

RH 5782 – “You Shall be a Light unto the Nations”
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Good Yontiv,

Some of you know the joke about the conversation between two farmers, one Israeli and the other Texan. As farmers do, they got around to comparing their plots of land. The Texan said to the Israeli, "How big a farm do you have?"

The Israeli proudly announced, "Thirty-five acres!"

"Thirty-five acres?" the Texan scoffed. "Why, I can get in my truck at 8:00 AM and start driving and at noon, I am still on my farm. I can eat lunch and start driving again and at 5:00 PM I am *still* on my farm.

"Ah, yes," the Israeli nodded in understanding. "I had a truck like that once."

Everything is on a little different scale when one begins to consider Israel. Many of you know that Julie and I met when we were both volunteering for a year in Israel and then lived there for another 2.5 years after that. We've spent time getting to know Israel – both the Israel one experiences from a tour bus and the one that is somewhat off that beaten path. I have a place deep within my heart for the land, its people, its history, its difficult-to-enumerate contributions to the world and the role it places as a refuge to those who need it.

Part of the experience of that volunteer program was to travel around together with highly educated tour guides. I remember very clearly being taken to a refugee camp for Palestinians in the West Bank. I had seen blighted neighborhoods before – I am, After all, from Detroit! But nothing prepared me for the poverty and despair of this town. I walked down the streets and saw the children playing amongst the burned-out metal drums and the exposed rebar of unfinished or irreparably destroyed construction projects. Abject impermanence. We call them Refugee Camps which insinuates some temporary status but they've been living, temporarily like this for a long time. It was hard for me to understand that the government that shares and is guided by my religion has humans under its control who live like that.

It was also hard to reconcile in my mind with another vision I still have. We were paired with Israeli families who became our adopted kin while there. My family lives in a beautiful villa in the wealthiest city in Israel – Caesaria, the Beverly Hills of Israel, if you will. I could lounge with their children around the pool in their backyard and we could watch the golfers on the only course in Israel. Because, well, who builds a golf course in the climate of the middle east? I saw the wealth...I *enjoyed* the wealth of some of Israel's elite.

I walked the dusty paths of Bat Ayin, on my way to meet a friend of a friend. It was one of the most hotly contested, un-permitted settlements at the time. The young men who lived there looked skinny, serious, well-armed and at joy. They loved the importance they assigned to living this life – for the cause of creating facts-on-the-ground in the ongoing conflict over territory there. Walking through the collection of mobile homes and shipping containers that passed for their town, almost everyone had a sidearm and I couldn't help wondering, by the way they talked about their Arab neighbors, if they secretly hoped one would give them a reason to shoot.

But these people don't reflect my experience of the general Israel. This was a set of snapshots gathered from the fringes of Israeli society but my impression of the average Israeli, in my experiences over the years, is that they have no specific gripe with the Palestinians. They would prefer that the Arabs live their lives and let us live ours. They take their land (the majority of Israelis don't want it anyway) and we'll take this land that is on our side of the Green Line – the land we controlled at the ceasefire of the 1967 Six Day War. A war they forced on us.

But I ceased being a resident of Israel back in 2003 And that's why it has been so hard for me to understand what I'm reading in the news these days. Let me explain. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times: I lived there for two years from 1998 to 2000 – one of the most peaceful periods Israel has ever enjoyed - and then I returned again in 2002 for my first year of Seminary. This was in and around the 2nd intifada – one of the bloodiest and most scary for the Israelis. It was following, immediately, the horrific bombing at Hebrew University and another at the community's favorite coffee shop on Emek Refaim. S'barro Pizza, the bus stops

– bombs seemed to be going off left and right. All of this in the midst of the Iraq war. Saddam Hussein represented a real threat with his scud missiles and we were all issued gas masks to have on our person 24 hours a day. We were instructed how to tape plastic over the windows and door of one room in our apartments to create the sense of having a safe space to protect us in the event of a chemical attack. I lived that fear. Even in the midst of all that emotion, Israelis preferred the two state solution and were in favor of making peace.

And then my life's focus turned once again to my studies, life in New York, and beginning my career. Almost 12 years passed before I got back to Israel. It was my first time leading a congregational trip and it was with many of you. Lots of infrastructure improvements and other skyline changes but, generally it felt pretty familiar. I went back a couple years later with a, largely, different group of many of you.

But these last many years have felt different in my experience of Israel from afar. The supreme court, almost always ruling on the side of Justice as imagined by the Torah and in favor of the causes I supported, has begun to lose some degree of power in society as public confidence has waned. And whispers back home told me that Jerusalem's demographic had dramatically changed and the sector of the city that reflected us and our Judaism had shrunk as more and more progressive Israelis decide they'd rather live somewhere else – somewhere less overwhelmingly religious.

At the same time that I was increasingly disoriented here with our own rapid domestic political changes, I was also growing in my confusion by the parallel trends in Israel – the far-right elements of the government coalition managed to pass the Nation-State law which preserves control of Israel just to Jews, removes Arabic as an official language of the state and proclaims the central commitment to settlement of the Land¹² – all aimed at cleansing the nation of all non-Jewish influences. Expressions like “ethnic cleansing” became harder to argue

¹ Jewish nation state: Israel approves controversial bill. BBCnews.com, posted July 19, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44881554>

² “Israel’s hugely controversial “nation-state” law, explained. Supporters call Israel’s new Jewish nation-state law a “defining moment.” Critics say it’s “apartheid.” By [Miriam Berger](#) Updated Jul 31, 2018 <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/7/31/17623978/israel-jewish-nation-state-law-bill-explained-apartheid-netanyahu-democracy>

against and I hated that – though still I argued. In 2017, buzzfeed ran a column titled, “The Rise And Rise And Rise Of Israel’s Right-Wing Media”³

Israelis, and its allies like me, had grown tired of the repeated failures of the Peace Processes and the world condemnation of Israel and it hardened our hearts. According to Laura Adkins, “While American millennials have a reputation for liberal politics, young Israeli Jews have gone the opposite direction over time. For at least the past 10 years, these voters have identified as right wing at much higher levels than their parents.”⁴ Anger at corrupt politicians and intractable parties has been simmering. After three failed elections, the chasm had grown and the country was fractured until all that was left for the politicians to do was to throw a hail mary and form a ragtag coalition of fringe parties that held one single agreed upon premise: that Netanyahu has to go.

Well fine, he’s gone but what now? Israel’s got a PR problem, that’s for sure but there are also some details that are difficult to explain away. Rather than take the moral high road along the way, the Israeli far-right has pulled the agenda toward a nationalist, supremacist platform. And now, I cannot imagine what they’re going to do after this most recent war. I’ll quote Lemony Snickett here in dark irony, like a “Series of Unfortunate Events,” the Israeli courts denied the claim of 6 Palestinian families living in East Jerusalem. An area that has seen more and more Arab families removed and increasing Jewish archeological digging taking their place. The announcement of their removal came, hopefully coincidentally, on the final day of the holy month of Ramadan – a rather inauspicious time to announce, to the world, something so divisive.

All this immediately triggered the rockets that Hamas was just waiting to fire from Gaza and what else was Israel to do? No nation should tolerate the express effort to kill its citizens – so Israel defended itself. Trying to root out Hamas, the Israelis used methods of calling ahead to remove non-combatants from buildings believed to be of strategic value before destroying

³ Berger, Miriam. Posted on August 20, 2017. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/miriamberger/the-rise-and-rise-and-rise-of-israels-right-wing-media>

⁴ The kids are all right-wing: Why Israel’s younger voters are more conservative. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-kids-are-all-right-wing-why-israels-younger-voters-are-more-conservative/>

them. The Israelis even drop advance “knock-knock bombs” on the roof before the real bombs come to ensure nobody was caught off guard.⁵ So Israel fired back...and kept firing and firing and firing.

And now, lest you thought that this sermon was only about Israelis, let’s turn our attention back to American Jews. We have all worked to transmit the best of ourselves to our children. The values that define us and the commitments that we believe in are communicated in both explicit and more subtle messages from the time we first begin speaking to them about kindness, fairness, empathy and compassion. Donniel Hartman, the director and senior educator of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem warns us: "If you want our children to be soldiers for Israel, the first thing you have to do is validate their moral engagement with Israel."⁶ To help understand the current character of the American Jewish Community as it applies to Israel, he has divided us into four groups.

The first two groups consist of those who are Troubled and those who are Untroubled. There are plenty of complications that every nation faces as it exercises protection of national interests but, one who is troubled by what they see in Israel believes that it can and should be doing a better job of dealing with human rights, religious equality, geo-political negotiations and adherence to Jewish values. One who is untroubled believes Israel is acting well-within her right to self-defense and sees no problem with how she is behaving within her borders.

Then, in each of those groups, you will find those who are Committed Zionists as well as the Uncommitted Zionists. A committed Zionist is one who feels that Israel matters to them. They understand the importance it has played historically, in the world, the region and the hearts of the Jewish community. Uncommitted Zionists don’t share that view. They see Israel is one country among all countries with nothing particular about it.

An Untroubled, Committed Zionist supports Israel – right or wrong. A Troubled, Uncommitted Zionist is inclined to attack and defame Israel – perhaps with a tinge of Jewish

⁵ Video shows Israeli "knock on the roof" bombing tactic in Gaza July 12, 2014
<https://www.nytimes.com/video/multimedia/10000002997212/video-shows-israeli-knock-on-the-roof-bombing-tactic-in-gaza.html>

⁶ Hartman, Donniel. Interview with Abigail Pogrebin, July 5, 2021.

shame and their Anti-Zionism is sometimes difficult to differentiate from Anti-Semitism. An Untroubled, Uncommitted Zionist isn't paying attention. A Troubled, Committed Zionist loves the people and feels a deep connection to the land...but is disturbed by the demonstration of Torah in Israel's policies.

Like the characters of the Four Children we discuss at our seder tables, there are aspects of each of these to be found in each of us but the model allows for one to determine how they identify and which description best fits them. I am a troubled, Committed Zionist - And, I think many of you are, too.

I'm going to begin by addressing the Untroubled Committed Zionists. Their untroubled response to criticism of Israel often includes statements like: We offered them 98% of the West Bank and they said, "no," so I no longer need to be troubled by the situation. It may include the claim, "This is who they are – *we're* the victims." Sometimes it includes the insistence that, "We don't want war, but they give us no choice." As Rabbi Hartman teaches, "these facts are true...but they're the wrong facts."

Here are a few other true facts. The world knows that refugee camps are supposed to be a temporary solution to a problem. But we can't claim that it is still temporary after 54 years. There are people who are grandparents of refugees who were, themselves, born in the camps – three generations of refugees and one should examine the situation carefully. Israel's intertwined existence with the Palestinians does not mean we can write off the human rights abuses as unfortunate but necessary conditions. Here is another fact: Israel continues to claim the position of victim but everyone knows that they have one of the most robust defensive security systems in the world and the most powerful military in the region. That sort of strength demands that **force** not be the first resort to problematic situations.

Now, I'll turn to the Troubled Committed Zionists, like myself. It is a very risky position to take. You may feel like you'll be accused of anti-Semitism when you are inclined to criticize. It certainly happens – I was recently denounced as a *Shanda* – a Shame on our people – when I expressed my personal concerns about the ongoing war this summer to a gathering of local rabbis and community leaders. My guess is that you also feel overwhelmed by the problems

America is dealing with domestically and are genuinely bewildered - not sure where to start. Maybe you wonder about the overwhelmingly negative response to Israel in the UN and you have listened to the arguments of your deeply Troubled Uncommitted liberal friends and you are doubting yourself - they can't all be wrong! Maybe you're moved by the accusation that, unless you live there, you don't get a say in how they run their country. Or, perhaps you just feel like the Untroubled Committed Zionists have taken over the narrative, they've won and there's no room left for us at the table.

But I'm here to assure you that this is not the case. Remember for a moment that the charge against outsiders expressing a view is hypocritical – Rabbi Shaul Magid says, “if you have to live there to have a critical view then you should have to live there to express a supportive view, as well.” Do not suggest that this should be left to the ones living there – this is our land, too. If Israel is going to claim to be the singular country for the Jews of the World, then the Jews of the World are included in the narrative. And this moment in Israel's narrative is so, very important.

You are here as a part of a liberal Jewish community – as opposed to a traditional or orthodox community. It means that you've applied modern progressive techniques to the Torah to emphasize the best of our tradition. The liberal Jewish community includes those from both the liberal and conservative political communities and focuses on the Torah's insistence on the values of human and social justice.

Like me, you believe that Israel represents the best of what is possible in the world when the Torah, at its best and most timeless, is applied to nation-building. We have applied a liberal modern Judaism to our lives and the only type of Zionism that will find a home in the heart of liberal Jews is a liberal Zionism – this is a goal to be proud of, not one to be ashamed of. And, lest you think we members of the Progressive Jewish World have no power in the narrative, I'll remind you - A few years back, I urged you to register for and vote in the World Zionist Congress elections as did countless Reform colleagues of mine. As a result, the Reform party did wildly well – that fact has changed actual realities on the ground in Israel: concerning

non-orthodox conversions, mixed-gender prayer space at the Western Wall and recognition for non-orthodox rabbis in Israel. We have a LOT of power!

Donniel Hartman teaches that there are some fundamentals to a Liberal Zionism.

- 1) It demands Two States for two peoples – which itself is based on Moral Courage and some risk taking.
- 2) We must leave all settlements.
- 3) It is the relentless pursuit of human rights for all individuals living under Israeli control.
- 4) And, a Liberal Zionism must embrace a renewed narrative of Israeli Power – Humans share power with God and, like the Biblical portrayal of a God who can be reminded to hold back on destructive power, we too have to learn to restrain the use of that power. This may remind you of the beautiful teaching from Pirke Avot: Who is powerful, the one who restrains oneself⁷ – it goes on to tell us: “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty.

Israel and Liberal Judaism have given up the moral high ground...but we have not surrendered our desire to stand upon it. Our mission is to find those who share our values and to show them the possibilities of a Torah-true Israel, one who we can admire without qualifications and caveats, one that is a “Light Unto the Nations”⁸. Is this a double standard for Israel when looking at others in the Circle of Nations, of course it is. I don’t know about you, but I’m not particularly impressed with the human rights bar being set globally. We know that Israel can become the new Standard Bearer even if that exposes her to being out in front. Let other countries with resident ethnic minorities begin to look to Israel for inspiration. China with its Uigher population; Syria with its Kurdish population; The US with its Native American population.

⁷ Pirke Avot, 4:1.

⁸ Isaiah, 42:6.

Micah Goodman, another Israeli scholar encourages us to follow the instructions found in the book of Judges when God tells the prophet Gidon to *use* his indignation...It is precisely the thing that can *save* Israel.⁹ The Prophets of antiquity knew how vulnerable it could be to stand outside of the crowd and to rebuke the people for their own good; for their salvation. It is up to us to serve as today's prophets to Israel – speaking the truth of Torah so that she can stand as a prophetic example to the other nations of the world.

In just a moment, we will share the words of Gesher Tzar Me'od, a reminder that it is scary to stand up for what is right, but what is on the other side of the fear is well-worth it. Our sacred task, out of our love for “the-Israel-we-know-is-possible”, is to transform the Untroubled Zionists into those who are both, paying attention, *and* who will remain consistent in their commitment to universal human rights and Torah-true values in Israel just as they have taught it to their children here in the US. ביום ההוא - *Bayom Hahu* – On that Day, they will emerge as Committed Zionists who are deeply Troubled.

This is what it looks like for a powerfully proud, Reform Jewish Community to claim a sense of Commandedness. This is the sacred charge that we cannot ignore this day. And I'll conclude with the encouraging words of Deuteronomy, “[This vision] is not up in heaven nor too far away to hope for.”¹⁰

Good Yontiv

⁹ Judges, 6:14.

¹⁰ based on Deuteronomy 30:12.