

Yom Kippur 5787
Still a Zionist
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Gmar Hatimah Tovah.

I was in third grade at Jewish day school when I was assigned to write a report about Theodor Herzl. I had never heard of the man, so I turned to my most reliable source of information.

“Mom, who was Theodor Herzl?”

“He was the father of modern Zionism.”

“Ok. What's Zionism?”

“It's the idea that Israel should be a Jewish state.”

I was so confused. Now I had more questions: Hadn't Israel *a/ways* been Jewish? Wasn't everybody OK with that? And why would Herzl be celebrated for thinking of something so obvious? To me, it was like honoring the first person to say the sky is blue.

I had no idea then that I would spend much of my life trying to answer my own question.

“Are you a *Zionist*?”

After October 7th, that question sometimes has an edge to it. Like, “Are you a *Jew*?”

Because October 7th, 2023, changed so much about Israel and Jewish life everywhere. Broadly, it changed how many people see Israel and its supporters. Narrowly, it changed how some people define the word “Zionist.” Now some people define a Zionist as “someone who supports whatever action Israel takes.” No wonder so many Jews and Israel supporters now feel uncomfortable identifying themselves as such. The word's connotation has changed, so we need to talk about it.

Earlier this year, the Jewish Federations of North America released a survey of Jewish Americans. The headline was “Just 37% of Jewish Americans identify as Zionists.” But here's the thing: While the definition of “Zionist” changed for some people, October 7th didn't change what “Zionism” *is*. Or what it has meant until now. Didn't change that at all.

The very same survey showed that a full 88% of American Jews believe Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state. 88%! That's more Jews than those who believe in G-d! And most feel an *emotional connection* to Israel - 71%. Here's the most interesting finding: About half of American Jews *don't* consider themselves "Zionists" but *do* support the idea of Israel as a Jewish state. In other words, the Z word has become more fraught. But the underlying connection to Israel remains strong.

It's important for all of us to understand what Zionism really *means*, so we can all be openly proud supporters of the Jewish state. My favorite definition is one we all know already, in Hebrew no less. As Hatikvah concludes: "*Lihyot Am Hofshi Baartzeinu Eretz Tzion VYerushalayim*. To be a free nation in our land, land of Zion and Jerusalem."

Israel's national anthem gets it just right. Zionism advocates that Jews should have a state of their own in the historically Jewish land of Israel. A Jewish home today in the Jewish homeland.

That conversation I had with my mom in third grade? I think that is *the* most important Israel conversation that we need to have today. I'm not so concerned about arming ourselves for potential conversations with protesters who want Israel to disappear. Those people's minds are made up, and facts won't convince them otherwise. Of much more importance are the conversations we have in our *own* homes with Jewish kids of all ages. Our children and grandchildren are still figuring out what it means to be Jewish. We have a responsibility to make sure Israel is part of that story. They deserve to know *why*. *Feeling* a connection to the Jewish state is a first step; but in this particular moment, we must be able to *articulate* it. We must share the *Why*.

Something like this:

Zionism is the idea that Israel should be a Jewish state.

Because G-d promised *this* place to Abraham and his descendants, the Jewish people.

Because Israel is where so much of Jewish history happened.

Because when the Jews were exiled for 2000 years, there were always some Jews who lived there continuously.

Because when the Jews were exiled for 2000 years, the dream of returning home to Israel and Jerusalem constantly animated their religious lives, like finishing every Seder with "Next year in Jerusalem."

Because when Jews did *not* have a homeland to keep them safe, we Jews suffered from persecution and pogroms in so many places over so many centuries.

And because we Jews have the right to determine our own fate and history, and to never be second class citizens anymore, anywhere.

These were all true before 1948 when *Medinat Yisrael* - the State of Israel - was created. Since then, there are additional reasons to be a Zionist.

Because Israel is where about half of the world's Jews live today, a percentage that is only increasing.

Because Israel is home to the only army that protects and defends Jews in Israel, non-Jewish Israelis, and Jews around the world.

Because Israel is the only place where Jewish culture is the majority culture and can best thrive.

Because Israel is a safe haven for Jewish refugees from all over the world who find themselves in danger and need a place to live safely.

And because when Israel is strong and secure, we Jews around the world are safer. But when Israel is seen as weak and under attack, Jews around the world are in more danger. As we've seen the past three years with increased antisemitism everywhere.

It's vital to clarify: the Jewish state has an obligation to provide equal rights for *all* its citizens, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. It's right there in Israel's Declaration of Independence. There must be space there for non-Jewish Israelis to thrive in their own identities as Israeli Christians, Muslims, Druze, and others.

And we need to understand that Israel is both new and old. The State of Israel is only 78 years old; there are people in this room older than this. But the Jewish connection to *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel, goes back about 4,000 years to Abraham, the first Jew.

In Parashat Lech Lecha, G-d tells Abraham “*Lech Lecha*. Get going from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's house to the land that I will show you...’ [Abraham and Sarah] came to the land of Canaan...and G-d said ‘I will assign this land to your offspring’” (Gn. 12:1-7). Ever since then, our people has been connected to that small patch of land.

When our patriarch Jacob approached his final days in Egypt, he asked his children to promise they would bury him in Israel. In effect, he was saying: I'm living in Egypt, but my home is Israel. When I die, take me home. That's another way to describe Zionism: returning to our Jewish home.

There's a wonderful history book about Israel, called "Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn." The author, Daniel Gordis, begins by tracing the beginning of modern Zionism in the late 1800's. Herzl was a key player, of course, but not the only influential voice. One chapter is about how from its origins Zionism was a conversation, not an ideology. A conversation, not an ideology. The key point is that from the start, there were very divergent views about what kind of Jewish state they were trying to create. There was never a shared vision. Sound familiar?

Picture a tent held up by multiple poles. Herzl was one pole with his vision for political Zionism, a conventional nation-state like all others. But Ahad Ha'am was another. He argued that a future state should be a Jewish cultural center that strengthens the cultural and spiritual life of Jews everywhere. Meanwhile, Ze'ev Jabotinsky championed Revisionist Zionism and trained young Jews for the inevitable military fights to come. AD Gordon modeled Labor Zionism, the ethos of physically working the land with bare hands. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook pioneered Religious Zionism and saw a return to Israel as a directive from the Torah. All of these were vastly different pictures of what a Jewish state should look like. Which prompted fierce arguments among their followers. These were different poles under the Zionist tent. But each of these approaches widened that very same tent to hold them all.

This too-brief history of Zionism's different strands demonstrates that from the beginning there were *many* different approaches to what a Jewish state should look like. In light of this past history, of course disagreements about Israel's direction continue to the present day. Perhaps that is one lesson Zionism teaches us today: disagreement does not have to mean departure.

Today, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, Zionists disagree strongly among themselves about the current and future direction of the State of Israel. Civil disagreement is productive; unfortunately much of the discourse today is far from civil. But especially today, it's critical that Zionists stand with the *people* of Israel: the millions who call Israel home, and the millions of Jews around the world for whom Israel is part of our people's story.

It's easy to be consumed by our opinions of the Israeli Prime Minister and government, or how the Gaza War went. Those are real issues, and they are definitely worth discussion later. But Zionism is *bigger* than these particulars. It's about supporting the *people* of Israel, not necessarily the *government*. Zionism doesn't require us to support Israel exactly as it *is*. It asks us to imagine what Israel can *become* - and to help build it. That should be all of us.

The Anti-Defamation League sums it up well: "Zionists include progressives, moderates, conservatives and those who are apolitical." Some Zionists support a future Palestinian state, oppose the settlements, and can't stand the current government. While other Zionists oppose a future Palestinian state, support the settlements, and support the Knesset. Other Zionists

mix and match. They are *all* still Zionists! *Israelis themselves* are all over the map on these specific issues.

Our experience as Americans reminds us of this. Many Americans have taken issue with our country's leadership at different points in time. But criticizing *our* government doesn't make us *less* American. We want America to be better, so we continue to vote. And we believe better is possible, if not now, then in the future.

I know this is a challenging time for Israel. Geopolitics are complicated, and Israel isn't perfect. I too have my issues. For example, the ongoing settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank is indefensible and reprehensible. And members of Knesset who espouse racist or supremacist views must not be given a pass. They do not speak for me.

But I'm still all in on Israel because I love its people and its potential. I'm not pretending that everything is good. I care enough about Israel to believe that things can be better. I understand that governments can change with each election, and the next election is only five weeks away. I strongly believe Israel can be better next year than it is today, and so I stay engaged.

On a Jewish level, that's really what we are all doing today on Yom Kippur. The Jewish premise is that each one of us is always capable of growth. Whatever our age, these High Holidays demand introspection and self-improvement because we are not yet complete. We too can be better *next* year than *this* year. Teshuvah is the Jewish refusal to believe that the present is permanent.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav taught: "If you believe you can destroy, believe you can repair." That is, authentic Teshuvah is not just about feeling regrets about what we did yesterday. The other half is believing that we can be different tomorrow and planning for it. Personal growth is never easy but always possible.

This reminds me of a story told by Rabbi David Wolpe about a rabbinical student who prepared his senior sermon with Professor Mordechai Kaplan, a brilliant and powerful teacher. Sparks flew when they met to discuss the sermon. With a week to go before the big day, the sermon finally earned his teacher's approval. On Shabbat the student delivered the sermon, and as soon as he sat down, Kaplan tore it apart. The baffled student protested, "I don't understand. Two weeks ago you approved it!" The professor replied, "Young man, since then I've grown!"

It's a funny story, but the punchline is seriously true. Every Yom Kippur gives us the opportunity to say: the person sitting here today does not have to be the same person who sits here next year. Next Yom Kippur, we can look back and say: "Since then, I've grown."

It's true for every Jewish *Neshama*. And it's true for Israel. Israel is not a person, of course, but it is made up of people. Israel is a miracle, and it is also a human project. And human projects are never finished. Perhaps that is why Zionism and Teshuvah belong together. Both begin with the belief that the way things are today is not the way they have to be tomorrow. Especially at this moment in time, when Israel is about to conduct elections for a new government, let's stay engaged. Let's help it grow.

"Are you a Zionist?"

Absolutely I am. I know it doesn't poll well today. I get that the word is commonly misunderstood. I know that some people might assume that I don't care about Palestinians. That's not true. Palestinians too deserve to live lives of dignity.

My own particular vision for Israel's leadership and future may be the same as yours. Or it might be different. Both are OK. But let's remember that we share the same tent: we want Israel to thrive as a Jewish and democratic state in our ancient homeland.

Thankfully, rockets are not falling on Israel these days, and may G-d keep it that way. But still under attack is the story of Israel's legitimacy to even exist. Each of us has a role to play in defending Israel's story by explaining it to the next generation.

As my mom did to my third grade self:

"Mom, who was Theodor Herzl?"

"He was the father of modern Zionism."

"Ok. What's Zionism?"

"It's the idea that Israel should be a Jewish state."

That shouldn't be the *end* of the conversation. It must be the *beginning*.

Because on Yom Kippur, we believe that nothing is finished—not a person, not a people, and not the future.

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