

Why Should We Care?
Engaging with Israel and Our Interconnected Future
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman
Second Day Rosh Hashanah 5784

I moved to Israel in January, 1996, to study. First in Haifa and then Jerusalem. For the first few years, I was on a student visa. Only when I decided to transfer from my Master's program to the rabbinical program did I decide to make *aliyah*, to become an Israeli citizen.

I have a very strong memory of walking the streets of Jerusalem while trying to make that decision – I know exactly which street in *Katamon Hayesbana* (the old Katamon neighborhood) – and realizing I was home, I was finally home. After years of wandering – personally, as this was my third country; spiritually, as I carried everything in a much deeper way; and also, perhaps, familiarly, with the generational experience of exile – I had arrived. I stood on that very narrow street and I cried. It was my time, I was going to make *aliyah*.

As you know, life took me on a different journey, one that I did not expect (isn't that what life is about?), and I ended up moving to Boston ten years later. But that profound feeling I had long ago on that old and narrow street, that sense of home-coming... that has always stayed with me. And so I weep now for Israel, for my Israel.

I have expressed my love and commitment to Israel, with steady criticism of its politics, over the many years since I have become more aware of the injustices against minorities, especially, but not only, against Palestinian people. When living in Israel, I was actively involved in all kinds of organizations and endeavors, working for justice, mostly around women's issues, LGBTQ issues, and freedom of religion. My fights, my standing in protest, has always been nurtured by my love and by the hope that Israel can be a place of justice for all its inhabitants, as stated in the Declaration of the Independence:

[The State of Israel] 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 culture¹.

Over the years, since being a rabbi in Boston and here at TBZ, I have been outspoken about all things Israel. And I have tried, not always successfully, to be in conversation with so many of you: those who agree with my views and those who disagree. You are probably not going to be surprised if I tell you that I get criticized (or maybe when the criticism is more gentle... I get feedback) both from the left and from the right. Our congregation (and the Jewish community around us) has many voices: those who think Israel should not exist as a Jewish state; those who think we should not criticize the government of Israel, because criticism means not supporting Israel; and even those who believe criticism of Israel is a form of anti-semitism.

And today, I weep, with people in Israel and I stand with them – with the hundreds of thousands of them who have been filling the streets for many months. I can not disengage myself from this conversation and I want to tell you today why I believe that you, too, must engage.

Believe me, I went back and forth too many times, trying to decide if I should speak about Israel from the *bimah* on the High Holidays. After all, I often speak about Israel on Shabbat morning and many of you have come with me to protests organized by Boston UnXeptable², a grassroots movement launched by Israeli expats in support of democratic Israel

So why bring this hot political issue to the *bimah* during these ten days of introspection and spirituality?

¹ Israel's Declaration of Independence

² <https://www.unxeptable.org/>

My answer is that when I hear the call of the shofar, I know I must respond.

Our fate as the Jewish People, here in Boston, and wherever we are, is intertwined with the fate of the Jewish People in Israel and all over the world, for good and for bad.

No matter where your personal or my personal relationship with Israel stands:
I have been to Israel, I haven't,
I have family there, I don't,
I like Israel, I don't,
I think having a Jewish State is key to the survival of the Jewish people
I don't think having Jewish state is necessary at all...

No matter which view you have, or if you're somewhere in between, it does not change the fact that what happens in Israel cannot be separated from our own Jewish existence here in Massachusetts.

Some might ask, why? Especially those of us who do not have a personal connection, if any, with Israel... Why should a Jew, living in Brookline, care?

Reasons can vary and for each of us different reasons might resonate more deeply:

First, our liturgy and texts speak about Israel. Even when we think about this metaphorically, the connection to the land is real and ancient. And even if that doesn't speak to some of us, Israel contains half the world's Jewish population and that is a fact. And additionally, like it or not, we are judged by non-Jews for what happens there. You may object to that, but the reality is that acts are being done in our name as Jews by other Jews. If we don't speak out, then we are complicit.

So, ignoring Israel is not an option. We must recognize that this moment is historic and will determine the future of Israel and thus the future of the Jewish People. That is part of our burden as a people, for good or for bad.

What is happening right now in Israel puts the existence of Israel as a liberal democracy in danger. The Israel that will respect all of its inhabitants; that will listen to different voices; that will accept us, as non-Orthodox Jews... That Israel is in danger.

What's happening in Israel right now, with the attempts to overhaul the judiciary system, will destroy Israel as we know it. It will become a theocracy, ruled by extremist Jews, who believe in the supremacy of the Jewish People over everyone else. What is happening now in Israel will clear a path to the annexation of the occupied territories, without regard to the lives of Palestinians living in those areas. What is happening now in Israel is giving voice to one kind of Judaism, is giving politicians the right to define what Judaism is – and their definition leaves **us** out, and leaves out our vision of an inclusive, democratic Israel, one that believes in a shared society and a shared place to live in peace.

Esther Sperber, an Israeli-American architect, said at a protest on Tisha B'Av outside the Israeli Consulate in New York: "If missiles were falling on Israel, every Jewish synagogue, school, and JCC would be out to support Israel...this is a self-inflicted, legislative missile attack on Israel, led by an extreme right-wing, messianic and corrupt government."³

Like Esther, I believe that we must act as if missiles are falling on us because the stakes are that high.

And Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur, a French Rabbi, wrote an essay this past January titled: "For Zion's Sake, I will not Keep Silent."⁴ In it, she reminds us

³ As quoted by Rabbi Jill Jacobs

<https://forward.com/opinion/560652/american-jews-israel-judicial-overhaul-court/>

⁴ <https://www.tenoua.org/en/dh-israel-jan2023-en/>

that we have a choice to make, not between a democratic state or a Jewish state, but between Jewish voices of extremism and hatred and Jewish voices of justice.

Rabbi Horvilleur writes about the current Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben Gvir, a religious Jew, who wears a kippah and lives what he calls a religious life. He also endorses the denial of Palestinian right of movement and supported the settlers who rampaged in Huwara, a Palestinian village. A video of these settlers, stopping to *daven Ma'ariv* (pray the evening service) during the pogrom went viral.

Rabbi Horvilleur explains:

Ben Gvir's interpretation of Judaism is just one voice, just one language, among so many others. His language is not my Jewish language, it is not the one in which I speak to my children, my students, or my friends, and it is not the one I believe in. Its exclusive and exclusionary message impoverishes and condemns us even as it claims full legitimacy. It must be fought not only by modern democratic means, but also from within the Jewish tradition. It is up to us not to let Zionism or Judaism be kidnapped by those who claim it. It is up to us to fight for democracy in Israel, not against Judaism, but with and through it.

This last sentence is so powerful and bears repeating.

“It is up to us to fight for democracy in Israel, not against Judaism, but with and through it.”

I am here to say, like Rabbi Horvilleur, that I would not let anyone, especially those in power in Israel, kidnap Judaism for me and for you.

But I am also here to remind you that our fate is bound up with each other. We are all interconnected: people in Israel and people in the U.S., Orthodox Jews

and secular Jews, extremists and progressives, Zionists and anti-Zionists. We are all interconnected.

In the coming year, I want to invite you to do three things to deepen your understanding of and relationship with Israel — no matter where you stand politically:

1. GET CURIOUS ABOUT ASPECTS OF ISRAEL YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND.

Maybe you want to learn about Israel's judicial reforms. Maybe you want to learn about the experiences of Israeli citizens in the Diaspora. Maybe you want to learn about Israeli grassroots groups fighting for the rights of Palestinians. Lean into your curiosity. Ask questions. Listen with resilience.

2. ENGAGE IN A CONVERSATION ABOUT ISRAEL THAT FEELS CHALLENGING, BUT DO SO WITH HUMILITY.

There is a beautiful poem by the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai called, "The Place Where We Are Right."⁵ It begins with the words: "From the place where we are right, flowers will never grow in the spring." His poem invites us to consider loosening our grip on what we know to be true. Amichai reminds us that if we truly wish to grow, we need to acknowledge that we don't have all the answers. We are not always right. Growing our relationship with Israel is not easy; it depends on our capacity to talk about things that are hard and painful; it requires us to listen deeply to others, and acknowledge what we don't know.

3. FINALLY, COMMIT TO BEING FULLY PRESENT IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP OR STRUGGLE WITH ISRAEL.

I want to return to the words of *Ya'aleh Koleinu*. As I shared on *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, we have chosen the words from the beautiful *piyut* (liturgical poem) *Ya'aleh* to be the guiding words during our High Holidays. This

⁵ <https://princeton57.org/dynamic.asp?id=Amichai>

piyut is sung during the Kol Nidre service, during the *Selichot* section. The first stanza reads:

יַעֲלֶה תְּחִנּוּתֵנוּ מֵעֶרֶב. וַיָּבֵא שׁוֹעֲתֵנוּ מִבֹּקֶר. וַיִּרְאֶה רִנּוּתֵנוּ עַד עֶרֶב

May our supplication ascend from the evening.
And may our cry come from the morning.
And may our song appear till evening.

These words speak to the opening of our hearts and voices, bringing our full self to prayer, bringing our full self to life, and committing ourselves to showing up in the world, morning, afternoon, and evening. All of the time. That includes how we show up in learning about Israel.

Allow yourself to be vulnerable; open up to each other about your hopes and fears for Israel's future. Stand up and raise your voice for your values. Treat yourself and each other generously — not only when it feels easy, but especially when it feels hard.

I invite us to stand as I read a prayer for Israel, written by the UnXeptable grassroots group.



יהי רצון שתברך מדינת ישראל ותמשיך
להתקיים כמדינה דמוקרטית וליברלית המכבדת
את כל תושביה ואת כל גוני היהדות.

יהי רצון שלראשי המדינה ואזרחיה תהיה
התבונה להקשיב לקולות השונים, לנהל את
המחלוקות לשם שמים, לקבל החלטות ולפעל
לטובת כלל הציבור.

יהי רצון שיהיה לנו הכוח להמשיך במאבק
לשמירת עצמאות המערכת המשפטית,
ולשמירת שיוון הזכויות לכל תושבי מדינת
ישראל ולכל העם היהודי.

אמן



UNXCEPTABLE



May it be your will that the State of Israel
be blessed and continue to exist as a liberal
democracy, respecting all its inhabitants and all
shades of Judaism.

May it be your will that the leaders and people
of Israel have the wisdom to listen to different
voices and diverse viewpoints, manage the
disputes, and take actions that benefit the
community and the whole public.

May it be your will that we have the strength to
protect the judicial system's independence and
preserve equal rights for all people of Israel and
all Jewish people worldwide.

Amen



UNXCEPTABLE