

Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel  
Temple Micah  
Washington, DC  
Kol Nidre, 5779-2018

## THE ZIONIST BRIDGE (F-1)

Dear Friends,

A story is told of Elie Wiesel who by the 1970s maintained homes in both Paris and New York. When asked where he feels most at home in the world, according to accounts he responded, "Israel, when I'm not there."

Like Elie Wiesel, Israel is inside of me all of the time.

I love Israel every time I am there.

When I am not in Israel, I love thinking about being there.

Israel today remains a place I love as well as a cause of great worry and concern.

You can ask Louise, I find myself saying too regularly about Israel: "They have a great thing going if they just don't blow it for themselves."

Before we delve into today's obvious challenges, I want to linger for a moment on the Israel I love and along with that the Zionism that defines so much of who I am. I sometimes call Zionism—the God that did not fail. In 1945 after our people had been stripped naked and destroyed before the entire world as witness, Zionism was the God that offered the surviving remnant a home when there was nowhere else to go. We forget that at great peril.

Israel—is a life –boat and so much more.

We begin with Tel Aviv—the first Hebrew city, founded in 1909 by a small group of Jewish pioneers who sought to move out of densely packed, unsanitary and overcrowded Jaffa. They laid the groundwork for the modern city it is today. The name Tel Aviv—as many of you know is the Hebrew for Altneuland, Theodor Herzl's Zionist novel. Alt-neu Land-old new land.

Tel is old –an archaeological mound.

Aviv is spring—a Hebrew metaphor for new—fresh blossoming.

And in Tel Aviv we head for Bet Bialik on a small quiet residential street in the heart of the city, the former home—now a museum of the life and work of Haim Nahman Bialik, the poet laureate of the Jewish people. Bialik lived in this home from 1924- until his death in 1934.

It is impossible to overestimate Bialik's importance in the revival of Modern Hebrew in Israel (Palestine) in the early part of the 20th century. His writings are vast--poetry, short stories, essays, children's stories.

The small museum tells the story of Bialik's life. His early years were in Russia- a brilliant student in the Yeshiva world who discovers the Haskallah—that Jewish Enlightenment world teeming with new ideas, the exciting possibilities of modernity and yes Zionism. In 1903, Bialik is sent as a reporter to cover the massacre of Jews in Kishinev inspiring him to write his eulogy poem “The Slaughter.” Bialik eventually moves to Israel and becomes a lionized figure of the Jewish population there.

What for me is most striking about the house turned museum is Bialik's library-- his deep learning in traditional Jewish writings was apparent. His collection of the great Hebrew books--midrashim -Mekilta, Sifre, Sifra-- Midrash Rabbah, Yalkutim of every variety--Maimonides, Judah Ha-Levi, YD Eisenstein--collections of Medieval Hebrew poetry. The library is vast—a library of centuries of Hebrew literature.

From the old--Bialik is the symbol of the creation of a new Hebrew literature. The library is an embodiment of the symbol-- a vast ancient and medieval literature giving birth to a modern Hebrew literature but it is a symbol of even more.

The people who built Israel -- those Zionist patriarchs and pioneers were deeply learned, rooted in the great expanse of Jewish culture. Their very life project was to sift through the ancient Jewish past and refashion it to create a Jewish future.

It's not that they decided one day to create a homeland in Israel. They were building on a foundation as old as human history. As they dug into the soil of the very earth of Israel to make the desert bloom in their old-new homeland, they were simultaneously excavating and sifting through the wisdom of their inherited civilization as they created something old-new—a Jewish Democratic state. It is there to be felt in Bialik's home and on his street.

Herzl got it right-- Altneuland. This is our old new land.

Place Number two—Tzippori – a wondrous site in the Israel National Archaeological Park system.

This may be a place with which many of you are unfamiliar. If you come with me on a Temple Micah trip to Israel, I will take you to Tzippori. Tzipporri was a major Jewish city under Roman rule in the period of late antiquity. The archaeological excavations there go back as far as the Bronze Age and earlier. It was an established city by 1000 BCE and over a thousand years later near the mid second century of the Common Era and the defeat of the Bar Kochba revolt against

Roman rule in 132 CE, Tziporri gained great prominence as a center for Jewish learning. The Sanhedrin convened in Tziporri, the great late second \early third century Rabbi Judah Ha Nasi lived in Tziporri and parts of the Mishnah were written there.

Go to Tziporri today and consider especially the mosaic floor of the ancient synagogue that archaeologists have excavated. The synagogue floor is filled with art scenes--biblical and other.

Among them is a scene from the Book of Genesis showing the angels visiting Sarah telling her she will bear a child in her old age. The next section shows the binding of Isaac. There is a large Zodiac with the names of the months written in Hebrew. What can only be considered a Sun God sits in a chariot in the middle of the Zodiac.

The mosaic floor also shows a building facade, probably representing the Temple, incense shovels, shofars, and the seven-branched menorah from the Temple.

Another section shows a robed priest offering sacrifices.

In other words--there are human forms, scenes of a temple service in a post temple world and a sun God--doing exactly what?--a scene from Ezekiel--God in his chariot- an early scene from the Jewish mystical tradition?

What I am saying is--go to Israel today and the Jewish past is being literally unearthed revealing previously unbeknownst diversity and imagination.

We once knew of ancient Judaism only thru our inherited literature of rabbinic writing. In Israel today, modern archaeology is uncovering an entire diverse world of previously unknown ancient Jewish practice.

When I bring Micah groups to Tziporri I comment to them that here too prayed and gathered a community that was looking to preserve the past as it struggled to engage an ever changing present. Here too was a community that was seeking to creatively forge a new understanding of Judaism. Here was a community looking to bring its past story of the Torah and weave it into the cultural aesthetic of its surrounding environment. Here was a Judaism that defied the Ten Commandments by putting human forms and other icons in the synagogue. In other words--when we go to Israel and encounter our dazzling Jewish past, we are seeing that the project of creating what we call a contemporary Jewish life has been an ongoing adventure for over 2000 years. Jewish communities pushing on the boundaries of what is considered Judaism is perhaps the very definition of what Judaism is. Judaism is a conversation, says our collective teacher, Rabbi Larry Hoffman. All I need say on this Yom Kippur is that in our Micah language, ancient Tziporri had its own Liz Lermans and leave it at that!!!!

Israel is a source and an inspiration for unlocking our own creative Jewish impulses. It reveals new questions as it links us to the wealth of our inherited past. We go to Israel and are emboldened to push our own limits---at least I am. We can see in those ancient stones a kind of roadmap and license for our own imaginations.

Israel today is a gathering of writers and poets, artists and galleries, musical ensembles, dance companies, street artists, sculpture gardens and art fairs— Modern Israel’s glory is seen in the creative outpouring of the Jewish soul that has reinvigorated Jewish life everywhere. The films coming from Israel are dazzling-- the art scene in Tel Aviv--unsurpassed--in Israel today the Jewish soul is on fire. And I have said this so many times-- the word secular as we understand it--cannot be used in Israel. Walk down a busy street in Tel Aviv on a Friday evening and there are lit Shabbat candles in the bars on Dizengoff.

And the spark from this fire ignites our own American Jewish passions. How could it not? They are our cousins--they are ourselves. There can be no question that however you evaluate the quality of American Jewish culture in all of its forms, the influence of modern Israel is ever present.

We cannot stray from our Zionist path without abandoning all that is good.

My love for Israel has not diminished one iota. My feeling is that neither has her love for me increased since I last spoke of Israel on the Holy Days in 2014.

My love remains un-reciprocated just as my letters to the prime minister remain unanswered.

We must therefore pause. We have seen how the full half portion of the Zionist cup is replete in history and wisdom, beauty and creativity—old and new. What is the story of the half that is empty and dry?

By half empty cup, I mean far more than rights for Reform Jews-or all non-Orthodox forms of Judaism and the struggles over the Western Wall and women’s prayer rights. They actually appear secondary at the moment.

The primary issue is that the current government of Israel has turned its back on Zionism. This is it in a nutshell. If the very heart of Zionism is Jewish peoplehood--the idea that we are a far-flung people with a spiritual center in Israel, the current government has cast that idea and that commitment asunder. This is, to my way of thinking, Israel’s first anti-Zionist government.

There is much here to account. First the record itself:

The ongoing growth in a vehement ultra and ugly nationalism

The growth in an ultra-ultra –Orthodox brand of Judaism which is alien to the historical Jewish experience

The ongoing merger of this vehement nationalism wed to this biblical Orthodoxy  
The growth in the boisterous ideology and violence of some of the settlers and  
the settler movement—attacks on Palestinian Arabs and their property.

The efforts to control the Supreme Court.

Diminishing tolerance for dissent and the harassment and even arrest of  
protestors

The harassment of and detainment of those with divergent views when they seek  
to enter Israel

Government sponsored confiscation of Arab lands and villages

The harassment of non-profit organizations that work on behalf of pluralism and  
civil society

With these alone we hold up our hands to say Dayyenu.

But there is more- There is that which makes the government anti- Zionist — it  
has aligned itself with unacceptable nations and movements. It has separated  
itself from the bulk of world Jewry and rejected our Judaism and our moral  
posture.

The current government in Jerusalem has made common cause with the leaders  
of other countries including those who are Holocaust deniers, stir anti-Semitic  
sentiments in their own countries and made public statements in admiration of  
Adolf Hitler. These governmental actions are so outrageous no one could make  
them up—actions that have been condemned by Yad Vashem, Israel's own  
Holocaust Memorial Museum and Study Center.

Again, Dayyenu—although I go on.

One Israeli scholar of the Hebrew University, Professor Eva Illouz, whom I very  
much admire has gone so far as to publish an article titled-THE STATE OF ISRAEL  
VS THE JEWISH PEOPLE examining in excruciating detail the various ways in which  
the current government in Jerusalem has aligned itself with ultra-nationalist and  
anti-Semitic regimes around the globe—including Hungary, Poland and the  
Philippines and in doing so has abandoned world Jewry and its liberal  
Enlightenment principles.

To my way of thinking the current government is so profoundly anti-Zionist in its  
actions and attitudes that it has earned the phrase I used last week on Rosh  
Hashanah to describe Jews in the current executive branch in our country.

The current government in Israel has, like Esau, sold its birthright, its Zionist  
birthright in exchange for the friendship of some of the world's most profoundly  
distasteful, anti-democratic, ultra-nationalist strongmen. Bialik and his  
generation are looking on in horror from wherever they sit in the Zionist

pantheon. The very foundations of *alt-neu* are screaming at the utter defiance with which today's princes in Jerusalem scorn the philosophical treasure they have inherited. They have abandoned every shred of Zionist principle from Herzl to Nordau- from Ben Gurion to Vladimir Jabotinsky. Was it not Jabotinsky who said that every prime minister of Israel should have an Arab deputy? Was it not Menachem Begin who was an early advocate for full citizenship for Israel's Arabs after the 1948 War of Independence? Today's government is deviant from all previous Zionist thought.

Even as we despair over the current drift in Israel, we have to recognize the reality for many Israelis is that things--relatively speaking-- are good. The economy is stable and Israelis feel relatively safe even as their neighborhood-the Middle East is supremely unstable. Syria is wracked by a ruthless and unending civil war that has brought Russia and ISIS into the region. Jordan is destabilized by massive numbers of Syrian refugees. Hezbollah threatens Israel from the north, Hamas from the south, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard has become entrenched in Syria drawing ever nearer to the Israeli border. The Palestinian Authority is unable to hold elections, and if it were to do so, Hamas would probably win.

In this situation, most Israelis say peace for Israel is currently impossible. Nothing that might happen would make Israel feel secure enough to make territorial concessions. The occupation may be unfortunate, these people say but there is no alternative to the status quo and Israel needs to make friends where it can.

This reality makes our story even more complicated and creates even more challenges--because--it is those of us who seek to stand for Israel and its damaged Zionism and who see in Israel a flawed democracy facing unprecedented security challenges, have to recognize a growing drumbeat around us that sees only an "apartheid regime" founded upon "racism," "ethnic cleansing," and "colonialist imperialism." Zionism, anti-Israelists believe, can be neither defended nor corrected, because the very idea of a Jewish state in that region depends on the dispossession of others. This voice casts Israel as altogether illegitimate. The problem isn't Israel's alleged "crimes," then, but its sinful essence. "A crime," wrote Hannah Arendt, "is met with punishment; a vice can only be exterminated."

We must recognize and confront this reality as well. It is real and it too is a threat and the Jews among those vehement anti-Israelists that say this have likewise despised and scorned the birthright they have inherited.

All of the above has combined to make Israel among the most uncomfortable topics to discuss in much of what counts as polite conversation within American Jewish circles.

As Rabbi Eric Yoffie, past president of the Union for Reform Judaism said from our bimah when he spoke to us in May—“It is not true that you can’t make a case for Israel on the American college campus. You can. What you can’t make is a case for the policies of the current government.”

And then this summer as if to add insult to Rabbi Yoffie’s words, Israel adopted the ugly new Nation State Law. This is the Basic Law that was pushed forward by the most extreme elements in the current government and opposed by such Likkud Party royalty as Meachem Begin’s own son. These Basic Laws form the cornerstone law in what will someday be Israel’s Constitution. The law, among other things, defines Israel as Jewish but not Democratic, makes Hebrew the sole official language, and is designed to curtail the authority of Israel’s Supreme Court. The law has been almost uniformly opposed by American Jewish organizations running the gamut from the American Jewish Committee to J Street. My anger and disappointment at so many sides in the complicated story that is Israel is almost unlimited. And yet, I say this evening--I love Israel even thru the pain of disappointment. I love Israel because of the sense of the Jewish past and opportunity for the future that it gives me. And today I love Israel because of the heroes that are there every single day devoting their lives to making Israel a better place.

One of those heroes is Yaniv Sagee. A dear friend of our Micah community, Yaniv Sagee is the executive director of Givat Haviva, Israel’s oldest institution, established in 1949, dedicated to creating a shared society of Jews and Palestinians. Yaniv Sagee has been a guest at Temple Micah many times. He most recently spoke from our bimah last May. We visit Givat Haviva on nearly every Micah trip—so many of you that are here this evening have been there. Many of you have met Yaniv and heard him speak. These are his words published in the Israel press in response to the Nation State Basic Law:

“Write this down: on July 18, 2018, the State of Israel changed the definition of its entire essence. From May 1948 until this week, we defined ourselves as a Jewish-democratic state. That is, as the national state of the Jewish people that is also the democratic and equal state of all its citizens, without regard to sex, religion, race, or nationality. Israel’s Declaration of Independence was not only its founding vision; it was the consensus defining the boundaries of public discourse and laws of the country. All this now belongs to the past....

The Israeli Knesset that passed the Nationality Law ...has decided that ... anyone who is not Jewish is a second-class citizen in the State of Israel.... For the twenty percent of the citizens of the country who are native-born Arabs, the message is – this is not your land, and we, the Jewish majority, have no intention of ensuring your personal rights, and certainly not your collective national rights.

The Declaration of Independence and all legislation since then until now, has attempted to preserve the balance between the natural right of the Jewish people to a national home and our commitment to democracy and equality. But this law, intended to be a prelude to future legislation, does not deal with democracy at all, nor with human rights or equality. This is the new Israel envisioned by the parties of the coalition: a Jewish state that is not democratic, humiliating the large minority living in it.

For the first time in my life, I feel a genuine threat to my life in Israel. This is not an external threat ... It is an internal threat from nationalists and racists..... The time has come to act before it is too late. This is not the time for apathy and not the time for despair. It is the time to join forces and to embark on a struggle to save Israel from itself.... We need to raise our voices in a piercing outcry that will wash over our shared land, that will also connect Jews of the Diaspora, Jews...(all) , those who understand very well that this country is shared by all of its residents from both peoples, and ... after the protest we must change the legislation. Either through annulment by the Supreme Court, or with 61 hands raised in the Knesset against this disgrace.”

How can we not stand with Yaniv? I am proud to count Yaniv Sagee as a friend and I am prouder to count Temple Micah as a friend of Givat Haviva. Our support is unwavering. They are a primary recipient of funding from our Temple Micah Israel Fund. May this support increase.

The associate director of Givat Haviva, Yaniv’s partner, Mohammed Darawshe, will be speaking from our bimah on October 12—mark the date. Mohammed Darawshe also wrote on this legislation in the Israeli press- He wrote, “This is a historic moment, for me and for the country. I can sound a warning, feel pain, shout.... I am the injured minority.... None of the country’s leaders...will heed my shouting. ...Here in Israel..the problem is not mine, nor is there an Arab problem. There is only an Israeli problem, and Israelis are the ones who will have to stand strong against the annihilation of democracy here.”

Yaniv Sagee and Mohammed Darawshe spell out our challenge.

We are Jews and as I said last week—“there is nothing new under the sun.” We are not the first Jewish community in history to feel betrayed and abandoned by our own Jewish leaders.

The biblical books of the prophets read like a text book of leadership failure. The biblical prophets rail against nearly each and every king of Israel. David makes war immorally, commits adultery and conspires in what amounts to murder.

Solomon brutally raises taxes, conscripts slave labor, builds palaces to himself up and down the country, forges alliances with foreign powers sometimes by expanding his harem, and wages war to expand the borders. After the kingdom divides, the sins of the leaders only seem to multiply.

Jeremiah cried out against the entire leadership structure:

The priests do not say: 'Where is God?'

And those responsible for the law, do not know me.

The princes sin against Me;

And the prophets themselves are Idolaters,

They follow that which will come to nothing. (Jeremiah 2:8)

We have been here before. We know the perils of immoral leadership.

Does our very own liturgy not read- “Because of our sins we were exiled from our land.”

We therefore understand why our young people turn away from Israel in pain and anger.

They see a government in Israel that has abandoned any semblance of a Jewish ethic, a Jewish norm.

Yet—I implore us to remain Zionists—Zionists standing on the principles of the great Zionist past.

We are at one with the Bratzlaver who taught us that the world can be a narrow bridge.

We stand on that bridge. We stand on the narrow bridge of ethical Zionism forged by Herzl, Bialik, Ben Gurion, Jabotinsky, Begin and Rabin.

We cannot walk away because victory in the struggle for the Israel we want feels remote.

We cannot abandon the struggle for Israel any more than we can abandon the struggle for America. It is not in our theological DNA. We cannot abandon that which we love.

We are Jews--a people who measure time in the thousands of years. We are at the dawn of year 5779 on our calendar. Israel is 70. We are a people who know

better than anyone else in human history that the past is not the blue print for the future. If we walk away from Israel now, we abandon the field to those whose vision for Israel is a dark one. Zionism is not a fad--or a passing interest--or a trend. Zionism is the contemporary name for the project that God first uttered to Abraham-- go to the land that I will show you. No matter how one might try, it is impossible to wrench the land of Israel out of the Jewish equation. The struggle for the soul of Israel is linked to the very spiritual DNA of our being.

As we enter this still New Year, I renew my connection to the Israel of Tziporri and Bialik. We cannot abandon the good—those that inspired our past and continue to inspire our present.

As the dark clouds gather over Israel, we are challenged to redouble our efforts and support our friends. We stand with the Jeremiahs of today—Yaniv Sagee, Gili Rei, Eilon Schwartz, Mohammed Darwashe, and so many more and the organizations they lead. These organizations and others today form the very purpose behind our Temple Micah Israel Fund. I am not above asking for your generosity. They are the recipients of your\our generosity.

We will stand with them.

We are blessed to live in a remarkable moment in Jewish history with two vital centers of Jewish life. We have work to do on both sides of the ocean — in the U.S. and in Israel. Let the call of the shofar at the end of this holy day rouse us to these great challenges and the opportunities they will and must create.

In closing I say to my e-mail friend and to all of you who look for optimism— we can turn to historian and journalist Josh Marshall who wrote, “Optimism isn’t ... an analysis of present reality. It’s an ethic.... It is a moral posture toward the world we find ourselves in. .... Our commitment to our values is an ethical commitment not a read of the odds..... We can lie down. We can stand up. We can walk forward. For my part...I will walk forward regardless.”

I like to think that we at Temple Micah stand on the Bratzlover’s narrow bridge with the full strength of Jewish history and Zionist history and ethics in our souls. Our hearts are in the East and from the farthest corner of the West we fight the Zionist battle for the soul of Israel just as we struggle for America’s.

Like Jeremiah

and

Like the Bratzlaver—We will not be afraid

We sing our anthem

Od lo avda tikvateinu

We have not lost our hope.

We will walk forward.  
There is much work to do in 5779.  
Join me-  
Shannah Tovah