

Israel- in a fight for her soul

RH morning 2023

Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers

A new rabbi comes to a well-established congregation. Every week on the Sabbath, a fight erupts during the service. When it comes time to recite the Shema prayer, half of the congregation stands and the other half sits. The half who stand say, "Of course we stand for the Shema. It's the credo of Judaism. Throughout history, thousands of Jews have died with the words of the Shema on their lips." The half who remain seated say, "No, according to the Shulchan Aruch (the code of Jewish law), if you are seated when you get to the Shema you remain seated."

The people who are standing yell at the people who are sitting, "Stand up!" while the people who are sitting yell at the people who are standing, "Sit down!" It's destroying the whole decorum of the service, and driving the new rabbi crazy. Finally, it's brought to the rabbi's attention that at a nearby home for the aged is a 98-year-old man who was a founding member of the congregation. So, in accordance with Talmudic tradition, the rabbi appoints a delegation of three, one who stands for the Shema, one who sits, and the rabbi himself, to go interview the man. They enter his room, and the man who stands for the Shema rushes over to the old man and says, "Was it the tradition in our synagogue to stand for the Shema?"

"No," the old man answers in a weak voice. "That wasn't the tradition."

The other man jumps in excitedly. "Was it the tradition in our synagogue to sit for the Shema?"

"No," the old man says. "That wasn't the tradition."

At this point, the rabbi cannot control himself. He cuts in angrily. "I don't care what the tradition was! Just tell them one or the other. Do you know what goes on in services every week — the people who are standing yell at the people who are sitting, the people who are sitting yell at the people who are standing—"

"That was the tradition," the old man says.

How many of you have heard that joke? Everyone? It is a humorous way to demonstrate that we Jews like to express our beliefs and arguing is just part of our heritage. Yes, maybe this is why we were called an *Am Oref*, a stiff necked people, in the Torah. Having differing views and debating them can be a healthy way to work through challenges that arise in every time and in every generation. In the Mishneh, in Pirkei Avot, we learn about the many disagreements between Hillel and Shammai. They differed in their approach to blessings, calendar, and converts. Hence the teaching is,

כָּל מַחְלָקַת שָׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוֹפָה לְהִתְקַיֵּם.

“Every dispute that is for the sake of Heaven, will in the end endure; But one that is not for the sake of Heaven, will not endure.”¹ The disagreements of Hillel and Shammai are examples of those that were considered for a higher cause and despite their differences, we learn that their followers were able to marry with one another. In other words, our community was strengthened by their teachings and disagreements.

There are conflicts though, as we are aware, that can be divisive and destructive. How many of you have been following the events in Israel this past year? Generally, I am reticent to speak about Israel for a number of reasons. First of all, there are many different perspectives here in our congregation and just the topic alone can be contentious. Also, especially when it comes to security matters in Israel, I am personally very deferential to the Israeli government. This is because Israel faces some real challenges. Iran continues to fund Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah from the north. This terrorist government also continues to develop its technology towards nuclear weaponry.

In addition, rockets are launched from the Gaza strip towards Israeli Kibbutzim in the Negev, with the goal of reaching Tel Aviv in the North. Sirens can sound at literally any time of the day or night and men, women, and children have seconds to get into their bomb shelters. If they aren't close to a shelter, they lay face down on the ground and just pray that the defensive Iron Dome protects them and their loved ones. This is why I don't take Israel's existence for granted. I am respectful of Israel's security needs because I don't live in fear that my son, Shane will be sent into Jenin in the West Bank to capture or kill Islamic terrorists. I am not worried that he will be killed or come back with PTSD, forever changing him. And this is why I approach my talks about Israel with lots of thoughtfulness and caution.

Even as I defer to Israel on security issues, I find myself in immense turmoil about what is happening within Israel, especially this past year. As a Jew, with my heart in Jerusalem, the teachings from Torah in my mind, and knowing our people's history there thousands of years ago to today, I and you, have a vested interest in Israel. It is our people's homeland and place that we yearned for over the millennia. In the words of the Psalmist,

אִם-אֶשְׁכַּחְךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי:

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither.²

Israel is a place where some of us have family and the connection there is unbreakable. I also believe that because it is Jewish state that it must strive for the highest of values. Isaiah says,

וְנָתַתִּיךָ לְאֹר גּוֹיִם לְהַיּוֹת יְשׁוּעָתִי עַד-קֵצָה הָאָרֶץ:

I will also give you as a light unto the nations, That My salvation may be unto the end of the earth.³

This is our heritage. And this is why I have so much pain in what the current Israeli government is doing.

Last year in November 2022, after Israel went through five successive elections in less than four years, Benjamin Netanyahu, as prime minister, assembled the most right wing nationalistic governing party in the history of Israel. Make no mistake about it, the election was close. According to the Times of Israel, “the final vote tallies showed just 30,293 votes separating the opposing political camps.”⁴ The reason, though, for the extra Knesset seats for Netanyahu’s coalition is because the opposition groups were fragmented and some of them didn’t reach the threshold where they would gain Knesset seats in this parliamentary style of government.

In short order, Netanyahu’s coalition instigated revolutionary change within Israel. Governmental officials have proposed full annexation of the occupied West Bank, a rollback of pro-LGBTQ+ legislation, eliminating laws protecting women’s and minority rights, a loosening of the rules of engagement for Israeli police and soldiers, and “judicial reform.”

Let’s take a look at some of the prominent people in Netanyahu’s government. Itamar Ben-Gvir, Minister of National Security, was a follower of the late, explicitly racist, ultra-nationalist Meir Kahane, whose organization was banned in Israel and designated as a terrorist group by the United States. Back in the 1990’s, as the leader of the far-right Jewish power party, Ben-Gvir threatened Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, weeks before he was assassinated in 1995 and then thanked a rabbi who justified Rabin’s murder. Ben-Gvir has been convicted on at least eight charges of supporting terrorism and inciting racism.

Bezalel Smotrich, Finance Minister, leader of the Religious Zionist Party, called to “erase” a Palestinian town, Huwara that was the site of an Israeli settler riot. This is consistent with his hard line views on Palestinians as well as towards LGBT rights and more liberal streams of Judaism. This past March when Smotrich came to the U.S. to advocate for Israel bonds, many Jews groups including AIPAC, The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, boycotted his presentation and refused to meet with him. There was even an open letter, “...signed by 120 American Jewish leaders said Mr. Smotrich “should not be given a platform in our community” at Israel Bonds and called his presence in the U.S. “an affront to American Jewish values.”⁵

Orit Struck, a Religious Zionist member of the Knesset, Israel’s parliament, said her party seeks a change to the country’s anti-discrimination law that would include permitting people discriminating against LGBTQ people in hospitals.⁶

And now we get to the big one that has been unfolding these past nine months. Netanyahu’s coalition is working hard on undermining the Judiciary. First thing we need to be aware of is that, unlike the United States, Israel doesn’t have a constitution and there is no bill of rights. Furthermore, there isn’t a separation between the executive and legislative branch of government. The only check and balance in Israel has been the judiciary. Netanyahu’s coalition

are pressing for explosive changes in Israel. They advocate for a simple majority of 61 in the 120-seat Knesset to override any Supreme Court ruling and to give politicians complete authority to appoint justices they wish to the bench. Currently, the appointment committee is divided equally between sitting justices, representatives from the governing coalition, and members of the Israeli bar association.⁷

These measures could help Netanyahu evade prosecution in his corruption trial. Bibi has stated that he will continue with these plans after the High Holy Days. In July, his government removed the court's ability to apply reasonableness to the government's action. Thomas Friedman writes, quoting David Horowitz, the founding editor of the centrist Times of Israel, "Only a government bent on doing the unreasonable would move to ensure that the justices — the only brake on majority power in a country with no constitution and no enshrined, unbreachable defense of freedom of religion, freedom of speech and other basic rights — cannot review the reasonableness of its policies. Such a huge change to Israel's widely respected judicial system, which has guided the emergence of a remarkable start-up economy, is something that should be done only after study by nonpartisan experts and with a broad national consensus. That is how real democracies do these things, but there has been none of that in Netanyahu's case. It underscores that this whole farce has nothing to do with judicial "reform" and everything to do with a naked power grab by each segment of Netanyahu's coalition."⁸

This is what has led to hundreds of thousands of Israelis taking to the streets protesting for the last 9 months. Weekly, they demonstrate in Jerusalem, close to the Knesset, and fill up streets in Tel Aviv. There was a multi-day mile march in July from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 100 degree heat with tens of thousands of Israelis protesting.⁹ Army reservists are boycotting military service. There are concerns that if the Israeli Supreme Court loses its authenticity that Israeli soldiers and commanders could face sentencing at the Hague. Some of the Tech sector is divesting in Israel. And anecdotally, I am hearing of people who have the means are leaving and moving to Europe.

According to another article by Thomas Friedman, "The new government budget includes an unprecedented increment in allocations to the settlers and ultra-Orthodox, including full funding of schools to not teach English, science and math. This budgetary increment alone is more than Israel invests each year in higher education altogether — or 14 years of complete funding for the Technion, Israel's M.I.T.," said Dan Ben-David, a macroeconomist who has focused on the interaction between Israel's demography and education at Tel Aviv University... "It is completely nuts."

Freedman continues, "The ultra-Orthodox share of Israel's population doubles roughly every 25 years, added Ben-David. "Today it is 24 percent of the infants. By 2050, it will be half of Israel's infants. None of them learn basic civics or separation of powers and how liberal

democracy works, let alone receiving the tools to thrive in a modern economy...Unless we get our act together now, this will be the final nail into the coffin of our future...”¹⁰ And so, think about this, half of the Israeli population in the future won't have the skills or education they need to support their country, most won't pay taxes because they don't work and they won't serve in the military. Does Israel devolve into a third world country and become like Egypt?

Back in the second Temple days, there's a teaching in the Talmud, that our Temple was destroyed because of *Sinat Hinam*, hatred without cause. There is growing hatred between Israelis, there is growing hatred between Jews, and undisguised hatred of Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims. It is this unbridled hatred disguised as nationalism that is threatening the economic, military, and founding values within Israel. Israel is at an inflection point, a moment of decision, will it be a democratic state? What kind of Jewish state will it be? How will it deal with the minorities under its control? This is why I say that Israel is fighting for her soul. This is why hundreds of thousands of Israelis are taking to the streets.

Even as I express alarm to you, I want you to know that there are reasons to be hopeful. I personally attended rallies in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv when I was there in February. As I heard the people waving Israeli flags shout out *democratica, democratica*, I felt inspired. Here are hundreds of thousands of Israelis taking to the streets weekly, month after month. They love their country and they are using their voices to protest.

Some of you know that while I was there I was in an altercation at the wall with Haredi teenage girls. As I made my report to the police detective, who was wearing a knitted kippah, he reassured me that they behaved like animals. He was kind and reassuring to me at time of great distress. He told me over and over again, “That their actions do not reflect Israel. This is not Israel,” he stressed over and over again.

When we visited Lod, a town with Israeli Jews and Arabs, we met with a woman who has been working on creating bridges between people. She has put herself and her family at risk by moving there but she believes in corporation and that relationships can make the difference. And so, people like her are living their values through their day to day life.

As we visited Kibbutz Nachal Oz and Kfar Aza by the Gaza border, we heard from Head of Council, Ofir Lipstein, who has a vision of making life better for the Palestinians living in Gaza. He has already procured a permit to build a tech town right on the border to provide good quality jobs for thousands of Palestinians. With a decent income, they will be able to raise the standard of living for their families and communities. He also hopes to build a medical center to care for the Palestinians as well. It is his hope that by giving them a better life there will be an incentive to reject Hamas and Islamic Jihad's call for continuing violence against Israel. Ofir Lipstein is striving to break the cycle of violence and hatred with kindness and humanity.

You need to know about Gilad Kariv who is an inspiring man. He is an Israeli Reform rabbi, attorney and was the Executive Director of the Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism. Kariv is currently a member of the Knesset for the Labor Party. He is out front advocating on behalf of Reform Judaism, democracy in Israel, and responsible leadership. Using his diplomatic immunity he personally brought in a Torah on the men's side when we were praying at the wall so he could pass it on to us women. Even as ultra-Orthodox men screamed and tried to push at him, he persevered.

And so there are many courageous leaders and average Israelis who love their country and want it to be a place of tolerance, diversity, goodness, justice, and growth. They want equal treatment towards others regardless of their gender, orientation, religion, ethnicity, nationality, or denomination of Judaism. They reject hatred and are fighting for the highest ideals that we readily embrace right here.

And so, how can we help from over seas, thousands of miles away? Here are a few things.

We can join and support ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America, is the Israel arm of the Reform Movement.¹¹

We can support the Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism (IMRP) who strives to promote Israel as a Jewish and democratic state by nurturing values of religious pluralism, tolerance, equality and Tikkun Olam.¹²

The Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC) is an amazing organization that secures civil rights for a just and egalitarian Israel based on Israeli law and Jewish tradition.¹³

The Women of the Wall are group of Jewish women from Israel and around the world who strive to achieve the right to wear prayer shawls, pray and read from the Torah collectively and out loud at the Western Wall.¹⁴

And you can join the Israel committee headed by Charlie Niederman.

Lastly, you can join me on our Temple's trip to Israel the first two weeks in April. This will be an educational yet celebratory trip exploring Israel's roots, current challenges, and accomplishments.

When our people were in Egypt, God sent down the ninth plague of darkness. Then Adonai said to Moses, "Hold out your arm toward the sky that there may be $\overline{\text{חֹשֶׁךְ}}$ darkness upon the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be touched." Moses held out his arm toward the sky and thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days. People could not see one another, and for three days no one could move about; but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings."¹⁵

Alden Solovy wrote this beautiful poem about this darkness.

If it is true

That there is a darkness

That consumes light,
 A darkness that makes
 Darker darkness
 Alive,
 So alive that you can touch it,
 Taste it,
 Smell it,
 Cold and Thick
 As liquid emptiness,
 A darkness that frightens itself...

Then it must be true
 That there is a light
 That consumes darkness,
 A radiance that makes
 Brilliant brilliance
 Alive,
 So alive that you can touch it,
 Taste it,
 Smell it,
 Warm and bright
 As liquid sunshine,
 A light that
 Blesses Creation.

I believe we need to be the light. The light of truth. The light of compassion and goodness.
 Isaiah says,

וְנִתְּתִיךָ לְאֹר גּוֹלִים לְהַנִּיחַ יְשׁוּעָתִי עַד־קֵצֵה הָאָרֶץ:

I will also give you as a light unto the nations, That My salvation may be unto the end of the earth.³

We can be the light. We can be the light of inspiration for our people, for Israel, and it can radiate out into the world.

And let us pray, l'shanah habah b'yirushalayim, next year in Jerusalem. May the following year be a better one for our beloved Israel.

Notes:

1 Pirkei Avot 5:17

2 Psalm 137:5

3 Isaiah 49:6

4 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-won-8-seat-majority-over-his-opponents-despite-near-parity-in-raw-votes/>

5 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-jews-set-to-shun-israeli-finance-minister-bezalel-smotrich-on-washington-visit-4818ac5f><https://apnews.com/article/israel-discrimination-benjamin-netanyahu-lgbtq-people-78bcd332053aa26c3c9949eac2264d1c>

6 <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-12-07/ty-article/.premium/far-right-lawmaker-named-israels-first-national-missions-minister/00000184-ebe0-d523-a3bc-efb32af0000>

<https://www.nyl.com/nyc/all-boroughs/news/2022/12/27/israel-netanyahu-orit-struck-lgbtq>

7 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/israels-government-looks-at-next-steps-in-judicial-overhaul-shrugging-off-protests-7172e0ad>

8 Thomas Friedman

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/11/opinion/netanyahu-israel-judiciary.html>

9 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/22/world/middleeast/jerusalem-protest-march-israel.html#:~:text=In%20temperatures%20that%20were%20at,four%20nights%20along%20the%20route.>

10 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/06/opinion/israel-saudi-arabia.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>

11 .ARZA

<https://arza.org/>

The Association of Reform Zionists of America is the Israel arm of the Reform Movement, “Arza strengthens and enriches the Jewish identity of reform Jews in the united states by ensuring that a connection with the land, people, and state of israel are fundamental parts of that identity.”

You may send a check directly to ARZA: 633 Third Ave., 7th Floor, New York, NY 10017 or give an online donation

12 Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive (IMPJ) <https://reform.org.il/en/>

Please designate your gift to the Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism In each of the donation options below there is a place to designate your gift.

13 <https://www.irac.org/>

14 Women of the Wall

<https://womenofthewall.org.il/>

15 Exodus chapter 10