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Washington, DC
Rosh Hashanah 5782\2021

Whither Israel?

Dear Friends,

I am a worrier.

I worry about serious things:

COVID

The future of American Jewish life

How our Micah community can continue to thrive and be impactful through COVID and its necessary limitations.

I worry about Israel and its future and our future as American Jews in relation to Israel.

To be sure, I also worry about trivial matters:

The Chicago White Sox

The availability of Deep Dish pizza

Where do I find the best butter-brickle ice cream?

But this morning I return to Israel -- our relationship to it, my worries and my actions.

This is a huge topic and my remarks have to be brief –I hope not too brief that it prevents clarity.

I am a liberal Jew who likes to push the boundaries and is not afraid to make mistakes.

My Judaism is an eclectic Judaism that I continually create and recreate. I am rooted in the past through both personal and inherited memory.

I increasingly desire a vibrant, tolerant, ethically demanding and personally supportive big-wide Judaism for my grandchildren's grandchildren.

This brings me then to Israel and the increasingly lonely place of the liberal American Zionist.

Last spring, during the height of the latest round of violence between HAMAS of Gaza and Israel, a group of approximately one hundred rabbinical students wrote an open letter, "Rabbinical and Cantorial Students Appeal to the Heart of the Jewish Community." The letter was highly critical of many of Israel's actions, not only of the military confrontation of that spring. The letter was informed by the new language that has emerged in some circles; phrases which many young Jews today use to describe their views and positions on Israel:

Colonialist enterprise.

Post-Zionist

Recovering Zionist

Ethnic Cleansing Zionist

Many of you have seen these terms used. Many of you have seen the hostility expressed towards Israel—and for me frequently, the double standard, from particularly those on the Left who are otherwise our friends.

The letter of the young rabbinical students brought this to a head for me and I wrote a response which was published in a Jewish on-line journal and circulated among some liberal Zionist groups.

I tried my best to articulate the deep roots of Zionism—not as a modern political ideology—but as a sense of place, rootedness, and home that it has in the Jewish experience. Zion, if you will, is knit into the Jewish DNA.

There is no Jewish community anywhere in Jewish history that cut off its connection to Zion as place and survived.

We are caught in a take no prisoners argument of two extremes.

There is the obsessively anti-Israel, colonialist power Israel of the Left
and

the ultra-nationalist, Israel right or wrong ferocity of the right.

How can our relationship with Israel be one that gives voice to a passionate progressive Zionism? What of the vital center?

I begin with the premise that Zionism is not simply a modern late 19th century Jewish undertaking. It is as ancient as our oldest texts. The Jewish experience in history always informs our theology. Our religion begins not with the idea but with the deed.

The State of Israel represents not only a safe harbor from the deadly danger that nearly 2000 years of exile created but also a return home. "Home" for us is of deep theological significance. Home is the Garden of Genesis. Home vs Exile is the central Jewish story.

Zionism is simply an articulation of Jewish peoplehood, Jewish civilization and the place of "home" in Jewish theology.

We are Jews because we understand that Judaism happens in relation to real places. The Shabbat table, the kitchen, the home, the bimah, the school, the camp, the succah. This "sense of place" has been central to our theology from its very beginning. The dawn of the Jewish saga began with going to the land – we call it Abraham's initial journey. This "placeness" that defines us began in a specific place that we can point to on a map. If we leave all thoughts of nationalism and politics and power aside, how does a Jew relate to that place? That is not a mere theoretical question. Can we take the land away from the story and in any way have the same story?

The entire framework for Jewish spirituality is a cycle: home, exile, return. This is rooted in the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), our oldest story. It is our most powerful metaphor for what it means to live as a person in the world. It is the part of Judaism that lives in our gut. It informs the ethical mandate that motivates our pursuit of justice.

The late Amos Oz understood that when he wrote that for Jews to resort to forging a nation state was a matter of sheer survival. Consider Oz:

"I think that the nation-state is a tool, an instrument, that is necessary for a return to Zion, but I am not enamored of this instrument.... I would be more than happy to live in a world composed of dozens of civilizations...all cross pollinating one another, without anyone emerging as a nation-state...No nothing. Only spiritual civilizations tied somehow to their lands, without the tools of statehood and without the instruments of war.

But the Jewish people has already staged a long-running one-man show of that sort... No one joined us; no one copied the model the Jews were forced to sustain for two thousand years, the model of a civilization without the 'tools of statehood.' For me the drama ended with the murder of Europe's Jews by Hitler."

Oz goes on to quote George Steiner who said that for Jews to form a nation state was like "being an old man in a kindergarten." We knew better but we had no choice.

We must never be afraid to say aloud that the creation of Israel was a matter of our survival.

Post Zionism? Recovering Zionist? Please remember how the pre-Zionist era ended.

Ethnic Cleansing? We knew Ethnic Cleansing. "Our people took (and barely survived) the advanced course."

We all know that it is common currency on the Left to reject the idea of Israel as the lifeboat that world Jewry needs. But when we say "Never Forget!" the Zionist in me continues, "...the pogroms that rippled across Eastern and Central Europe **after** the Holocaust." That's right, **after**. I therefore take it as axiomatic that without Israel, there would be Jews living still today in refugee camps. "Kol Yisraeil arevim zeh ba zeh," (All Israel is responsible for one another), our ancient rabbis taught.

Emanuel Levinas, a holocaust survivor, interpreted that statement as only a starting point. To be human, Levinas taught, is to be infinitely obligated to be fully present morally for each and every "other." Can we dare to imagine a Zionism that encompasses Levinas?

This is the urgent project for our time. And it is a challenge that brings out the worrier in me. We are burdened with a kind of nightmare. When we came home, because there was nowhere else to go, we came to a homeland where the occupants were not eager to share. We are one home with two indigenous peoples. As Abba Eban once said so aptly, "Partition is stamped on Israel's birth certificate." This land must be shared. There is no other way.

In Anita Shapira's masterful book, *Israel: A History*, she writes this regarding the 1948 Independence war:

“The... biggest losers were the Palestinians...about 700,000 ... had been exiled from their homeland...In the context of the time, Israeli policy on the refugee issue was not considered out of the ordinary...”

Shapira then cites the displacement\ refugee statistics that World War II created in Europe where after the war millions were forcibly moved from their homes as borders were redrawn. Shapira concludes, “Of all the refugees created in the second half of the 1940s, the Palestinians were the only ones not absorbed by the countries where they lived. Thus they became a permanent problem in the Middle East.”

The full understanding of this problem requires intensive engagement with both history as well as conflicting narratives and ideologies. No one can be allowed easy answers.

Two Jewish texts of the twentieth century underscore and define our challenge. Israel’s Declaration of Independence of May 1948 and the official Prayer for the State of Israel written by the Sephardic and Ashkenazic Chief rabbis in September of that same year.

(See the on your screen or service sheet—note what is in bold)

Israel’s founding Declaration:

“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 religions...

WE APPEAL - ... **to the Arab inhabitants** of the State of Israel to **preserve peace** and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of **full and equal citizenship** and due representation in all its ... institutions.

WE EXTEND our hand to all **neighboring states** and their peoples in an offer of **peace and good neighborliness**, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land...”

And the first line of the official prayer for the State begins:

“Our Father in Heaven, Rock and Redeemer of Israel, bless the State of Israel, the first flowering of our redemption.”

The question before us - how do we regard the phrase “first flowering of our redemption?” Is this metaphor or does this signify something cosmic and real—if you will? Are we in an era of “redemption?” What does being in an era of “redemption” mean? Does being in an era of “redemption” change the rules of life?

The writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and his son, Rabbi Tzvi-Yehuda Kook shed some light.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the pre-State chief rabbi was a deeply spiritual Jew with a universalist ethic. He saw great promise in the movement of secular Zionism. He taught that the return of the Jewish People to the Land of Israel had cosmic significance, “the Judaism of the Land of Israel is salvation itself.” (Eretz Yisrael in Orot, 1920)

He believed that the building of even a secular Jewish presence in the Land of Israel marked the engagement of the people with a messianic quest. In other words, earthly sovereignty (Ben Gurion’s “mamlachtiyut”) had cosmic, and messianic impact. He believed that secular Zionism was recreating the Jewish soul. Rabbi Kook gave a religious “imprint to the Zionist notion of *Livnot u’lhivanot* to build and to be rebuilt.”

Rabbi Kook’s son expanded his father’s theory and belief into an aggressive political ideology and a motivating theology for the settler movement. He wrote: “The state is the highest earthly revelation of ‘Him Who returns His Presence to the World.’ All else is detail...” (Zvi Yehuda HaKohen Kook, *Within the Public Campaign*. In the Press, ed. Yosef Bermason, Jerusalem: HaRav Kook Institute, 1986).

These followers see in the State of Israel a messianic event beyond history. The world is in a new era of a “Revealed End that prohibits the ceding of any occupied territory because possession of the Land is a divinely ordained inheritance.” (Rabbi Shlomo Goren in *Quarterly of the Israel Chief Rabbinate*, 1980). Israel’s conquests in the Six Day War affirmed the belief that the secular state itself represented the unfolding of a divine plan that suspends all other concerns, values, and interests. To partition the land is therefore to commit blasphemy.

How does this Revealed End understanding square with the promise and commitments made to “the Arab inhabitants” and “all neighboring states” in Israel’s Declaration of May 14, 1948? A literal understanding of “the dawning of redemption” and the promises of the Declaration cannot live side by side.

These Holy Days invite us to take action, to go deeply into our souls. We each seek to measure our lives through the prism of our past. We are each invited to consider Israel’s Declaration of Independence and the Prayer for the State. We are then called to decide which text is metaphor and which text is literal or for some to abandon the field altogether. Our personal decisions determine the nature of both our Zionism and our very Judaism.

Tony Bayfield, in his masterful recent book, *Being Jewish Today: Confronting the Real Issues*, describes Judaism as a paradox: “We insist on the importance of our particularity but argue it’s only through the particular that the universal can be realized.” This is the Jewish challenge of our time. Zionism is not an end unto itself. Jewish sovereignty gives us responsibility to care for ourselves and a greater responsibility to show that we take our own Bible seriously, “one law for citizen and stranger alike.” Zionism offers us the opportunity to model justice on the world stage.

The liberal Zionist role is to work incessantly to ensure that our contemporary return home is built on a moral foundation.

I cannot not love America even as I struggle on behalf of a better America. I cannot not love Israel even as I struggle on behalf of a better Israel.

I implore all those who would abandon Israel as I implore each one of you, please join that effort. We need you. We need your children and grandchildren.

Let our contribution to Judaism include the creation of a new language that advances the vision of an ethical, forward looking, confident Zionism.

We need strong, passionate voices to stand on what I call the liberal Zionist bridge. Without our strength, passion and love, our unashamed, proud, progressive Zionism is weaker. The Jewish people and Jewish history deserve our best shot. Don’t abandon the effort. Stand with those committed to change the direction.