

Rosh HaShana 5784  
To Be a Free People in Our Land  
Rabbi Betsy Forester

In 1878, the Jewish poet Naftali Herz Imber composed a poem called "*Tikvateinu*," "Our Hope" which 70 years later became "Hatikva," the National Anthem of the modern State of Israel. "*Od lo avdah tikvateinu, hatikva bat sh'not alpayim*, our hope has not yet been lost, the hope of two thousand years," he wrote, "*lashuv l'erezt avoteinu*," to return to the land of our ancestors, "*l'h'yot am chofshi b'artzeinu, eretz Tzion, viy'rerushalaym*—to be a free people in our land, the land of Zion, and Jerusalem.

The dream of Jewish sovereignty in our homeland has been part of the Jewish consciousness from our earliest biblical roots. The miracle of the modern State and her survival against all odds is astounding, her achievements in science, technology, agriculture, engineering, literature and the arts breathtakingly brilliant. Her reliability as a refuge has been proven time and time again, as has her willingness to cede land for the hope of peace.

Last year at this time, I invited you into a year-long conversation about Israel, hoping that talking about Israel could become more part of our Beth Israel Center life. Little did I know what a watershed year it would be. More people showed up consistently to engage in our monthly discussions than for any other sustained program outside of Shabbat morning services for as long as anyone remembers. Led by our outstanding JFM-sponsored *shlichim* Hanna Bloch and Oz Bin Nun, and guided by our co-chairs Maddie Tyner and Bob Factor, our accomplishment became not only the jewel in the crown for Hannah and Oz, but a model for other North American synagogues.

We were already a community that valued diversity of perspective and intellectual argument. What we learned over the past year was that we could discuss the one topic that was nearly verboten here. Sharing our individual perspectives about Israel-Diaspora relations, indigeneity, Zionism, the West Bank, the Palestinian Conflict, internal Israeli politics, Israel's democracy and the challenges it faces, what it means for Israel to be a Jewish state, and more, we broke through our fear that differences in our deeply held beliefs about Israel would sow discord and division among us. If anything, we grew closer in our sense of shared destiny as we shared not only what we think, but what it means to us—our pride and our disappointment, our theretofore unexamined

biases and our frequent and growing bewilderment and confusion over what we are seeing.

I am delighted to share that Maddie and Bob will continue to co-chair our conversations in a new format this year. Our own Nadav Shelef will present three Sunday morning talks to help us better understand the background of Israel's constitutional crisis, the relationship between Religion and State in Israel, and the situation in the occupied territories. Nadav is a professor of Israel Studies and Political Science at the UW, where he teaches and studies nationalism, religion and politics, Israeli politics and society, and middle east politics. Each talk will be followed by small group discussions.

I am also eager to plan at least one Beth Israel Center trip to Israel in the next year or two. If you are interested, I need you to let me know.

And, talking and learning amongst ourselves and planning a trip or two will not meet the demands of this moment in Jewish history. We are living through nothing less than a fight for the soul of the Jewish State. Israel's government, with its Jewish supremacist senior ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir, are enacting policies and practices steeped in extremism and bigotry. They see the Jewish People as eternal masters of the Land, leaving others, like the Palestinian residents of the territories, at best, like our biblical "hewers of wood and drawers of water." Their rhetoric and military orders embolden and abet increasing numbers of Jewish settlers who are perpetuating a campaign of terror against Palestinians in the West Bank, in flagrant violation of Israel's own founding principles as well as international law. Millions of dollars—or, shekels, Israel's currency—have been redirected from the Education and Interior Ministries to fund settlements, including settlements that the Israeli government itself considers illegal. Convicted criminals, cursing the U.S. government and our President, are giving orders and subduing people—including Jewish Israelis—who work for human rights in our Jewish homeland.

Further, with the joining of the Kahanists with the ultra-Orthodox in Netanyahu's government, a theocratic will percolates at the center of Israeli politics. If left unchecked it will destroy not only the rights of Palestinians, but also the rights of non-Orthodox Jews, women, and LGBTQ people.

As a lover of Israel I find all of this terrifying and heartbreaking. I never imagined that I would need to lead my community to care for Israel against such circumstances. That is not because the current realities sprang from nowhere but because I, like most American Jews, did not see them coming.

Josh Drill, the International Spokesperson for Israel's pro-Democracy protest movement, grew up in New Jersey with a passion for Israel that inspired him to make aliyah after high school and serve in the IDF. In northern Israel, he responded to threats from Hezbollah. He was then posted deep in the West Bank, in Hebron. His description of the brutality of the Occupation—like so many others—is too harrowing for a Rosh HaShanah sermon.

This is Drill's message to us: "It's long overdue for diaspora Jews to change the way they speak about Israel and to truly recognize the threat posed by the array of right-wing, anti-democratic voices in Israel—from the settlement movement to the ultra-Orthodox to the hard-right nationalists. **The way we spoke about Israel 10, 20 years ago is no longer relevant.** *The way we spoke about Israel 10, 20 years ago is no longer relevant.* If you're speaking about Israel still as if it's Disneyland, you're stuck in the past and are very much part of the problem."

It is not easy to say those words. But I must, when exactly one week ago from this moment, over 100,000 Israeli's filled the streets of Tel Aviv in protest and their spokesperson sends such a message. He is speaking to us.

We cannot be afraid to say, as Avi Meyer, the Israel-based Director of Global Communications for the American Jewish Committee recently said, "I am ashamed and repulsed by the hate-fueled violence taking place...The individuals perpetrating it are as foreign to me and my Judaism as are skinheads, white supremacists, and other racists around the world." We must not support the hubris of the ultra-Orthodox. Just because you have "payus" does not mean your Torah is right. It is critical that we call out our fellow Jews when their behavior in the name of Torah flies in the face of Torah itself and when they wrongfully deny the legitimacy of our approach to Judaism.

Of course, we must not be naive to the security risks Israel faces daily and the legacy of violence and trauma that Jewish Israelis carry. At the same time we must understand that Israel's most pressing existential threat now comes from within. As Rabbi Eric Yoffie, Past President of the Union for Reform Judaism, recently wrote, "This is no time for fairy tales or self-deception. In the Jewish state that I love, common trust is evaporating, norms are being destroyed and an unrestrained government is dismantling the democratic frameworks established over the last century. This is not the Zionism that the state of Israel was meant to embody. This is not the Judaism that the state of Israel was meant to produce."

It is hard to believe that Israel could descend into chaos, civil war—God forbid, or a violent theocracy—God forbid, but we must not remain complacent. We have a role to

play in restoring the Zionist hope, which I still believe was a beautiful hope and a pure one. Numerous organizations and individuals are working tirelessly to protect the civil rights of human beings who live in Israel and the Occupied Territories. They need our support. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis are taking to the streets now in the 37th sustained week of protest against the governing party's consolidation of power. This unprecedented groundswell of concern is nothing short of breathtaking—more inspiring, in my view, than any other Israeli achievement—and *we* are being called to raise *our* voices from here. What began as an invitation from a few journalists has now become an urgent call for us to join the conversation by supporting the protesters and the organizations working for democracy and human rights in Israel and the occupied territories—supporting them with our words, our influence, and our money.

Israel is not a fantasy land. She is rugged and beautiful, a place of miracles and a modern wonder, teeming with our relatives speaking the language of our people, exploding in heartwarming realities and heartbreaking realities. Neither the ugliness we hear about nor the everyday acts of profound humanity that abound there are fabrications. Pretending that violations of human rights and basic human dignity, and threats to Israel's future as a thriving democracy will only hurt Israel and make the position of Jews worldwide, including here in Wisconsin, more precarious, will not do.

UK politician Daniel Finkelstein stated last Yom HaAtzma'ut: "If Zionism is the theory, Israel is the practice and like all practical translations of idealism it is compromised, haphazard, sometimes unsightly, and occasionally disheartening. But that tension...is where the great debates take place and where the course of Jewish history can be set or changed. Israeli independence, as it reaches 75 years, is still a miraculous application of a mundane idea: Jewish self-determination."

Challenging work lies before the us if we are to achieve the vision of a Jewish State her founders laid out in her declaration of independence, namely: "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 United Nations."

For 75 hard-won years we have lived as “*am chofshi b’artzeinu*”—a free people in our land. Let us honor that dream by helping Israel recreate her sense of who she is and where is going, just as each of us is doing on a personal level on this holy day. On this Rosh HaShanah, may we be moved to carry the collective yearning of the Jewish soul, the hope—*hatikvah*— that inspired our people for millennia, that our freedom would offer something magnificent, miraculously life-giving to the world. May we work for that hope in the coming year.

כן יהי רצון.