

Yom Kippur Morning 2022 - Standing Together

By Rabbi Dean Kertesz

This morning's Torah portion begins with a statement of Jewish connection, "אַתֶּם נֹצְרִים: הַיּוֹם כִּלְכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם רֵאשֵׁיכֶם שְׂבֻטֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם וְשָׂרֵיכֶם לְאִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל: You stand this day, all of you, before your God—your tribal heads, your elders, and your officials, every householder in Israel," At Sinai, the entire Jewish people stood together, from the highest to the lowest. And it continues, "I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before our God and with those who are not with us here this day." This connection, this covenant at Sinai, transcends time and space. All of us stood together at Sinai. All of us stand together at Sinai. All of us will continue to stand together at Sinai until the end of time. Our Jewish commitment is always happening.

Israel will be 75 years old this year, on May 14 or, if using the Hebrew Calendar, the 5th of Iyar which this coming year falls on April 26th. It's hard to imagine now, when so many of us take Israel for granted and don't even think about it, or think about it as an annoyance or an embarrassment, but it is still miraculous that a Jewish country exists at all. For some of us here in this room, certainly for all our parents and our grandparents, the idea of a Jewish state once seemed unimaginable. That despite two thousand years of statelessness and powerlessness as a minority people scattered across the globe Jews would one day reestablish themselves as a national polity, with political, diplomatic and military power was a dream, or at best an unfulfilled hope, as we sing in *Hatikva*:
לְהִיּוֹת עִם חֻפְּשֵׁי בְּאֶרְצֵנוּ "To live as a free people, in our own land."

Eighty-five years ago, when the vast majority of Jews lived in Poland or the USSR, Zionism was considered idealistic and unreasonable. About 80% of Polish Jews between the two World Wars were supporters of the Yiddisher Arbeiter Bund, The Jewish Workers' Party, which advocated for a culturally autonomous Jewish polity within Poland. The Soviet Union considered Zionism to be a reactionary nationalist heresy and crushed it. Here in the United States Jewish attitudes were decidedly mixed. The American Council for Judaism was established right here in San Francisco to lobby

against the establishment of a Jewish state and was heavily supported by the San Francisco Jewish elite, who were afraid such a state would raise questions of Jewish loyalty and patriotism (as it has done) and threaten the freedoms and privileges American Jews had won. By 1945 90% of Polish Jews were dead along with another million and a half Soviet Jews, their Yiddish civilization and language destroyed along with them and the only remnants of that community either in Palestine or in DP camps in Europe. No one cared much about the fate of European Jews and no one wanted the survivors of the ghettos or the camps. For one brief moment, in the late 1940's there was a consensus that a Jewish state might hold the solution to the pesky problem of what to do with the Jews who had survived the German genocide, so the United Nations voted to partition Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state on November 29, 1947. At least this way the 250,000 survivors had a place to go besides the nations that didn't want them before the Second World War and didn't want the surviving remnant after either. You could argue that even the existence of Israel was in doubt until at least 1967 and more probably after 1973. So Israel's position today seems miraculous to me.

But, why should we care? Particularly today, on Yom Kippur. Let me give you a few reasons.

- In 1948, when Israel declared its independence, there were 600,000 living there, a tiny fraction of the Jewish population. Today, almost seven million Jews live in Israel. Israel has absorbed the survivors of the Shoah, immigrants and refugees from North Africa, the Middle East, endangered Jews from Ethiopia and the Soviet Union. For the first time in **two millennia**, more than half the world's Jewish population live in Israel. In another fifty years it will probably be 75%.
- Even before its establishment, Israel developed the capacity to defend itself and its citizens and continues to provide a safe haven for Jews who have had to flee from persecution and physical danger.
- In 1949, at the end of the War of Independence, Israel was bankrupt and impoverished. Today Israel is the 19th largest economy in the world.¹ With a

¹ <https://forbes.co.il/e/israel-is-among-the-top-20-global-economies-in-gdp-per-capita-for-the-first-time/>

vibrant and creative tech sector, along with (unfortunately) growing economic inequality

- Again, since before its establishment, at the first Zionist Congress in 1894, Israel has maintained a vibrant (maybe too vibrant) democracy and continues to do so, despite authoritarian attacks by some on the right... much like the United States. By the way, women have had the right to vote since the founding of the Zionist movement and Israel has had a woman as head of government. Something we have yet to achieve.
- Yet again, since before its establishment, beginning in 1924, Israel has developed a first rate university system that has added immeasurable value to the world, primarily in sciences and technology.

But, more than all of these accomplishments, Israel has changed the existential and historical conditions of the Jewish people in ways that we still don't fully understand or appreciate. When the Zionist movement began in the late 19th Century, as a response to the unbearable living conditions of Jews in the Russian Empire, it set out to create a new kind of Jew. It rejected the passivity and powerlessness that had, more or less, defined Jewish existence for two millennia since the Roman expulsion in 120 CE, and set about to create a Jew who was comfortable in their bodies, physically strong, and willing to defend themselves. It also set about to build an economy of Jews who would work in every aspect of Jewish life including farming, factory work, garbage collection, as well as study, small merchants, and professional work - the classic domains of Jewish work. It would do this by rooting the Jewish people in their own soil.

Those visionaries succeeded beyond their wildest dreams, creating a country that can defend itself, has a thriving agricultural economy (in fact was founded on that agricultural economy) and changed how the world looks at Jews and how Jews look at themselves. But more than that, by changing Hebrew from a language of study and prayer to a living language in daily use in a country with a Jewish majority, they transformed the ways Jews think about themselves and express themselves. The creation of a vibrant Hebrew culture may be the most amazing single accomplishment

of Israel. Israeli literature, cinema, television, theater, art, dance and journalism are astounding accomplishments. As Rabbi Daniel Gordis wrote, “Today, millions of Israelis speak the language of the Bible; they take it so for granted that they do not realize that an Israeli bookstore, with hundreds of linear feet of shelves of books written in a language that not long ago virtually no one spoke, is miraculous.”² It is unfortunate that so few of us know Hebrew well enough to appreciate the creative power and vitality of Israeli cultural production, but we can still enjoy much of it in translation (as we did last year in our adult education class) and we must stand back in awe at this achievement of national/cultural revitalization.

Further, I would like to suggest that if Israel had not been established in 1948 the Jewish people might not exist today. Or, to be a little bit more accurate, I think only a small minority of ardently religious Jews would have remained out of an unshakable ultra-Orthodox commitment while the vast majority of Jews would have just walked away, out of shame, or fear, or questioning whether being Jewish was worth the risk. Today the Jewish population stands at 14.2 million and has still not reached the level of 1939 when there were 16.6 million Jews world wide.³ But without Israel I think that number would have been far fewer, maybe four million. This is all speculation, but you get my point. So the impact of Israel on world Jewish life goes far beyond its borders, to the very existence of the Jewish people.

So, if the founders of Zionism set out to transform the political and historical conditions of the Jewish people they succeeded beyond their wildest fantasies. Jewish life today is fundamentally different from Jewish life 80 years ago. Unimaginably and fundamentally different. Those early visionaries (and it's important to note they were women as well as men) wanted the Jewish people to gain political power and they did. They wanted Jews to have control over their historical destiny and we have. They wanted Jews to be able

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https://danielgordis.substack.com/p/if-i-had-a-sermon-?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email#details

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/07/02/has-the-global-jewish-population-finally-rebounded-from-the-holocaust-not-exactly/>

to protect themselves from physical threats and not rely on the kindness of the populations among whom we lived, which could be given or taken away on a whim, we can and we don't have to anymore. They wanted to spark a cultural revival and it has happened. So on this day of recognizing the good - *hakarat ha tov* - let's pause for a moment in appreciation of all that the first Zionists, the *halutzim* (pioneers) who they inspired and laid the foundation of the state, and all the Israelis who came after them who have built and sustained it, have accomplished.

On Erev Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the necessity of imperfection. That we are all imperfect and that we must embrace that imperfection, to see ourselves as we really are, and to respond to the constant opportunity to grow. Israel, as a creation of human beings, is no different. It too, despite the existential necessity for Jewish continuity and despite its many miraculous achievements, also is in an ongoing process of development and becoming. Israel has made its share of mistakes and faces many ethical and moral challenges. If, on the one hand, Israel's existence has been essential for Jewish survival and renewal, it has come at a great cost to the Palestinian Arabs. Our success has been built on their suffering. This is an inescapable truth and must be faced squarely.

There are many different suggestions on how to address this conundrum from, on one extreme, wiping Israel off the map and replacing it with an Arab State, or more mildly put - one state for two people. Or in the middle two states for two people, or some type of confederation, or, at the other extreme, Israeli Jews ruling over Palestinian Arabs indefinitely or in perpetuity. Each of these possible solutions is fraught with difficulties. This is because we live in the real world. Power carries responsibility as does becoming a historical actor rather than a victim. The reality of power is that often our moral choices are limited to making the best, worst decision, not the best decision. But, based on the last 100 years of world history, or what we see unfolding in Ukraine right now, I would rather have the moral challenges of power, at its most basic - the ability to protect and defend yourself - than the moral purity of victimhood. But, regardless where you

stand on this issue, you must face it. Do otherwise is to step outside of Jewish history and peoplehood and to avoid taking a moral stand.

Israel has other problems as well, like a long history of treating new immigrants abysmally. From the Holocaust survivors who treated as pariahs, sheep to the slaughter, in the late 1940's, to the Jews from North Africa and the Middle East who arrived in the 1950's and early 60's, and were seen as backward and too Jewish, to Soviet emigres who were welcomed in the 1970's and 1990's and then had their talents and gifts squandered, to Ethiopian Jews who were welcomed with great fanfare in the 1990's and then treated like second class citizens because of their skin color and so on. In this, Israel is like almost every other country with an ambivalent record of caring for its immigrants. On the other hand Israel, by its very existence, saved each of these groups from either physical or cultural destruction. Israel fulfilled its responsibility to save threatened Jewish populations, even if it failed to integrate them effectively. Although over time, each group has found its place after much suffering and social and political conflict. My point is Israel is simultaneously miraculous and deeply flawed; a place of miracles and misery.

Israel is deeply unpopular in some parts of our society and in parts of the world. On the left Israel is seen as colonial/settler colony, an apartheid state that should be done away with. Its very existence is a moral blemish that must be erased. This is particularly true on university campuses, among the progressive and socialist left in much of the world, and in the United Nations, where the word Zionist is used as slur. On the right it is either embraced for the wrong reasons, the Christian fundamentalist messianic impulse or ethno-nationalism or condemned for duping and distorting American foreign policy for decades. On the left we have progressives who love Jews but hate the Jewish state and make a distinction between Jews and Zionists. On the right we have reactionaries who hate Jews but love Israel.

So here we return to our Torah portion for this morning. This statement of unity, solidarity, and connection. All of us stand together at Sinai. On this day all of us stand

together in the belief of God's loving power to forgive. So if I began this drash talking about connection I want to end with love. There is a fundamental Jewish value of *ahavat Israel* that we must love of our fellow Jews. On Erev Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the basic human condition of imperfection. Love is what enables us to be in relationship with the imperfect others in our life. We don't give up on the people we love because of their imperfections. The same is true for countries and societies. The United States is deeply flawed, but I don't see people giving up on America. The benefits and the potential for creating something better outway the flaws. In the same way, we cannot walk away from Israel. To do otherwise is to abandon half the Jewish people and reject the painful historical lessons of the 20th Century and the incredible strides we have made as a people, which could not have been accomplished without Israel.

I want to be clear, we do not have to agree on Israel: its policies, its values, its behaviors, or its actions. Israel should be open to criticism and we can have vigorous debates. Certainly Israelis do. But, I want to set one clear boundary I hold to: where are you coming from? If you want to criticize Israel because you want to make it a better place; bring it on. I want to hear you. But, if you want to criticize Israel because your goal is to see it eliminated and wiped off the map, then we have nothing to talk about. Because one criticism comes from a place of love while the other comes from a place of hate, or at best delusion.

On Rosh Hashanah morning I talked about the unique collective nature of Jewish identity. We are all in this together, whether we like it or not. As it says in the Talmud, *kol yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*, all Israel is responsible each for the other. If Israel makes us feel uncomfortable, that is part of the deal. We have to accept it and grapple with it. In the simplest terms, I am asking you to affirm your connection to Israel and act on it.

That action could take many forms. Here are just a few:

- Keep up on the news about Israel, not just through the American press but with an Israel newspaper either daily or weekly, many are online and in English. Access is easy.

- Dive into modern Israeli culture - read an Israeli novel, watch a movie or tv series (they are great). Again, they are easily available at any bookstore or online, on Netflix, Amazon TV, and youtube.
- Learn your history, so you can participate in conversations about Israel from a place of knowledge and educate others. There are so many great readable histories of Israel that have been published in just the last decade.
- Get involved politically to support Israel, regardless of your political perspective you can find a political group to engage with
- Pick the internal Israeli cause you care the most about and get involved: whether strengthening democracy, supporting social services, the Israeli - Arab conflict or whatever. The possibilities are endless.
- If you are really ambitious you might want to learn Hebrew: trust me learning Hebrew will open your eyes and blow your mind

My point is simple. We are living through one of the most amazing periods of Jewish history, a time our parents or grandparents could only dream of. Do not take Israel for granted. Engage with it. Connect with it. Enrich your life through it. Find your reason to love it and then act on that love. Our Torah portion this morning says, We are all called. We all stand together.