



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2023/5784

“Israel – The Hope”
Yom Kippur Sermon, 5784/2023
Rabba Kaya Stern-Kaufman

Looking about in this room, we see a beautifully diverse community with members from varied Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds. Our synagogue is affiliated with the Conservative movement, but we have members who come from Reform, Reconstructionist and Orthodox backgrounds. I myself have practiced Judaism, touching every one of these denominations and at times, none at all. I have had the privilege and freedom to choose an orthodox lifestyle in my youth and to attend a pluralistic seminary to become a Rabbi in my 40's. And during many of those in-between years, I was also an unaffiliated Jew who attended the sanctuary of mother nature rather than the synagogue down the road. But what always pulled me back into relationship with Judaism was its honoring of a multiplicity of voices as reflected in our sacred texts and the ever-evolving nature of Jewish life. Our rituals and beliefs had the foundational strength to remain intact and support Jews through countless persecutions and as well as the resilience to evolve through the ages. I personally adored Talmud and the way in which our religion enshrines minority views along with majority opinions. Hillel and Shammai rarely if ever agreed, but we remember their discourse and honor their differing points of view. Judaism has never been monolithic nor have the Jewish people ever been homogenous.

And it is also taught – *Shivim Panim LaTorah*- that the Torah has 70 faces. The number 70 is Jewish code for all possibilities. “The Torah has 70 faces” means that it contains endless possibilities for interpretation. Our tradition values a multiplicity of opinions and perspectives. (We are the *Davar Acheir* people!) And it is these core Jewish values that undergird the vision and the hope of the early founders to build a Jewish democratic state in the land of Israel.



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2023/5784

Today, on this most holy of days, I have chosen to speak with you about Israel once more, because I feel we have arrived at a critical point in her destiny. And as Jews, our destiny and hers are completely interwoven. We are one people- *goy echad ba'aretz*- one people who over thousands of years have cherished One God and One land.

Now, I understand that most of us here have very strong feelings about Israel and many of us disagree vehemently about her politics. But I want to remind us that heated disagreements arise because we **share both** a love for the land and grief over all the impediments to achieving a lasting peace.

At this point I want to pause and ask us all to take a deep breath. I want to simply invite you to notice how you are feeling as I raise the topic. Let's take a moment of personal awareness to notice your heart rate, your breathing. (Pause) Let's take another deep breath together and remember that we are in a safe place, surrounded by people we love. We can disagree and you may have very strong feelings about this sermon, but we are challenged to remember that we are one community- one Jewish family- and our strength lies in respectfully managing multiple perspectives.

As I mentioned earlier, it is these core pluralistic values that guided the founders of the State of Israel toward a Jewish democratic vision. The Israeli Declaration of Independence specifically addresses democratic values in the following passage:

“The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.”



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2023/5784

I bring this to our awareness because the current right wing coalition government in Israel has been making moves that, according to most legal scholars, threatens the future of Israel as a democratic state. The recent move to shift power away from the Judiciary and increase the power of the legislative branch, neuters the power of the Supreme Court to serve as any kind of check and balance upon the legislative branch. This current govt is comprised of a slim majority coalition composed of extreme right and ultra-Orthodox parties. This govt has also communicated their agenda to take complete control of the appointment of Judges to the Supreme Court, exempt religious Jews from military service, give an expanded role to religious courts to determine civil laws, limit the freedom of movement for women in public spaces, pass anti-LGBTQ legislation and annex the occupied territories.

In response, approximately 20% of the entire Israeli population have taken to the streets to protest every Sat. night for the past 8 months. The protesters come from diverse populations of Israeli society, people who are not natural allies. They are from the right and the left, religious and secular, Muslim, Bedouin, and Jewish, wealthy and poor, intellectuals and factory workers, straight and gay, a plurality of voices. And they are crying out together against the current government's anti-democratic moves. The protestors fear that Israel stands on the brink of becoming a religious dictatorship.

The situation is dire. Many experts much wiser and more informed than I have expressed their worry that Israel is headed into a constitutional crisis. With increasing numbers of Air Force Reservists registering their protest by refusing to serve and with scores of medical professionals searching for jobs overseas, many fear legitimately for the survival of the State.

What pains my heart is the framing of this crisis as a battle between democracy and Judaism. That is to say, that if we want to maintain a Jewish State, then we must dispense with the democratic ideal of equal rights for all her inhabitants. The idea that Judaism is responsible for the destabilization of democracy in Israel is a frightening and painful construct that denies the history of Judaism itself, and



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2023/5784

the plurality of voices and perspectives that contribute to Jewish life around the world.

Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur is one of three female Rabbis in France, and a co-leader of the Liberal Jewish Movement of France. She writes the following:

Ben Gvir's interpretation of Judaism is just one voice, just one language, among so many others. His language is not my Jewish language, it is not the one in which I speak to my children, my students, or my friends, and it is not the one I believe in. Its exclusive and exclusionary message impoverishes and condemns us even as it claims full legitimacy. It must be fought not only by modern democratic means, but also from within the Jewish tradition. It is up to us not to let Zionism or Judaism be kidnapped by those who claim it. It is up to us to fight for democracy in Israel, not against Judaism, but with and through it.

In recent months we have also witnessed an escalation of Settler violence against Arab communities. I am ashamed of the “religious” Jewish settlers who, fueled by the current extreme voices in the govt, and in the name of Torah, commit murder and other acts of violence against their Arab neighbors. I grieve for the Hillul Hashem- the desecration of God’s name, the desecration of Judaism that is committed by those who shout, “Death to Arabs.” Let not our holy Torah be used as a weapon of war.

Today, our Israeli brothers and sisters are crying out to us, begging us to join the fight for the future of democracy in Israel as well as for the future of Judaism. Perhaps for the first time, Israelis and we, diaspora Jews, are forced to look directly into what it means to be a true democracy, with equal rights for **all** her inhabitants. After 75 years, now is the moment, the critical moment, when Israel is taking up this existential question- one that has been lurking since ‘67. Can Israel be both a Jewish state and a Democratic State?

Now is the moment, when we, Jewish family around the world must take up the challenge to be Yisrael - that is “God wrestlers.” We are all called upon to wrestle



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2023/5784

with the many truths that co-exist in this conflict. That is our sacred task. For, in the end, we must acknowledge that for Israel to thrive and flourish, we must also care about the thriving and flourishing of the Palestinian people. Because our destinies are inextricably woven together.

The situation is certainly dire, and we naturally ask, where in this situation lies the HOPE- Hatikvah? I would offer that the hope lies in the hundreds of thousands of Israelis who have not given up, but who rise up every week to declare their fidelity to a democratic vision of Israel. And the hope lies now with us as well, to join that struggle, in strength and in solidarity.

We have all received a great spiritual heritage, the great blessing of a Judaism that includes all of us because our ancestors fought for her. We, the Jewish people, have lived long on this earth with Judaism, but without a Jewish state. After two thousand years, we, a privileged generation, have lived through the miracle of the establishment of a Jewish state. It is precious and so short-lived. Now is the time to ensure her future as a just and democratic state for all her inhabitants.

And so, one may ask- What can we, American Jews do from here?

First, is to resist the pull to step back. Let us not cast judgment, shut down and pull away. Our Israeli cousins are begging us to engage in any way we can, to support the struggle for democracy in Israel. To begin, that means engaging in discussions with one another, informing ourselves about what is happening. I am very pleased to share that our Israel Affairs Committee has put together a special workshop for our community this November entitled "For the Sake of Argument". It is designed to help us develop the communication skills to discuss difficult and often polarizing points of view in ways that build rather than threaten our sense of community. Please look for the announcement of this workshop coming soon.

Additionally, the IAC is sponsoring an Israeli Speaker Series that will, throughout the year, bring several Israeli Wexner Fellows from the Harvard Kennedy School to speak with us about events in various sectors of Israeli society.



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2023/5784

Finally, there are many webinars and calls to action coming from a variety of Israeli and Jewish organizations. I will continue to share these opportunities through my email messages to the community. I ask you to please look for them, open them and read them.

In closing, I share this prayer for the welfare of the State of Israel written in honor of Israel's 75th anniversary by: Rabbi Ayelet Cohen

Source of life, Maker of wonders
Bless the State of Israel and all the inhabitants of the land
Protect her with infinite compassion
Spread over her your shelter of peace
Strengthen the hearts and the will of its citizens
Calling out for justice and democracy
May their voices ring out like a shofar throughout the land
A budding redemption
Help them replant what has been uprooted and tend what has been neglected
So the seedling promises of refuge and equality blossom and thrive
May their feet not give way, let them not tire nor slumber nor succumb to fear
Grant strength and courage
Nurture a shared future for all who call the land home

Healer of the broken-hearted
Sustain our hope
Help us celebrate what was and is miraculous in Israel's founding
Help us grieve all that has been lost in the realization of that dream,
May we be strong enough and honest enough to carry the shattered along with the whole
May our love and our commitment to the vision of the Prophets endure like honey from the rock
May we be partners with the Divine and with all the inhabitants of the land in establishing and protecting justice, peace and joy.

and let us say: Amein