

Our Ties to Israel
Kol Nidre 5782
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Before I say anything else, I want to say to you, the people who mean the most to me, "I am sorry." I acknowledge that I have done wrong, offended, disappointed, not come through for, and even hurt you. I apologize because I care about you. I will not make any excuses. I am truly sorry. I honestly hope that these words do not ring hollow. Maybe you told me what I did wrong; I will endeavor to grow and change, to do *teshuvah*, so that I act or speak differently next time. I may also not be aware of how I wronged you. Try as I might, I don't pick up on all clues. Come talk with me directly. Let this Yom Kippur apology be an opener for us to take whatever next steps are necessary. I promise to listen. I promise to do better next time. I mean this sincerely, from my heart.

One of the traditions of Yom Kippur is for those of us 13 and older to wear a *tallit* during evening services. The *tallit's* fringes are said to symbolize the 613 commandments. Kol Nidre begins the day of atonement, and we literally wear a representation of our responsibilities, reminding ourselves in the most tactile ways of our actions: what we did right and also what we did wrong. True, we have much that is to our credit. Then again, there is much that we regret. The words may not come easily: tonight, and tomorrow we express them. We missed the mark so many times. We are sorry.

But there is something else to see when we gaze at these fringes, the knots, they are also meaningful. They represent connections; connections that we have to one another.

From last Yom Kippur until now, some of your connections may have tightened. Some knots surely solidified. On the other hand, some connections - some of the knots of our lives - became tangled. They may have been loosened. This Yom Kippur, they may be the ones that need special care so that they don't break. They may even need to be retied.

It is tempting to see Yom Kippur as just a day devoted to turning inward. Likewise, we might think of it as a day devoted only to God. Yom Kippur is also a time that we pay attention to how we connect with others. It is a day that we stand in connection to our people as a whole. Tomorrow morning's Torah portion says it so well: *Atem Nitzavim HaYom Kulchem* - today, you are standing here, all of you, together.

In other words, none of us should say that Yom Kippur is only about “me.” It is about “us.” As a whole. It is about our responsibilities to one another. Our sages tell us that all of Israel is responsible for one another.

Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh LaZeh - Jews anywhere are responsible for and to Jews everywhere.

On Yom Kippur we are called to connect beyond our individual spaces. We are invited to see where we fit within what is called *Am Yisrael* - the entirety of the Jewish people, in all of our glorious and complicated diversity. And, given the world we live in, Yom Kippur should be when we reaffirm our connection with all of the people of Israel, including those IN Israel. It needs to be a day that we, as a Jewish community outside of Israel, reaffirm our connection to the state of Israel.

For Temple Emanuel, Israel is not an off-limits subject. On the contrary. Israel surrounds us. We speak about Israel from this Bimah often, in larger and smaller settings. We raise questions when they are warranted. We also speak up to make the case for Israel, proactively with our elected officials, and - far too often - to counter claims or situations that are downright unacceptable.

This past spring was especially tough for Israel, as well as for those of us with close ties to Israel. It is impossible to talk honestly about this past year without referencing the spring of this year, when Hamas - the notorious terror group which rules the Gaza Strip and is dedicated to the elimination of Israel - fired over 4500 missiles and rockets into Israel exclusively targeting civilian areas. Each of those rockets was a violation of international law. Whatever rationale Hamas cited for doing this, their actions were calculated acts of war.

Israel had no choice but to respond in defense, activating its anti-missile Iron Dome system, while also deploying its forces to disable Hamas' offensive capabilities.

We should never forget that most, if not all, of Hamas' attacks took place from population centers placing innocents in harm's way. This use of “human shields” by the leaders of Hamas violated every sense of morality and international conduct. It should have been roundly condemned by the nations of the world. It wasn't. Moreover, we know that groups such as

Hamas never fight fair. They always rely on the world's selective amnesia and bigger distractions to divert attention so that they can wreak havoc and harass others.

Michal was in Israel during this conflict, making her first visit back home to Jerusalem since the start of COVID. She had waited a long time to see her parents, our niece who was born right before COVID, and to well-needed time with our extended family there. One night, she stayed with her cousins who live not far from Tel Aviv. Michal recalls the siren going off at one AM, giving the two adults in the house only 90 seconds to wake up their guest and three children, go down two flights of stairs and enter the bomb shelter, which sadly, by the way, is a must-have room in every household in Israel. Clearly, none of us would want to be in such a situation. Thankfully, no one was hurt in that instance.

Back here in the US, and I am sure you recall this, the wave of vitriol unleashed against Israel – and against Jews – was among the worst we have ever witnessed in recent years. Media outlets that should have known better, botched the coverage. There were acts of violence against Jews from California to New York. Social media was awash in anti-Israel posts, many crossing the lines into outright antisemitism if not calls for genocide against our people. #FreePalestine – that is code for “Free Palestine from the River to the Sea.” Last time I checked, that would equate to the elimination of the state of Israel.

Lest we think that what I'm talking about happened months ago, and that all is now well, this week during this holy period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, there were renewed rocket attacks coming from Gaza. Israel did not retaliate and therefore it was not “news” in American media. These regular salvos from Gaza seem to only make the news when Israel strikes back. That should tell us something.

Let us be reminded: *Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh LaZeh* – Jews anywhere are responsible for and to Jews everywhere. We as a people stand together. In this era of increasing misconnection and dis-connection, I am proud that we stand with Israel.

What I hope wasn't missed due to the springtime conflict, were the remarkable changes that took place in Israel. I'll list a few:

Today, September 15th, marks the one-year anniversary of the Abraham Accords. While this was not the dramatic Deal of the Century promised by the last US administration, adding

the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan to the list of countries in the region who have inked peace agreements with Israel should be recognized and applauded. What is quite remarkable is that none of these Arab countries cut ties with Israel during the recent Gaza conflict. Neither did Egypt or Jordan, Israel's neighbors to the south and east who were the first Arab countries to enter into peace agreements with Israel.

That is Israel's most timely headline.

Equally significant, and contrary to many fears, Israel's democracy proved to be quite robust during the past two-plus years. After four election cycles dating back to 2019, Israel finally has a stable government. The current government is headed by a Prime Minister other than Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu for the first time in over a decade.

What is important to note is that Israel is now being led by a remarkable pluralistic coalition that most Americans would find absolutely inconceivable. Israel's current unity government led by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has brought together the hard-right, the hard-left, together with the center.

There are many firsts in this current government. This is the first time a Reform Rabbi has been elected to Knesset. We are quite proud of our colleague and friend, Rabbi Gilad Kariv. Rabbi Kariv heads Israel's Reform Movement. He has also visited Greensboro and Temple Emanuel on a few occasions. Gilad recently recovered from COVID; we wish him good health and much success in all of his endeavors.

There are no ultra-Orthodox religious parties represented in this government. That has happened before. However, this is the first time that an Arab party – the Islamist Ra'am or United Arab List party – is serving in an Israeli governing coalition, and NOT in the opposition. This is something that everyone swore was impossible; that it would never happen. But it did. It also stands as a reminder to everyone who claims that the two-state solution is dead. The Middle East is like that. It can surprise you. I mean, who saw this coming?

Israel's flexibility, its diversity, and its openness to partnerships is a positive sign of what is to come.

The puzzling piece is that as the Israel discussion has become more and more polarized in the US, Israel itself is moving in the direction of less and less polarization.

By the way, I am not ignoring the violent acts which erupted between Arabs and Jews within Israel as the war was taking place in Gaza. It got very ugly and was heart-breaking.

The silver lining, and it is a big silver lining, is that Israel's leaders have made internal issues such as these top priorities. I'll paraphrase the words of one Israeli analyst: "this next phase of Israel's story seems to be: what unites us is greater than what divides us." Harkening back to its Declaration of Independence, Israel is saying: we are a state of all of our citizens whether or not we're all Jews. Moreover, they are turning to us and working on larger issues of pluralism saying: we are a state of all the Jews, whether or not we're all citizens.

I like that characterization. It is true to Israel's spirit. It is also perfect for Yom Kippur.

I think that we, as Jews and as Americans, can learn a great deal from it. Do not give up on our connections or turn away. Boycotting has been tried; it was a dismal failure. Engagement and investment in peoplehood is the way forward.

Israel's new government has a newly appointed Minister of Diaspora Affairs - Nachman Shai. Such a post exists in Israel, because they feel, as we should, that Jews anywhere are responsible for and to Jews everywhere. As we think of Israel on this Yom Kippur, know that in Israel similar thoughts or connections are being sent our way.

"Talk about Israel." That was the message that came from Israel's Minister of Diaspora Affairs, Prof. Nachman Shai, who was elected to Knesset as part of the left-of-center Labor Party. The message was directed to me and other Rabbis. "Talk about Israel from the pulpit...Talk about the bonds between us, as a Jewish people, about our shared past and imagined future. Talk about the challenges, but also the opportunities."

I have endeavored to do this tonight. Israel is central to who we are, as a Temple and as a people. I want us to have these conversations. I want us to have them here. And I want us to have them in Israel; God willing, we will be able to do this again soon and in good health.

But there was more to that letter in the Jerusalem Post, that call to Jews everywhere from Israel. It was similar to how I began just a few minutes ago. His message: "We're sorry."

I quote from his statement, that seems to come from his heart to ours: "...we in Israel are slowly but surely taking responsibility for our side of the relationship in a way that you have never seen... [W]e realize we have disappointed you and are doing teshuvah, repentance, with a sincere desire to make things right in the future. ...this new government is committed to bringing back a Kotel Compromise – that is, formalizing an egalitarian prayer section at the Western Wall. It is committed to learning and understanding how our actions impact your communities. ...we believe in you... we are ready for both your critique and your ideas."

"...Most importantly," he added, "Israel desires to be your partner, to not let our politics or diverse identities serve as barriers to our fundamental belief that we are a people with a common fate and destiny."

Hold the fringes on your Tallit. Look at them, or the ones that others are holding, or mine.

Tonight, let them remind you that our task is not to fray, but to connect and to strengthen.

It is not to berate, but to relate.

It is not to leave, but to lean in.

Tonight, let us resolve not to live apart, but to be a part of something bigger, a people.

Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh LaZeh – Jews anywhere are responsible for and to Jews everywhere. We as a people stand together.

Ours can be a world where triumph gives way to trust and understanding.

And where division gives way to cooperation.

Now is not the time for unraveling. It is the time for tying, connecting, and return.

L'shanah tovah – may all people be blessed as our people – the Jewish people – are, with strength, connections, kindness, and peace. AMEN