

Kol Nidrei 2024: I Am A Zionist

In the year 586 BCE, we were exiled from our homeland for the first time. The Babylonians, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, invaded Jerusalem after having laid siege to the city for two and a half years. They destroyed the Temple and sent the majority of the inhabitants of the city to Babylon, now present-day Iraq. We have historical and archeological evidence to corroborate this sad story. But perhaps, the most well-known artifact from that time is the hauntingly beautiful poetry of Psalm 137, which we sing on Tisha b'av, the 9th day of the month of av, the day on which the Temple was destroyed. "By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion." Ever since that terrible time, Judaism has been inextricably woven together with the longing for that special place, that sacred land, that we call Zion.

My name is Adam, and I am a Zionist. I never thought this is something I would have to say in this manner, on this day, especially on this day. I never thought the word Zionist would be used so pejoratively in so many ways. I never thought I would have to use today, National Coming Out Day, to "come out" as a Zionist, as I came out as a gay man so many years ago. I never thought declaring myself a Zionist could bring up so many negative associations. But we are living in an age where Zionists are being told we are not welcome- in bars, in bookstores, in pride parades, on college campuses. Social media is awash with memes and videos about the evils of Zionism, about how Zionism is racism, Zionism is white supremacy, Zionism is oppression. Even here, at Temple Emanuel, the fact that at a recent executive committee meeting I had to remind our leadership that we are a Zionist congregation and that I received some uncomfortable looks for mentioning that, well that proved to me that it is time for us to talk about it. On this holy day, when we stand before God in our brokenness, in our exhaustion, after an incredibly trying year when we were viciously attacked physically and spiritually, I am here to reclaim Zionism. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, for the sake of Zion, I will not keep silent.

To begin, we need to establish what Zionism is. Its central idea is that the Jewish people, like every people on earth, have a right to self-determination in our homeland. That's it. A right to control our own destiny. A right to exercise power. A right to self-governance. A right to live in peace, guided by our values, our faith, our culture, our traditions. The Chinese have a country. The Indians do too. So do the French, the Moroccans, the Peruvians. So, it follows that the Jewish people should also have a place to call home. Why does this get so complicated? Because for thousands of years, we did not have our own home. We were a people who wandered, not because we wanted to, but because we had no choice in the matter. But since the time of the first exile from our land, a land which had been promised to Abraham and his descendants, a land conquered and settled by Joshua and the judges, a land where we built a society, where King David ruled, where King Solomon built the first Temple devoted to the worship of our God, we have yearned for home. We have wept, we have prayed, we have hoped, we have struggled for Zion.

Judaism has always been centered on three pillars. God, Torah, and Israel. Israel means the people and the land. That is why when we pray, we face towards the land of Israel. That is

why the land is mentioned throughout our liturgy. Ever since Abraham nearly sacrificed his son atop Mount Moriah¹, which our tradition teaches us is Mount Zion, we have had a special, grounded, and unbreakable connection to it. Zionism, the longing to be in the land of Israel, is an ancient, unshakeable, and irrevocable pillar of Judaism. There is no such thing as Judaism without God, without Torah, or without Israel. Yes, we can and should wrestle with all three, as our name, Israel, means to wrestle. But there is a difference between wrestling and denying. Imagine someone saying I am an antiGod Jew, or I am an antiTorah Jew. The longing for Zion cannot be extracted from Judaism. We are a people, and Israel is our home.

Now that we have established the ancient origins of Zionism, let us look back at some modern history. To see how ancient Zionism evolved into a political movement which would put into motion the creation of the modern state of Israel, we need to fast forward to the late 19th century. Theodore Herzl, perceived by many as the father of modern Zionism, lived as a secular Jew. He was born in Budapest and worked as a reporter in Vienna. He was covering the trial of a French general by the name of Alfred Dreyfuss who had been falsely accused of treason. What shook Herzl to the core was when he saw the crowds gathering to taunt Dreyfuss. In the streets of Paris, the mob was not calling for Dreyfuss to be punished. Rather, they were chanting “Death to the Jews.”

This spurred Herzl to action. He understood the pervasiveness of antisemitism. He knew our history of exile, murder, and violence. He knew that in order for the Jews to be safe, we needed a place to call home. So, Herzl organized the World Zionist Congress in 1897 which convened in Basel, Switzerland. It was a gathering of leaders from around the world. They decided to come together to share their goals, the most prominent of which was to strategize about how we could return to the land of Israel. Herzl prophesied that in no less than 1 and no more than 50 years, there would be a Jewish state. He was correct.

The antisemitic mob Herzl witnessed in France was not a one-off. In 1881, Tzar Alexander the II, was assassinated in Saint Petersburg. The subsequent blaming of the Jews for his murder, for which they were not responsible, set off another wave of violence and pogroms leading many in Russia and eastern Europe to leave for what was then Palestine or the United States. In 1903, the Kishniev pogrom in what is present-day Moldova, another hateful violent and bloody episode against Jews, led to further emigration. And of course, we know what happened several decades after Kishniev, when two-thirds of Europe’s Jews, one-third of the entire Jewish population of the world, were purposely, violently, and cruelly murdered. We have been victims of antisemitism, often promoted and sanctioned by the government, church, or religious authorities wherever we have dwelled on earth, for millennia, which culminated in the unbelievable amount of violence and death during the first half of the twentieth century.

On November 29th, 1947, the United Nations voted on the partition of mandatory Palestine. The British had decided they had had enough of governing this very difficult place, where two distinct peoples were fighting against each other and against colonial rule. The plan was to divide Mandatory Palestine into three areas- a Jewish state, an Arab state, and an international zone for Jerusalem. The plan was accepted by the Jews and a majority of the

¹ Genesis 22

countries of the world. It was completely rejected by the Arabs. Sadly, in spite of fairly recent peace agreements with some Arab and Muslim-majority countries beginning with Egypt and up until the Abraham accords of the past few years, Israel has never been completely tolerated or accepted in that part of the world.

Fast forward to October 7th, 2023. A horrible day on our calendar. Nearly 1200 lives cut short. Babies shot in the arms of their parents. Women and men were humiliated, raped, and murdered. More than 300 people dancing at a music festival were hunted and gunned down. Countless more were injured. Over 250 souls, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Israeli and many other nationalities were taken hostage into the dark tunnels of Gaza. Yes, Israel gained some measure of sympathy, but that lasted maybe a few days. Because here is the truth- a large segment of the Arab world, and the world in general, including a small but vocal minority of Jews, believe Israel got what it deserved, because they have never accepted Israel and never will. They do not believe Jews are a people worthy of a home. The world, over thousands of years, got used to the idea that Jews should be nomads, that our peace and security should be at the whim of a government and ruling class which may or may not accept them. That has been the story throughout the vast sweep of our history. To quote the prescient title of author Dara Horn's book, written several years before October 7th, "People Love Dead Jews." That is why, just days after October 7th, the D.C. chapter of the so-called Jewish Voice for Peace shared a meme which stated the following. "Do not call it terrorism, call it resistance." Only a few weeks ago, the University of Michigan's chapter of the so-called Jewish Voice for Peace posted the following statement on their Instagram account: "death to Israel" is not just a threat. It is a moral imperative and the only acceptable solution. May the entire colony burn to the ground for good."

We've seen an unbelievable amount of Jew hate in the wake of the bloodiest day for our people since World War II. A professor at Cornell, who is back to teaching this semester, said he was exhilarated by the attack. The Chicago chapter of Black Lives Matter posted a victory meme of a Hamas terrorist paragliding into Israel. Only days ago, on the one-year anniversary of October 7th, students at Columbia held signs calling for intifada to come to us and chanted glory to the resistance, glory to the martyrs. Last December, as I was leaving a rather somber Chanukah event at the Embassy of Israel, I was carrying a plate of sufganiyot to bring home to my family. Some protestors approached me and started screaming. How dare I take food when Israel was starving the citizens of Gaza. They called me a Nazi, an occupier, and other slurs I will not mention. I've received threatening letters at the synagogue asking when will we stop supporting the murderous regime. I've heard stories from you about your friends asking why you care about the six recently murdered hostages when thousands of Palestinians are dying. I've heard you share with me how acquaintances, colleagues, family members, have shared memes and pictures on facebook and Instagram declaring Zionism to be evil, that Jews are settler colonists, that we are doing to the Palestinians what white people did to black people for centuries in this country, or worse, what the Nazis did to us. I've seen the social media feeds of teachers who are unbelievably still employed in MCPS posting conspiracy theories about IDF soldiers killing Palestinian children and harvesting their organs. I spoke with a Temple member about her colleague who was signing her emails with a slogan that the United States Congress has declared antisemitic, "From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free." The degradation of

Zion and Zionism, which began in 586 BCE, has not stopped. It has gotten worse, especially in the past year.

I want to pause here, because as awful as all of this is, I am strictly speaking about the Jewish narrative. There is a Palestinian narrative that is equally valid and that contradicts ours. And although we saw the founding of the State of Israel as the fulfillment of a millennia old dream, as a great miracle, Palestinians called it the nakba, the catastrophe. And their narrative is just as valid as ours. As we deserve a state, so do they. You can fight antisemitism and antizionism without degrading their story or their people. Here's an example of how. Let's look at the word "genocide." It was invented in the aftermath of the Shoah to try and express some of the unbelievable horrors of those years. Its definition is the "deliberate and systematic destruction of a national, ethnic, religious, or racial group." The present-day claim that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza is outrageously false. Yet, some members of the Israeli government, part of a right-wing extremist, cowardly, ineffective ruling coalition, have made statements which could be categorized as having genocidal intent. If we perceive the Hamas charter and their atrocious actions on October 7th as genocidal, which we should, as the radical Islamist movement calls for the destruction of Israel and the slaughter of Jews around the world, then likewise when Ministers Smotrich and Ben Gvir make statements about completely flattening Gaza or expelling its entire population, we have to call out those statements as well. Several years ago, during a close election, Netanyahu used a racist scare tactic, declaring that "the Arabs are voting in large numbers" to try and get more Israeli Jews to the polls. It worked and he was re-elected. We have set up a binary that you can be pro-Israel or pro-Palestine but not both. And there are many who would use Zionism in a more expansionist way in the model of Jabotinsky, that there should be a Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan river. The violence, often provoked by settlers, in the West Bank, is further fanning the flames.

So, what am I, a Zionist for sure, but also a Zionist who is liberal, troubled, and exhausted, to do? What should each of us, who identify with varying expressions of Judaism and Zionism, do? The first thing is to establish ground rules of what we would like Zionism to be. Zionism must be the project of Jews to maintain a Jewish and democratic society in our ancient homeland. That means while Israel should continue to exist and thrive as the only Jewish state on earth, the only homeland we have, it needs to treat its non-Jewish citizens with equal rights, dignity, and opportunity. A decent model, for now, is the United States. Although we are overwhelmingly a Christian nation and although one political party in particular is pushing Christian nationalism and totalitarianism on us, in theory folks of all faiths, races, and backgrounds, have equal rights here. I serve as a volunteer chaplain for DC police alongside Catholic priests and evangelical ministers. Our schools- yes, I know Montgomery County is an exception- close for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur along with Eid and holidays from other faiths. As we need to make sure we reject Christian nationalism in our government, in our courts, in our society, Israel needs to reject extremist and oppressive Jewish nationalism as well. Israel can and should have a Jewish flavor to it- without being intolerable or exclusive. As liberal Jews, we have a special role to play here because we believe Judaism is not only compatible with but supports and nourishes democracy. We believe every person, no matter their faith, is worthy of respect and dignity. So, the Israel we want to see thrive and flourish needs to reflect our values, and we need to be involved in making that happen. My Zionism compels me to

support organizations like the Israel Religious Action Center and Women of the Wall. My Zionism means I travel to Israel when I can to support our liberal and progressive synagogues and institutions over there. I invite you to consider coming with me on our Temple Emanuel trip in February- there's room for you!

The second thing we desperately need to do is educate ourselves and the people around us. There are so many great resources and books out there. I recommend Amir Tibon's book which just came out. It is called "The Gates of Gaza." In it, Tibon, a journalist for Haaretz, documents his father's unbelievably heroic journey to rescue Amir and his family from their home in Kibbutz Nahal Oz on October 7th. Throughout the harrowing narrative which reads like something out of a movie, he interjects critical and historical information about the founding of the state and the stories of the communities in the Gaza envelope. I also recommend learning about organizations on the Israeli left who are working to end the war, bring the hostages home, and look towards a brighter future for Israelis and Palestinians alike. Some of my favorites are Omdim Bayachud, standing together, Breaking the Silence which consists of folks who served in the IDF and are now quite critical, and Teruah, Rabbis for Human Rights. I do not agree with all of their positions, but I know they believe in Zionism and critique Israel for the sake of making it better, not for the sake of destroying it.

The third thing we need to do during these difficult days is call out Jew hate whenever and wherever we see it. No Zionists allowed is the new No Jews, blacks, or dogs. Jew hate is filled with conspiracy theories, and we need to debunk those with facts, with evidence, with truth. That means refuting the Marjorie Taylor Greene's of the world that we can control the weather- although the Jewish Museum in Philadelphia is selling some cool "Jewish space laser crew" t-shirts, along with the Ilhan Omar's who have said Jewish college students supporting Israel are pro-genocide. Some people are filled with hate and will never accept any sort of Jewish state in the land of Israel. Unfortunately, they are unwinnable. But many others, including I'm guessing many of our friends, are simply misinformed. We need to try and reach out to them, to educate and teach, and hear them out. We need to acknowledge the suffering that is happening in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon. We need to name it correctly. It is not genocide- it is not a deliberate attempt to wipe out a people the way the Jews of Europe were systemically murdered in the Shoah. But this war is awful and brutal. No matter how hard the IDF tries to preserve civilian life, and I believe they try incredibly hard, they make mistakes. Innocent men, women, and children are being killed every day. That deserves our sympathy and our condemnation. And we need to remember who the enemies of peace are. They are Hamas. They are Hezbollah. They are the radical, cruel, extremist government of Iran. They are Smotrich and Ben Gvir and anybody who thinks it is acceptable to degrade, humiliate, and murder others. They are any organization which doesn't believe Israel has a right to exist like Jewish Voice for Peace, or Students for Justice in Palestine. They are any organization that believes the Palestinians are not real or do not have the right to exist, like the so-called Zionist Organization of America. We should aim to have a broad tent, a tent with room for many ideas and arguments and opinions. But anybody who is an absolutist, who thinks I am completely right and you are completely wrong, who doesn't want a better future for all people, they are not welcome in our tent nor should we tolerate their hatred.

The final thing we need to do is to be proud of our Zionism. I am so proud of our college students who are defying the hate, who are becoming more active in Hillel and standing up to bullies and misinformation and toxic Jew hating professors. I see you; I've spoken with you, I follow you on social media and I want you to know that even as you are on the frontlines, you have the support and admiration and love of this community. I was proud of our large delegation that traveled down to the National Mall last November in support of Israel, even though the rally included some speakers that should not have been there, folks who have odious and hateful views. I am proud of the challenging and courageous conversations we have had, with Kohenet April Baskin and most recently, with our guests Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger and Noor Awad, who brought their amazing program Roots to us as our Global Mitzvah Shabbaton. They are working for dialogue, understanding, and peace in the West Bank, and they need our support more than ever. The prouder we can be of our Zionism, a Zionism which supports Israel and also the Palestinian right for self-determination, a Zionism which is inclusive, a Zionism which carries our ancient longings but also our modern ideas for tolerance and acceptance of all, the better off the Jewish people, Israel, and the world will be.

This is not going to be an easy task. Our world has become more complicated, and yet we yearn for simplification. I wish I could find a way to fit my sermon onto a bumper sticker, but it's certainly not as catchy as the slogans we see and hear from all sides of the conflict. As this war drags on, as people bent on evil remain in power on all sides, as the hostages linger in horrifyingly awful conditions, we are growing wearier. But we do not have a choice to disengage, for I believe that could mark the end of Judaism. After seventy-five years of existence, the United States found itself in the throes of the civil war. After nearly seventy-five years of existence, Israel elected an extremist and divisive right-wing government that caused major frictions within the people, which I believe provided an opening for Hamas to launch its deadly massacre. But we cannot allow our two-thousand-year-old dream, the dream brought to life by Herzl, to die. Imagine a world without a Jewish state. For thousands of years, that was our reality. And it was not great. We need Israel because whether or not we have a home, the reality is that some folks will never accept us and will do their best to denigrate, hurt, and destroy us. While that's a topic for a different sermon, I much prefer us having a place to go if needed. The United States is my home, but I know, and frankly, as a student of history, I expect that one day, this will change. That is why since God made a promise to Abraham, we have been Zionists, yearning for home, to be free to be ourselves, to live like every other nation on earth. My name is Adam, and I am, in spite of the hate and the lies and the challenges, now and always, a proud Zionist.