

**The Fourth Quarter has begun:**

**Israel on the precipice of disaster or the brink of renewal**

Debbie sing: Od lo Avda Tikvatenu

Hatikvah, bat Shnot Alpaim

L'hiyot am Chofshi

B'artzenu, Eretz Tzion V'yerslalayim

“We still have not lost our hope

The hope of 2,000 years

To be a free people, in our own land

The land of Zion and Jerusalem”

To be a free people in our own land

The land of Zion and Jerusalem

What does it mean to be a free people? Free from external threats? Free to exercise agency? Free to determine one's own destiny? For 2,000 years after we lost our homeland to the Roman oppressor, we dreamt, prayed and yearned as a people to return to the birthplace of where our national liberty was formed to be free to defend ourselves, to build the land and be built by it, the Zionist dream of independence, reconnecting to the soil of our ancient homeland and to our ancestors, upon which our identity as a people evolved, and was recorded in the best-selling book of all time, the Bible, our Bible, the story of us. But freedom and its expression in the form of democracy, is indeed a two edged sword. It can cut both ways. It is not a given as we have learned in our own country that freedom will always prevail. As it has been said, "Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom". Today on this Yom Kippur, A High Holy day upon which should be celebrating the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the founding of the Jewish state, is equally unfortunately about asking hard questions of the present reality which threatens to topple the achievements of the past 75 years.

Israel at 75 is not much different than when the US was 75. Then as now both democracies stood on the precipice of intolerable divides, divisions that lead one to a bloody civil war, the other to a so far non-violent protest against a government that in the eyes of many of its citizens is nothing short of an anti-democratic coup d'état by the freely elected governing coalition. On the cusp of this milestone of 75 years indeed we must understand that "past performance does not guarantee future results."

It is sobering to realize that for all of Israel's accomplishments, and there are many, nothing is a given. As one who has loved Israel, with all her flaws, perhaps even despite them who first stepped foot in this magical place 45 years ago, in 1978, I find it soberingly-incomprehensible that something so big and grand can be so fragile.

In those 45 years, I have visited Israel 22 times and lived there for long stretches at a time. All 3 of my daughters have spent significant amounts of time there, and my wife and I would not have met and married if not for this land. Amos Davidowitz one of our guides on our recent trip to Israel wrote in his book entitled A Path of Peace in the Fields of Battle “I have suffered no PTSD from many wars and battles I fought in – only now I have PTSD thinking that all that killing and potential loss of my life was for nothing.”

I have shared my love and passion for Israel with my fellow congregants in 4 congregations, comprising 12 pilgrimages to Israel, hoping to inspire the same attachment in well over 200 individuals who have travelled with me on these trips, including the 12 who made the journey with CKT just this past summer. So why? What is the source of this emotional attachment and the power of this Zionist dream to make a grown man well up with tears even on his 22<sup>nd</sup> encounter with this

land of milk and honey? Let me put it to you like this. Israel is an imperfect society, but that society is my family (my mishpucha), as one of the members of our group that travelled to Israel this summer said “Everyone I meet here is like my family, an aunt, an uncle, a brother or sister. It all just feels so natural.”

### Israel is my extended Jewish family

Israel like every other country in the world has heroes and villains, leaders with clay feet, but they are freely elected in the only democracy in the whole Middle East. Israel and Israelis stand for freedom and democracy as we witnessed first-hand this summer at the weekly protest rallies. When the rally ended and ten thousand voices united in song, singing Hatikvah, I knew in my bones that Israelis cherish freedom above all else. When I hear the Hebrew language spoken, using the same words Abraham, Moses, Isaiah and Jeremiah spoke eons ago, I am awed by my people, the only ones in history ever to revive an ancient

language which lay dormant for 2,000 years and now is the language of AI and computer software.

Israel is the center stage of Jewish history where the narratives that shaped our people's values, ideals and morals are found in every rock and hillside, in every crevice and cranny, waiting to be discovered and revived. Israel is the startup nation, the only country that can boast of more Nobel prize winners per capita than any other country in the world, whose technological knowhow and creative genius has improved the lives of millions of people across the globe.

Israel is almost always the first country to be at the scene of a natural disaster, anywhere in the world, freely offering its help, its medical prowess and rescue operations to save thousands of lives.

Israel is the only country where Jews in distress, Jews fleeing persecution or fleeing a war torn nation like Ukraine, can find instant refuge, no questions asked, no more stateless, no more powerless, Israel is a beacon of hope and security for Jews everywhere.

Finally, in 75 years Israel against all odds has managed to survive multiple wars, terrorist attacks, and threats of nuclear annihilation all while making peace with Egypt and Jordan, and normalizing relations with multiple Muslim nations.

As I've said, Israel still has much to achieve and historical blunders to undo, including ending the occupation, finding a just and peaceful solution with the Palestinians, healing rifts between the secular and religious, between Jewish Israelis and Israeli Arabs. But even with all this unfinished business, the greatness of Israel's achievements over

the past 75 years are nothing short of miraculous, awe inspiring and spectacular beyond comprehension!

And yet, as it has been said, “Past performance is no guarantee of future results.” Has it taken 75 years to reach a terminal diagnosis?

Recognizing that only twice in history before this has Israel exercised independence and sovereignty in this land, once during the time of the united monarchy of Kings Saul, David and Solomon, and the other during the Hasmonean Dynasty 163-96 BCE, both ending after only 75 years, brings us no consolation. As Bret Stephens an opinion writer stated in a recent article: “Eight decades have never been kind to Jewish sovereignty and the end has always been preceded by a massive rift among the people.”

And indeed Israel today is a deeply divided country led by a Prime Minister facing multiple criminal charges, who has surrounded himself



in his ruling coalition comprising 64 seats in the Knesset, with right wing zealots, chauvinistic extremists, messianic ideologues homophobic haters, convicted criminals, and orthodox extortionists. Once Netanyahu formed his extremist government his ministers immediately set forth to strip the Judicial branch of any real power, thus concentrating all power in the Executive and Legislative branches which in Israel are really one and the same. Many Israeli's see this as nothing other than a coup de'tate, leading to the creation of an illiberal democracy where minority rights are severely limited in the hands of an autocratic leader.

What was promised in pre-election rhetoric concerning reasonable and modest judicial reforms quickly evolved into a plot to overthrow or severely diminish democracy in Israel. In an impassioned letter written by IDF reserve officer, Udy Epstein to Jewish federations in the US, the writer implores these American communal organizations to take a

stand, a stand for freedom and democracy. Epstein whose family lived in Jerusalem since 1804 and has lost countless relatives to war, speaks for the vast majority of IDF officers and reservists when he vociferously, expressed these ominous words:

I plead with you to own up to your responsibility in this crucial urgent moment. North American Jews are stakeholders in Israel, hence the Jewish Federation has the right and the obligation to take a decisive public stand on the issue of the assault, the all-out coup d'état, against democracy in Israel. Political correctness and "neutrality" are not an option, anymore!

The Federation cannot continue to interact with the Israeli government as if its business as usual. By keeping so-called "neutrality" you WILL BE making a stand to become complicit with a radical, extremist, messianic, and destructive Government. I also assume you know that ALL polls show that the vast majority of Israelis (including many from

Likud party voters) strongly oppose this coup. The facts are overwhelming; the so-called judicial reform and 153 laws in various stages of passage through parliament to boot cannot be ignored. Each one of us will be held accountable for our moral decisions and the public positions we take today. Either you stand with Israel, its people and the values of its declaration of independence, or your de-facto collaborate with fascism and otherwise desert the Israel you supported all these years leaving it to its ultimate demise. These are urgent times; dictatorship is no small matter. Please help stop the free fall of Israel into the abyss. Gevalt! – We American Jews played the card of looking the other way when our brothers and sisters were being slaughtered in Europe 80 years ago and we know how that ended. I for one refuse to look away and do nothing as the greatest triumph and the most important National Project of the Jewish people in over 2,000 years teeters on the brink of oblivion.

[Since he wrote that letter . . . update on the current situation]

This is the time for us to join our Israeli brothers and sisters in their fight for an Israel we can still identify with as outlined in its own Declaration of Independence. This is a time for **chazon**, **chutzpah**, and **chesed**. **Chazon** means visionary leadership. Israel needs leaders who look beyond selfish ill-begotten gains constrained by narrow political interests or for power at the expense of the common good. Instead this is a time for **chazon**, a rededication to the Zionist ideals that birthed this nation as detailed in Israeli's own declaration of Independence which pledges to uphold the values of freedom, justice and peace as envisioned by the Prophets of Israel. As it states:

“Israel will ensure complete equality of social and political rights of all its citizens irrespective of religion, race or sex and it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.” This is a time for **chutzpah**, a time to rise up and speak truth to power.

Israelis have been in the streets for almost a year, refusing to be

governed by a coalition that subverts the will of the vast majority of the people who did not sign up for radical judicial reforms that render the Judicial branch inert and powerless to check the excesses of unhinged autocratic rule. This is a time for us in the diaspora to stand shoulder to shoulder with our Israeli brothers and sisters as our CKT travelers to Israel did this summer when we participated in the demonstrations in Jerusalem. In an open letter to Israeli's friends in North America, Israeli journalists and authors, Matti Friedman, Daniel Gordis and Yossi Klein Ha Levi, made the following passionate appeal:

“Israel belongs first of all to its citizens, and they have the final word. But Israel also matters to the entire Jewish people. When an Israeli government strays beyond what your commitments to liberal democracy can abide, you have both the right and the responsibility to speak up.

Israeli leaders need to hear where you stand. North American Jews and their leaders must make clear to this government that if it continues on

the path to transforming Israel into a country of which Diaspora Jews can no longer be proud, there will be no business as usual. We and our families, along with many tens of thousands of other Israelis are in the streets every week demanding the government end its war against our democratic values and institutions. We need your voice to help us preserve Israel as a state both Jewish and democratic.”

As individuals and as a congregation we need to let our representatives in congress as well as federation leaders know that an Israel that is not both Jewish and democratic is a recipe for disaster. They need to apply pressure on Israeli leaders to read the tea leaves and to take steps to heal and unify a nation that cannot afford to devolve further into chaos, that turns Jew against Jew.

This is also a time for **chesed**, kindness, mutual respect and restraint.

Emotions run hot; rhetoric on all sides is incendiary; individual acts of

hate begin to multiply. The way out of this existential crisis will only be through compromise. If one side wins, then all will be lost. Chesed must in the end reunite our people in Israel.

My friends, I call upon you to be informed about current events in Israel, to subscribe to the app known as the Times of Israel, to become a member of ARZA, our congregation's connection to Israel, to attend the multi-faceted Israel programs here at CKT, including Israel movie nights, and to visit Israel again and again. I'm announcing our next CKT trip to Israel, July 1-12, 2024. If you are interested in finding out more about this next pilgrimage, you can pick up a page like this on the way out. Most importantly, I urge you to attend an emergency town hall meeting here at CKT this coming Sunday at 7pm to learn more about the crisis in Israel, to be informed, to ask questions, to debate the issues and find out how we can make sure our voices are heard. I for

one will not stand by and watch in horror as Israel descends into the abyss. Please join me if you care about Israel.

During our CKT pilgrimage to Israel this past summer, among our many activities, was a visit to various art galleries. In one of them was a framed work of art that only had 3 Hebrew words written on a single page. It looked like this: [Put up on screen] Perek R'veen Ha-kaytz that is all. Fourth quarter; the end. What in God's name could this possibly mean? What message is being conveyed? Then a terribly disturbing thought crept into my heart. This is the last quarter, the last 25 years of Israel's existence. Then the end! But then when I looked closely at the image of the picture I had taken of this "work of art", lo and behold my reflection appears faintly in the background.

In other words, the future of Israel and as a derivative, the future of the Jewish people lies within us and our commitment to steer the course of history as Rabbi Josh Weinberg writes:



“No one can wield power except when others yield power. The power that anyone holds over us originates with us – and can ultimately be reclaimed or redirected by us”. By investing ourselves in Jewish education, positive experiences in Israel, and a sense of obligation to a shared responsibility for the fate and destiny of the Jewish people, Israel will yet survive and thrive as a Jewish and democratic state we can be proud of. With God’s help there **will** be a fifth chapter, and a sixth and so on with no end in sight.

Ken Y’hi Ratzon