

Kol Nidre Sermon 5778
By Rabbi David Kosak

Before starting my sermon, I'd like to begin with a quick Hebrew lesson. What's the Hebrew word for yes? (wait). correct, it is kein. and the Hebrew for no? Yup, no is "lo." Alright a couple of more words. Good? Tov. Bad? Ra. Wonderful, you are now ready for the following story:

A veteran Israeli asks an oleh, an immigrant of a number of years how he'd sum up life in Israel *in one word*.

"Tov."

"And in two words?"

"Lo tov."

Around the world tonight, Jews have gathered to pray, to be moved by their cantor's voice, and hopefully to be inspired or forced to think by their rabbi's words. No matter how different those services may look, we know that all of Am Yisrael, the People Israel, has engaged in the same basic activity.

What is no longer the case, however, is how all those people feel about Medinat Yisrael, the state of Israel. Not so many years ago, and with the exception of some very fringe groups like Neturei Karta, all Jews felt pride in Israel. For many decades, American Jewish identity with Israel was a given. It was the strongest part of American Jewish identity, where all Jews had a strong bond. Additionally, we American Jews tended to assume

to hold a deferential attitude toward Israel. She was our little miracle, the one that held off countless hostile Arab armies, who made the desert bloom and created the Silicon Wadi with the greatest number of start up companies per capita of any country in the world.

Today that deferential stance is no longer the case. Increasingly, it is a broken, bruised or irrelevant relationship. That pains me.

I am an Ohev Yisrael, a deep lover of Israel. That affection began in my earliest years when we'd sing songs of the land in religious school. It was strengthened when my grandfather took all seventeen of us there shortly after my bar mitzvah. I even tried to sell my sister to a bedouin in exchange for several camels and a dozen goats, but my dad put a stop to that. In high school I went there on a teen trip, and hiked up Masada with my friends.

There was a time when I actually tried to switch rabbinical schools from Ziegler to Machon Schechter, the Israeli Masorti school for Israeli rabbinical students. I toyed with the idea of making a go of it as a conservative rabbi there, which is extremely difficult. But the American schools had created an agreement so that students studying in Israel could not switch schools.

Existentially, I feel myself to me Israeli. The moment the bomb went off in Frank Sinatra Cafeteria at Hebrew University, I irrevocably became an Israeli. More than that, an invisible line connected me to all the Jewish martyrs who perished throughout our long history.

So when I see what has happened to how we talk about Israel-- or don't talk about her...when I see how we feel about Israel-- either rabidly in favor of her every action or unable to see past her flaws, I am pained. When my rabbinical school friends, and now some of my rabbinic colleagues whisper to me that they dislike Israel, I feel it like a dagger wound.

Some studies show that an increasing number of American Jews have no emotional connection with Israel, and that hurts me most of all. After all, we pray repeatedly in the mahzor, “vayasu culam agudah achat.” Please God, make all of us a single bundle, a single cohesive nation.

We are facing a dangerous moment for relations between Israel and the Diaspora. A permanent split is possible, and I believe that both Israel and we would be deeply diminished and impoverished by that split. In fact, we already are both suffering for lack of what the other has.

Just this summer, the tear grew larger.

In late June, Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu reneged on a compromise agreement concerning the Kotel, or Western Wall prayer space. For 17 months, leaders from the Conservative, Masorti, and Reform movements, as well as the egalitarian Women of the Wall group, the Jewish Federations of North America and the Jewish Agency, had entered into a good-faith compromise agreement concerning access for egalitarian prayer at the Kotel. At the same time, he handed over control of determining who is a Jew to the Haredi or Ultra-Orthodox Jews.

It's important to realize that American Jews have confronted this sort of thing in the past, and that the ACT of renegeing by Israel was nothing new. The issues of egalitarianism and pluralism in the Israeli public square and how it impacts the world's largest and most successful Jewish diaspora are not new either. In fact, on April 6, 2003, a full 14 years earlier, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled in case HCJFH 4128/00 that the government had to either convert the Robinson's arch area into a prayer space equal to the upper plaza within 12 months, or permit the Women of the Wall to pray at the wall with tefillin and tallit. Neither of those conditions were met, not then and not today. But back then, while American Jews were upset, we sort of accepted the government's intransigence.

That is no longer the case. After this summer's events, the outrage that resulted was unlike anything I can recall. In a letter our movement leadership wrote:

We are writing to express to you our dismay, anger and sense of betrayal concerning the events of June 25, 2017 in which the Cabinet tabled the *Kotel* Agreement of January 2016 and simultaneously the Legislative Committee of the *Knesset* put forward a new Conversion Law that would codify the *Rabbanut* as the sole authority in Israel for conversion to Judaism.

It concluded:

“Mr. Prime Minister, you can influence the content of our *Yamim Noraim* messages. Will we speak of Israel's reality in a

language of betrayal or hope? Will we speak of struggle or achievement? We ask you to lead; we ask you to fulfill your promise to us that Israel will be the homeland of the entire Jewish people – Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and secular.”

I should let you know that our congregation signed on to that letter, despite my hesitancy with the use of the word betrayal. Moreover, in the weeks that followed, prominent Jews, such as Ike Fisher, who is an AIPAC board member, and Daniel Gordis, an influential pundit, have argued that American Jews should suspend donating dollars to Israel. Instead, those charitable dollars should be directed to organizations in Israel which support pluralism and egalitarianism.

Such a statement coming from consummate insiders would have been unthinkable even a few short years ago. What changed? Or better yet, what has been changing beneath our noses?

The best way I know how to explain it is by turning to some of the research of individuals like Michael Barnett and Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer. Yehuda Kurtzer is a philosopher and president of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. His area of specialization is on the meaning of Israel to American Jews.

A year ago, he gave a lecture in which he traced the attitudes of American Jews on the political left and right back to two seminal moments in Jewish history. One was Emancipation, the other the Enlightenment. Each had different tasks. One we achieved. One still lays in front of us.

THE ROLE OF EMANCIPATION

The role of emancipation, our freedom, was to secure our physical safety and allow us educational and economic opportunities equal to the non-Jew. In both Israel and in America, that task has been achieved. Yes, there is some antisemitism in America that rears its head up on both the left and the right. But if we are honest, it poses no real risk to us. Whenever there has been an act of violence or the desecration of a cemetery, our fellow Americans have stood up, joined hands with us, and have proven again and again that they are the vast majority. The authorities work consistently to protect us. American Jews are fully emancipated. We are safe, educated and have a world of opportunities in front of us. We are part of the community. We are *empowered*.

In Israel, the case is the same. Israel has one of the world's strongest armies. It's incidence of violent crime and murder--including terrorism and Hamas missiles--is almost a third of the rate of violence in America. Yes, you heard that right. You are two and a half times more likely to get murdered in the USA than you are in Israel. This is not to say that there are not real risks to Israel. A nuclear Iran would clearly change the power dynamic of the middle east. But global power dynamics and geopolitics always change, and the US is finding that the case with North Korea as well. We can issue those caveats so long as we remain honest enough to acknowledge that in Israel, the Jew is fully emancipated, and lives under some of the safest conditions that we Jews have ever known.

The Jewish Enlightenment, or Haskalah, posed us with a different set of tasks. What is the meaning of Jewish life once

we are safe and free? Here, Kurtzer frames the challenge of that question by highlighting that both Israel and American are wrestling with the same philosophical problem, what he calls The Problem of Arrival.

The Problem of Arrival

Judaism has always been about getting to the promised land. Until the modern period, we never had to deal with what happens once you arrive. All of our master stories are about dislocation and “out-of-homeness”—Adam and Eve, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and Moses. Each of them has to leave their home.

We are the questing people--it's why you'll find us always on the cutting edge of industries and cultural movements. Whether that was socialism in the 1920's, progressivism in the 2000's, silicon valley and FB as we plunge into the leading edge of virtual community, and virtual homes. We are restless, nomadic. We don't like the status quo.

As a people, our great cultural legacy has always been about homelessness, not of rootedness. Our tradition is about heading toward, but not being in the Promised Land. That common quest and yearning is what historically tied all Jewish communities together.

There are only a few hundred years out of our total history when we have lived in Israel. The Davidic Kingdom didn't last very long. This year marks seventy years in the current state. We

don't have extended experience of rootedness, and therefore lack a certain cultural depth for being at home.

What happens when you are faced with the anxiety caused by the unprecedented and a corresponding lack of intellectual resources? Most of us Jews look backward, and keep imagining that the obstacles of today can be understood by reference to our pre-enlightenment and pre-emancipated state.

American Jewish Engagement with Israel

We can see how this backward looking nostalgia plays itself out in the Israeli politics of American Jews. It seems to me that there are two main polemical approaches that popularly describe American Jew's feelings towards Israel. I'll call them the Beinart and the Glick approaches.

1. Coming from the right, the tendency has been to blame American Jews and their leftist politics for the faltering relationship. Carolyn Glick is a sound spokesperson for this perspective. We American Jews are naive she argues. If we understood the "difficult neighborhood" Israel is in, if we better understood the existential threats it faced, the realpolitik of Israel's precarious existence, we would better support Israel. Therefore, the solution to the deteriorating condition is for American Jews to "grow up." In our joke, this is the first answer. Israel is good.
2. Quite popular on the left is the tendency to blame the Israeli Government--this perspective was popularized by Peter Beinart, and claims that the right leaning electorate

and government, and Israeli institutions are so at odds with American democratic values, and our egalitarian impulses, that younger American Jews no longer can support Israel. As soon as Israel gets rid of its right leaning government and gets serious about making peace with the Palestinians, these Jews will be back on board with Israel. Like our joke, this is the two word answer which sees Israel as “lo tov.” Not good.

The problem is that neither of these positions is correct.

The Glick perspective that we find on the right more or less gives Israel a free pass because it lives in a dangerous neighborhood. It relies on the notion that Israel remains in constant and terminal existential danger. Despite possessing one of the world’s strongest militaries, despite a murder and terror rate that the US can envy, she would have us believe that Israel remains in a pre-emancipated state. One wants to ask those who hold this position--and it’s a vast majority of the affiliated Jewish world--when would Israel ever be safe? What would it look like?

The Beinart argument is also factually challenged. If we go back to 1980’s Israel, we see that neither Israel NOR American Jews were in favor of a two state solution. And yet that is now a normal view held by most Israelis on left and right. So how can one blame the deteriorating relationship on Israel’s rightward move, when on one of the most important issues--Palestinian sovereignty, the national perspective has moved leftward. Additionally, there are many other indicators, such as legal

rights and protections for LGBTQ individuals, where Israel is socially *more* advanced than America.

For these and other reasons, it's not sufficient to accept Peter Beinart's critique. In a very real way, Israel has moved closer to the left, even under Bibi Netanyahu.

Moreover, if a leftist government were to be in charge of Israel, this would not overnight help the American Jew, because part of what has shifted is how the American Jew views our own changing identity. And that returns us to the problem of arrival.

I had the great privilege of studying under David Hartman when we lived in Israel. Even after his death, he remains an extremely important modern Jewish thinker. One of his gifts to the world is Hartman Zionism.

In some ways, the central question of Hartman Zionism was, "can the idealism of the Torah and a Jewish tradition rooted in powerlessness actually inform and guide a nation that has power and authority?" What happens to such a society when its dominant myth, its foundational story--of seeking but not arriving at home--no longer matters?

It is those two last questions that brings us back to American Jewry, to us and to why the Israel-American relationship is so essential. There is no denying how different our communities are. How divergent our realities are. And yet in some very important ways, we are both facing the same post-emancipation enlightenment question.

What should a free Jewish people do when safety and economic security have been achieved? Once we have power? Once we are at home? Because both Israeli and American Jews feel equally at home. I don't know very many American Jews who feel they are living in exile. And in Portland? Why would you leave?

What is the purpose and meaning of Jewish life then? Israel and America are two poles providing very different answers to the question of the meaning of Jewish life.

What does Judaism mean when we are at home and largely are safe? what does it mean to hold power? What does it mean when our Jewish values conflict with our democratic values? Which wins out and why? These are mission-critical questions posed by enlightenment, and they remain largely unanswered both here and in *eretz yisrael*. So we can and ought to learn from one another as we work out these answers.

It's one of the important goals of our Israel360 series. As we learn more about Israeli art, music, culture, politics and science, we get to see how Israel answers these questions. And we might just learn something about how we ought to address them in Portland.

The question of the meaning of Jewish life for me is one that I have been trying, to answer and share with my Neveh Shalom community.

What our earlier answer has been is that we needed to be a relational community, one in which programming came second to relationships, and in which all we do should deepen our connections with one another. That came out of Ron Wolfson's visit here, but it also has been the answer that American Jews have discovered is essential if our individual communities will survive. Nationally, membership is declining (not by us thankfully). The sense of obligation and responsibility--those PEOPLEHOOD traits that our older generations deeply felt and which kept our communities intact--are fading. The survival mode, in an era of isolation and alienation, is to provide a place where people can feel heard, recognized and at home.

In other words, there is an element of relational Judaism that is focused primarily on our survival as both communities and individuals in America. It is a pre-emancipation stance.

Relational Judaism when viewed in a certain way can provide some of those answers, but not all. It's one of the reasons that a lot of contemporary Judaism, and some of our weaknesses as a community, can be pediatric. If we are connecting with you, if we have relationships with you, we can actually push away some of those deeper questions. But not forever.

Now I don't think we've fully addressed our relational needs, nor do I think we've answered our survival needs as a congregation. But I think we are making good headway. As we move past our holidays, we will increase our focus on our 150th anniversary. Our work will be to endow and ensure our future. It will be to move us past the sorts of emancipation-era questions that we've been discussing.

Because while America is great at emancipating us, it is currently failing almost all of its citizens in the enlightenment question--what is the purpose of our lives supposed to be? The state of our politics seems mired in pre-emancipation issues. Either we are attempting to emancipate the non-college educated white man with better jobs and money, or we are attempting to emancipate everyone else by providing safety and protections and greater economic opportunities to those who fall under our multi-cultural umbrella.

But on the holiest night of the year, those are not sufficient tasks. It does a disservice to Judaism, to America and to ourselves. We are called on to share our depths, our capacities and the gifts which our tradition gives us. It's why I've presented repeatedly the tools for dialogue, and more recently, some materials to help us refine our characters.

Our society is in jeopardy. How serious is that jeopardy? None of us knows. Are our current pressures temporary or do they presage something fundamentally broken? What is clear to me is that we Jews have endured as long as any people on the planet. That's not an accident. Within our traditions are the tools for building communities of caring, tools our society desperately needs, tools that can point us to a path of significance.

So here is my ask. I'd like us all to commit to going deeper and grappling with our Judaism. This year, in addition to the character bingo sheets distributed at Rosh Hashanah, I want to challenge everyone to read one book about Israel, and one book about Judaism. As you read them, ask yourself, what am I learning that can be of use to my country and community. And

then share what you've learned. Pass it on in conversations, on social media, with friends over a beer.

Because when they ask us at the end of our days--when we've finally arrived--to sum up life in our communities--let's hope we all only need one word. Tov.