

Erev RH 1948

Erev Rosh Hashanah. 1948. The state of Israel was but 4 months old, fighting for survival against multiple foreign powers.

The 2nd truce of the war was in effect, the army anxiously waiting for the fighting to resume. Their brothers in the negev were under siege. And although it was the first Rosh Hashanah since the time of the Crusades that Jews were not heard praying at the Kotel, the western wall, for that night the country wrapped itself in prayer. In Jerusalem, some prayed laying on the ground, staying out of the line of sight of enemy snipers from across the valley. In Tel Aviv, after evening prayers, many worshippers headed to local café's for parties celebrating the new Jewish year, 5709.

2 weeks earlier, Israel's chief Ashkenazi rabbi Isaac Halevi Herzog wrote a draft of a new prayer, one that could be used on Rosh Hashanah, a Prayer for the State of Israel. He sent the words to his friend, Shai Agnon, one of Israel's most celebrated authors, and together they published it in Israeli newspapers. And on that Rosh Hashanah night in 1948, Rabbi Herzog recited the prayer for the first time in the heart of Jerusalem. It starts "Avinu Shabashamayim Tzur Yisrael v'goal." Our creator who is in heaven, rock of Israel and its redeemer. Bareich et medinat Yisrael, reisheet smichat g'ulateinu. Bless the country of Israel, first flowering of our redemption. 75 years later, it is the same prayer for the state of Israel we will recite tomorrow morning after our Torah reading, asking God to grant good counsel to its leaders, and spread peace among all its inhabitants.

Over the last 5 years, I have taken many opportunities to speak about Israel in this congregation, from it's governmental structure and voting system, to the Palestinian conflict and rise of ultra-nationalism, to the struggle of reform Judaism under an orthodox chief rabbinate. I can't tell you the number of my colleagues who don't feel that they can speak about Israel in their synagogues, and I'm grateful that has not been the case for me because it is a topic so dear to me. And over these years I have always tried to approach the topic with nuance and balance. Some might say I've done that with varying degrees of success, but it's been my goal. I felt it was my responsibility as a rabbi to bring discussions of Israeli history and politics into a deeper more meaningful, and more nuanced place.

But I had an interaction this summer has made me rethink my approach.

My best friend recently got married, and to celebrate his impending nuptials, about of a dozen of us went camping in Yosemite for the weekend. I was the only Jewish individual which meant nothing, except that after our l'chayyims for the evening, somehow the conversation turned into a q and a with me about being a rabbi, and then about Israel. And the discussion came from a place of pure curiosity so I took no offense when someone asked a question that was phrased in a way that made me uncomfortable, or lacked the nuance that I tried to hard to present. One guy in particular was a bit more forward with his questions, and at one point he asked me "So, why do you guys hate Palestinians?".

He asked it casually as if he asked so why do you guys eat matzah, but it was so why do you guys hate Palestinians. And I explained to him that first of all, it's not you guys, it's Israelis, but that most Israelis don't hate

Palestinians, and would much rather be living in peace than in this back and forth violence.

And he responded, "Yah but you guys like tear down their houses"

And I said, again its not you guys, it's the Israeli Army, there's a difference, and yes the army has torn down homes of Palestinians terrorists and illegal encampments blah blah blah...you could possibly guess the rest.

And this continued "but you guys put them in camps and invade their cities"

And at this point I looked at him and in a fairly loud and exasperated voice said "Dude, it's not you guys."

slight pause

And when you raise your voice at a slightly inebriated individual, they raise their voice back. He said "Of course its you guys. Jews, Israel, it's all the same!" And I wish....that I was making that up. I wish I could tell you I embellished this dialogue to make my point more convincing but that's exactly what he said. Jews, Israel, it's all the same. You are all the same.

And he didn't say it because he was drunk. And he didn't say it to be hurtful, and certainly not to be hateful of me or of Israel. But I was talking with someone with an objectively misinformed view of reality, and it didn't matter how much nuance I brought to the conversation in that moment. There was no deep discussion to be had. I had to explain to him that, yes Jews around the world share a connection with Israel, but Jews and Israel are not the same thing. That American jews in particular are not representative of any Israeli military or governmental policy or action. And the majority of anti-semitism that stems from anti-israel sentiment is due to an inability to separate the concept of

the modern state of Israel with the individual Jews around the world. Sadly, I'm not sure he fully grasped what I said.

This interaction taught me that I have been too busy picking through the weeds, I've been too focused on developing a meaningful and balanced conversation around Israel. That's not to say I shouldn't be, or I won't anymore. But perhaps I missed the mark in not trying to cultivate a deep sense of connection to Israel that I feel, but perhaps others are still searching for. What good is nuance if we don't understand Judaism's relationship with Israel, if we don't see it as part of our heritage.

It is undeniable that the Jewish people have been connected to Israel and considered it their physical and spiritual home for more than 3000 years.

2500 years ago, our ancestors cried out for Zion when they were exiled in Babylon, dreaming of their return.

2000 years ago, as the Romans sacked Jerusalem, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai preserved Jewish life in the Holy Land, moving the rabbinic leaders to Tzippori and Tiberias in Israel's north instead of allowing them to be taken back to Rome.

1500 years ago, even as Jewish life began to flourish outside of Israel, communities still relied on Jerusalem to set the calendar of holidays for the year, and a visit to Israel was considered an Aliyah, a going up.

1000 years ago, from Spain, the center of medieval Jewish life, Maimonides wrote sovereignty will be re-established in Israel, and there will be a return to Israel . . . and the heart of the kingdom will be in Zion.

And in the last 100 years, Yiddish author Mendele Mocher Seforim describes a poor Jewish shtetl, tucked away in the snow of Europe,

gathering around a table to observe a gift brought from a stranger. A single date from the land of Israel. As the villagers hold the date, they are transported to the shores of the galilee, dreaming of a redeemed future.

Our people have directed their prayers towards Jerusalem since the 2nd temple's destruction almost 2000 years ago, words crying out for a wandering people brought home. Not one day has passed on this earth where a Jew did not dream of a return to Israel. And after centuries of waiting, from the ashes of Europe, the modern state of Israel arose, burdened with a purpose. Kol Yisrael aravim ze bazeh. All of Israel is responsible for one another. And she lived up to that purpose.

Israel became a refuge to millions of Jews escaping antisemitism in Europe and around the globe. Over the decades Israel has rescued thousands of Jews. Operation Magic carpet brought Jews trapped in Yemen, Operations Ezra and Nechemia from Iraq, Moses and Solomon from Ethiopia.

And those refugees turned to doctors, and scientists, and farmers, and journalists, and teachers, and they have transformed our ancient homeland into a modern marvel, 75 years in the making.

75 years of the Jewish State is no small triumph. More than once Israel has been pushed to the brink of extermination, many lives cut short defending a right to a life free from religious persecution. Arguments against the legitimacy of the Jewish state which started in the 20s continue through to today. And waves of terror, failed peace negotiations, infighting between religious and secular, and the Palestinian conflict have sometimes made these 75 years hard to

watch. But despite all of this, Israel's impending milestone should be a source of pride and excitement for us all.

Throughout this whole year CBB will celebrate Israel's 75th anniversary, commemorating the legacy it represents, and dreaming of its potential future. We will eat Israeli foods, dancing Israeli dances, and read Israeli authors.

Our book group Israel between the Pages explores the relationship between American and Israeli Jews, the history of Israel's leadership, and the stories that make us feel connected to a land thousands of miles away. Our first book for this year is the perfect starter book for anyone interested in reading about Israel. Written by Noa Tishby, it's called "Israel, a simple guide to the most misunderstood country on earth", and we'll be discussing it in late October.

In the Fall as we near the 75th anniversary of the UN vote to approve the Israel partition plan, we will highlight one of our congregation's greatest treasures. At least three members of our community, Devorah Sprecher, Ronit Anolick, and Tuli Glassman were living in Israel the day of the UN vote, and remember the celebrations in the streets. It is our communal responsibility to hear their stories of early Israel, and to carry those stories to the next generations. I hope you'll join us for this powerful evening.

Israel at 75 is a country wondering what it could look like at 100. How will it change and grow over the next 25 years? And the Jewish community in the United States is wondering, what's our role getting Israel to 100? How do we commit to a future of engagement with Israel?

This "emerging vision" has already started to take shape here at CBB.

Our congregation's commitment to Israel at 100 is clear through our partnership and support of Givat Haviva. This school brings together Israeli Jews and Arabs, along with students from around the world, committed to the mission of peace and communication. This school will produce Israel's next great leaders, and our volunteers are engaging with these students one on one. Givat Haviva is one of the most important initiatives in Israel today, and our community's support will directly impact what Israel at 100 will look like.

We can also commit to a future vision for Israel by traveling there. You may have seen the poster outside for our congregational Israel trip this March. Entitled "An emerging vision, food, culture, shared society" we will go and witness firsthand the projects of cooperation already making progress towards a more just and intertwined future, including a visit to Givat Haviva. Traveling to Israel with the congregation is something I have dreamed about since I started here and I'm so excited to bring some of you with me to my favorite places on earth. There is a small side-effect you should be aware of though. Many of the participants in our last congregational trip ended up on temple committees and the board, and one even became president of the congregation. So choose wisely. But really I hope you consider joining me in Israel between Purim and Passover this year.

Most importantly, we will commit to a future vision of Israel by instilling a deep passion for it with our young people. This is how Israel has remained so sacred to our people for thousands of years. The elder generations planting Israel in the hearts of the youth. And this is necessary now more than ever. As our teens go off to college they are met by extreme anti-Israel and anti-Semitic sentiment. They are faced with individuals unwilling to dive into nuance and polite conversation,

individuals resolved to make life uncomfortable for Jewish students expressing any sort of relationship with Israel. And it's not just on college campuses. Due to the prevalence of misinformation on social media, our high school students now deal with this. With that in mind, next December, December 2023, CBB will be offering its first ever Teen Trip to Israel. With support from this congregation we will send up to 40 of our 9th-12th graders to Israel for 9 days of dynamic learning and bonding with each other.

I was prepared for that midnight conversation camping in the hills of Yosemite. It was uncomfortable, but I knew how to respond, because I was confident in my knowledge of Israeli history and the current conflict. The greatest way we can prepare our teens for these conversations is to empower them with knowledge, and it cannot just be repeating the words their rabbi told them. For this knowledge to be authentic, they need to experience it for themselves. I hope you will support this project.

When Rabbi Herzog wrote the prayer for the state of Israel in 1948 it was a time of great uncertainty. No one knew what would become of the small Israeli defense force facing off against established militaries. Imagine what he would say if he knew that 75 years later, Israel would be flourishing and Jews around the world were still reciting the same prayer, imagining a future of prosperity and peace for her and all her inhabitants. I think he would say "our prayer was answered".

L'shana Tova