

Whither Israel: A Retrospective

Yom Kippur Day 2023 Shaul Magid

[I want to dedicate this sermon to our friend Burt Biderman who passed away this year. Many of us knew Burt and he had been a beloved mainstay of our synagogue for many years, even president before I arrived. Burt always came up to me after services and had a joke (mostly not very good), after which he gently criticized my sermon, always with a smile and a tub of Zabar's herring. I had the chance to see him, with Michael and Joyce a few days before he passed. He was a sweet and generous soul. I miss his presence here at the FIS.]

Given that we stand in the midst of Yom Kippur, I want to begin with a confession: I didn't intend to talk about Israel this Yom Kippur. In some way, for those who know me, the reasons are obvious. My views are often not in concert with the larger Jewish community and thus my remarks often result in some element of consternation. While in the old days (meaning thirty years ago at least) speaking about Israel on Yom Kippur was standard fare; it was often the topic of the "Yom Kippur appeal" largely to get congregants to take out their check books. It was the great American Jewish unifier. But in the past twenty years, certainly in the past decade, Israel is the a topic American rabbis largely try to avoid. It has become too toxic and the issue itself, often not presented in a nuanced fashion, too deeply embedded in the American Jewish psyche for any one sermon to satisfy everyone. Once the great unifier, in America today Israel is the great divider.

So, I decided to avoid the topic altogether. And then a few weeks ago, like the famous Al Pacino line from Godfather III, "every time I try to get out, they pull me back in" I read Alon Pinkus' provocative op-ed in the Israeli daily Haaretz. Pinus wrote an open letter to American rabbis, as an Israeli pleading us, to talk about Israel these High Holidays. I want to quote an excerpt from his op-ed to give you a sense of his message:

Dear North American rabbi, while you're ruminating and toiling writing your New Year sermon know this: The Israel you referred to in previous years is gravely endangered.

In fact, to a degree, it no longer exists. It is a torturous realization, but you cannot avoid it or deliver a sermon without alluding to it – unless you intend to ignore Israel altogether, which I suspect you are not.

The burden is heavy. North American Jews (as well as those in Britain, France, Australia, Argentina, and so on) are essentially being asked to shift the paradigm, to change their mind-set, to dispense with clichés, to be critical on an issue they habitually veer away from and to look at reality without flinching. This is a big ask, particularly for rabbis who see in front of them a mixed audience and a confused community.

Israel as a unifying element in Jewish identity is no longer relevant. How divisive it has become is a matter of opinion and degree, but for many years Israel – as a topic of High Holy Days sermons and Rosh Hashanah dinner conversation – has been a don't-go-there-hot-potato item, stirring argument, anger, resentment, vitriol and hypertension.

This is the real thing. Sanctimoniously bemoaning the lack of “unity” and preaching about the perils of “divisiveness” as we enter a new year “as one” is disingenuous. There are no talmudic dialectics at work here, no moral

equivocation. This government is all about excluding you and your community, rabbi.

These are heavy words, singeing the fibers of the collective body that is American Jewry. I have written a lot about this in the past, about the role Israel plays in the American Jewish imaginary, about the half century occupation of another people, about the dream in some way gone awry. And, also about our culpability of American Jews; have we been enabling that which we do not agree with, that which we could fight against in America? Has Israel exceptionalism become endemic to our Judaism? In one sense this is understandable: American Jews *need* Israel for its own self-fashioning. Israel is often less about the country we choose not to live in and more about grappling with new forms of identity. When we talk about “love for Israel” it seems to me we often mean love for the *idea* of Israel, rather than that country over there mired in deep conflictual problems partly of its own making. In most cases I have been criticized for being a naysayer, for being overly critical and not seeing the great miracle in the Mediterranean. I took that criticism seriously, even as I have close Israeli friends who encouraged me to take the fire and keep up the heat.

But still I largely resisted the temptation. And then after reading Alon Pinkus’ op-ed and I reconsidered. I found his point an interesting one worth examining. Putting aside the politics and the contention, he makes a simple point worthy of our consideration: Israel is simply no longer the country we grew up with. That may be hard to hear, but it is true. We can forever disagree with the reasons, but his point was a stinging empirical observation. He didn’t tell us to defend Israel against all detractors,

he didn't tell us to be proud of what we Jews accomplished after 2000 years, he didn't tell us that Israel is the "only democracy in the Middle East." He didn't tell us that the protest movement is a sign of Israel's strong democracy. He wasn't calling for "*achdus*" (collective unity). Rather, he told us it is time to face a reality many of us cannot quite face: Israel is just not the same country it was three decades ago.

Just this week we experienced something we have never experienced in the history of the state of Israel and something those who witnessed the establishment of the state in 1948, or even more recently, could never have imagined. The duly elected Prime Minister of Israel came to the UN for a gathering of international leaders. Previously we would have welcomed him (or her) as the PM of a state we may choose not to love in but respect and support nonetheless. Those who did not like him would have remained quiet. Yet in 2023 Netanyahu's visit was accompanied by a massive demonstration of American Jews and Israeli ex-pats to protest the PM of the Jewish state. At his hotel, at restaurants where he dined, even at the UN. And these were not radical gatherings of rag-tag extremists but a protest whose speakers included pretty mainstream rabbis and supporters of Israel such as Elliot Cosgrove of Park Avenue Synagogue and Angela Buchdahl of Central Synagogue. Something is certainly shifting. This was the very mainstream of American Jewry.

In the wake of all this, I wondered, why did Alon Pinkus feel it was so important to tell us that it is time to stand in support of Israel by protesting against it? And why now? And what can we do? It is because, I think, many who are part of the protest movement, certainly many I know, are telling us that we are underestimating what is

actually happening. That this is not a passing phase like the cottage cheese and real estate protests some years ago (even though Tel Aviv remains one of the least affordable cities in the world). This is not even only about Israel's democracy, although that would be enough. It is nothing less than the slow and steady dismantling of the Israeli nation-state as we know it. And the state, says Pinkus, is not your friend. He writes,

Dear rabbi, this is a government that is trying to codify your exclusion, refusing to recognize Reform and Conservative Jews. A government that is legislating over 225 laws that would make Israel a hollow democracy with strong theocratic undertones. A government that shares no values with you or your congregants. A government that accommodates and tolerates antisemitism as long as the antisemites don't care about settlements or democracy – and they don't.

This takes us back to the distinction between Jews and Judaism. People think Judaism is the official religion in Israel, but that is inaccurate. The official religion in Israel is Orthodox Judaism. Not only culturally, but legally. The Israeli Rabbanut, an official government agency, does not recognize non-Orthodox Judaism as legitimate; our rabbis' conversions are not accepted, we cannot marry our congregants in Israel without an Orthodox rabbi being present (there is no civil marriage in Israel), although this is beginning to slowly change. We know all that Israel officially may accept us as Jews but reject our Judaism, and many of us have made peace with it.

But things are changing because demography is changing. I do not have exact statistics, but it is safe to say that a large majority of Diaspora Jews who immigrate to become citizens of Israel are Orthodox (modern and more traditional). And many Israeli Jews who move to the Diaspora, to Palo Alto, NY, Berlin, Paris, and Los Angeles, are secular. Given the large birth rates of haredi Jews, and settlers, over the course of the next few decades, Israel will become an increasingly haredi settler country. And given the higher birth rates of Israeli Palestinians, in the next two decades, haredim, settlers, and Israeli Palestinians will make up close to 50% of the population. I know that haredim have become a target of animus for many of us. But just as we are living the Judaism, we feel best embodies the values of the tradition, they are doing the same. And they are committed to residing in the state the way we, and increasing numbers of secular Israelis, are not. Problems remain, but the problem is not the haredim, the problem goes much deeper than that. I think this is what Pinkus was trying to tell us.

Israel was founded on a set of values, codified in an amendment to its Basic Law in 1985 we all know as “Jewish and democratic.” It was and is a laudable aspirational idea. But even its architects knew it was not simple and that the very notion of Jewish and democratic had serious fault lines. But still, we didn’t pay too much attention. And we defended it, claiming all who question it are suspicious of being anti-Israel. And maybe that is part of the problem; we somehow did not quite recognize the precariousness of the balance between secular Israelis, religious settlers, haredim, and Arabs, believing somehow the miracle of Israel’s existence would take care of all the divisions and democracy would survive; or that there was a sense of unity among Israeli

Jews, as Jews, that would never let the social fabric unravel. But we were wrong and Alon Pinkus is asking us to recognize that.

Pinkus is asking us a few things. First to recognize that “Jewish” is not a sufficient descriptor of the state. Jewish according to whom? Some might say, Jews. Others say “Judaism,” and in that second instance, only my kind of Judaism. Is Herzl’s *Judenstaadt* best translated as “The Jewish State” or “The State of the Jews”? And what of democracy. For whom? Just for Jews? For everyone living under the auspices of the state? Should everyone be granted citizenship. And if not, how is that a democracy? There is no consensus on this. These fissures have existed in the state from its beginning. This is not about 1967, this is about 1948. But back then, we responded to an emergence situation, the aftermath of the Holocaust, the demographic crisis of survivors. And the miracle of making a country appear out of nothing overshadowed the complexity that awaited Israel as it moved through its first era of existence. And of course, the wars and threats Israel faced and faces is not small matter. But it also gave us a half century occupation and a set of problems that cast a dark cloud over Israel’s miraculous beginnings. Let us not forget that a Jew, Yigal Amir assassinated Yitzhak Rabin because he threatened to make peace with the Palestinians. And people from Amir’s ideological camp now run part of the country and are threatening to undermine the democracy of Israeli Jews.

On the one hand, we should be shocked. But if we step back, it is less shocking than we think. Did we not think that the lack of democracy offered to the Palestinian population would not someday turn against liberal Israeli Jews? We have seen this

before. Hatred often turns on itself. The post-colonialist black thinker Franz Fanon once said his teacher in Martinique once said to him, “Franz, just know when they are talking about Jews, they are really talking about you.” And so we can say, “When they are talking about Palestinians, they are really talking about liberal Jews.”

So what can we do about it? What is the solution? That I’m afraid is an American trap. We are raised to believe every problem has a solution; we just have to find it. That is the American way. I think it was Abraham Joshua Heschel who said (I have forgotten where), there are questions and there are problems. Questions usually have answers, and not all problems have solutions. Certainly not easy ones, or proximate ones. First, perhaps, we need to better understand where we are, and as important, where we stand.

The irony of the moment in which we live is that for the entirety of Israel’s history, Jewish patriotism was based on supporting Israel. And those of us who were critical of Israel were accused of being unsupportive and deemed unpatriotic, even aiding the enemy. Today, literally today as I speak, we are being told that supporting Israel is protesting Israel. But it is precisely by protesting Israel that we are supporting Israel, or the aspirational democratic Israel we all support. Now we can say “It is only protesting the government” which is true. But the government was elected by Israelis, it wasn’t a *coup d’etat*. And it was not in some anomalous way, but through five elections. Netanyahu is the longest sitting PM in the history of the state. So let’s not fool ourselves, as Alon Pinkus suggests, it is not that Israel is *becoming* a different country; Israel has *become* a different country. Should we support the protests? 100%,

we should do what we can to let Israelis fighting for their country's democracy know that we support them. Should we hope that Israel once again becomes the country we hoped it would be? Yes, but let's not be naïve enough to think that it can be without significant and systemic change. And we should seriously consider the possibility that its population doesn't want to be what we think it should be. And then what shall we do?

Here is an example. There is a settlement called Efrat, which was founded mostly by American olim. It has always been known as a moderate settlement, many Modern Orthodox Jews live there not extremists. It exists on the rim of what would become the Israeli border if a Palestinian State should come into existence. In the last election, close to fifty percent of residents of Efrat voted for the far-right party of Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich. Fifty percent! People may counter that there are numerous complex reasons for this, which is certainly true. But that does not discount that fifty percent of a moderate settlement chose a far-right quasi-fascist party. That should tell us something. This governmental turn is not a bunch of far-right radicals who are stealing the country. This also includes people we might have had at a Shabbos table.

I certainly do not stand before you with any answers. But let me make a few observations. Most American Jews still consider themselves liberal in one way or another. But today, Israel is not a liberal country. Not by a long shot. Let's remember that Trump's approval rating in Israel is the highest in any country on the planet. By far. Hovering somewhere in the mid-70s percentile. Yes, tens of thousands of protestors are

fighting to step back from the precipice of autocracy. And many of them are liberal. And many of them are not. Democracy and liberalism, and democracy and pluralism are not identical. This is one reason the protestors have thus far prevented opposition to the occupation from taking center stage. As an Israeli academic from Tel Aviv told me, “if we included the occupation in the protest declaration we would lose half our constituency.” So is this about democracy writ large or democracy for Jews? This may change, I hope it does, but not yet.

So, we as American Jews are in a tight spot. We want to support Israel, but the Israel we want to support is becoming less and less a reality some of us think we can support. Where does that leave us? For some, it leaves one with the option to support the protests in the hope it can ignite a significant societal shift. But again let’s also not fool ourselves. One of the tenets of democracy is that the people choose the government. And given all the complexities of a parliamentary system, Israel has chosen this government. It doesn’t mean we have to support it. And it doesn’t mean it is inevitable, but it also means that we can’t ignore it or view it as some anomaly of electoral politics. It is real. And it tells us something about the direction of the country. Someday some of us may have to make a tough decision. Some already have. For many that day may have not yet come. But it is no longer blasphemous to think that one day it might. Ask any Israeli who stands in protest in Kaplan Square in Tel Aviv on any Saturday night fearful that the democratic country where they live is in real danger of collapse. No, its not just that Israel isn’t a “perfect democracy.” Perfection is never the standard of human endeavors. It is, rather, than the fissures in Israel’s democracy on the Arab Question has now emerged as a threat to Israel as a democracy, period.

