

The Israel Vow – Yom Kippur Morning
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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I want a short cut. I want a shortcut like when I'm on a hike and I realize that I've planned something too ambitious and so I cut down a streambed to shorten the loop. I want a shortcut like when I order in food for guests instead of cooking everything myself. I want a shortcut like when I cut a prayer or two from our worship and you sigh with relief that the service won't be quite as long as you feared. I want a shortcut... but there are no shortcuts.

What kind of shortcut do I want? I want a shortcut for Israel. I want a shortcut to bring the hostages home. I want a shortcut to peace. I want a shortcut to security. I want a shortcut to the Israel pictured in the Declaration of Independence that is a country for all its people living in peace with its neighbors. I want a short cut to the elimination of Hamas. I want a shortcut to an unarmed Palestinian state living side by side with Israel in peace and prosperity. I want a shortcut that shows all the European countries the blow that Israel struck against terrorist strategies for the whole West. I want a shortcut that gets college students and progressives excited about a high tech, modern, democratic country in the midst of repressive regimes modeling how to make the desert bloom for the benefit of all inhabitants of the land. I want Muslim Palestinians to be able to pray at the Al-Aqsa mosque and I want Jewish Israelis to be able to pray at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. I want every child, every child, between the Mediterranean and the Jordan to know opportunity, democracy, peace, and prosperity – to know what it's like to spend a day at the beach. I want to start my day in Tel Aviv and go to sleep in Damascus before spending a day hiking amongst the cedars of Lebanon. I want a short cut to everything that the crossroads of the world that is the Land of Israel could be for Jews and Palestinians and all people of good will.

I want to be able to turn back time to the heady days of the Oslo Accords. No actually, those did not work, but I want to feel that hope and spirit again. That hope and spirit I felt in August of 2000 when I stood at the Western Wall and believed – as so many did – that the talks at Camp David would turn to a real and durable peace. I want to know the security that I felt when I lived in Jerusalem. When I lived there protected by a newly built security barrier. It was a barrier that I hoped would prove to be a good fence that would cause Israelis and Palestinians to be good neighbors. I want to believe that they still can be good neighbors because they are neighbors and they will be neighbors and only they can decide that they will be good neighbors... or not. Perhaps we are heading back to those days with this new proposal on the table – a proposal accepted by Israel and the nations of the world, a proposal for hostage return and ceasefire, and for security and rebuilding. Will Hamas accept it? Who knows. Even if they do, it will not be a shortcut – there are no shortcuts in the Middle East. Even if they do, it does not erase the physical, emotional, and spiritual storm of the last two years. But even the possibility of peace... the glimmer of hope on this holiest day of the year? Please God.

I want the haters to understand why I love Israel. That I love it – first and foremost for the half of our people who live there. Ashkenazi and Sephardi and Mizrahi, Israelis on the left and on the right, farmers and construction workers, high tech entrepreneurs and lotto ticket vendors. Ultra-Orthodox Jews yelling at Reform Jews and Reform Jews yelling at Ultra-Orthodox Jews and

then all of them dancing together at a wedding or a bris or chatting amiably while in line for hummus and pita at Hummus Abu Hassan in Jaffa – the best hummus on earth as far as I am concerned.

And that Israeli flag. I love the Israeli flag. Those blue stripes signifying the river and the sea. The six-pointed star, our six-pointed star. All standing proudly on a field of white and flying above the Knesset, the Israeli philharmonic, Masada, a small tank brigade camp on the Golan Heights, on the astronaut's uniform of Ilan Ramon, zichrono livracha, and on the IDF uniform of the heroic kids – kids! – who have bravely fought for Israel over the last two years – kids from every sector of society blending together and standing up and following orders under simply impossible conditions. That flag flew over missions of untold success – Hezbollah degraded, Hamas broken as a strategic threat, Iran's defenses set back, Assad gone, the Houthis hit hard. Those strategic gains under that flag, Jews fighting back against those who would kill them. And I love the flag for the way that my friends and colleagues carry it to protests every Saturday night. They protest attempts to degrade democracy. They protest on behalf of the hostages. They protest corruption in the government. They insist on a better, freer, safer, just and righteous Israel. Imagine it! In America protesters sometimes burn flags or stomp on flags. People on the American political left have all but ceded the Stars and Stripes to the political right. But not in Israel. In Israel left and right both wrap themselves in the flag to show how they feel, what they want, their hopes and dreams and aspirations. What a ridiculous irony when people on college campuses burn the Israeli flag, the same flag that their political compatriots in Israel wave in defiance and love and passion and hope and heartbreak.

So much heartbreak. For three years now heartbreak. First the heartbreak of an Israel fractured by politics, fractured by attempts to degrade its judiciary, its democracy. And then the heartbreak of October 7, 2023. I got the call from a congregant at an airport. "Rabbi," she asked me, "did you see what's going on in Israel? Do you think our trip to Israel will still happen in December?" "Oh, I'm sure it will!" I responded, "There are flares up in Gaza from time to time and they only last a few weeks and then, ironically, it will be safer when we are there than it might have otherwise been." I was so wrong. So, so wrong. 1,195 killed. 251 kidnapped. Towns destroyed. The IDF missing in action. The violations of fences and protocols, the violations of lives and women's bodies and basic decency. The shattering of Israel's myth of deterrence. The shattering of what they called the conceptzia – the concept that Hamas was more interested in power than in fulfilling its stated purpose of destroying Israel, of killing every last Jew, even the ones who hide behind trees. No, Hamas played the long game and played Israel for the fool and the whole world saw it, all of Israel's enemies ready to pounce. But thank God they did not, thank God it was a steady drip of missiles from Hezbollah and not a constant barrage. Thank God Iran stayed out at first. The IDF was asleep at the wheel on October 7th – as the resignations of nearly every official demonstrate – and if they had all joined in... I cannot even say it.

And every day since then my heart has broken for the hostages. We say it so much. Does it become cliché? An almost symbolic statement, pro forma, before saying what we want to say or getting to the topic at hand. But it is not a cliché or a talking point or a bullet on a list for negotiators. The hostages, each one of them are you and me. On October 8th they were mothers and brothers, sisters and fathers and children. The hostages were happy music fans and farmers and immigrants and Americans and Russians and soldiers and peaceniks – so many of them were

peaceniks who used to drive Gazans to hospitals in Israel for treatment for childhood cancer or when an old woman needed a specialist. And then the peacenik was in a hole in a tunnel under the ground until he died there. Some of the hostages on October 8th were artists, chefs, students, executives. And this great variety of people – faces we’ve seen plastered on posters, faces defaced by antisemites, faces painted in tribute at the Jewish Museum in Philly – that great variety of people all became one thing: hostage human shields. A source of daily, ongoing heartbreak. The only daily, ongoing thing we’re supposed to have as Jews is an Eternal light, but these hostages entered a world of Eternal darkness. And perhaps – perhaps – this new proposal could finally open the way for their release. Because I want them home. I want them home. I want them home!

But the heartbreak, of course, goes beyond the hostages. My heart breaks whenever war breaks out. Even when the US Army entered Iraq in 2003, I vividly remember shedding a tear for all who would die because war, even just and noble and necessary wars, bring horror that few of us, few sitting in the Ivory Tower of a campus, few who have not themselves served in combat could ever possibly understand. And the war in Gaza – even if this new proposal takes effect – has been terrible. 893 Israeli soldiers killed. 82 hostages killed. Tens of thousands of Gazans killed. And what do we do when we hear of the deaths? We prognostic about how many dead people are worth it. We pretend to be military experts talking about proportionality and target value and AI target selection. We debate to what extent we can trust this number or that. We split hairs about definitions of starvations versus hunger, of genocide, of war crime, of legitimate target. I can do it with the best of them. I’ve listened to all the podcasts and I can tell you why it is not genocide and I can tell you what food aid systems seem to be most effective and I can quote you chapter and verse about the laws of military engagement and the fact that armies are not obligated to provide any aid that benefits their enemies. But you know what? On this Day of Atonement, this day when we tear out our hearts and beat our chests and rend our souls, on this day I am heartbroken for all the loss of life, the inability of human beings to get along. I know why we fight. I get it. Israel had no choice whatsoever. But the death and destruction and disease and dislocation and devastation is terrible. Why? Because war is terrible even when it is necessary. During this time there have been moments, days, weeks, even, when I have allowed the necessity of it to harden my heart to so-called collateral damage (perhaps the worst phrase ever invented) harden my heart to the innocent people who have had their limbs blown off or shrapnel pierce their heart because they stood too close to a Hamas operative. But today, today on Yom Kippur when I stand before all of you and when I stand before my children and my God, today I set aside all of the rational and reasonable and debatable reasons for the war. Today I lay bare the awful pain and horror of war and of the cruelty of humans who use other humans as human shield and of the devastating ways that we hold hostages and maim and kill one another. It is heartbreaking.

Last night we asked God to release us from any neder, any vow, that we might make in the coming year. We did this because, for most of our history, vows were a really big deal and breaking them was unthinkable. In October of 2023, before Israel invaded Gaza, a thinker who I deeply admire, Micah Goodman, challenged us diaspora Jews. With the horrors still fresh in our minds, Micah said the following, “Please go to your rabbis, go to your leaders together now, before Israel hits back. This is the time for a neder, a vow. Make this vow: We will support Israel [not only when it is hit, but] throughout the period where it’s fighting for its existence.”

At the time that Micah asked this I was interviewed by a reporter from The Times of Israel about my reaction to his request. I explained, “My connection with Israel is emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and visceral. Like a connection with a family member, it can never actually be broken. And so, I do not need a vow about my connection with Israel – it is a permanent part of who I am. Will I stand with Israel no matter what? On an existential level, yes. Might I critique Israel? Perhaps. I’ve done it before. But any public critique would only be in the context of that enduring relationship, that enduring loyalty, that enduring, unbreakable connection.” What I did not realize when I said that is that, in my heart, I did make the vow. It was not a conscious thing. It was more like... more like the commitment that parents make to children when they hold them for the first time. There was no need to say anything.

And I have stood by that vow because I can do no other. But that vow, like the love between two people, does not mean unconditional support of everything that this Israeli government does. Just like loving your children does not mean unconditional support of everything your children do. Instead, I filter my understanding of this two-year nightmare through that commitment first. It means that I seek the perspective of Israelis – my fellow Jews, those who share my history and my destiny. I seek the perspectives of Israelis from every walk of life and then I align myself with the ones whose perspective makes the most sense to me, those whose morals align with mine, those whose world outlook aligns with mine. That is what it means to be committed to Israel today, what it means to be a Zionist today. You do not need to support everything the government does – or you can. You do not need to be an Israeli flag waving protestor – or you can. You do not need to agree with everything the IDF does – or you can. What we need to do is find our Israelis, our fellow Jews, and stand with them. Stand with them in support or in protest, stand with them in tears or in laughter, stand with them in fear and in courage. Standing with Israel does not mean one thing. It cannot mean one thing because Israelis themselves are Jews and Jews argue. Two Jews three opinions and all that. So, find those Israelis that share your world view and join with them.

Because you have a stake in this. Some days it may feel a million miles away. Some days you may feel like you Just. Can’t. But your fate is wrapped up in the future of Israel. It may not be you, it may be your children or great-grandchildren, but someone you love will intersect with the land or state or people of Israel in meaningful and important ways because they will be Jewish and Jews find each other and matter to each other and, we are, we really are, responsible for one another. And what a gift. For 3,000 years we have walked the face of this earth, and we have cared for one another in ways that have sustained us against all odds. For the first time in 2,000 years we have a state, a land of our own for protection and for pride and for us to try to live out our values and learn to have power and to fail and succeed and to make us proud and to break our hearts. It is the dream come true of our ancestors, a miracle that none of them could have really imagined outside of messianic visions. And it is real, and it is Israel and you have a stake in it simply by virtue of being part of the Jewish community.

Shortcut. I really do want a shortcut past the unpleasantness and tragedy and violence and heartbreak. But that is not the way of history, not the way of Jewish history. And so, like my grandparents and their grandparents and theirs going all the way back to my ancestors who wandered in the desert with Moses, like them I vow to walk this journey with the Jews in Israel

and the Jews here, with all the Jews. I vow to drown out the pundits and to hear my fellow Jews. No matter what happens with the latest plan, I vow to love Israel with all the complexity that love entails: joy and sorrow and pride and disappointment and nuance and passion. I vow to avoid the idolatry of politics and power, the idolatry of simplistic answers or neat solutions. I will slog through this moment as my ancestors slogged through the desert and through 2,000 years of exile. And I will do it all with a faith that, at the end of that journey, Israel will live up to its founding vision as stated in its declaration of independence: THE STATE OF ISRAEL will restore in the Jewish people their natural right to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations... [It will] ensure complete equality of ... rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture... it will be based on freedom, justice and peace...”

I hope and pray that it is a journey we can take together – a journey toward peace, toward justice, toward wholeness. May it bring peace to Israel, to her neighbors, and to us all.

כן יהי רצון

May this be God's will