier in 800 Before the Common Era than in the early 2000s of the Common Era. I took growing pride in Reform Judaism, created in the forge of tradition meeting paradigm shifting 19th century modernity in so much the same way that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakki transformed 1st century Biblical, sacrificial Judaism into something new when Rome destroyed The Temple.² Past and the present mingling in the headlines and our holy books and in the Land of Israel and all the lands in which we’ve lived, even Cincinnati, Ohio.

I love Israel,

a love profoundly deepened when I finally made it back there, this time to live for a year in my fourth year of studies. Now engaged to Jennifer, now with an apartment and not a bed in a hostel, now knowing where I would land and where I would go and still feeling the thrill of driving up Highway One and glimpsing Ben Yehuda Street before moving in to our home for the year. I learned. But more than that, I lived. I saw and lived the *ירושלים של מטה*, the Jerusalem of THIS world.³ The one of too cold apartments and slippery sidewalks, the one of traffic jams and five hours sitting at home to get cable hooked up and wintertime cloths lines on which cloths don’t dry. But also the one with indescribably delicious cafes and beautiful artisan shops, the incredible variety of Jewish life and the Arab suk open on Shabbat and early morning bike rides through its quiet streets to the valley near the zoo and the path along the green line between the olive groves. We took a subscription to the Philharmonic. That first performance, the orchestra seated, the conductor tapped his baton. The whole audience stood as one and the orchestra played *Hatikvah*, “להיות עם חפשי בארצנו ארץ ציון וירושלים” “To be a free people in its land, the land of Israel and Jerusalem.”⁴ Goose bumps all over, tears down my cheeks and those of everyone. Then Mozart and Brahms.

I love Israel...

... despite that year of learning its warts, its complications. The rose-colored lenses of Birthright forever shattered. Israelis demonstrating weekly for peace in Kikar Tzarfat around the corner from our apartment and scorn shown to those who wanted peace. The Arab boys who cornered me and a friend in an alley of the Old City with taunts of “Jew.” The ultra-Orthodox teens who threw rocks at me as I biked past their neighborhood on Shabbat shouting “שבת קודש! Holy Sabbath!” The Israeli settlers in their apartments in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City, long Israeli flag banners like a thumb in the eye of the Muslim world only blocks from the Dome of the Rock. The motorcycles that flew by on the highway before traffic stopped so braver men than I could catch someone before he detonated. Interning at the Israel Religious Action Center I had a front row seat to the disparity of civil rights among the nations’ many peoples: secular and Orthodox, Palestinian and Jew and Druze and Bedouin, man and woman, straight and gay. The

¹ Libi Bamizrach, Yehuda Halevi

² Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 56b

³ Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit 5a

⁴ *Hatikvah*, Naftali Herz Imber

extreme wealth gap. The threat of fundamentalism. “The Israelis should leave the territories!” screamed the world. Fine. The evacuation of the settlements in Gaza by Ariel Sharon, a father of the settlement movement. Israelis tearing other Israelis from their homes for a chance at peace. Israelis creating Jewish refugees in a Jewish state in hopes of a Palestinian Switzerland on the border. Instead – Hamasistan. (I know it is more complicated but come with me to see the rocket shells at the Sderot police station to know how it feels.) And, of course, the facts-on-the-ground barrier to separate Israel from the West Bank – sometimes a wall, sometimes a fence, always keeping us safe, always humiliating the vast majority of Palestinians who want peace or at least to be left alone and to leave alone in turn. Heartache that comes with any love. Show me a real love without heartache.

But still, I love Israel...

and its glorious and messy and aggravating and vibrant and infuriating democracy. Left and right and Arab and secular and modern Orthodox and Green and ultra-Orthodox and middle of the road – or at least that’s how each look at the moment before the center shifts again and again and again. Israelis vote for security first. For some that means a party that will make peace – the ultimate security – and for others it means voting for a hawkish party, one skeptical of peace deals. But they also vote for the bread and butter issues, the price of cottage cheese and rent driving elections as much, if not more, than how many Iranian missiles are pointed at Tel Aviv or how many Gazan rockets fall on Ashkelon. Day-to-day, Israelis want to know that their schools teach and their buses run and that the state will own and regulate or sell and deregulate and take care of pensioners and run the health care system and fix the roads and pick up the garbage. No matter if they elect a plurality of the left or the right you can bet the Ultra-Orthodox will be in the government because they don’t care about economic policy or security, they only care about controlling religion. Who will win the next election? Who knows? But we do know that they are a democracy as complex and messy and flawed as – well – our democracy.

I love Israel...

...on this day, on Yom Kippur, when secular Israelis take to the streets and highways by the thousands on bicycles for what they call Yom Oafanaim, bicycle day. I love so-called secular Israelis who have dinner every Friday night with extended family with candles and kiddush, secular Israelis who build a sukkah in the backyard or on their terrace, secular Israelis who light Chanukah candles, secular Israelis who celebrate a week of Purim – a one day festival, – secular Israelis who attend seders on Passover, and secular Israelis who eat cheese cake on Shavuot on the beach in Tel Aviv and secular Israelis who, of course, know the Bible front to back. Yeah, real secular. I cannot stand the ultra-Orthodox control of religious life but I love the liberal Judaism that grows in the cracks of their control: Kabbalat shabbat of song and dance and prayer and modern poetry on the Tel Aviv Port or the old train station in Jerusalem. Progressive Jewish life at Reform and Conservative synagogues all over the country this past year touching the lives of 8% of Israelis, about the same percentage as the ultra-Orthodox.⁵ No longer an Anglo-transplant, but real, authentic, native progressive Israeli Judaism growing in our native soil, re-creating Judaism as ben Zakkai did 2000 years ago.

⁵ <http://www.timesofisrael.com/reform-judaism-argues-its-new-us-president-is-the-answer-to-secular-israelis-prayers/>

I love Israel's tough-guy softies like...

...Ilan Shulman, my jeep driver of choice on the Golan. I've been going long enough to know which off-roading, Range Rover driving, Golan-living, gun wielding security expert I prefer to drive me next to the mine fields and cow fields and Syrian border and the new experiment in truffle cultivation. Three years ago Ilan, an intelligence reservist in the IDF, told me that Israel cannot, in any way shape or form, involve itself in the Syrian civil war: No sending supplies. No humanitarian aid. No refugees. No medical treatment. Nothing. I nodded politely. Then, one year ago, Ilan Shulman, standing on a hill with a tank and gazing into Syria told Jen, Lev, Talia, and me with pride of the humanitarian aid that Israel provides to Syrians. No-questions-asked medical treatment for men and women and children in Israeli hospitals. Diapers and baby formula and warm clothing and food donated from all over Israel surreptitiously slipped over the border. "But you said never," I protested. "Yes, but then you see a human suffering and you help. What other response can their be?" So on its border and with refuges on the Isle of Lesbos and after the earthquake in Haiti, and the earthquake in Nepal, and the ongoing tragedy of South Sudan, and the earthquake in Japan and all over the world where tragedy strikes, Israel is first on the scene to help Christians and Buddhists and Hindus and Muslims, to help anyone created in the image of God with Israeli know-how and compassion and love.

I love Israel.

Each year the Israel Defense Forces chief of staff goes to Auschwitz for a ceremony. And at the ceremony, every year, in one way or another, that chief of staff declares that never again will the Jewish people perish at the hands of tyrants, that the IDF is there not only to defend the land of Israel but to defend the Jewish people of the world. The Roman exile of 70, the slaughters during the crusades, the 1290 expulsion from England, 1492's expulsion from Spain and the inquisition that followed, the pogroms of Russia and Poland, the Holocaust, we were a people pursued and persecuted and slaughtered across the ages. No more! In 1967 we showed the world that the Jews will always defend themselves, we would fight back when faced with extermination, we will stand up in our nation state and for Jews threatened anywhere in the world. There will be no more crematoria! And as much as a particular action or another sometimes offends my liberal, western sensibilities, I also know that the Israel Defense Forces makes certain that the Jews of Israel, the 50% of our people who live between the Mediterranean and the Jordan, will stay safe. Safe from Iranian missiles. Safe from Palestinian suicide bombers. Safe from Hamas rockets. Safe from Hezbollah border infiltrations. I do not envy the soldiers who have to face a mob of teens, mothers, militia members, children, gun toting terrorists, teachers, stone throwing boys, doctors, civil protestors, Palestinians who seek peace and those who seek to cause harm. I do not envy those soldiers and I cannot imagine it and I wish with all my heart that the world was different and that there was no need to stop a mob like that. Show me a more ethical army on this earth of ours. Show me a military more willing to stand up to its political leaders to force what is right instead of what is politically expedient. Show me a military that investigates itself as often. It is not a perfect army, not by a long shot. But a rabbi once taught that when an Israeli soldier fires his weapon he prays "that just before the bullet hits, the Messiah will come and end the war."⁶ This is my prayer, my fervent prayer, and with all of my being I work to bring that peace

⁶ <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-fight-the-war-well-and-pray-for-peace-1.5199059>

and to bring about a day that requires no war and until that day I thank God for our ability, for the first time in 2,000 years to defend ourselves against those who would cause us harm.

I love Israel despite...

...the occupation. Doubled in size in six days in 1967 but those lands came with people and consequences. The millions of Palestinian residents of the West Bank live without self-determination, under martial law, with some limited self-government and some limited self-defense. The IDF can arrest Palestinians and hold them for any reason without trial for as long as they like and uproot the fruit trees on Palestinian land.⁷ We demanded the world allow us self-determination. Now Israel rules over millions of people who do not have true self-determination. I have no solutions. But I do know that the occupation is an open wound that festers in the status quo.

I love Israel...

... though its official rejection of our Judaism breaks my heart. Ministers in the Israeli government declare that Reform Jews “are not Jews,”⁸ that we’ll be gone in two generations.⁹ The government canceled the deal for a pluralistic prayer space at the Western Wall because of ultra-Orthodox objections.¹⁰ The police arrested one of my Conservative rabbinic colleagues for officiating a wedding in Haifa.¹¹ This makes it harder to feel welcome in the land of our ancestors.

But still, I love Israel ...

... even in the face of the growing split between American Jews and Israelis. The division comes from views of the occupation, rejection of Reform and Conservative Judaism, the rightward tilt of Israelis, and left leaning American Jews. It comes from the fact that Israel no longer has an existential need for our dollars. It comes from the fact that American Jews feel keenly the universal, humanitarian messages of our tradition while Israelis feel more keenly its particularistic messages. It comes from immense pressure that our college students feel on campus from the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement and intersectionality and their inadequate Israel education. But listen: studies show that the split comes, more than anything else, it comes from a general lack of Jewish engagement. Controlling for every other factor, the more engaged in Jewish life, the greater the connection to Israel no matter a person’s age, politics, Jewish movement, or economic status. You believe in the importance of the relationship between American Jewry and Israel? Want to foster it? Then don’t argue about AIPAC vs J-Street. Don’t be furious with your uncle for his love (or disdain) for settlements or with your niece for her liberal campus activism. If we care about the connection between American Jews

⁷ Deuteronomy 20:19–20

⁸ Shas MK Yinon Azoulay, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Earthquake-caused-by-Reform-Conservative-Jews-says-Shas-MK-561646>

⁹ <http://www.jewishpress.com/news/israel/netanyahu-non-orthodox-american-jewry-will-disappear-in-a-generation-or-two/2017/12/03/>

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/25/world/middleeast/benjamin-netanyahu-israel-western-wall-non-orthodox-jews.html>

¹¹ <https://www.jta.org/2018/07/20/news-opinion/israel-detained-rabbi-performing-wedding-people-angry>

and Israelis, the single greatest thing we can do is promote and participate in and support Jewish life here at home.

I love Israel...

...because whatever my political views, whatever my policy preferences or highest values, I find Israelis who share my passions. Israel is so much more than Likud or Labor, Zionist Union or Yesh Atid, United Torah Judaism and Yisrael Beiteinu. When you disagree with some Israeli policy, don't walk away from Israel. Instead, find Israeli allies and Israeli organizations that share your values, build connections and help to champion the highest and best Israel that you can imagine. No matter where you stand on the political spectrum, left, right, or center; no matter if your passion is the arts or the environment or sports, no matter if you want to help people with disabilities or to address poverty, wherever you stand, join forces with our Israeli brothers and sisters to help forge an Israel that is the highest and best form of the dream that our ancestors carried for two thousand years of exile and wandering. That is Zionism in 2018, in 5779. That is what we owe to everyone who came before us, everyone who passed us this tradition and who held on to the dream of Zion restored, of a Jewish state in our land.

I love Israel.

I love that we live in this moment of Jewish history. While it feels so fraught, when we look at it in the context of our long journey on this earth, it is an amazing, no, a miraculous time to be a Jew on this planet. With two incredible centers of Jewish life, here and Israel, we live in a time of religious, cultural, spiritual and national vibrancy that we have not known since ancient days. We have problems, Israel has problems, so many problems that you do not need me to list for you. But we also have possibilities that our ancestors simply could not have imagined. For two thousand years, literally for two thousand years, one hundred generations, our ancestors, your ancestors, dreamed of returning to the land of Israel, of reestablishing Jewish sovereignty. They prayed for it three times a day. At times they literally kept bags packed, ready to go the moment the messiah showed up. At the end of the Passover seder they said, “לשנה הבאה בירושלים” “Next year in Jerusalem” as a far away, impossible dream. They held in their hearts the verse from Psalm 137 “אם אשכחך ירושלים, תשכח ימיני” “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right-hand wither.”¹² But for us, Next Year in Jerusalem is as easy as elal.com. And when we land there we find the other half of our people: Jews from around the world, European Jews, Middle Eastern Jews, Jews from the Former Soviet Union, Ethiopia, India, Uganda, America, and now, 70 years in, so many Jews born in Israel with ancestors from each and every one of these places. We are connected to them by history, by faith, by practice, by food, by music, by culture, by argument – so many arguments, – and by destiny. Loving Israel is like any love with joy, pride and fulfillment, tested by disappointment and heartache. Israel is no longer the messianic dream of our ancestors, it is real and messy and beautiful and oh, so complicated like anything worth loving. Join me in the love affair, in this historic love affair of the Jewish people.

I love Israel.

¹² Psalm 137:5