

Kol Nidre Sermon 5771
Rabbi Fine

Tonight I would like to speak about Israel. I speak from the perspective of one who loves Eretz Yisrael, Medinat Yisrael, and *am Yisrael* – the Land of Israel, the State of Israel, and the people of Israel.

I believe these three loves are inextricably intertwined. This certainly has been the case in my personal history. I would like to share with you today some of what has shaped my perspective on Israel.

We are at a critical time in the history of the State of Israel, and in Jewish history. I believe now is as important a time as ever for American Jews to be involved and connected to Israel, and to work to ensure its healthy future not only physically but also spiritually.

I am here to ask us tonight to consider what it means to support Israel not only with our material resources, but with our souls as well. I hope that looking through the lens of my personal experience with Israel will help us begin to address this question this Yom Kippur.

In the late 1800's, my great great grandparents journeyed to Tsfat, the mountain town in the North of Israel that has been the heart of Jewish mysticism for hundreds of years. They came from Galicia in Eastern Poland.

The story goes that my great great grandfather, Shalom miPodeitz, Shalom of the town of Podeitz Poland, walked this immense distance when he was just a teenager.

Both he and his wife, Tziviya were from Chassidic families, and Shalom was a *m'kubal*, a kabbalist. Without a doubt it was religious yearning

for eretz Yisrael that led them to take this journey.

I lived in Tsfat for a couple months years ago, and the mountainside town remains a place of tremendous spiritual power, a place I consider my spiritual home in Israel.

Shalom and Tziviya sent their young children to the more populated Jerusalem for school, where they lived in the home of a Hasidic rebbe.

My great grandfather Baruch married and had 3 children in the religious neighborhood of Mea Shearim, including my grandfather Jacob. Before World War I things were tough, and Baruch came to the States, sending for my great grandmother Sarah Rivkah and their children a few years later.

Baruch's 4 siblings remained in Jerusalem, which has led to the fact that I have many many cousins who I am just getting to know now in Israel.

I spent the year after high school in Israel, and early in the year I traveled to Tsfat to search for the graves of my great great grandparents. On that trip, I had the good fortune to meet an American-born kabbalistic painter in the artist's colony, named Avraham, who became a close friend.

The summer leading up to that year, I had been going through a spiritual growth spurt so to speak, during which I was constantly pondering the big questions in life. With Avraham, I discovered a side of Judaism that spoke to my deepest life experiences. That entire year became a journey of spiritual exploration and discovery.

It was over the course of that year in Israel that Judaism became the central passion of my life. I wouldn't be standing here before you as a rabbi if it weren't for the range of experiences I had there.

It was only in the Land of Israel and the State of Israel that I could have

the experience awakened me to the power of *am Yisrael* - the community of people to which we belong that transcends the bounds of a single lifetime or generation.

The meaning and purpose of my life deepened as I found connection to something larger than myself - the tradition of our ancestors and its core assertion that the world can yet become the place we dream of, a place where the ultimate preciousness of life is appreciated and celebrated. A world filled with justice and peace, a world in which the ultimate unity of all of creation is realized.

I've chosen to go back to Israel whenever I've had the opportunity, which thank God has been often; living there for about 3 years of my life altogether. I fell in love with so much about Israel. The diversity of the people, middle Eastern culture and music, and of course the food; the amazing fresh fruit and veggies and pastries and pita with olive oil and zatar.

Good thing I'm giving this talk tonight and not tomorrow, further into the fast!

And of course I fell in love with the great power and beauty of the land itself, from the crisp air and spectacular wild flowers of the Galil to the night sky of the Negev desert filled with more stars than empty space.

During college, I spent time on Kibbutz Eliyahu where I worked in the date fields, starting work before dawn to avoid the heat of the day. During that period I felt more than ever the fragility of the modern State of Israel.

It was a time of political challenge within Israel, as always, and it was also a period of great confusion in our own country, with the results of the American presidential election hanging in the balance for weeks. Amidst the peace of the slow calm life on kibbutz, I also felt profoundly and with fear how there is truly no guarantee that the State of Israel will

be around forever.

Indeed, 62 years in the context of the history of that land is like the blink of an eye. Learning the history of the Land of Israel is overwhelming and awe-inspiring.

It is hard to keep the dynasties straight, with layer upon layer of history of one group conquering the land and then eventually losing it to another and another and another ad infinitum.

I was blessed to grow up in an era when Israel existed, and time when unlike our ancestors for thousands of years, I could simply hop on a plane and be there. But going to Israel is still not just a trip for me, but a spiritual journey. Every time I make it to Israel or leave the country remains a time of real emotion for me.

During my year in Israel after high school, I was touched by the writings of the early Zionist thinkers. From the vision of the secular Zionist A.D Gordon of a Jewish people reborn through a renewed connection with the natural world and with physical labor, to the profound beauty of the transcendent messianic vision of Rav Kook, I found deep inspiration.

Rav Kook the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Palestine prior to the creation of the state of Israel, viewed the coming of the messiah not as the sudden arrival of a man on a donkey but rather as the gradual awakening of the world to greater and greater degrees of spiritual awareness, at which Israel would be the heart.

The more *religious* Zionist part of my soul was given to likewise dreaming of this miraculous new period of Jewish sovereignty in the land as part of the fulfillment of that ancient dream of Judaism of a perfected world.

Who wouldn't be moved by the power of our miraculous return to the Land - a people who had prayed 3 times a day during 2000 years after

exile from the land, *“v’leyerushalayim ircha b’rachamim tashuv – return us to your city Jerusalem with compassion.”*

But I also came to see over the course of time, that despite the spiritual truth that underlay my feelings, the state of Israel was anything but a perfected place. I came to understand that the ideas of the early Zionist thinkers were profound but also at times naïve, blinded by the spiritual power of return that was so heightened by centuries of persecution and trauma.

For example, I came to understand the naivete of the notion that we would be returning to a land without a people. Indeed there were real people there with deep roots in the land as well. There were other narratives of identity and connection with the land that didn’t match up with our narrative, people with histories that were also at times quite pained and tragic.

One memory from my year in Israel after high school comes to mind as a poignant metaphor for this dichotomy of experience. It took place during a time period of intense spiritual reconnection for me.

One night, I sat at Hebrew university on the gravel edge of the outdoor basketball court. I have always said, this basketball court has the most incredible view in the world, with a clear and close panorama of the heart of the old city.

As I sat there under the branches of old olive trees, looking out at the gleaming gold of the Dome of the Rock and the yellow glow of the limestone of the old city, I found myself saying outloud, "I can live nowhere else."

And then suddenly a large pack of wild dogs burst out from across the gravel parking lot and starting hurling towards me barking ferociously. I was on my feet sprinting before I knew what happened, narrowly escaping.

The spiritual pull of Jerusalem is real. So is the wild pack of dogs that chases you to wake you up and remind you that the dream is far from reality yet.

Over the years, my love of Israel has deepened and likewise has my understanding of the complexity of Israeli society.

I have come to see the brokenness of Israeli society that is compounded and often obscured by the chronic state of security emergency there – with divides between religious and secular, between rich and poor, between Jewish Israeli and Arab Israeli, between ashkenazi Jew and sephardi Jew, between older generation Jews and Ethiopian and Russian Jews.

Likewise, I have spent enough time in Israel to taste the bitterness of the violence in the land on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab conflicts.

When I was in 10th grade, my brother Jacob spent his year after high school in Israel with Young Judaea. In Jerusalem, he acquired a favorite café in downtown Jerusalem, a funky little place covered with bookshelves. One day while he was there, they suddenly heard machine gun shots overhead.

A terrorist was on the roof of the building. For 45 minutes everyone in the shop feared for their lives, as they lay on the ground underneath tables listening to machine gun fire close by.

My brother spent the time on the floor behind the counter holding an Israeli waitress' hand, unable to understand most of what the army was shouting into megaphones outside. Thank God, somehow no one in the café was physically injured.

During my own year in Israel after high school, we were fit for gas masks along with all Israelis, as we lived our daily lives with the threat of chemical or biological attack by Saddam Hussein.

Later that year I lived for a period of time on Kibbutz Baram, one of the oldest kibbutzim, directly on the Northern border with Lebanon. Sitting on the rocks one night enjoying the night sky of northern Israel with friends, I noticed red streaks in the sky a few miles away.

At first we thought that they were helicopters, but then realized they were katusha rockets coming in from Lebanon over the mountain onto the ever vulnerable town of Kiryat Shemonah.

And during the 6 months I spent in Israel studying in preparation for rabbinical school, I had another frightening experience. Sitting one day at the kitchen table of my godparents in Jerusalem, we heard a boom and a shake.

At first I thought it was an earthquake. Soon Adi, my godparents daughter came running in, saying it was a *pigua*, a terrorist attack, grabbing her camera to run down the street to take pictures of the bus that had blown up a few blocks away. Every Israeli has their own way of coping with the reality they live with I guess.

I have also tasted the violence that comes from the Israeli side, sometimes in actions, sometime in inciteful words.

That morning of the bus bombing, at the yeshiva I was studying at, I heard words garbed as Torah from the Rosh Yeshiva, that to me was hate speech, expressing a theology that included generalized hatred towards arabs.

It was not the only time I felt the strange dichotomy there between great Talmud classes, and worldviews that were skewed and anything but

truly religious to me.

During that half year, I shared an apartment in downtown Jerusalem with two brothers from North Carolina who had made aliyah, one who was a paratrooper commando, the other in personal training getting ready to try out for the even more elite unit Navy commando unit. I have often referred to these guys as Rambo 1 and Rambo 2.

These guys were on the one hand relaxed Americans from North Carolina who like to listen to bluegrass. But I also was deeply frightened by their mind-sets. They were excited to kill arabs. One day over a meal they gleefully discussed an independent plan to attack arabs near a West bank outpost settlement where a friend lived, planning to tie them up and essentially terrorize and torture them to get them to leave the area.

During this same time period, I visited my rabbi from college for Shabbas at his daughter's apartment in the arab village of Ras al Amud in East Jerusalem, in a fenced in compound built by an American Jew across from a police station. I learned that the police station used to house a school for Arab children until the building was taken over by Israel to protect the compound.

Another particularly striking experience occurred during the year that Emily and I spent in Israel during my time in rabbinical school. My family was visiting, and along with my Godparents, we were hiking in *maktesh Ramon*, the extraordinary crater in the negev desert.

As we were hiking, Israel airforce jets started to fly over the crater and then veer to the West, letting off missiles, then circling back. At first, we thought that they were practice runs. But then I thought about where we were. In this terribly small country, the Gaza Strip was not far to the West. Indeed later that day, I saw in the news, that a significant bombing of Gaza had taken place.

My intention is not to equate this with a terrorist act such as a bus bombing. But when you feel the power of those jets, and watch the missiles being launched, knowing they are landing in an enclosed highly overpopulated area where there are militants but also civilians, you can not help but be shaken.

No matter what your politics are, being so close to the destruction of human life is disturbing.

These feelings were only amplified when a year or two later I watched on CNN, Christine Amanpour's trip to Gaza after the Gaza campaign had ended.

In a Gazan school, I saw how during art time, when the kids were free to draw whatever they wanted with crayons, every single little kid ended up drawing planes with bombs dropping or something of the sort.

One can not help feel deep sadness at the depth of trauma within both the Israeli and Palestinian populations, with violence begetting trauma begetting anger and hatred begetting more violence.

I am thankful to say that I have also witnessed tremendous humanity and courage in Israel.

My friend Eliyahu McClain co-founded an organization called the Jerusalem Peacemakers with his friend, the Sufi Sheik Aziz. I hope in the future to bring them to speak here at Temple Sinai. For years, these two remarkable individuals have been gathering Jewish Muslim Christian and Druze religious leaders to establish real relationships and move towards true co-existence.

The religious leaders coming together are not left wing hippies, they are serious imam's and west bank ultra-orthodox rabbi's, such as the long bearded Rabbi Fruman from the West Bank settlement of Tekoa.

Rabbi Fruman and his colleagues have been establishing a "board of friendship" consisting of Jewish and Muslim religious leaders committed to establishing peace in the holy land.

In a letter to Abu Mazen, Rabbi Fruman said the following:

"From the difficult experience of the shared history of the two nations – the Israel nation and the Palestinian nation – we can learn one important thing – between two brothers – when one's fate is bad, the fate is also bad of the second. Only when it is good for one, it will be, with God's help, good for its double. Little Jewish children know the famous story of the man who came to the head of the Jewish Sages and asked him to teach him the principle of the Jewish religion while he was standing on one foot. The Sage taught him, 'Love your neighbor exactly how you would love yourself.' If both nations will be fortunate to stone the Cursed Satan who stimulates war and hate, and establish Jerusalem as a capital of peace, there will be, God Willing, Jerusalem the Capital of Peace for the whole world!"

I had the privilege of going with Eliyahu to visit his friend Sheik Aziz in arab East Jerusalem, at his family home near to the Temple mount, where his family has lived for several generations. Next to his home they have a private cemetery where his parents, grandparents and great-grandparents are all buried.

He welcomed us into his home graciously, and showed us an unbelievable collection of one of a kind hand written Sufi mystical manuscripts that have been passed down in his family of Sheik's for 7 generations.

I likewise experienced warm hospitality during a trip to the west bank city of Bethlehem. Emily and I went with a group called Encounter, a group started by a conservative rabbinical student about 10 years ago, which brings Jewish leaders to West Bank cities to meet Palestinians.

During the visit, Emily and I stayed overnight with a Christian Palestinian family, where we were welcomed with true middle Eastern hospitality, with home made juice made from fruit grown on their property.

I saw the tears in the father's eyes when he pointed out the window towards the Israeli settlement across the valley that led to the creation of a settler-only highway that cut him off from the olive groves that had been his family's livelihood for generations.

Some of my most profoundly relaxed and positive interactions with Muslims have taken place during vacation trips from Israel to the Sinai peninsula in Egypt and to Petra, Jordan. In Sinai, Emily and I spent a week on the Red Sea, where a sweet Bedouin man and his family run a rustic vacation resort.

Israelis from Tel Aviv and Egyptians from Cairo hang out, playing music, and enjoying heavenly snorkeling right off the beach.

In Petra, my best friend James and I shot footage for a documentary we have yet to edit about the Bedouin who live in the ancient caves at this world heritage site.

As our new friend Sabah took us by donkey to meet her extended family and friends, who live more than rustic lives, we were consistently and genuinely welcomed with the sort of hospitality that allowed me to understand the true desert roots of our mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*, welcoming guests.

For them it's a way of life. (As a sidenote, if you ever visit Sabah's sister, I'd recommend declining the goat's milk 3 hours donkey ride from refrigeration).

These experiences are a breath of fresh air in the tense land of Israel, but they are not uncommon. They are a reminder that we are all human, and it feels so good when we can remember that and assert that together.

Nothing exemplifies this as well as the recent experience of my close friend from college, Barya, who made aliyah after college. Barya studied for many years in the west bank settlement of Bat Ayin. He is a *breslov hasid* with long *peas*. But Judaism is not Barya's only passion. He is a big guy, and during college, his great joy was playing on the Oberlin football team.

His dream of being able to be both ultra-orthodox and a crushing football star didn't end in college. An Israeli football league started a number of years ago, and Barya is now the coach of the Judaen rebels.

But the Judaen rebels aren't just Jews, there are Arab Muslims from East Jerusalem as well. Barya has a rule – no politics on the field. On the field, they are just close friends, humans, and serious football players seeking a championship together.

I believe that as American Jews, it is our role not only to help ensure the security of Israel from those who seek to destroy it, but also to strive to foster the deep humanity found there in the face of the cycles of violence.

I believe that first and foremost, the foundation that will allow us to do so is our own ability for constructive, civil, and inspired discourse with one another about Israel.

Just as Israel is a land of passion, it engenders passion for those of us who live outside the land, for good and for bad.

In the past year, I have become concerned by the increasing polarization of the American Jewish community when it comes to Israel.

Israel has the potential to be that which unifies the Jewish people. It is without a doubt the central place of the Jewish people, no matter how important New York City and its H&H bagels may be. Israel is the place where Jews of all different stripes interact.

I am always so grateful for the opportunity to shul hop there -- from Kurdish selichot in the North, to sunrise singing at the illustrious Syrian Ades synagogue in Nachlaot, to the middle of the night emotional Hasidic prayer and dance in Mea Shearim, to the song filled American influenced minyanim in the German colony.

The richness of thousands of years of Jewish diaspora life around the world can now be experienced in one place.

Israel is the place where Jewish ideas are expressed naturally, where we speak in our own ancient sacred language, where the calendar lived is the Hebrew calendar, with even secular Jews taking joy in bike riding down the highway on Yom Kippur for fun, because no one drives.

But despite its unifying potential, the real life challenges have also divided us.

People sometimes question the right of Jews outside of Israel to express opinions about what should go on there.

Of course this is true to a degree. But I believe it is also true that Israel won't find its way without us. The future of Israel is about more than survival of a country, it's about the Jewish dream for the world, and that dream belongs to all of us. All of us are responsible for the Jewish

dream.

Daniel Gordis says something similar in his new book called “Saving Israel.” He takes the pragmatic perspective that the wars and violence will not end anytime soon. But he makes the claim that “facing its enemies is not the primary battle that Israel must wage.”

Instead, Gordis says as follows, “For thousands of years, Jews have thrived on intense debate, on the cultivation of ideas, on disagreements that, though painful, often have led to greatness. They must do so once again.

Now is the time to reinvent Zionism, to re-create the conversation about why the Jews need a state and to ask what they are willing to do to preserve it. Nothing more ambitious is possible. And nothing less ambitious will suffice.”

Gordis calls on us to not simply concern ourselves with the important issues of security and peace, but to think about how Israel fits into a living Jewish dream for the world.

But increasingly, we are unable to have any real conversations about Israel with one another. Those who have perspectives different than ours trigger our alarm bells, which start ringing so loudly in our heads and hearts that we simply can’t hear what the person in front of us has to say, whether we align ourselves with the left or the right or somewhere in between.

Too often we leap to conclusions when another person holds a position that differs from ours about Israel. Out of fear and raw emotion, we immediately move to label them.

It is true that some people hold views that are truly beyond the pale, both on the extreme left and the extreme right in my opinion. Sometimes there are opinions that are too outrageous to be given the respect of

consideration. Where that line is drawn is different for different people. But I believe that in general, we draw that line way too quickly with one another.

Strong emotions have a power to overcome us in a way that blocks out all else. But we desperately need something other than emotionally driven divisiveness when it comes to Israel.

While I am frightened by this tendency in the American Jewish community I also understand it. So much of our complex identities as Jews is bound up with Israel that it often touches a raw nerve that raises anger and fear, that originates from our deeper emotions of love and positive concern.

And when we are scared or angry, we are prone to react rather than respond to one another.

But the significance of this moment in Jewish history calls upon us to take on the spiritual challenge of learning to hear one another and learn from one another, because the greatness of the Jewish people comes from our interconnectedness. We are *am Yisrael*, not *amei Yisrael* – the people of Israel, not the peoples of Israel.

Consider for a moment: when was it that we truly became Am Yisrael? We were truly forged into the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai, when all of Israel heard the revelation at Sinai together.

The midrash teaches that all of our souls were there together at that moment. Not only that, but the Midrash says that each person at Sinai heard something slightly different, depending on where we were positioned around the base of the mountain.

Yet, even though we heard the revelation at Sinai differently, it was exactly that moment that unified us. None of us had the whole picture. Only together could we fully hear the word of God.

We must realize that we have something yet to learn from one another. This is why in Pirke Avot, the sage Ben Zoma taught, “who is wise? One who learns from every person.”

To be unified in standing with Israel, does not mean that we all must hold the same beliefs and opinions about it. We all know that to think all Jews could hold the same opinion about anything is ludicrous. There is truth to all those jokes about two Jews three opinions.

Jews who love Israel deeply and seek it’s future for the sake of all of us, validly hold a variety of perspectives on Israel. The power of the Divine voice emanating from the land is heard differently, and only together can we receive the wisdom we are meant to receive in our own day.

So how can we come to be unified among our diverse and passionate perspectives about Israel? How can we learn to hear one another so that together we can discover the wisdom to help move us forward as a people?

It is easy to say that we should listen to one another, but how can we actually learn to communicate with greater spiritual maturity when our emotions are often much more powerful than our rational minds?

I want to suggest a spiritual practice of how to support Israel not only materially but with our souls as well.

I believe that to be able to listen to one another requires us to also listen to our own inner emotional world with awareness, with *daat*.

In the Talmud, the great sage Resh Lakish stated, "kol hakoeh, im hacham hu - hochmato mistaleket mimenu"- “A wise person who

becomes angry, his wisdom leaves him.” He goes on to add that a “ prophet who becomes angry, his prophecy forsakes him.”

When we are angry, our sages tell us, our wisdom leaves us!

The great Kabbalistic master Isaac Luria, who lived in the 16th century in Tsfat, said that when we get angry, it is not only our wisdom that leaves us but nothing less than our souls.

Anger exiles our soul from us. For Luria, anger was an emotion with tremendous negative consequences because of this.

If you want to understand what he means, think about what it feels like when you get really angry. You are filled up by the emotion so that there is little room for anything else in you.

This is what Luria means that our souls are exiled. We become incapable of being receptive to others when this takes place.

If we want to truly fulfill the depth of our role of supporting Israel, I firmly believe we need to learn to speak about Israel with one another with our souls present, retaining our groundedness and openness.

After all, the essence of what it means to be in Israel for a Jew is to no longer be in exile. How can we expect to support Israel if our soul is in exile?

The way we can protect ourselves from losing our soul to anger and passion is not by suppressing our emotions. This is like putting a lid on a hot kettle, sooner or later it will blow.

Instead, the spiritual practice I offer to help us do so is the simple practice of listening to our own inner emotions around the topic of

Israel. Despite the potentially harmful consequences of anger and other strong emotions, it is not wrong to feel these emotions in relation to issues that are extremely important to us.

Emotions are emotions, we are human and it is natural to feel things. But if we are unaware when strong emotions are shaping our experience and interactions, that's when we begin to get in trouble, allowing our souls to be fully exiled.

When we are aware that we are experiencing a particular emotion, then there is at least a part of us that transcends it.

If we are aware that the emotion is not our essence, then it doesn't entirely have the power to exile our soul, our wisdom and our receptivity to one another. And with practice, this power of awareness can become a stronger and stronger spiritual force.

While this power is a spiritual asset worth cultivating in all aspects of our lives, tonight I offer this as a spiritual practice for all of us when we speak about Israel in the year ahead.

If we are able to utilize this power of self-awareness in our conversations, it will enable us to support Israel with the depth, wisdom and power that the situation requires.

When I am finished speaking in just a minute, you will have the opportunity to support Israel by investing in Israel bonds.

I'd also like to suggest this year that you consider after Yontif supporting Israel by donating to the Lappin Foundation fund for their teen trips to Israel.

The type of life changing experiences I had in Israel as a young person

continue today for those who are able to go.

This has been the case for numerous teens in our community over the past year. To quote Allie Wittner who returned from an amazing trip to Israel this summer, “Before I came to Israel I looked at Judaism with disdain. It was a nuisance and some of the stories were way too far fetched. I didn't plan on raising my children with any religion at all. I struggled with the idea of God.”

But by the end of her trip she said that what Judaism has come to mean for her is “being part of something larger and more important than myself.” Giving more young people this opportunity is a priceless investment.

In line with my talk, I also urge all of us to expand the means by which we receive our knowledge about Israel this year. If you only receive your news from American media, try reading Israeli newspapers online.

If you already do that, if you only read Haaretz, read the Jerusalem Post as well sometimes, and vice versa. And whether you know a great deal about Israeli history or very little, we can all gain by committing to further educating ourselves this year.

Lastly, I ask you to support Israel by taking my plea seriously to take on the spiritual practice of speaking about Israel with mindfulness, striving to remember always what Israel should awaken in us – the unique bond of interconnectedness that makes us *am Yisrael*, the people of Israel.

May we work and pray together this year to ensure that Israel is not just a blip on the map of Jewish history.

May we seek with our bodies and our souls to ensure that the State of Israel is a blessing for the land of Israel, for the people of Israel and for the whole world. And let us say, Amen.