

Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel

Temple Micah, Washington, DC

November 4, 2022

RECOMMITTING TO ZIONISM

“B’Eretz Yisraeil Kam Ha-am Ha Yehudi...”

“The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.”

These are the opening words of Israel’s Declaration of Independence, May 14, 1948 in Tel Aviv.

I read these words this evening for two reasons.

Israel’s elections –of course

but even if no elections had been held, these words would have informed the crux of my remarks.

Several weeks ago, I shared with the congregation a letter to the editor that I sent to the Washington Post which the Post chose not to print. I received several questions and some pushback on one particular phrase in that letter. I wrote in regard to the former president’s statements regarding Jews earlier that week which I regarded as antisemitic that the former president derives his limited understanding about Jews and Judaism in part from:

“His friendship with the anti-Zionist former Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. If Zionism has anything at all to do with the unity of the Jewish people, the former prime minister does not qualify as a Zionist.”

People challenged my calling former and now about to be again prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu an anti-Zionist.

Here, I simply note my word choice, “if Zionism has anything to do with the unity of the Jewish people.”

Zionism is nothing if not about Jewish peoplehood

and

peoplehood means all of us—that we are one people—many customs, beliefs, languages but we are one people.

Our foundational story is found in Torah. We all know that.

We resonate to the narrative and theological premise that we all stood at Sinai.

Peoplehood means that we have a distinct culture—there is such a thing as a Jewish cookbook—there are, in fact, hundreds if not thousands of Jewish cookbooks.

I say cookbooks to show the distinctive quality of being Jewish.

Which list do we belong on?

Italian, Chinese, French

Or

Methodist, Buddhist, Hindu

Do you see what I mean?

Is there a Methodist cuisine?

There is Japanese cuisine but is it ever called Buddhist?

We measure time sharing the same calendar with the same rhythm to the year—High Holy Days—this month we call Mar Cheshvan (Bitter Cheshvan because of no holidays). As the fall moves towards winter and the nights get longer and colder, our calendar has us look towards Hanukkah and its light. We all know the rhythm of our year. It is the rhythm of Jewish peoplehood. We may observe these days differently but we are guided by the same calendar. We understand what we say to each other when we ask is the New Year early or late this year?

To an outsider, that is an absurd question.

We are a people because we understand what the question is asking—including the self-proclaimed non-religious Jew.

This is why the State of Israel's founding document refers to the birth of the Jewish people because there can be no Zionism without a people.

Zionism is about people and land.

Peoplehood is our shared language—so to speak.

Zionism is the simple idea that this people, our people had for 2000 years of exile longed to return to its original land and the abuses we suffered outside of our land had made not having a land beyond intolerable.

We barely survived the crisis of the last century.

As a self-proclaimed committed Zionist, I say that I fully believe that were it not for Israel, the world today would be dotted with refugee camps filled with Jews.

If you do not accept Jewish peoplehood, you cannot be a Zionist. If you do not stand for the unity of the Jewish people, you cannot be a Zionist. If you put Israeli politics or winning an election above Jewish peoplehood, you are destroying the very fabric of Zionism.

That brings us to today—and the sobering news of this week’s Israeli elections.

No less a figure than General Gadi Eisenkot, former Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces, has warned repeatedly in recent years that the country’s internal divisions pose a greater threat to Israel’s flourishing than its foreign enemies. This year—just a few months ago, a group of over one hundred Israeli former generals and security officials wrote a letter endorsing the general’s position.

A person as responsible as anyone for creating, manipulating and stoking these divisions in order to gain political reward has been Benjamin Netanyahu. On this Shabbat of all Shabbatot—on this November 4, the twenty-seven year anniversary of the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin, we need to recall Rabin’s courage and vision. We need to also remember the events that laid the groundwork for his murder—a murder that changed the history of the country.

It was Netanyahu, who in 1995 spoke at a Likud Party anti-Oslo rally where then Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin was hung in effigy dressed in the garb of a Nazi uniform. In another rally that same year, Netanyahu led a mock funeral procession featuring a coffin and hangman's noose where the crowd chanted, "Death to Rabin."

Netanyahu planted and cultivated the seeds of today’s Israeli politics.

The unity of the Jewish people means nothing to this man. He scorns his Zionist heritage as he scores his cheap political points.

It is on this basis that I wrote the sentence that I did. There is politics and there is Zionism. Just as in this country, until this era, there has been politics and there has been democracy.

Israel rests on the twin pillars of Zionism and Democracy which leads me to another statement from the Declaration of Independence and then a thought on this week’s election:

“THE STATE OF ISRAEL... 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...”

This is the deepest fears about this election. They now go beyond Netanyahu to the ugly beast that he has spawned. There is the Religious Zionist Party which he was instrumental in creating—the union of Itamar ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich .

As I wrote in the Micah newsletter just a few weeks ago, they are Jewish fascists and we should not hesitate to call them that. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president emeritus of the Union for Reform Judaism, was blunt when he wrote these two represent “nothing less than a poison in the lifeblood of Israel and the Jewish world” by advocating that Palestinians be forced to choose “between expulsion and servitude.”

With this election, our American Jewish communal leadership needs to show a new kind of leadership—a new Zionist courage –if you will—and follow the model of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, which responded to Smotrich’s visit to London earlier this year with this statement: “We reject Smotrich’s abominable views and hateful ideology. Get back on the plane, Bezalel, and be remembered as a disgrace forever. You are not welcome here.”

My friend and colleague Rabbi Jill Jacobs, executive director of Truah: The Rabbinic Moral Voice wrote the following this week:

“With his record of hate speech and violence, coupled with his strong anti-Arab racist beliefs, MK Itamar Ben-Gvir has no place in the political mainstream. Allowing any messages for the justification of violence to be elevated to a government platform endangers the safety and security of people living in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. We also hold former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responsible for his role in legitimizing Ben-Gvir and his party as a means of reclaiming his own power.”

Where does that leave us?

I ask myself that question often. It is deeply personal.

What will it take for me to say that I am turning my back on Israel? I ask the same question regarding our own country. I cannot turn my back on America.

Therefore I personally feel an overwhelming obligation to double down on my support for the most progressive-shared society human rights organizations both in Israel.

Our support for Givat Haviva, Israel’s oldest and premiere institution for shared society must increase—hopefully dramatically. They are a regular beneficiary of our Temple Micah Israel

Fund. We are going to visit them on our December Micah Israel trip—there are other similar organizations that we support and visit.

Truah—the rabbinic Moral Voice is an organization that I am so proud to support and help to lead. These places are in desperate need of strong funding. You know, I never ask for money from the bimah—and I do so only when the times are desperate. As you consider any end of year gifts—consider our Israel Fund—consider Truah—the rabbinic moral voice.

Od lo avdah tikvateinu-

We will never lose our hope for a better Israel-

And we will work unceasingly—relentlessly for a better Israel.

Lo Alech hamlacha ligmor—v lo atah ben chorin lihibatel memenu-

We are not obligated to complete the work—neither are we free to refrain from doing our part.

In other word,

I will not cede my Zionism not one inch to those who seek to destroy it from the inside.

Shabbat Shalom--