

Rabbi Jeremy S. Morrison
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Congregation Beth Am
Parashat Sh'mini

Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israel's Independence Day will be celebrated next week, and the approaching holiday provides us with an opportunity to reflect on our personal, and communal, relationships with Israel. I want to spend a few moments tonight to reflect on some of what I've learned about our congregation's connections to Israel during this first year of my tenure as Senior Rabbi. I also want to share with you exciting news.

The infrastructure of Judaism consists of three pillars: God, Torah, and Israel. At Beth Am, we embrace and encourage the exploration of disparate and wide-ranging understandings of God and spirituality. Similarly, we cherish our open, dynamic and critical investigation of our relationship with Jewish texts and practices. But the third pillar, forged from a composite of peoplehood—*Am Yisrael*/ the people of Israel—and, since 1948, place—*M'dinat Yisrael*/ the State of Israel—this pillar is something of a third rail. Considered by some, too emotional, too complicated and too divisive, Israel has become a high-voltage topic that we, as a community, have become, in many instances, hesitant to touch. Furthermore, the tensions that we are experiencing within Beth Am are coterminous with challenges faced by the broader American Jewish community: the complexity of our congregation's relationships with Israel is a microcosm of the crosscurrents roiling our movement as a whole.

The causes of a growing sense of alienation from *M'dinat Yisrael*/the State of Israel among Reform Jews are multi-dimensional and comprise issues of age, politics, and religious identity. And none of this is new. I also hasten to add that what I'm attempting to summarize in a few paragraphs are generalizations; In other words, what I am describing here may not apply directly to you, but I am certain that these are accurate descriptions of one of your acquaintances, or of a friend.

Or of your children or grandchildren. Because, in part, the characteristics of our relationships with Israel are generational. Many of those born before World War II can remember the founding of the State, and their children have memories of the victorious Six Day War. By and large, these two generations “see Israel as tolerant and peace-seeking...efficient and proudly Jewish, a society that has withstood mortal threats from enemies.”¹ But it is a different story for younger Jews. Many of us who were born after 1967 draw upon memories of the wars and internal conflicts of the past 40 years: conflicts considered much more politically and morally complex than the wars fought between 1948 and 1973. This generation—and growing numbers of its parents—finds it increasingly difficult to square certain policies of Israel's government with liberal values. Educationally, the Jewish community continues to be slow to respond to

¹ From Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, *Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel*, p. 3.

this dilemma, or as Peter Beinart wrote, in the *New York Review of Books*, “For several decades, the Jewish establishment has asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism’s door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead.”² Beinart wrote those words in 2010; if anything the feelings of alienation from Israel felt by non-Orthodox Jews younger than the age of 50, have only intensified during the past decade. As each generation slowly becomes less Israel-attached than its elders, a pillar of our covenant decays.

And we are often trapped in a conundrum of our own making. Generally, there is a lack of knowledge and information about the State of Israel and its history, and particularly for those who are my age or younger, there is a growing sense of ambivalence about the importance of Zionism. Uncertainty as to what we think and feel about Israel often leads to an avoidance of issues which, in turn, prevents individuals from pursuing a relationship with Israel and from further education about the State. Additionally, in Jewish communal settings, those voicing strong opinions about Israel crowd out the voices of those unsure of their stance, or those whose opinions put them in a more moderate position on the political spectrum. Extreme positions, on both the Left and the Right, frequently silence the center. Jewish criticism of the State of Israel is often condemned as anti-Zionist and stalwart support is characterized as anti-humanist. The tensions are particularly acute here in the Bay Area.

As I said, none of this is new and it is deeply concerning to me. Although fortunate to live in an era in which the world contains two vibrant centers of Jewish life with equivalent populations of Jews, our increasing, generational sense of alienation from *M’dinat Yisrael* has attenuated our feelings of connection to *Am Yisrael*/the People of Israel. When we avoid the political and religious complexities that confront us, we threaten to sever our relationship with a large percentage of the world’s Jews. To separate our fate as Jews living in America from that of Jews living in Israel will, over the long-term, diminish the vibrancy and creativity of our community. At another time, I promise to say more about how I conceptualize the relationship between American, Reform Jews and Israel, and of the necessity of this relationship.

Next week, *am Yisrael*, the people of Israel, will celebrate the *atzmaut*, the independence of *Medinat Yisrael*, the State of Israel. But *Am Israel*, the people of Israel, is proudly, and necessarily, interdependent. We are an interconnected people and our interdependence is encapsulated in the frequently quoted Talmudic statement, *Kol yisrael aravim zeh ba zeh*, often translated as, All of Israel is responsible for one another.

One of the beautiful attributes of Beth Am that I’ve learned about this past year, is the depth of connection felt by many congregants, to the world-wide Jewish community: many of you enact the principle of bearing responsibility for our fellow Jews throughout the world. Within the legalistic context of the Talmudic quote, the word *aravim* means to function as responsible

² Follow this link in order to read the full article:
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/10/failure-american-jewish-establishment/>.

parties, as guarantors for each other, and our responsibility to Jews living beyond our borders is concretely expressed, institutionally, through our long-term relationship to Congregation Beth Am in Poltava. Thanks to the work of Cheri and Fred Half, and in collaboration with the World Union for Progressive Judaism, we are expanding our support of emerging Progressive communities in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) to include the Odessa, Ukraine congregation, Shirat Ha-Yam, which is led by Rabbi Julia Gris.

During these past months, I have also learned of the depth of connections to the State of Israel that many individual Beth Am congregants hold. Additionally, each year we have a number of Israel focused programs, often sponsored by our JIAC Committee, or created by one of the gems of our congregation, Orna Morad, who is an institution within our institution! (Orna is amazing.) As a synagogue, we contribute, annually, to the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, and every-other month we dedicate our Tzedakah collection to various organizations in Israel. What we have lacked, however, is a focused, institution-to-institution connection to a congregation in Israel, along the lines of what we have built, during the past decades, with Poltava. So I am excited to share with you the news that we are entering into a relationship with KaMaTZ: an acronym for *Kehillat M'vassert Tzion*/Congregation M'vasseret Tzion. I want to thank Charlie Rothschild, through his leadership with the World Union of Progressive Judaism, for helping to make this *shidduch*.

M'vasseret Tzion, a name meaning Announcing Zion, is 10 km west of Jerusalem, along route 1; from its heights, you can see Jerusalem; I imagine that many of you have been there. *Kehillat M'vassert Zion* was founded in 1993, and is a community of approximately 300 families. Its rabbi, Alona Nir Keren, was ordained in 2016 by the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. For the first two years of her work, she served as a Rabbi for Kehillat Yozma in Modiin. Alona has twice served as a Shaliach in the Tri-state area and her English is excellent. She lives in Mevasseret Zion with her partner Yael, their daughter Ori and son Itamar. Over time, I hope that our two congregations will develop strong connections through visits and programs and that, in the coming months, we will be able to welcome, virtually, Rabbi Nir Keren, to our bimah. I also intend to form a cohort of younger congregants to lead this initiative, so that we may address, in part, some of the fissures that are creating generational divisions within Beth Am in regard to our commitment to Israel as both a people and place.

And to that end, we are not going to begin building this institutional relationship through programs. The first action that Rabbi Nir Keren and I want to take together, is focused on people, and on forging interpersonal relationships. She and I are embarking on a kind of mapping project: Rabbi Nir Keren is surveying her congregants to learn of any personal connections that they may have to Silicon Valley, and I would like to learn from you, of any individual connections you may have to residents of *Mevasseret Tzion* or to congregants of KaMaTZ. Please be in touch with me if you have a first or second degree of connection to this community.

The acronym KaMaTz is also a word: *Kamatz* can refer to a Hebrew vowel, the one that looks like a small “t”, and is pronounced, “aw”. It also means, in the Torah, enclosed with a hand or grasp; it’s a measurement, a handful, a small amount: a *kometz*.

The word appears in Leviticus, the book of the Torah from which we are reading these weeks. There, the high priest is instructed to take a handful of a flour mixed with oil and burn it on the altar as an offering to God (Lev. 2).

Tonight, I have only offered a small amount, a *kometz*, of my thoughts regarding our relationship with Israel. There’s more to be said; but more importantly, there’s much to do. And it will be through small, but carefully considered actions, *kometz al yadei kometz*, bit by bit, little by little, that we will, together, address the tensions that divide our congregation and strengthen our connections to one another and to a people and a place called, Israel.

Shabbat Shalom.