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The Fight for Democracy in Israel

All theology is a form of auto-biography or the current preferred term, memoir. We can't escape our past—nor should we try. We seek to understand it, embrace it when we can, and learn from it.

This is a simple way of saying that tonight, I will, once again, speak on Israel, even as for much of the summer, I had decided that I would not. By summer's end, I could not say no to the voice in my soul.

As many of you know, perhaps nearly all of you by now, in my home growing up, I was raised to be a Zionist.

Zionism—love of the land of Israel is integral to my Judaism. It is more than that, for I believe that there is no such thing as a Judaism without Zionism and here, I do not mean—Zionism as the political state of Israel. Zionism is much larger than that.

In fact, part of my deep and profound love for Reform Judaism is how Reform Judaism's own Zionist history reflects Reform Judaism's wisdom and vitality. As many of you know, early Reform Judaism was anti-Zionist—not neutral but anti.

"This is our Jerusalem," they taught and sung. "This" being Berlin or later Cincinnati, for example.

Reform Judaism's 1885 Pittsburgh Platform captured this move away from Zionism:

"We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine...nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state."

This pronouncement of the Central Conference of American Rabbis articulated the height of Reform Judaism's rejection of Jewish peoplehood and connection to the land of Israel. This was, as we know, accompanied by the elimination of most

Hebrew, the abandonment of the dietary laws, and curtailment of much else of Jewish culture.

The Pittsburgh Platform stated explicitly:

“We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state... their observance in our days is apt ... to obstruct ...modern spiritual elevation.”

This was Reform Judaism because this is life when you live as a creative explorer at the boundary. You find yourself searching and breathing the spiritual air of the culture around you. This life can be intoxicating causing one to miss the boundary markers, cross the border and go too far. So—Reform Judaism, in its quest for a new Judaism and its infatuation with the universal ideals of the Enlightenment went too far and overlooked core Jewish tenets.

Peoplehood and landedness, the two pillars of Zionism, were left behind.

Life at the edge is enticing but when you are wise and strong, as I believe our Reform Jewish forbears were, we acknowledged our error and reclaimed what was lost.

This is what we have done with both Hebrew, much of Jewish culture, and Israel. Reform Judaism today is alive and seeking mightily to make up lost ground in the State of Israel itself.

We now all understand that Zionism is central to our Judaism—and this is a story that I wish to try and tell this evening because I know that there are many who are deeply troubled by actions of the State of Israel and have been for many years. I count myself as one of them.

There are also those in our American Jewish community however, who have nothing to do with Israel or can see nothing in Israel but the wrong.

I am not among them.

I love Israel—even as I critique it with a heart breaking passion. You can look this up but in 1983, I gave my first Israel sermon in our Micah community wherein I critiqued Israeli behavior on the West Bank. When I was a very young rabbi in Minnesota, I stayed up half the night rewriting my Yom Kippur sermon wherein I condemned the Israeli army behavior at Sabra and Shatila.

I love Israel with a deep passion because I cannot not love Israel even as I rage at its excesses because how can you not rage at the excesses of that which you love?

And today we must say unequivocally-

Yes—there can be a Jewish Democratic state and that is our fight.

So--the Zionism story is two stories and both must be told.

First is the Zionism that is integral to Judaism—a historical and theological story.

And second is the Zionism of the struggles in Israel today—and our role.

Zionism is critical to the Jewish story because the essence of the Jewish story is a covenantal story of peoplehood and land. Seven times in the Book of Genesis God promises the land to Abraham, then again to Isaac, and to Jacob. The rest of the Torah, from when Moses meets God at the Burning Bush to the end of Deuteronomy is about the Land of Israel and the people's journey toward it.

There is no Jewish story without that land and its embodiment of place.

We see our lives as an ongoing attempt to feel at home, to feel loved, understood, and wanted.

Home—the place where we can simply be who we wish to be, the place we can discover who we are—this is Judaism's aspiration for all of us.

So of course, the Jewish story has to center on a sense of being at home in a real place in the real world.

This is the biblical Israel—a communal home where a people can create a society where no one feels alienated—but instead have unalienable rights and unalienable loves—a place where there is no distinguishing between the so-called citizen and the so-called stranger.

There is no deep Torah message without that real place.

This is what it means when the Torah commands Israel to be “or laGoyim—a light to the nations.” We were striving to create a model for how people everywhere might live. This was our ancient vision—that fell short.

or

As my Grandpa Goldman wrote in his, for me, brilliant book, *The Book of Book: An Introduction*, (Israel) “resolved never ... to be like the other nations---but could

not abandon their ways...In a word, Israel dreamed and prophesized of the ideal society and even legislated for it, but never got down to build it... it was out of these apostasies ... and aspirations that the Bible came into being.” (Solomon Goldman, *The Book of Book: An Introduction* ix-x)

This is who we are –

people and land

family and home

Dream and failure

aspiration and stumbling

These comprise the essence of our ancient story. We wrote it all down and fashioned a religious life around its study so at some distant day, when given the opportunity we might get it right.

This is what Zionism is—creating a sense of home for an entire people and for all who lived amongst them—one law for citizen and stranger alike, the Torah urges again and again.

But Zionism is also the modern story--the struggles in Israel today and our role in this moment.

Israel today is the manifestation of modern **political** Zionism, born out of our master Jewish story.

Here and now, I want to term the 20th century story a case of world affirmative action on behalf of the Jewish people. I use the expression “affirmative action” deliberately—as I first heard it in this Zionist context from a member of this community.

The recognition of Zionism as the political liberation movement of world Jewry by the United Nations in November, 1947, was an act of affirmative action. The world had come to recognize that a people battered throughout history and whose European branch was obliterated as their neighbors participated and the world watched, was finally owed a huge debt. The State of Israel was brought into being by this UN vote.

The affirmative action understanding is important here as an answer to the question most frequently posed by the Left, “why can’t Israel just be a democratic state?” The answer is simply too tragically simple. We need the “Jewish” because

history has shown that we need a state where a Jew is given automatic citizenship, a home that will always reliably and readily take in Jewish refugees fleeing what we already know can be history's worst. In 1947 the world recognized that. This is Israel's birth certificate.

I call modern political Zionism the God that did not fail. Those few pioneers inspired by the Zionist call of Theodore Herzl that went to Israel between 1881-1933 created the beachhead that allowed the survivors of our European devastation a place to go. By 1897, in the post Dreyfus world, Herzl and his followers had come to understand that even liberal western Europe was no place to be a Jew.

In 1945, when the Diaspora had failed---Zion redeemed.

This is the Israel story that we all know from roughly 1945-2000, the end of World War II and the rise of the Second Intifada.

Since 2000 and the Second Intifada—Israel has been embroiled in a political struggle that has now exploded since its current government formed in January of this year.

The ambitions of the current government and the nation-wide protest movement against it have thrown into the spotlight all of the underlying tensions that have been present in Israel since its founding and brought to a beneath the surface boiling for the last twenty years.

As I said, the true Zionist aspiration, our biblical inheritance is to create a homeland where no one is made to feel like a stranger. This is the only true aspiration for a Jewish democratic state---one law for Israelite and non-Israelite alike. This is the dream enshrined in Israel's own Declaration of Independence, a document that the current government treats with disdain.

What we see instead is a government of Israel that is intent on destroying Israel as a Jewish and democratic state and replace it with an ultranationalist orthodox Jewish authoritarian regime. In their madness, our biblical inheritance is in danger of becoming an obscene nightmare.

Where Reform Judaism once was blind to the deep lessons of our Jewish past—the Israeli government and its followers is the product of a different Jewish blindness—an ingrown orthodoxy of biblical literalists who see everyone who disagrees as a biblical Philistine who needs to be destroyed. They are autocratic zealots who are bent on creating a Zionist nightmare.

They despise a vision of a consensus Israel with its competing visions all arguing passionately but civilly in a public square.

The current government is an assortment of anti-democracy, criminals and Jewish Fascists. This is the coalition that was eager to serve with the indicted prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. They have seized upon his weakness and aggressively asserted their far right radical agenda which begins with simultaneously stripping the Israeli court system of its power as well as controlling who is appointed to the courts. They have a plan and a backup. In a political system with no Constitution, the independent court system has been the only check on the government.

This so-called judiciary overhaul is simply a tool for their real aim---

- ongoing settlement expansion leading to annexation—their greater Israel biblical theology knows no limits in its delirium

- the erosion of the rights of Arab citizens in Israel—they want to make Israel free of anyone they consider an “other”

and

- expansion of religious law in the public realm---they hold what we call human rights in disdain.

The first law they have passed, stripping the court of the reasonableness override, is their first step in the consolidation of power in order to implement their real agenda.

Yuval Harari, the Israeli historian and public intellectual summed up his objection to the government’s attempted moves in a single question:

“Should they succeed, what will limit the power of the government?”

“If there is no answer to that question,” he writes, “there is no longer real democracy. Democracy has then been replaced by an authoritarian regime. With no check on what it could legislate...”

Harari points out, this regime could delay the next elections indefinitely thus enshrining totalitarian rule.

Harari, fighting for liberal democracy writes:

“it doesn’t matter what majority you have, even if there is 99 percent ... a majority cannot be allowed to do what is blatantly and obscenely immoral—you cannot (for example) send one percent to extermination camps.”

The public pushback in Israel has been inspiring, galvanizing and beyond courageous. Some estimates claim that to date seven million individual Israelis have participated in the demonstrations out of a population of 9.2 million. On any given Saturday night as much as 17% of the population is demonstrating against the government. These protests –where the slogan is DEMOCRATCIA !—have been overwhelmingly civil and peaceful.

We are all inspired as vast sectors of Israeli society have united in protest.

Army reservists—including from the most elite and highly trained units—air force, intelligence, commandoes,

University professors

Scientists and engineers

Medical professionals

High Tech industry leaders

Business investors

Former chiefs of staff of the Israeli army

Former leaders of the intelligence agencies

Artists and writers

Rabbis-Reform, Conservative and Orthodox

Religious and Secular

Ashkenazi and Mizrachi

All united in the ranks of the protest movement.

Should Netanyahu succeed in his desperate democracy ending measures, we will be looking at a radically different Israel.

Where does this leave us? Why am I bothering to discuss all of this on our holiest night of the year?

Israel embodies the Jewish miracle of our time. In Israel, we are a people that rose from the ashes to build something far from perfect but nonetheless beautiful and great.

The Jewish spirit comes alive in Israel.

Amos Oz called Tel Aviv alone as great a contribution to world culture as the Babylonian Talmud—and then he said—maybe even greater.

Consider Jewish culture today—music, the arts, dance, literature—by any measure—Israel is an inspiration world-wide.

The Zionist cup that is Israel overflows with creativity and contributions to all humankind.

Our Jewish world is impoverished if we do not have Israel.

Thus far, American Jewry's so called national leadership has been way too tepid in their response. Maybe now—they are beginning to catch on.

About two months ago, before Tisha b'Av—our traditional date commemorating the destruction of the temple and subsequent exile, I was called by a journalist to comment on the parallels between that destruction which the Talmud says was brought about by internal Jewish rivalries and hatred and the current situation in Israel. I told the journalist that I had nothing to say even though, just a few months earlier, while in Israel with our Micah group, we had participated in the protests.

I have thought about that ever since and regretted saying – “no comment” to the journalist.

I wish I had said two things:

1. Israelis are fighting the same fight to preserve their democracy that we are fighting here. They have no Constitution with its checks and balances as a backstop. They have therefore taken to the streets. I applaud their every move.

I then would have gone further.

2. Everything in Jewish history is about hope.

OD LO AVDA TIKVATEINU

We have not yet lost our hope.

Jewish history is a story of miracles.

Millions of Israelis are now fighting for that miracle like almost never before. They are fighting for the country they live and for Herzl's dream.

a Jewish and democratic state.

Let us not be Jews of silence.

Let us seek every way that we can to show common cause with those who go out into the streets in protest.

I also hear the protests of many of you. What about the occupation and the West Bank? What about the Palestinians?

Thomas Friedman recently answered this very question:

"To paraphrase Yitzhak Rabin...: I will oppose Israel's creeping annexation of the West Bank as if there were no Israeli democracy movement – and I will support the Israeli democracy movement as if there were no creeping annexation.... And, by the way, the two are related: It will be impossible to resist the forces of ...annexation ...if the Supreme Court is disempowered."

This moment demands us.

It is time for the great North American diaspora to rise just as we did in 1973 when Syrian tanks looked down on the Galilee from the Golan Heights and Egyptian armor had crossed the Suez.

We must fight in support of Israel to seek to save Israel from its worst.

We cannot let this affirmative action venture, **our** affirmative action venture wherein we re-entered history with a great biblical dream to fail without giving it our very best shot. And we dare not let our affirmative action dream be destroyed by those who will turn it into an orthodox settler state.

Support the protest movement with your dollars. Our Temple Micah Fund for Israel is doing just that. It is a pass thru—100% of every dollar given goes to a progressive Israeli non-profit.

Talk to any member of congress who might listen to you and urge them to support this protest movement.

Lobby anyone in the administration whom you know.

Subscribe to the What's App group "DC Protest for Israeli Democracy."

Go to Israel and join a protest.

We do this because our Judaism is incomplete without Zionism.

We do this because our covenant is defined by a sense of home.

On this holiest night of our year –I ask each one of us to look into our most personal, deepest selves, let us each reach back to commune with the souls of our ancestors, and ask ourselves one simple question:

If the greatest Jewish miracle of our time is not worth our fighting for what is?

Od Lo Avda Tikvateinu.

Avinu Malkeinu Sh'ma Koleinu!