

Ain Li Eretz Aheret – I Have No Other Land

Good Yontiv,

There was an Indian restaurant on Washington Street for several years whose name I never knew how to pronounce. It had an awful lot of letters in it, so I always just called it the veggie Indian place on Washington. This would not have presented a problem if the restaurant had proven to be only mediocre. Unfortunately, it was some of the best food from the sub-continent that I've ever had so I found it necessary to refer to it quite often when suggesting it to others. Parking was never an obstacle, and neither was finding a table. I don't recall ever seeing more than one other table of guests when I was there. Needless to say, I should not therefore have been surprised (but was deeply disappointed) when it went out of business. The loss of something that I valued leaves me yearning for the good old days. I've tried other places around and, while they're OK, they're just not the veggie Indian place that was on Washington.

Sometimes, I'll choose just to go with the easy place down the block. Our Asian restaurant is, by no means, fabulous. Often, it's not even all that good. But it's familiar, it's easier and some days I don't seem to have the energy to go any further. Then other days, though I know the French fries at Layla's are my favorite, I will still order fries at other places – who knows, maybe I'll be surprised with a new favorite. Usually, they are underwhelming so I ask you: why would I ever go

someplace new if I know there is far less risk in simply sticking with a meal that I know I already like? I'll tell you why...because I'm a Zionist. Let me explain.

The Jewish bible uses the word "Zion" 152 times; its meaning is varied and falls into several categories. Sometimes it refers to one of the three hills that make up Jerusalem. Other times it is the whole city of Jerusalem or the whole Israelite kingdom. In later Jewish texts, we find its meaning expanded to name the mystical place related to the messiah. It is the place from which God will open the opportunity for future perfection. That is why we will soon call our children up to the bimah and sing the words, "כי מציון תצא תורה" - *Ki m'tzion teitzei Torah...*, for out of Zion will come the perfection of Torah".¹ We will surround the kids, the quintessential symbol of our hope, with the energy of our optimism about the future. Our tradition teaches that God has already tried twice to introduce the potential for perfection into this world during the times of the first and second now-destroyed Temples. We're told the Third Temple refers to the moment that the glorious vision will become reality - someday.

And using Zion as a metaphor for a better future isn't just found in Judaism; Others have absorbed it from us, too. Rastafarianism, best known through the music of Bob Marley references Zion all over its material. The American slaves employed Zion as an image they conjured to dream of a future when they would know redemption from their oppressive reality. The biblical book of Isaiah predicts that, in a place called Zion, God will someday set a cornerstone for a new

¹ Morning Torah Service Liturgy

reality.² Islam understands that cornerstone of Zion to be the Kabaa, in Mecca. Christians use the same verse, but they insist it is referring to Jesus. One last modern example, the Matrix movies portrayed a dystopic underground fortress named Zion from which they fight for the uncertain future of humanity because their lives depend on it. Zion has remained a timeless symbol for various wandering peoples of the longing they feel for something better than they have now. One of the most beautiful documents I have ever read was written by a group of men who felt this way.

Life had become untenable, and they found, in each other, comrades who shared their belief that not only was it was reasonable to expect more out of life, but they could do something about it. The Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel was pronounced and signed in this room and, for those who've traveled to Tel Aviv and stood in that hall, perhaps you've felt, as I have, the residual vibration of hope and of conviction that was present on May 14, 1948, the day it was signed.

My favorite part of this relatively short document reads,

“THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all

² Based on Isaiah 28:16.

religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.”

Doesn't that sound like a great place? A couple of years ago, Israeli journalist, Yossi Klein Halevi, defined a democratic and Jewish Israel as a place that must be, "A state for all the Jews, even those not its citizens, and a state for all its citizens, even those who are not Jews."³

Our traditions are at their best when they assure us that we have the right to expect better and motivate us to apply ourselves to its creation. So, while I have *playfully* used the term “Zionism” to describe this lover of French fries who goes about searching for the messianically perfect version, it *has* long been associated with the hope for a substantive change in the world that has yet to be realized.

This is why the classical Jewish Zionism of the 19th century, which took so many different forms, were all associated with a fresh start. There were religious Zionists that believed that it was their responsibility to be in the Holy Land when God decided it was time to reset the world with the delivery of the messiah. Then, there were the secular Zionists who believed that there was a better way for humans to live together in cooperation. They insistently built their belief into reality and the outcome of their dreams was the kibbutz. An institution of early Israeli culture, the kibbutz movement cannot be overstated in its importance to the creation, transmission and development of today's modern state.

³ Halevi, Yossi Klein. [Does new law tilt Israel away from its democratic values?](https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2018/0724/Does-new-law-tilt-Israel-away-from-its-democratic-values). Christian Science Monitor, July 24, 2018. <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2018/0724/Does-new-law-tilt-Israel-away-from-its-democratic-values>

And let's not forget the Zionism of the Tevyas of the world who were simply tired of living at the whim of whichever king, caliph, tzar or dictator happened to hold power over us. This manner of dreamer pined for a place where they could live and let live wanting nothing special other than life, liberty and the pursuit of meaning.

These three groups of Zionists all believed that a better life was possible and was a reasonable hope. And *they* all focused that effort on the land known, at the time as Palestine, which represented that possibility. They were building something for their children that none of them had ever seen. And they were unwilling to let the odds dissuade them from the challenge of making it into reality. Zionism, then, is the human commitment to the dream of a better future.

Take a moment and conjure the image of something in your experience that turned out not to live up to your dreams: a dream home that you found out just a little late was built on a toxic waste dump; the new job that was oversold in ways that would have been nice to know ahead of time; the lover, the partner, the friend, or the neighbor who turned out to be a lesser person than you thought. Your trust was violated, your safety was sacrificed, or your self-worth was attacked. I am trying to remind you how it feels to be let down by something to which you had assigned importance. In some of those examples, you probably just settled into the disappointment and lived with it. While, in other cases, you chose to fight for what you believed was reasonable. Sometimes you could do so from within the job or the relationship and sometimes you had to extricate yourself to start fresh.

Who taught you hope? What fighters for good inspire you? Who gets you to believe in a future that others are not ready or willing to see? These visionaries refuse to accept the status quo as sufficient. They push you to see that you are allowed to expect, and in fact fight for, something better. That better future is reasonable, and I call it “Zion.”

I have detached the term Zion from the State of Israel and returned it to its original meaning: the Biblical notion that it is not crazy to believe that a better reality exists ahead of us. Therefore, I am telling you that that *your* commitment to that change is called “Zionism.” And, if you’re someone who is inspired by the notion, I want you to try calling yourself a Zionist.

This has been a very difficult year for Israel and, while I’m not going to go into great depth or explanation at this moment, I am going to give a quick summary of some salient matters that are good to know or to hear again at this point. In the earliest days of Israel’s formation, David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister, needed the broadest Jewish support and so he entered into the so-called “Status Quo Agreement” with the Jewish Agency and the Ultra-Orthodox extreme minority promising that Israel would not infringe on any element of Jewish Law. Effectively, he handed decision-making for all religious matters to the ultra-orthodox which he considered a small concession considering they would be an extinct reality in a short matter of time. 75 years later and we have a real problem now between the two populations in Israel – the ultra-orthodox who did not, in fact, disappear and believe that the country should be guided by the strictest

interpretation of Jewish Law and the remaining 87% of the country who would prefer a more modern approach to democracy.⁴

The issue in the news today has to do with the fact that, 75 years after its founding, Israel has still not gotten around to the establishment of a Constitution of Laws. Instead, they rely on a set of about 20 Basic Laws that are wildly vague and easy for any sitting government to change with a simple majority of one vote in the Knesset. In fact, they *have* changed the Basic Laws 23 times in the last five years alone.

Most recently, after three failed elections, we saw the creation of the most extreme right-wing government coalition Israel has ever seen. With power consolidated as it currently is into the barest of a majority, the unstable coalition of parties has used the opportunity to make dramatic changes that have led to the current crisis. And while they continue to create a slew of offenses against non-orthodox Jews, the queer community, the female half of humanity, the Arab residents of Israel and on and on, at the center of the matter is the fact that Israel's government was designed without the kinds of checks and balances that we rely upon in the US.

Their Supreme Court has, until now, had the ability to overrule and veto any laws made by the Knesset that its judges decided were unreasonable.

"Reasonableness" is a difficult-to-define legal term that is open to broad interpretation (and therefore overuse) and it means that the will of the people as

⁴ ForeignPolicy.com. July, 27, 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/27/israel-ultra-orthodox-judicial-religion-netanyahu/#:~:text=The%20Central%20Bureau%20of%20Statistics,by%202062%20almost%20a%20third.>

expressed through their elected representatives of parliament might not be enacted because of the over-sized and unchecked power of a few magistrates. For this reason, the reform of the Judiciary in Israel was seen as overdue by a huge majority of the populace...but not in the way it has taken place. The proposed changes will not lead to a better reality for the largest portion of Israel citizens. I am a Zionist, and what I see in Israel today is not Zion. And this is what has led to unprecedented protests – unprecedented in the history of the world.

Proof of this is seen nowhere more convincingly than the weekly protests in Israel. Every single Saturday night, without exception, for the last 38 weeks, 10's of thousands of people in Jerusalem and 100's of thousands of protesters in Tel Aviv have gathered to voice their upset. Not only those on one side of the argument, it seems just about every single Israeli is upset about the state of things. And not just in Israel. Those of us around the world who care and are paying close attention are upset to our core in the diaspora, as well. This is a picture of the protest outside the United Nations Building in NYC on Friday morning of thousands of people who are upset over the situation in Israel. It is not hyperbole to pose the real question of whether Israel's democracy will survive this moment.

But, here I offer the perspective of the journalist and political commentator, Haviv Gur who says that, "with every new crisis, he grows more optimistic."⁵ He says these issues are of existential import and absolutely *must* be dealt with

⁵ [Grappling with Israel's Political Crisis with Haviv Gur](https://youtu.be/fDD4xLayP8?si=xgg9UVpX4Rnx4GeF). August 9, 2023.
<https://youtu.be/fDD4xLayP8?si=xgg9UVpX4Rnx4GeF>

eventually and, he says, if now is the time, then so be it. But he does not offer soft words of comfort - warning that things *will* get more difficult before they get better. Neither does he predict, with any confidence, that Israel's democracy will even survive this harrowing moment in its maturation. His point is that, if we don't now address matters of religious co-existence and racial co-existence and national co-existence, they will continue to plague the country.

This is an essential part of any country growing up. And, Israel is simply that – a young country, with a tapestry of opinions and led by humans who are, by definition, flawed. The names you hear in the news alongside the corrupted leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu include Itamar Ben G'vir and Bezalel Smotrich. These two are the *most* racist, the *most* despotic voices in the fray – but they represent only about 2% of the Israelis who voted. Just as we know all too well back here at home, the voices of those with the most ridiculous opinions on the extreme fringe seem to get the most attention while the far more significant portion of the populace in the middle wrings its hands - seeming not to realize just how much power it actually has. I will be deeply saddened if we fail – if Israel is destroyed, again, from within. But I won't give up – we Zionists are playing the long game.

It would not surprise me that there are some of you listening to the kinds of challenges facing Israel and thinking to yourselves, "Wow, it sounds like he could be describing the US!" Racism, classism, homophobia, and ideological divides are stretching us at the seams here at home, too. The painful differences of opinion of passionate, patriotic Americans are on matters that have been simmering

beneath the surface for so long that we finally got tired of pretending they weren't there.

Decades of marginalization in Israel, and centuries in the States, are now being placed upon the table for address. Every ounce of pain that is being expressed is real and cannot be swept under the rug. As a Jewish community, it is helpful to remember that the essence of our Jewish history is one of fighting back. We have done so in a hundred different ways; we have never simply accepted what was handed us without imposing our influence on the situation; Not even when the voice of the oppressing power was God's voice!

Abraham argued against God's decree for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai audaciously pressed the Caesar to save Judaism from destruction in the year 70CE. In Shushan, Queen Esther risked her life and stood up to the power of Haman's xenophobia. During the Inquisition, our rabbis bravely entered into disputations with the Catholic religious authorities to defend our beliefs. And every time our ancestors experienced the expulsion from wherever they happened to be living – upon arriving in the new land, they immediately looked for what they could contribute in their new home.

Thankfully, the early Zionists recognized the limitations of life in Europe and got to work encouraging Jewish migration in the 1880's. This meant Israel was largely in place just in time to offer some refuge to the survivors of the Shoah. Call it "Jewish Pragmatism" if you like, this survival instinct requires several elements - hope, stamina, sacrifice and the right balance of "flexigidity" – and, as I said

before, the core belief that there is a better option to be created, also known as “Zionism.”

As members of the Jewish community in the Diaspora, we embody that refusal to throw up our hands and surrender. With a collective, “Hineini - we are stating, “we are here, and we will do our part.” As hard as it is, we stay focused on what we believe is possible. Both in Israel and in America.

And this is not the naïveté of dreamers, these are the voices of those working for a better future. I take Theodore Herzl literally when he urged us saying, “if you will it, it is not simply a dream.”⁶

Why? Because the alternatives are too horrible to consider. No superhero is going to come swooping in to save Israel from stiff-necked ourselves. It is tempting to turn our back on the problem and run. To reject an Israel whose current leadership rejects our Jewish relevance.

But, I’m going to urge you to choose a different way of approaching the stress of this difficult and frightening period and imagine that your back is up against the wall; to embrace the feeling that you have no other choice. Heed Rabbi Hillel’s encouragement: “In a place where nobody else is acting like a mensch, then you should act like a mensch.”⁷

Israel is the only Jewish State out there. It is a place where dreamers created the best likeness of their dreams and left us to continue the project. It has been a beacon to the world of what is possible and with all its imperfections it

⁶ Herzl, Theodore. Old, New Land. 1902.

⁷ M. Pirke Avot 2:6.

is *still* better than any other Jewish state I know, and **I am a Zionist** because I know we can realize the Hope of 2000 years – the *Eretz Tzion* – the Land of Zion.

That is an important statement for those of you who have hope, “I am a Zionist.” and I ask you to join me in proclaiming it. I am proud that I can say, with great confidence, “I am a Zionist.” We can expect better, and we will be a part of creating it.

There are a few of you who see me as a naïve idealist. But in fact, I am a pragmatist. What I’m demanding is that we stick with it and go further than dreaming of a better time – that we roll up our sleeves to work for that vision. Join me and other Zionists who know that a better Israel and a better world is possible. My local Reform Rabbinic colleagues and I will be creating a Learn-In style protest in the coming weeks in which we will protest on behalf of democracy within the Jewish State. It is the most immediate way available to get off the sidelines and make yourself heard. Remember, throwing up your hands and accepting the unacceptable simply isn’t Jewish...We have no other choice - *ain li eretz aheret* - we have no other land.

Good Yontiv,