

Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel  
Temple Micah, Washington, DC  
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## LIBERAL JUDAISM, LIBERAL ZIONISM

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ־לְךָ  
מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ  
אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶה:

ADONAI said to Abram: ‘Leave your country, your birthplace, your father’s house and go to the land that I will show you.

Ha-aretz asher ar-eka—The land that I will make visible to you. The land that you will be able to see.

And then this morning’s Torah portion—we begin with uncannily similar words.

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח־נָא אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יִחְזָקָה  
אֲשֶׁר־אֶהְבֶּתְךָ אֶת־יִצְחָק וְלֵךְ־לְךָ  
אֶל־הָאָרֶץ הַמְרֵיָה

God said to Abraham—Take your son, your only son, the son that you love, take Isaac and go to the land that I will show you.

El Eretz Ha-Moriah—The land that I will make visible to you, the land where there is vision.

Here we have God's first command to Abraham- leave home and go to the land that I will make visible to you—

And then—just ten chapters on—God orders Abraham to take Isaac to the land of vision.

As God is leading Abraham to this place of vision, I wonder what did he see as he surveyed what lay ahead. Did Abraham wonder about the future? After all, God had told him that he would be the father of many nations and through him the nations of the world would be blessed.

As he climbed Mt. Moriah, did our mythic Abraham envision the temple Solomon would someday build on that spot?

Did he see that the Babylonians would destroy that very Temple?

Did he foresee his descendants lay down by the waters of Babylon in tears, mourning their exile and the loss of God's house? Did Abraham see them proclaim, "If I forget you o' Jerusalem, let my right hand lose its cunning and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I remember you not?"

Does he see Ezra return to Jerusalem from Babylon seventy years later and rebuild the temple?

Does Abraham glimpse that later yet, Herod, under Roman rule, would revamp and overhaul this second temple making it one of the architectural wonders of the ancient world?

Does he see **this** temple destroyed as those pesky Judeans rebelled against the yoke of Rome?

Was Abraham able to see the wisdom of Yochanan ben Zakkai who in this great mythic story sneaks out of Jerusalem and establishes a school in Yavneh where Torah would be taught such that with a destroyed temple, Jewish life continued, albeit in a perpetual state of mourning and longing for return to the Land?

Did Abraham foresee the Jewish law that taught:

*“Adam Saad Et Bayto Ba-Seyeed Miyasher Ta-am Zecher L’Yerushalayim.”*

“When a person builds his house, he leaves one wall unfinished (unplastered) in memory of Jerusalem?”

Did Abraham know that Jewish homes in Europe would hang a Mizrach (wall hanging) on the Eastern wall simply because their hearts were in the Land of Israel?

I wonder what Abraham envisioned just as I ask myself this at this moment what do I see?

When I look at our Jewish world today I see too much.

We are a people at war.

We are a people in mourning.

We are a people in fear.

We are a people divided.

When I look at this morning’s Torah portion, I wonder, as Abraham certainly wondered as he climbed that mountain with Isaac—is this really the path to the future?

What is our path?

What is the role of Zionism in our American Jewish future?

What is the place of Israel in our American Jewish future?

How secure is America for our Jewish future?

We know from a close read of this biblical text that after this trauma up the mountain Abraham and Isaac never speak to each other again. They leave the mountain separately.

We ask:

What is the distance between today's Abraham and today's Isaac, between today's Jewish generations?

What is the relationship between American Jewry and Israel?

As I look out for my final Rosh Hashanah sermon at Micah, what do I see?

Where has our Jewish journey led us?

I offer these thoughts as an unabashed liberal Zionist. As I am wont to say, many Zionists hold me in disdain because I am liberal.

Many liberals, whom I do not deem as liberal, hold me in disdain because I am a Zionist.

First, my Zionist definition:

Zionism is the understanding that Jews constitute a people, a nation, and therefore in a world organized around nation states, Jews have the moral right of self-determination in a nation state in our ancient homeland from which we were driven and furthermore that the Jewish experience in history proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that without such a state, Jewish life is subject to relentless persecution and even destruction. I am a **liberal** Zionist because I believe that everyone living in such a Jewish state, Jewish or not Jewish is entitled to full and equal rights of citizenship, as clearly articulated in Israel's own Declaration of Independence. Sovereignty in our world means having a nation state. This is in no way a preference but a pragmatic necessity. (For more on this, I can refer you to Amos Oz.)

So, when we look out into **our** world today, what do we see?

For one thing, we have entered an age of tribal intolerance.

An ethnic\religious tribe on one side.

A moral\philosophical tribe on another.

First—the ethnic\religious tribe:

In our great land, there is a political movement that is animated by an extreme White Christian Nationalist vision. They hold that America is a nation state of and for White Christians, that there is such a thing as a correct American culture, with English as its language, a particular kind of Christianity as its religious ethos and its own concept of family---heterosexual, with naturally conceived children.

In this mind set-

the creative arts must be controlled,

history has to be taught in their defined way,

the civil war was a great lost cause,

library shelves have to be monitored because the wrong books influence the reader with unacceptable ideas or behaviors,

immigrants are invaders (especially if you are a person of color),

and

Jews are outsiders and threats—look at how we control the banks, Hollywood, and the media. We are communist agitators, global cosmopolitans, internationalists, decadent artists, union organizers, New York intellectuals and with our dual loyalty we sway foreign policy.

It gets worse not better-

Is it not terrifying that Holocaust denial has seeped or perhaps flowed into the far right conversation. In 2018, our own former Micah member now living in Chicago, Jonathan Weisman, wrote a book about his personal experiences with these American Nazis.

This sewage has now gone farther.

Just consider a recent Michelle Goldberg column:

“not every red-pilled conservative ends up arguing, as (Candace) Owens did (Candace Owens describes herself as “Hitler curious”), that Hitler gets a bad rap. But the weakening of the intellectual quarantine around Nazism — and the MAGA

right's fetish for ideas their enemies see as dangerous — makes it easier for ... conservatives to surrender to fascist impulses.”

This is where one influential political sentiment lives. Hitler has become someone to “consider.” Hitler “fans” are embraced without shame by those running for our highest elected office. To American ears this should sound absolutely unbelievable—but we have already been told that “there are very fine people on both sides.”

We, Jews, have been told even more. We have been told that

**we** have to be “crazy,”

**we** “have to have our heads examined”

and that

**we** “don’t like the Jewish people”

if we vote for this candidate’s opponent.

(P A U S E)

How can we not wonder if Jews are being set-up as the scapegoat if this candidate loses the election?

History tells us what happens when Jews as a group are called out by politicians. Don’t think that there is no such thing as American Fascism.

We know that when we see

voter suppression,

book banning, and censorship —

we are seeing the tip of the iceberg—antisemitism, and a totalitarian White Christian Nationalism are anchoring the root.

History teaches us that authoritarian; anti-liberal forces always fear a free mind—

Heinrich Heine’s tragic words should not be forgotten— “Where they burn books, they will also come to burn people.”

(And here, as an aside, I would beg for the messianic, authoritarian, culture censoring, zealots in the current government of Israel to look into Heinrich Heine's mirror. It is no accident that the same people that censor Israeli cultural expression allow the murderous rampages on the West Bank.)

In celebration of America's bi-centennial, Librarian of Congress, Archibald Macleish wrote these words:

"there is not a single police state of any ideology which does not confess by its Berlin Walls

...its nets of concentration camps,

... its censorship of books ...its suppression of minds, that it is afraid...

(because) the free mind, it cannot conquer..."

The border walls, family separation detention camps at the border, book banning in library districts across the country and the Florida, Oklahoma and others school curricula check every box Macleish offers.

If our Judaism stands for anything, it is this self-same free mind. Irving Howe, put it like this: (never a captive mind, but) "a mind committed yet dispassionate, ready to stand alone, curious, and skeptical. The banner of critical independence ... is still the best (strength) we have."

Our Jewish inheritance is everything from Spinoza to Albert Einstein or if you prefer the arts---the Psalmists to Leonard Bernstein.

We say---no compromise at all when it comes to a free mind.

This is a radical and dangerous force we are facing in this country and make no mistake they see Jews as a primary source of cultural creativity.

(PAUSE)

What about the other side of the divide?

Here our Jewish challenge is centered on a radical, utter rejection of and deliberate mischaracterization of Zionism. This has been evident for some time. This year it boiled over in both word and deed.

For my family, it began with our witnessing in horror the triumphant anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, antisemitic demonstration on October 8—that is right—October 8 down Chestnut Street in center city Philadelphia. The chants of “Palestine will be free from the river to the sea!” and “Global Intifada” echoed around us. There was no doubt that those who celebrated on **that** day had crossed a line from pro-Palestinian to antisemitic.

Our hearts drained to the very bottom when we saw that proud participants in this horror show included a delegation from Jewish Voices for Peace. Remember this was on October 8. Hamas was still running all over southern Israel.

In our own city, the George Washington University anti-Israel campus encampment featured a sign “Final Solution.”

Leon Wieseltier wrote in response:

“For all of Israel’s cruelties toward the Palestinians, it is a gross historical lie that the Jewish state ever set out to eliminate every last Palestinian and every last vestige of Palestinian culture, so that the people and the culture would disappear from the face of the earth.”

Wieseltier continues

“... Aren’t war crimes, or crimes against humanity...evil enough? “Genocide” has become the term with which to describe the atrocity of which one most disapproves. There certainly are genocides in the world now — the Uyghurs most notably — but the left never marches for them... Rohynga? Not a prayer...Sudanese? It appears that you have to be fighting Israelis or Jews for progressives to bestir themselves on your behalf. Wieseltier concludes: Anyway, the definition of genocide is not quantitative: The Hamas savagery of October 7, even though it killed “only” twelve hundred people, was in fact genocidal, owing to the anti-Semitic and eliminationist motivations that are amply and explicitly articulated in Hamas’s literature.”

The Liberal Zionist space is a lonely one.

Last May, as I addressed our Temple Micah High School graduates, I spoke to them about the environment they would be facing on the college campus. The odds were great that among those with whom they would find common cause on abortion justice, ballot access, global warming, immigration reform, living wage, workers' rights—you name it— there would be a bright line on anything regarding Israel and the Palestinians.

I urged our students to strive to distinguish between legitimate criticism of Israel government policies and the movement towards the de-legitimization of the only Jewish country in the world.

How many times must one say that the current Israeli government is a desecration of everything Judaism has ever taught—the violence its ultranationalist, expansionist, racist, thugs promotes are in two Hebrew words—Hillul Ha-Shem—a desecration of God's name. The Gaza war, incited by Hamas's brutal, evil pogrom of October 7 became a horrifying nightmare as the Palestinian death toll rose, the hostages remained in captivity and no plan has to date emerged for how to move towards a shared and peaceful future.

Israel is led by a man with no plan except his own survival. A revenge war leads to nothing but more revenge. All this while Israel continues to face real dangers which emanate from Iran through its proxies surrounding Israel.

This Israeli government and relentlessly fight expanding wars with no evident strategy that will help Israel over the long term.

As this goes on, the reign of terror unleashed by ultranationalist religious settlers on the West Bank simply increases encouraged by this outrageous government.

Retired general Yitzchak Brik, former director of the Israel Army Military College wrote, that the Gaza war hasn't "achieved any of the goals they had set...The foremost of these goals was "destroying Hamas and freeing all the hostages. But in reality, Hamas still controls the whole Strip, including its tunnel city and all of Gaza's residents, in every walk of life."

Israel's most highly respected, former chief of staff retired General Gadi Eisenkot captured the situation in one sentence: "Israel has failed miserably to achieve its goals." This, in a war, where the general lost his own son.

A tragic contemporary and too real Abraham- Isaac story.

How can we in America not be overcome with a sense of horror and loss and not grief? Are we waiting for an angel of God to call back the knife as the ideals and aspirations of the Zionist story are destroyed by radical messianists and the Zionist vision of an earlier era unravels?

I both worry and wonder about those that truly hate Israel and regard Zionism as a curse. Why this disdain and disregard for liberal Zionism? Are they unaware of our existence? Do they not know of J-Street, New Israel Fund? Americans for Peace Now? The group that commands so much of my own time, T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights? Do they not know of our unceasing critique of Israeli policies, our efforts for a different Israel?

Wieseltier writes:

"today's progressive anti-Zionists would like us to desist. Our work spoils their paradigm, which is that liberalism and Zionism are incompatible... What is true is that we doves...moderates, or two-staters, are the big losers in present-day Israel. But progressives... should understand that historical reversal is not the same as philosophical refutation... We are not wrong in our hunger for Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation, we are merely unpopular ...what is a more principled and more practicable solution to the conflict than the adjacent states of Israel and Palestine? I have not heard one."

Wieseltier concludes:

"Justice that is purchased with injustice is injustice... If Israel commits crimes or abuses that must be criticized, we have plentiful grounds, liberal grounds, Zionist grounds, Jewish grounds ...on which to criticize it... If Israel cured cancer, (the Left) would defend cancer."

Eva Ilouz is one of Israel's greatest intellectuals-- a feminist sociologist, a leading Israeli public intellectual and a fierce critic of both the Israeli political right and world-wide anti-Zionists. (If you wish, take the time to look up her skewering of Judith Butler.)

Profesor Ilouz captures it all in these two statements:

1.

First of the external threat, Ilouz writes, "No country would take lightly the genocidal intentions of neighboring states."

And-2. Ilouz writes:

"The second existential threat, an internal one ... A large contingent of power-hungry Jewish messianists want to expel the Palestinians from Israel and the territories, they view as traitors the descendants of the secular pioneers who helped establish modern Israel, and they aspire to impose a Jewish supremacist regime. To achieve these goals, they intend to destroy Israeli democracy."

This is what I see when I consider our Jewish world.

Two Jewish worlds in turmoil.

Israel is under siege from dangerous enemies empowered by Iran and simultaneously, ineptly led by a corrupt, misguided government anchored by Biblical messianists.

Between Christian nationalists and fervent anti-Zionists, America's political poles flirt with two different kinds of antisemitism.

One side scares me. They prefer totalitarian authority, fixate on Hitler reminiscences, embrace bigotry, seek to police our private lives, and publicly call Jews out with such terms as globalist and communist. Nothing good will come of this for anyone. Any decent American should tremble.

The other side disappoints me. They vehemently refuse to understand that the most traumatized and smallest minority people in human history, that remains surrounded by unrelenting and fierce enemies have not in a mere seventy-five

years, yet been able to run a country in a way that accords with their moral preferences.

And what do I see when I consider our own small corner of the world?

What of our Micah community?

In some sense, it has been a very good year, I have just about an equal number of complaints criticizing me from our two different sides.

I walk a fine line.

One group asks for example:

How and when did this become a Zionist congregation?

How and why do we have an Israel section on our website?

Why don't we say more about the tragedy of Gaza?

Why don't we offer more that represents the Palestinian narrative?

I have likewise been strongly challenged by those with a different view: Why do I so strongly criticize the government of Israel?

What is my military expertise to prioritize rescuing the hostages?

Why don't I say more about the thousands of Israelis displaced from the North?

Why do I not emphasize more the constant threat from Iran?

The challenges are everywhere.

As the past year went by, our staff talked about our response to the ongoing war more than anything else. We devoted more hours to education, sermons and conversation about it.

Our Micah staff is not of one mind in our Zionist opinions and beliefs. We are, however, united in our love and devotion to Israel and the Zionist project.

My own Zionism is a Zionism of Herzl's political and Ahad Haam's cultural Zionism. Amos Oz said this most powerfully: History has proven that for Jews "existence

without the tools of statehood is a matter of mortal danger.” He called Tel Aviv “as great a cultural contribution to the world as the Babylonian Talmud.”

The arguments of the outside world have echoed through our congregation, the board and the staff.

It makes me worry for our American Jewish future.

Are we facing a moment when the Zionist idea has come to tear our American Jewish communities asunder?

In a recent challenging New Yorker article, UCLA Jewish history professor and former Board chair of the New Israel Fund, David Myers, is quoted “I belong to the last generation—really the last—raised in the shadow of the Holocaust, for whom the existential question of how we will survive is sort of the question of my life. -----The existential question for my daughters is: how can we possibly justify that degree of oppression, dehumanization, and brutality in our name?”

Myers then says, “(My) tortured “soul” (is) in Israel”

and continues: Israel “was a project ...that rescued Jews from great harm and certain death.” And finally —

“I may be a millimeter apart from my daughters, but in the heat of the fire that millimeter becomes magnified.”

The contemporary version of the Abraham – Isaac generational divide.

(P A U S E)

This captures it.

I then think of George Santayana’s haunting wisdom— “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Where has this modern day journey led us? Looking forward, what do we see? What do I see?

I believe that we are forced to ask ourselves:

Is the world really eternally safe for Jews? Do we not need a Jewish state?

In this regard, I am disappointed by the American Jewish organizational establishment's relative silence on so much that has transpired in Israel over the last two years—the anti-democracy movement disguised as judicial reform of 2023 and then, the too many horrors to even list of the last year. Our major Jewish organizations have largely followed a support the government of Israel posture. We have allowed ourselves to be silenced while a messianic expansion into the West Bank was done under the guise of so-called security needs.

We are in the midst of a growing pains struggle to create a mature American Zionism. Our great Zionist diaspora has not yet fully learned how not to take marching orders from Israel's government. We can see from afar what Israel is doing to itself.

When will we come to fully understand that we, here, in this country are a flourishing American Jewry--equal partners in world Jewry's state of affairs and we need take no orders from Jerusalem.

Our Zionism must be along the lines of "His majesty's loyal opposition." Sometimes we vote with the majority—sometimes we need to vigorously challenge the dictate emanating from Zion.

Larry Hoffman asked me if I ever might ever not be a Zionist. I don't know how to not be a Zionist, I responded.

What if messianic settler governments become the norm and West Bank expansion continues, he asked.

I will simply be a Zionist that opposes the vast majority of the actions of Israel's governments.

This, for me, is a mature Zionism.

We seek a Mt. Moriah where there can be clarity of vision. We are left in a cloud of questions.

Will American liberal democracy give way to censorship, voter suppression, minority rule, political campaign by lie, unabated gun violence, and the scorning of cherished personal freedoms?

And

Will Israel continue to follow an expansionist, messianic path, extinguishing any hope for peace with its Palestinian neighbors?

We do not know what the future holds, but I know that I will remain on the liberal bridge.

Sadly, Nachman of Bratslav was correct—we all stand on a narrow bridge.

We are also the heirs and creators of the next chapter of Abraham's great saga—

AND

we are also the heirs and creators of the next chapter of Isaac's saga.

Abraham was the revolutionary idol smasher. There used to be a joke. Abraham was the first Reform Jew. He refused to see the past as the blueprint for the future.

Are we able to learn from that and stay in passionate conversation with those older and those younger?

We are all both holders of memory and builders of the future.

Liberal Judaism

and

Liberal Zionism

These are arguably the two great Jewish movements of modernity both rooted in the ideas that emerged from the European Enlightenment.

I hold fast to four core beliefs which for me, are fundamental and pivotal to liberalism:

1.- Universal values—these are hard to define but in some way come down to this imperfect summation----everyone is free to lead the kind of life they want so long as it does not interfere with the ability of others to do the same.

2. -A hard distinction between justice and power (a claim for justice must never be the disguise for a drive for power—justice means justice for all)

3.-The possibility of progress—My faith is rooted in hope.

4.-Doubt—A liberal is open minded and able to live with ambiguity, always open to questioning. Michael Walzer says “ready for arguments we don’t feel we have to win.”

I find these values in Judaism and my Judaism rests upon them.

We look at our history.

We look at our divided world

but we also look, especially on this first day of the year, to our future. And as we look ahead, I pray we stand firm on two liberal fronts—

Israel and America:

I end therefore with two favorite quotes—

Zionism as offered by the Israeli historian, Shlomo Avineri who died this past year, concludes his biography of Theodore Herzl with these words:

“A saying circulated during the French Revolution: ‘How beautiful was the Republic- under the monarchy.’ Visions of an ideal future seldom live up to the expectations of the prophets who dream them. Such was the case in the French Revolution, when the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity transmogrified into the Jacobin Reign of Terror; the same thing happened with the Enlightenment ideas of the American Founders, who declared “all men are created equal’ but produced a constitution that protected slavery. Neither would it be hard to make a long list of the disparities between Herzl’s vision of his Old-New Land and the realities of Israel (today)... Those who seek to close the gap between today’s Israel and Herzl’s vision, to turn the ...flawed terrestrial Israel into a heavenly Altneuland, would do well to take heart Herzl’s insistence on human agency in his epigraph: “If you will it, it is no dream.”

And in America, we commit ourselves to Thomas Paine's aspirational revolutionary longing:

“When it can be said by any country in the world, my poor are happy, neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them, my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars, the aged are not in want, the taxes are not oppressive, the rational world is my friend because I am the friend of happiness. When these things can be said, then may that country boast its constitution and government.”

These are my Rosh Hashanah hopes and prayers for 5785.

**If we will it,**

I truly hope that **my** prayers find some resonance with your own,  
Shannah Tovah!