

**Israel: Release from Our Vows**  
**Kol Nidrei 5785/2024**

I don't often give content warnings for what I write or say, but I wanted to offer one for my words this evening. Tonight's sermon will be about our relationship with the modern state of Israel.

Some of what I say tonight might make you uncomfortable. You might not agree with some of what I say. That's OK – as I said back at Rosh HaShanah, disagreement is not a problem. The **real** problem is not listening to and connecting with one another. When we disagree, let's strive to **understand** one another. If something I say this evening resonates or if something strikes a nerve, I invite you into conversation with me so that I can understand your perspective.

That being said, I felt called to speak about Israel this year. Since the October 7th Hamas terrorist attacks, Israel has been at war. And that war has been steadily expanding. Furthermore, approximately 100 people, kidnapped from Israel, remain as hostages in Gaza. Since October 7th, acts of antisemitism have increased dramatically worldwide and in the United States. According to the Anti-Defamation League, there have been more than 10,000 antisemitic incidents in the United States in the year since the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks.<sup>1</sup>

Not a day has gone by in the past year when I have not read or listened to something about Gaza, Israel, or the West Bank. Not a day has passed without my feeling anxious, scared, sad, or angry about what is happening in the Middle

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.axios.com/2024/10/06/adl-antisemitic-incidents-record-year-oct-7>

East as well as how those events have affected Jewish people, including me, all around the world and especially here in the United States.

As I've followed the news, I have found myself returning to the same question. How have the October 7 attacks and the subsequent and ongoing war affected my relationship with Israel?

To explore that complex question, I decided first to think about relationships I understand a little better. I needed to reflect on how relationships between people are made and sustained. Personal relationships are built on trust. As a relationship forms, people set expectations, implicit and explicit. Each person in the relationship expects the other to hold up their end of the relationship. And, of particular significance in the context of Kol Nidrei, which annuls vows we might not remember making, we are not always aware of the expectations within our relationships.

Having a relationship with an **idea** is not all that different from our interpersonal relationships. Israel, for most of modern Jewish history, has been an idea, a dream. Our ancestors longed to return to their homeland. We see their yearning in many of our prayers to this day. In the blessing before the Sh'ma, we ask God to gather us from the four corners of the world and lead us to our land. In the Amidah, we pray for the ingathering of the exiles – those Jews who are NOT in Israel – and we pray for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. At the end of every Passover seder, we say “I’shanah ha-ba’ah birushalayim” – next year in

Jerusalem. All of these expressions of hope to return have been said long before Israel was an actual state, when Israel was still an idea.

Whenever we dream about something we dearly want – a good friend, an amazing vacation, or, as with Israel, a spiritual homeland – we often idealize what we hope to experience. As an example, Theodor Herzl, the person credited with founding the modern Zionist movement, wrote a book, titled *Altneuland* or “Old New Land,” about a possible Jewish state. In his book, he envisioned a country with advanced technology, egalitarian liberal values, and equal rights for all people – Jews and non-Jews alike. In Herzl’s vision, Jews and Arabs live in harmony. Put simply, he dreamt about a beautiful but sadly unrealistic utopia for the Jewish homeland.

When the idea of Israel became reality—an actual state—expectations and promises were made. Just like the Creation story in the book of Genesis, where God creates order from chaos, the founders of modern Israel had to make order, define itself, and determine how it related to the rest of the world. This creation process meant that the people of Israel and the people not living in Israel now had certain expectations of each other. And, like a personal relationship, some of those expectations were explicit while others were less clear.

As I’ve processed the past year of war in Israel, I have noticed some big feelings in myself. I realized that, besides sadness and grief, I also feel disappointed and betrayed in some way. I have felt as though Israel has not met

some of my expectations in the aftermath of October 7. Much like a relationship with a person or an idea, my relationship with the modern state of Israel deserves to be explored and updated.

To be clear, I absolutely believe that Israel has every right, in fact is obligated, to defend herself from attack. Despite holding that firm belief, I was surprised to realize that I still felt as though Israel, or at least her government, had broken some kind of promise to me and other Jews living outside of Israel. This has not been an easy feeling for me to have, especially as Israel continues to engage in conflict.

In recent months, I felt that I needed to take a hard look at what I thought Israel might have promised me and other Jews. And that also required me to consider what Israel has expected in turn from the Diaspora.

One of the most important expectations many of us have of Israel is that it will be a homeland where all Jews can live safely and fully as Jews.

When I first started studying about Israel back in the late 1990's, I quickly heard the description that so many others have reported being told when they were children. Israel is the place where Jews from anywhere in the world can go and live as Jews, without needing to tone down their identity or assimilate into a non-Jewish majority. Furthermore, if something, Heaven forbid, were to happen in the United States or elsewhere in the Diaspora that put Jews in danger, we could always turn to Israel. Israel was described to me as a safe haven.

Over the years since then, I adopted this same belief and occasionally would think that I could always make aliyah if circumstances here were no longer tenable. The attacks on October 7th and the subsequent war have made me question that belief. Can Israel still be an escape hatch for me or for any of us? Would I feel any safer there than I do here? I no longer feel certain about the answer to those questions. A description that I considered something akin to a promise no longer feels like an absolute guarantee, and as a result I feel a sense of disappointment.

The hope that Israel would be physically and spiritually safe for all Jews irrespective of race, sexual or gender identity, denomination or style of Judaism observed has not been my only expectation. I recognize, as well, that the disappointment is not one-sided. That is, I believe Israel has thought that I and other Jews outside of Israel would behave in certain ways in our relationship.

The Israeli Declaration of Independence states:

“WE APPEAL to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally round the Jews of Eretz-Israel in the tasks of immigration and upbuilding and to stand by them in the great struggle for the realization of the age-old dream - the redemption of Israel.”<sup>2</sup>

When I was in Israel this summer, multiple Israelis asked my husband and me when we planned to move to Israel. They reminded us to rally around them in the task of immigration, and I felt a twinge of guilt for not giving this support. In

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/declaration-of-establishment-state-of-israel>

addition to helping increase the number of Jews in Israel, we also are supposed to stand by Israel.

I think I have done a little better with the expectation to stand by Israel, but I have no doubt I have disappointed at least some Israelis in recent months. If Israel expects unwavering and unquestioning support of its actions, then I have failed in that expectation, reasonable or otherwise. When I was in Israel this summer, I had Shabbat dinner with some of my husband's cousins who live there. Over dinner, we talked politics, and I asked questions about the soundness of the government's decisions with respect to Gaza among other topics. Although the cousins answered my questions, their tone and facial expressions communicated frustration with what they perceived as less than full-hearted support. I wished that giving full-hearted support could be easy, but my feelings about the war are too complicated for an easy response.

Back stateside, I also have doubts about how well I have stood by Israel over the past year. My statement that Israel has a right and an obligation to defend herself has become more qualified. I often find myself limiting my statement of support by mentioning how I think it is possible to go too far such that defense becomes offense. Additionally, making a statement like "I support Israel in her quest for peace" does not really demonstrate the support I think Israel expects.

When we make our dreams into reality, the reality rarely matches the dream completely. We meet the life partner of our dreams only to discover that this partner is 100% human – beautiful, lovable, and flawed. Our partner cannot possibly meet all of our expectations, no matter how well-intended they are.

When a person does not meet our expectations or breaks a promise, we have to make at least one choice. Do we want to remain in a relationship with this person even though they let me down? Even though they did not do what they promised?

Israel also is beautiful, lovable, and flawed. And Israel has not lived up to all of my hopes and expectations this year. Given that Israel has disappointed me in some ways and I have not met her expectations in other ways, I'm left wondering about my relationship with Israel. Unlike interpersonal relationships which can end, I do not believe I can end my relationship with Israel, and I don't want to. Wrestling with the complexities of Israel is a core aspect of Judaism.

The question then becomes how to reset my expectations so that I can remain in a strong relationship with Israel. Tonight, on Kol Nidrei, we heard the hauntingly beautiful melody for words which help us to let go of past failings and hopefully our feelings about those disappointments. The words of Kol Nidrei annul any vows we make to God either accidentally or carelessly. They make it possible to let go of expectations or promises not kept. Kol Nidrei enables us to reset our relationship with our Creator and enter the new year fresh.

In our machzor, Kol Nidrei declares:

“All vows, oaths, and promises which we made to God from last Yom Kippur to this Yom Kippur and were not able to fulfill—may all such vows between ourselves and God be annulled. May they be void and of no effect. May we be absolved of them and released from them.”<sup>3</sup>

I would like to suggest that we use this framework to help us reset our relationship with Israel so that we can continue in strength together. We can identify and recognize the promises we thought Israel made to us, and we can consider whether those expectations are reasonable at this time. If the expectations are not reasonable or achievable right now, we can let go of them. Or we can choose to have compassion on our spiritual homeland and reflect on how we might help Israel meet our expectations better.

For example, if I want Israel to be a safe place for all Jews, then I can find ways to help Israel become that haven. In fact, it may be through striving to meet Israel’s requests that I am able to help Israel be the type of country I have dreamed about. Israel wants the Diaspora to stand by her. Standing by Israel does not mean blind unquestioning support of all of the government’s policies. Instead, we can help make the dream into a reality with some form of action.

I am still considering how I will support Israel more actively this year, and I will be meditating on it over the course of Yom Kippur and making a plan of action after the fall festival season. Each of us can find our own unique ways to

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<sup>3</sup> Mahzor Hadash, p.399  
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support Israel whether through financial contributions, speaking up for Israel when others demonize it, or some other action. As we engage with Israel, such as when we meet for Israel Chavurah once a month on Shabbat, and when we offer our support, perhaps Israel will become gradually safer for all of her inhabitants and once again be our place of refuge.

Kol Nidrei recognizes that we have broken promises and made promises we would become unable to fulfill, and it allows us to remain in relationship with God, with other people and even with Israel, despite our failings. Through releasing ourselves from the vows we could not keep, we are able to redefine our relationship and adjust our expectations so that we can connect authentically.

I do not have answers to offer about the geopolitical situation, or even how to counter antisemitism. What I do know for certain is that Israel needs us, and we need Israel. I am not ready to give up on my relationship with that beautiful and flawed place, and I dearly want to find a way to deepen my connection with our spiritual homeland. In a lot of ways, this feeling is a form of teshuvah, a desire to change the direction of a relationship; to find a new way forward together.

When we hear the words of Kol Nidrei, we are reminded that we can start anew, that we can work towards keeping our promises in our relationship with God, with other people, and even with Israel as our homeland. This process of returning requires us to face how we have been disappointed and how we have

not met expectations in our relationships. Confronting these failings can be uncomfortable, even painful, so we need to find compassion for ourselves and for others just as God has compassion for us.

On this Yom Kippur, let's recognize that relationships change over time and that we can remain in those relationships even after some hurt has happened. At this time when we ask God to release us from our unkept promises, let's offer our relationship with Israel, and with one another, the same grace and compassion. May we find within ourselves the capacity to let go of those expectations which have prevented us from deepening our relationship with our spiritual homeland. May our decision to release ourselves and Israel from the disappointments of this year allow us to heal and renew our connection with Israel so that our relationship brings us strength and blessing in the new year.