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Solidarity and Hope, Together

Have you ever been to a protest before? Raise your hand if you have. I've been to protests, and I never regret going, but I will confess, protesting and marching and rallying do not come naturally to me,

I suspect, however, that if I lived in Israel, I would have been at a lot of protests this past spring and summer.

The protests were against proposed changes in Israel's judicial system, "reforms" many see as profound threats to Israel's very democracy. Among the changes being proposed are allowing Knesset (Israel's parliament) to overrule, by a majority vote, to overrule Supreme Court decisions that overturn laws, changing the way judges are appointed, and allowing cabinet ministers to ignore legal advice of the attorney general. Already passed is a law preventing the Supreme Court from declaring laws "unreasonable," a law which the court itself is now figuring out how to rule on.

Hundreds of thousands of Israelis have been protesting, weekly, since the winter.

I want to speak this morning about these protests for three reasons: as an act of solidarity, because of the hope I see in the protests, and because I think this all can lead us to a reconceived relationship for us with Israel.

First, solidarity. The only thing Jews agree about is that we never all agree about anything. So, when basically every non-orthodox Jewish organization, including the Rabbinical Assembly, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, the Jewish Federations of North America (yes, that's a real organization), the ADL, the AJC, really, the whole alphabet soup of Jewish organizations, came out against these judicial changes, whether because of their content, or because of their unprecedented divisiveness, it was clear that something was different this time.

This almost wall-to-wall concern about the reforms mirrored the Israeli landscape. In Israel, hundreds of thousands of Israelis, supported by many of the largest businesses, universities, and NGOs, united to oppose the judicial reforms. Many Israelis were, and still are, terrified about the potential erosion of protections for women, for LGBTQ people, for the non-orthodox, and for Arabs and Palestinians. And they're angry about the specter of Israel's leaders being ethically compromised but above the law.

They have, and they are still, asking for us, as American Jews, to raise our voices, to be with them in their protests, in voice and spirit, even if we can't be physically present.

I find myself thinking of some of the most poignant yet simple words from the Torah reading this morning.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְצַדֵּק אֶל־אֲבֹרְהֶם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי בְנִי

Isaac spoke to Abraham his father, and said, “My father.” He said, “I am here, my son” (Gen. 22:7). Abraham was there with his son. That presence is a kind of solidarity at a time of fear and uncertainty for Isaac. It’s saying, “I’m here with you, even if I can’t change things.”

If we are really sick or hurting, to know that people are including us in their *misheberachs* for *cholim*, in their prayers for the ill, can indeed be powerful, connecting, supporting, and even life-giving. Solidarity, at minimum, is like a prayer for healing.

This sermon is an act of solidarity, with my friends and colleagues in Israel, solidarity with the values of equality and freedom and democracy that are core to who I am, to who we are. It’s an act of solidarity with the Israelis who are here in St. Louis, yet whose hearts are in Israel, and whose hearts are breaking at what they see happening with the nation they love yet do not live in. And it’s an act of solidarity with all those who see themselves in those in Israel who are the most afraid right now.

So, today’s sermon is about solidarity. It’s also about hope.

It’s in our Jewish nature to question—to question authority, to question rulings, decisions, details, to question basically everything. Those questions indicate curiosity, concern, interest, engagement and most of all, care. We don’t ask or question if we don’t care.

After Isaac says, “אבי, My father,” and Abraham responds to him, “הנני בני, I am here, my son,” Isaac questions his father. He asks, “Here are the fire and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” (Gen. 22:7) He maybe has an inkling as to what’s happening, but as my father has pointed out to me, implicit in Isaac’s question is that there will be a sheep, and that it will not be him.

One of the reasons I am often disinclined to go to protests is that so often they feel ineffectual. Protests are a way of being together, as opposed to alone, which is so important when we face challenges. But beyond that feeling of community, and meeting the need to shout, to do something, it feels like they rarely result in the sought-after change. Part of the problem is that protests don’t always have a particular, specific ask or goal.

The protests in Israel though have given me hope for what protests could be, for how democracy can work in ways I haven’t experienced in my lifetime in America. The protests in Israel delayed the voting on the whole package of judicial reforms, and while one change (about reasonableness) was passed, the others are still tabled, at least for now. The final verdict is still out, but it was very much not political business as usual in the face of these protests. This is to say, they had an immediate impact – and will also have a lasting effect.

What made the Israeli protests successful? For one, it was a lot of people protesting. More than one in five Israelis protested.¹ That’s like sixty-six million people protesting in America. What brought people out? The cause, for sure, but also the strategy. Protests were narrowly focused, to the frustration of some. They have mostly focused on the judicial reforms in question, and not on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the occupation, which in some sense are at the root of all this, because protest leaders know that that will create fractures in the coalition they have. They are careful about the forms of protest they use, and are constantly polling to determine what tactics will resonate, and what will alienate, how much civil disobedience will serve their purpose, and what will go too far.

¹ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/over-1-in-5-israelis-have-proteted-against-overhaul-and-numbers-are-rising-poll/>

The symbol of the protests hasn't been something new or divisive. It has been the most patriotic Israeli symbol you could imagine: the Israeli flag, and organizers have handed out thousands and thousands of flags at protests. Hatikvah is sung at the beginning and end of every protest, one Israeli told me. The protests have become not fringe or countercultural, anti-Israel or anti-Zionist, but the opposite—mainstream and patriotic.²

In a parliamentary system, the loyal opposition is the party that is not in power, but remains loyal to the government's formal source of power, such as the constitution. These protests have been the quintessential loyal opposition.

God forbid we in America should ever need a protest movement to save our democracy. But if we do, Israel has offered us a model of efficacy. And that gives me hope.

And last, I want to look at how the hope from these protests can lead us to a reconceived relationship with Israel.

After Abraham tells Isaac that God will provide the ram for the offering, the Torah says, וילכו שניהם יחדו—the two of them walked on together (v. 8).

For decades now, Israel has exported religion, and imported democracy. כי מציון תצא תורה—Torah comes from Zion, from Israel. And America has always seen itself as a beacon, exporter, and sometimes, imposer, of liberal democracy. Israel is still a center of Torah, and there is a real way in which, to complete the verse from Isaiah, מירושלים, ודבר ה' מירושלים, Torah comes from Zion, and the word of God from Jerusalem (Is. 2:3). And yet there is more and more amazing Torah scholarship in America, and we are as much a center for innovations and celebrations of Jewish life. Israel still looks to America for financial, military and moral support. Israel's NGOs still need our dollars to bolster Israel's civil society and democratic infrastructure. And we have what to learn from Israel's vibrant, participatory, and still young democracy.

This is all to say, at a certain point, neither Abraham nor Isaac was leading the way, but וילכו שניהם יחדו, they were walking together, supporting each other, on a sacred journey to the unknown.

May we say *hineni*, here I am, in solidarity with those who need us, in Israel, and in America.

May we find the ways to question, to protest, loyally, with faith, and with deep hope. And may we always feel and know we are not walking alone, but are walking together.

² <https://newrepublic.com/article/174231/americans-learn-israeli-democracy-protests>