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Kol Nidre Sermon
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Israel, A Love Story

When I was in high school, I fell in love for the first time. I didn't really talk about it much because it was pretty one sided, and I wasn't quite sure what I was feeling. I was smitten – she was everything I was not – strong, proud, tough, resilient and hauntingly beautiful. She was older and more worldly, but her upbringing was deeply troubled – rough neighborhoods and deep family trauma had left her abrasive and arrogant at times. When I asked her about it, she brushed it off explaining that even though she was thriving when we met, she'd been through a lot and hadn't fully let go of seeing herself as a victim. Despite her strong personality and tendency toward lashing out at those whom she disliked, in the face of her magnetism, wit, and exotic nature, I willingly overlooked any shortcomings. Still, we were young, and my parents were a bit dubious about my infatuation. Despite the intensity of our connection, over time and distance we lost touch. She remained in the recesses of my soul, tugging at my heart, like a whispered longing.

Years later, as I started Cantorial school, we reconnected. She was just as beautiful and electric as I remembered. She had flourished with powerful new friends around the globe, and made millions in technology, cyber security and medical advances. She told me she had come to see her life story as a kind of miracle, which it was. She was sophisticated, yet I felt at home with her – alive and vibrant – like my favorite version of myself, valued for who I am, even as a Jew, which wasn't always how I felt. Still, there was a certain tension in her, and I knew she harbored secrets I had yet to uncover, nursed a dark past and regularly fended off attacks from powerful enemies. But the closer we got, the more I saw a side of her that troubled me deeply. When she felt threatened, she could be a terrible bully and if provoked or frightened would sometimes wield her power over others in ways that were antithetical to who I was and who I believed her to be.

Now I understand the version of her story she shared when we were kids was a broad stroke ideal – the one she needed to tell at the time, and I needed to hear. Today, our relationship remains strong, no longer a one-sided infatuation on my part. As a grownup, I realize that like me, she is human and flawed, tormented and at times, heartbreakingly vulnerable. Still, being with her feels like home. So,

who is this mysterious on and off again relationship? Her name is Israel – beautiful, traumatized, wildly successful, deeply troubled Israel.

I imagine some of you have similarly fraught histories with Israel – a once fledgling Zionist dream seemingly too good to be true; a courageous, victorious David emerging in triumph over one terrifying Goliath after another; a tiny Jewish gem in a great sea of Arab countries who for years have been intent on her destruction. Early on, it was easy to revel in the glory of a young Israel defying all odds to achieve statehood – self-determined sovereignty after years of subjugation and persecution – a phoenix rising out of the ashes of the millions of Jews murdered in Europe during the Holocaust. The victory of independent statehood in 1948 was cause for collective Jubilation, exhales of relief and “national pride” by Jews around the globe. And of course, the miracles continued. Many of you may have watched in disbelief – 1948, 1967, 1972 bearing witness to the miracle as our nearly powerless homeland defied the odds, defeating her enemies, and transforming from a newborn nation state into a power player on the world stage. You marveled as Israel faced existential threats on her borders, terrorist attacks at home and on citizens abroad and triumphed repeatedly. Perhaps, like me, Israel even left you feeling proud to be Jewish. No longer were we the helpless meek victims of barbaric European antisemitism, but strapping, heroic gun toting soldiers protecting our citizens, making the desert bloom and taking in Jewish refugees from around the world. We had finally claimed the Jewish power that had, for centuries been denied or stolen. And it felt good!

For Israel, that meant liberation, freedom, safety, a place to come home, for all Jews, everywhere. For many early on, this newfound Jewish power was glorious and intoxicating – a welcome antidote to centuries of expulsion, violence and oppression. As early as 1948 with her statehood, Israel became a haven, not just for Jews escaping Europe, but also for Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews expelled from countries like Egypt, Morocco, Iran, Syria and others. Israel became a homeland and a refuge, a fortress for all these Jews – a bulwark against perpetual Jewish victimhood. Slowly though, it seems that our brave, heroic David, the underdog who so gallantly slew Goliath at each encounter, eventually became Goliath, drunk on power, and that my friends can be a much harder ideal to get behind.

It is a nuanced ideal – a delicate balance – because with each subsequent challenge Israel faces, her power is needed; it guarantees her sovereignty, but power alone cannot provide what her people, what every day Israelis want and need most: peace. And many of the ways in which Israel has gone about securing that peace are abhorrent to us here in the safety of western liberal Jewish society.

It is easy for us to look from afar and pass judgment on what is and is not acceptable, to point fingers and condemn an entire country and its people for the actions of certain leaders at certain times. To be clear, I have seen for myself during the year I lived in Israel with my family both the beautiful and the repugnant fruits of Israel's security efforts. I have felt the comfort of armed soldiers on the bus with me, in the same trolley car taking my 7-year-old daughter to the dentist. I have shared audible sighs of relief and prayers of gratitude upon hearing the Iron Dome destroy rockets launched with intent to destroy an area where I was hiking with my family and my classmates. And I have cried in dismay standing in the squalor of a West Bank village, the laughter of the Israeli Settlement Gush Etzion's school children echoing across the hill, as we toured the one room leaking tin shack in which the village's Palestinian children attend school. I have shouted in rage during a visit to Bethlehem upon learning our hosts are allowed electricity for just a few hours in the evening; shivered in the cold of the February morning after showering without hot water, and marveled at their generosity, giving freely of what little they had, sharing their pain at being cut off from family, safe work and friends because of the Israeli security barrier. And yet, the security barrier saves lives and kept us safe while we lived there. So, my love for Israel remains strong. I will not turn my back on her simply because she is less than perfect.

Beginning in the early 2000s, a false dichotomy has arisen between Zionism and Liberalism, an increasingly contrived pressure, particularly on progressive American Jews and Zionists, among which I count myself, to choose between Israel as a democratic state or Israel as a secure one. It's a kind of litmus test – you are either pro-Israel and support unconditionally everything her government does, or you're not, and therefore you do not love Israel. Excuse me? Do we require the same unquestionable allegiance in the United States? Such a stark disconnect I'm afraid has served to alienate an entire generation of young Jews, many of whom desperately want a relationship with Israel but strongly reject the human rights violations and settlement expansion that persist. Our children and young adults whom we have raised to understand that progressive Judaism champions justice, compassion and human dignity – to whom we have preached that our Torah teaches our responsibility to care for those in need, lift up the fallen, speak out for the voiceless and to not oppress the stranger. On the other side of the coin, those young people who have grown up in staunchly Zionist homes and synagogues without the benefit of frank conversation around the complexities of Israel, her Arab citizens and the Palestinians living in the Land arrive on the college campus completely unprepared to address (often harsh)

critiques of Israel's policies and the increasing wave of anti-Zionist and antisemitic activity on campuses across this country.

So, I ask you, why does it have to be either or? There is a fundamental principle in Hebrew, "*Kol Yisrael aravim zeh be zeh*" – All Israel is responsible for one another. I suggest to you that in this context, *Yisrael* refers to those of us in and out of the Land. As Jews, we are all one people, one family. What do you do when a member of your family heads down a path with which you disagree? Abandoned them? Take a step back? Or do you move forward to support, comfort, guide and help? My friends, as Jews, we have it pretty good in this country, despite all its faults. Some people think, "we don't need Israel today." And maybe that is true to some degree in this country. Antisemitism is certainly increasing at alarming rates across the US, and it isn't 1940s Europe. But that doesn't mean Israel isn't coming to the rescue of persecuted Jews in other parts of the world. Please God, we don't ever have to worry about that here in the US. When Jews are in trouble, Israel doesn't ask, which Jews – American Jews? Syrian? Iraqi Jews? Israel takes action to save and protect, regardless. *Kol Yisrael aravim zeh be zeh*.

We may not need Israel right now. But Israel needs us, desperately, especially our progressive voice. Israel, Israelis and the current government need that support, that solidarity that says, we have your back. Israel needs the voice that calls her to account for her transgressions against humanity. Yes, criticize Israel's government and its policies which are at odds with what we as Jews believe to be fundamental tenets of a just society. Hold the administration to a high standard just like you do with our own government. And do so from a place of knowledge and balance. Consider where you get your information about Israel? I respectfully suggest you seek out sources beyond US television media to develop a more nuanced understanding of what is really happening in the Land. I say this because there is so much anti-Israel, anti-Zionist bias on both sides of the aisle in this country and around the world, it is often hard to distinguish fact from spin.

As your spiritual leader, it is vital you know of my deep love for Israel and my steadfast belief in the absolute need and right of her existence. Please also understand how distraught I am by the disregard of basic human rights and dignity we have seen in the West Bank and Jerusalem over the past several years, not to mention what is going on today as the current administration pushes forward with its judicial coup. By now I think many of you know how much I love Torah and the lessons therein, and how passionate I am about maintaining their relevance today, particularly when it comes to our youth. I have a responsibility as your Cantor to ignite in your children and grandchildren a fierce and deep love for

Israel while at the same time emphasizing the Torah's commandments regarding Tikkun Olam and the vision of our Prophets to beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Perhaps I am an idealist, but I am also a pragmatist. I worry because I know there is a moral cost to Israel's security concerns. Israel's Declaration of Independence assures safety, security and equal treatment for ALL peoples living in the Land. Increasing security doesn't give us a free pass to disregard the rights of Arab Israelis and Palestinians. I worry that the current policies of settlement expansion and turning a blind eye to land confiscation and home demolitions imperils Israel's existence, ignites and "justifies" Hamas terrorism and gives credence to antisemitic United Nations claims that Israel is racist and brutal. And I worry that I have delayed too long sharing with you my thoughts on Israel, and that in so doing I have ceded a piece of my own humanity.

My friends, the word Zion is not only about one people, one land or one messiah. Zion is the epitome of a belief – the belief that what exists now is not all we have a right to hope for. There can be more. A Zionist is one who believes in the highest potential for the people and for a nation. I remain a Zionist even though what I see in Israel today falls short of the dream of Zion upon which I was raised. My prayers, hopes and efforts concerning Israel and the eradication of antisemitism are built sturdily upon my optimism about the future – the future that is possible for Israel AND for this country. For me, there is hope when I, when we, Jews and citizens of the world can separate our love for the dream from our dismay with those in power. Over the next 24 hours, we will stand together multiple times asking forgiveness for a litany of human failures, whether we individually feel we have committed the transgression or not. As Rabbi Dov Elkins reminds us, by reciting this confession as a group, we recall that "the failure of the individual is very often the result of the shortcomings of the society or community in which one lives." *Kol Yisrael aravim zeh be zeh...* How will you stand up for Israel in this new year? I ask, can you separate the dream – *HaTikvah* – the hope from what is currently repugnant just as you do here at home? After much wrestling, I have concluded that for me, this is the only way forward, because after all these years, I am still in love with Israel – troubled, achingly beautiful, miraculous – *our* Tzion. I invite you to explore with me how you too might fall into that love.

G'mar Chatima Tovah, may you and *Kol Yisrael* be sealed for blessing in the year ahead...