

Rosh Hashanah Sermon, 5767
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It is said that with each Rosh Hashanah we and the world are created anew. This year, more than ever, I wish that this mystical truth had the power to transform the deeply troubling past two months in the Middle East into a hopeful present and a peaceful future. On this day of renewal and joy, I feel compelled to speak about the painful reality of the Middle East. I will return our attention to the war even though, as I speak, the cease-fire has entered its fifth week, the UN force is deploying, and rebuilding has begun on both sides of the border. Why, then, still speak of the war? For four reasons:

First, this war felt different than any conflict in recent memory, and it was. Israel's military strength, which it has relied on as a deterrent, did not succeed in ending a guerilla threat on its border – Katyushas flew into northern Israel up until the last days of the war. In defending itself against an unconventional guerilla force by using conventional military tactics, Israel wrought devastation on Lebanon. While many nations – even Arab nations – initially supported Israel's actions, by the end of the war, even many whom we regard as friends were strongly critical. Whatever our views on the war, its outcomes and its aftermath, we've got to keep talking about it if we want to learn from it in moving forward.

Second, I have chosen to speak about this war because of the reactions of Jews here in the United States. Those who already have a strong, positive, and often personal connection to Israel seemed to respond with an even surer stance of support. Increasingly, though, I've spoken to members of the Jewish community who are so troubled or simply overwhelmed by the war that they seek to distance themselves from any association with Israel. I've been asked, even, if Judaism and the Jews might be better off without Israel. This morning, amidst recounting the darkness and suffering of this war, I want to affirm the necessity of Israel, and its centrality to our history, culture, and spiritual creativity.

Third, another result of conflict between Israel and her neighbors is its influence on how Jews respond to one another. When we had our congregational discussion group last year on the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, the range of opinion in the room was striking. The meeting was structured intentionally not to allow debate, so that people would be able to express their emotional response to the withdrawal without being judged. I realized that I had never before experienced individuals with so many different perspectives on Israel even taking these initial steps of coming together and being asked to listen to each other. Often when passions run high, people who share goals, values, and community, but who differ in opinion, start to shut one another out. I want to remind us that our tradition calls on us to judge each other *l'chaf z'chut*, assuming the best motives. Although it can be difficult, each of us must, at a minimum, refrain from demonizing those who do not share our own perspectives on this crisis—for the sake of the land of Israel and for the sake of all of us. [Pirke Avot 1.6: Joshua ben Perachyah and Nittai the Arbelite received the Torah from them. Joshua ben Perachyah said: "Provide for yourself a teacher and get yourself a friend; and judge every person towards merit."]

Finally, in a little while we will return the Torah scroll to the ark with the Prayer for the State of Israel. I hope my remarks will give that prayer both historical and immediate context.

I offer my thoughts this morning with humility and, admittedly, from my own place of sadness, despair, and confusion. I have spent many sleepless nights over the past few weeks worrying for the security of Israel and mourning deaths on both sides of the Israeli-Lebanese border. I am not a scholar of the Middle East nor a political philosopher (that was our speaker two weeks ago). All I can offer is my limited perspective, informed by having lived in and deeply loving Israel, by study and prayer, and by being in correspondence with Israeli friends as precious to me as my own family. I'll begin by recounting some of their stories.

Two of my dearest friends are a young couple living in Jerusalem. They were sitting down to Shabbat dinner with their two children – the younger one just two weeks old — when the husband received a phone call summoning him to reserve duty. By Sunday he was gone, leaving my friend to care for their newborn and their four year-old. When I spoke to her, she hadn't heard from her husband in days and she had been too worried to sleep much. She only knew he had entered Lebanon.

For those of us with friends and family in Israel, this war hit home – not only because of our broad concerns for Israel and the peace of the region, but because of the specter of fear, destruction, and death visited upon those we hold most dear. Every morning and night for three weeks, I checked Israeli newspapers, scanning for the names of close friends. Initially relieved when I didn't see familiar names, I then felt guilt and sorrow for my own relief—knowing that each name that I did read meant children without fathers and mothers, wives without their spouses, parents losing their children.

A rabbinic colleague wrote from Israel:

“I don't think that there is anyone in this country who doesn't know one of the families of a slain soldier or civilian. Those of us who have had children in combat situations know the panic when they aren't in touch. Even when they are in training.... Sadly, we know two families who mourned soldier-sons killed in combat. And experienced the same worry and concern for those soldiers we knew – praying for their safe return from horrific combat.”

On CNN, I saw coverage primarily of the destruction in Lebanon. I witnessed the same heartbreaking scenes that you did—mothers weeping over the deaths of their children, a young son crying for his father. I knew that this was a war of self-defense, but that did not stop my sorrow. My heart would break over the loss of innocent life on both sides, and I became confused and saddened by the unfathomable destruction of war. I was torn up inside with conflicting feelings that made it difficult to speak, even in my public role, about the war.

Each day and night, as I read from sources ranging from Ha'aretz to Al Jazeera and listened to different news reports, I became increasingly confounded by the multi-causal and multifaceted aspects of the situation. I grew envious of friends and colleagues who stood firmly on different ends of the political continuum and analyzed the war, it seemed, with absolute certainty.

Israeli and Lebanese families who lost loved ones have been changed forever. For those who had their homes and businesses destroyed, or spent weeks in bomb shelters, the fighting has ended, but the effects of the war are still being felt. The resilience among Israelis and Lebanese

civilians who are rebuilding is inspiring, but still so many are living in pain and in fear. Ten to fifteen percent of those who had direct experience of the war, including those in bomb shelters, are predicted to develop post-traumatic stress disorder. Israeli culture discourages seeking help, and Lebanon is short of resources to help its traumatized civilians.

At our lecture/discussion on the Middle East two weeks ago, Professor Jeff Spinner-Halev effectively surveyed the relevant history of the region and the complexity of the political situation. In his analysis, Israel was justified in entering a war of self-defense but fought with both just and unjust means. As we know, the situations in the West Bank and Gaza, the building of the wall, and the attempts at peace with the Palestinian people have led to complex moral struggles, and ever-shifting, fragile political realities between Israelis, between Israel and her neighbors, and in the broader Jewish world. It is not a simple picture. At the conclusion of his presentation, he turned to us and said quite candidly, “all we can hope for is better days.”

Hope, in our tradition, is expressed through the language of prayer. We pray even when the prayer seems to contradict our reality. We pray for peace in the midst of war. In the prayer for the State of Israel, written in 1948, we remember our history, our dreams, and our connection to Israel – the spiritual and geographic center of our religious and cultural identity.

I want us to explore the first four verses of the traditional prayer for the State of Israel, and through that affirm both the necessity of Israel for the Jewish people and *ahavat tziyon*, our love and connection to Zion. I do not claim that this is a simple, monochromatic love – like the one of a young couple when they first discover each other. I want to affirm the experience of those who have this love mixed with pain and sorrow, confusion and anger. There is room in the prayer for a complex love, a love that reflects both the dream we have had of an ideal Israel and the difficulties of its lived reality.

The prayer begins:

Tzur yisrael v'galo barech et m'dinat Yisrael
Rock of Israel and redeemer, bless the state of Israel

One of the traditional names of God is “*Tzur*,” Rock. If you have been to Israel, you may have seen the rocky cliffs of the Negev desert turning from burnt golden to cinnamon red in the sun. To be in the desert is to experience a vast and stunning beauty that echoes eternity. In the desert, it is easy to understand why in this landscape monotheism was born.

If you have been to Jerusalem and walked through some of its older neighborhoods, you may have seen the stones of people’s homes glistening brilliant white in the sun against the rich blue sky. At night, the tangles of jasmine in the rocks release their sweet scent perfuming the quiet of the night. Unlike the stones of the desert, these are shaped by human hands. They speak of those who built the land.

When you experience the physical reality of Israel, both natural and created by human hands, it seems apt that this prayer begins by naming God as Rock. Through the experience of the physical beauty of Israel, its connection to our ancient history, and the miracle of our participation in the building of the modern land, we experience God’s blessing.

The prayer continues:

Reishit Tzmichat Geulateynu

The first flowering of our redemption.

This reflects the perspective of religious Zionists who saw the return to Israel as the first signs of the messianic era. It turns the founding of Israel into a Divine event and the beginning of the redemption of the whole world. What meaning does this have for us in our time? Outside of this classical religious understanding, how can Israel be the seed of our redemption?

Try to imagine what Jewish life would be like today without the land of Israel. Only in Israel do Jews have control over our own destiny, developing political and judicial systems that, however flawed, strive to shape and express a society based on democratic and Jewish ideals. Through much of our history, we were viewed as unwanted or barely tolerated minorities, or as victims who somehow managed to survive. Now we have the experience of sovereignty and power. With it, of course the ability to misuse that power. We worry, as we should, about acting and being viewed as oppressors, but for the world even to think of Jews as pioneers, soldiers, leaders in our own right (and not merely the messengers or diplomats of others) was an impossibility for nearly two thousand years.

Israel truly is a refuge and a gathering place for Jews from all over the world. Two small but typical examples from my own years living in Israel: My upstairs neighbor planted trees in front of our apartment complex to memorialize his wife's whole family who did not survive the Holocaust. He and his wife, alone of their two families, survived to find a safe haven in Israel. I also hold dear the memory of another neighbor who came to Israel in the early 50's after persecution in Yemen. Through her, I was exposed to many Sephardic customs (and some really wonderful desserts!).

The foundational and ongoing problems of the modern state of Israel are not few – the split between the religious and the secular, the growing gaps between the rich and the poor, ethnic tensions, the treatment of foreign workers, the conflict with the Palestinians – and yet all of these are because Israel is not a dream, but a living, growing country in a complicated region.

Without Israel, modern Hebrew would never have taken root. The wealth of Hebrew literature, poetry, scholarship, and music that we take for granted would simply not exist. It hardly needs saying that Israel does not negate Jewish life in the Diaspora. Each invigorates the other. But the land of Israel is the nerve center and, as in the thinking of Kaplan and other Zionists, ensures the creative continuity of the Jewish people.

The prayer continues:

Hagen aleyha b'evrat chasdecha u'fros aleyha sukkat shlomecha

[God] protect her in the shelter of your love and spread over her the Sukkah of peace.

*U'shlach orcha va'amitcha l'rosheya, sareyah, v'yoateyah, v't'taknem b'eytzah tovah
mi'fanecha*

Send your light and your truth to its leaders and advisors and help them with your good counsel

It is not surprising that the opening of this prayer, naming God as our Rock, and Israel as a sign of our redemption, is immediately followed by prayers for peace. We all know that our return to Israel has come at great cost and with great conflict. It's important to see, though, that the prayer shifts focus from Divine to human activity, asking God for success of the people in guiding and protecting the nation:

*Chazek et y'dei mignei eretz kodsheynu v'hanchilem eloheynu y'shuah va'atert nitzachon
t'atrem*

Strengthen the hand of those who defend our Holy Land; grant them lasting fulfillment and crown their efforts with success

The prayer was written in 1948, right after the War of Independence. It reflects the reality that military strength was both essential and effective in ensuring the existence of Israel at its founding. Today, when a larger army and superior firepower do not seem so certain to assure victory or stability, this passage can lead to a difficult question: What is the role of military power in achieving lasting peace?

Of course, I raise the question and do not claim to know the answer. And raising this question in safety, thousands of miles away, is not the same as asking it with rockets raining down. It is a painful and complex question – precisely the kind that leads to acrimony among Jews where respect and compassion are badly needed. It is notable that the North American branch of Rabbis for Human Rights – an organization that has been highly critical of the Israeli government, Israel's military's actions, and housing demolitions – simply acknowledged the pain and suffering of Israelis affected by the recent war and chose not to issue policy statements about it. This, they said, was the province of Israeli rabbis who were living with the reality of the situation.

Rabbi Arthur Green sums up the practical and moral issues involved:

“We have been placed among genuinely difficult neighbors, and we have not been such easy neighbors ourselves. Many among our neighbors would like to see us destroyed or removed altogether from this land. The military strength and vigilance that have been developed by the State of Israel over its first half-century of existence have been vital to its survival. But we who continue to think of Eretz Yisrael in terms of covenant or sacred trust believe that the purpose of that survival has to be more than just survival itself. We remain a kingdom of Priests devoted to a message about a single God and the creation of all humans in God's image. Real enemies test our faith in that message every day. The ultimate victory of Israel (people, state, and land) lies in our ability to keep faith with our message and act upon it here in the real, tough, world of interpersonal and political life.”

Even as we affirm our connection and the centrality of Israel, voice our prayer for the wisdom of its leaders during these trying times, and pray for the success of those who protect her, we must also remember this sacred covenant and the sanctity of every human life. The midrash tells of God chastising the angels who were rejoicing as the Egyptians perished in the Sea while the Israelites crossed to safety: “How can you sing when my creatures (the Egyptians) are drowning in the Sea?” With each death the reflection of the divine image in this world is diminished. When we close our hearts to those who suffer and die, whether Israeli or Lebanese, we diminish our own humanity.

The version of our prayer for Israel found in our machzor concludes:

V'natata Shalom Ba'aretz v'simchat olam l'yoshveyah
Grant Peace in the land and everlasting joy to its inhabitants

It may seem difficult to speak of peace, let alone everlasting joy for the land's inhabitants at this time. The tradition, though, beckons us to not let reality rob us of these hopes, these dreams for Israel. Only by recalling them can we move toward them. Though we come shaken, mourning and confused from a terrible month of war, we pray, nonetheless, for peace between Palestinians and Israelis within the land, and for peace between the land of Israel and its neighbors. In this season of renewal and return, help us find new pathways to peace, security, and understanding. Grant us, God, the courage to reach out to each other and to not close our hearts to all who have suffered from this war. Amen.

L'shanah tovah. May it be a Good Year. A Year of healing and return.