

Kol Nidre

9/20/26

As I walked, bleary-eyed, through a beautiful park in Jerusalem within my first hours since touching down at Ben Gurion airport, I was filled with an abiding sense of being in the right place at the right time. The late afternoon summer sun was beginning to set, brilliantly illuminating the pale stone of the Old City's walls. A random song came up on my Apple playlist—one of those moments of serendipity that seem to provide a fitting soundtrack for life. I really tried to bask in the moment, feeling the depth of the present in this land of my past.

It had been 7 years since I had been to Israel—a sabbatical span in which so much has happened to all of us. But the confluence of events amplified my sense of awe. For I was accompanying my son Ben to begin his first year of rabbinic school, nearly 40 years to the day that I had embarked on that same journey toward becoming a rabbi. The interplay of the sacred numbers of 7 and 40—the generational parallels of Ben and my starts at the seminary—and the magic and mystery inherent in the Land of Israel itself—all of these elements conjured an overwhelming feeling of transcendence—telescoping past, present, and future in an experience that defies description.

But perhaps most abundant in that converging moment was my sense of love—love for my son, love for this land, love for my people. Our tradition broadly describes this feeling and this ideal as *Ahavat Yisrael*—a passion for all the many levels of what is conveyed by the word *yisrael*.

From Jacob's wrestling with an adversary and his transformation reflected by this new name—to the word's encompassing of the tribe that became a nation—to its affixing to that small but sacred piece of real estate along the Mediterranean Sea—it is all *yisrael*—literally a landed people who struggle with God, struggle with other nations, and struggle with ourselves.

Amidst the unprecedented rise in threats that confront us today--as Yisrael the Jewish people and Yisrael the nation state—we Jews hold so many and varied ideas about what it is to stand with our people against antisemitism and to stand with Israel against the newly emerging specter of antizionism.

Some say that in the face of an increasingly hostile world, we must support all that the State of Israel does in its defense without qualification—*Israel right or wrong*. We cannot give aid and comfort to her enemies—even if we are troubled by its policies—and even if those policies affect Jews the world over.

Others attack Israel and its founding principles of Zionism as an outdated artifact of the past—an archaic holdover from 19th century nationalism that ill fits our modern sense of universal pluralism. In this vein, Israel should become like all the other multi-ethnic nations rather than cling to its exclusively Jewish character.

But many of us—*most of us*—live in the gray and gradated world of complexity and nuance. Ahavat Yisrael—our love for Israel—is as heart-warming as it is heart-rending—as great a source of pride as it is a point of pain. It is a love for a nation and a people striving to be both a part of the family of nations and apart from the family of nations.

So, what does a more authentic Ahavat Yisrael look like—love for the land, love for the nation, and love for the people? Our tradition roots the sense of love for the Jewish people in the *klal gadol*—the Great Principle of Torah: *Ve’ahavta l’re’echa kamocha*--*To love your neighbor as yourself*. That sense of empathy and compassion—of respect for the dignity of others as we would want for ourselves—undergirds all the other commandments. We honor and regard other’s lives and livelihoods—their property, their possessions, and their persons—when we cling closely to this Golden Rule. And as Jews of the Diaspora, while we focus this love on our own—we strive to extend it to all humankind.

But what is it to embrace *ahavat yisrael* for the land of Israel itself—or for its modern expression as a nation? From our earliest days, the promise of this land was the basis of our covenant. If we followed the mitzvot—if we remained faithful to our teachings—if we transcended our failures and our flaws in an ongoing quest to be and to do better—we would warrant and deserve the land. But if we strayed from our part of that eternal pact—the land would be lost to us.

Our people don’t have such a great track record in upholding our part of the covenant—the part that enabled us to live and thrive in that land. And in our current moment Israel, again, seems to be on a troubling path. Of the more than 3000 years of unbroken bonds to Eretz Yisrael—we’ve experienced less than 500 years of sovereignty. That’s 2500 years of exile and expulsion—which, in our tradition, is understood as a profound reflection on our character and our behavior.

The two greatest catastrophes in our history prior to the Holocaust were the destruction of the two Temples. The sins for which we were deserving of these punishments: Idolatry and *sinat chinam*—senseless hatred. And our tradition sees this hatred as the diametric opposite of *ahavat yisrael*.

In fact, the rabbis go further. They remind us that the Jews of Second Temple period faithfully followed the other commandments. And yet they still lost the land—this time for 2000 years—because of *sinat chinam*—because of senseless hatred. Just as *ahavat yisrael* is the foundation of all that is good in the world—*sinat chinam* is the abyss from which all that is wrong, and hurtful, and evil emerges.

But there is a modern expression of *ahavat yisrael*—one that reflects the values, the culture, and the sensibilities of our times: *Liberal Zionism*. Though out of fashion amongst the extremes on both sides of the spectrum, this very judicious balance between the noblest of ideals for modern Jews is what renders it so authentic and necessary a remedy for our struggles.

Liberal Zionism is “zionistic” in that it is rooted in the true, classic definition of Zionism: The ideological movement to realize the return of an indigenous people to its historic homeland, seeking liberation and refuge from a tragic and tumultuous history. It is unapologetic about its particularism—about its insistence that the Jewish people have a unique history and unqualified need for a state of their own, despite the modern changes that have shaped other nations and other peoples.

And Liberal Zionism is “liberal” in that it is committed to the enlightenment values of the last 300 years—values that have liberated and secured and nourished us in all the places in which it has taken root. They are values that have changed the course of our history: The sanctity of individual rights and the rule of law--the freedoms of faith and discourse—providing for equality of opportunity and economic possibility--and the indispensability of reason based in fact as the pathway to truth.

Israel is--at its best--a bastion of democracy and openness amidst an arid Middle Eastern wasteland of petro-tyrannies and fascist theocracies—even as it—and we here in America—continue to fight the autocratic foes within that seek to return us to a dark past.

Particularly as American Jews, the vast majority of us value this nation and its civic virtues as dearly and as deeply as we cherish the State of Israel as the embodiment of the tenets of Torah. And so, Liberal Zionism is the pairing of the principles that have sustained us since antiquity---securing our survival and providing refuge from a tumultuous history.

And so, what is it to be a true *Ohev Yisrael*—a *Lover of Israel*? And what is it to love the land and people of Israel through the lens of Liberal Zionism?

I am a lover of Israel in that I am proud of the ideas enshrined in its founding Declaration of Independence, inspired by the inalienable rights of its American predecessor: “The State of Israel...will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; (ensuring) complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex...”

I am a lover of Israel because it strives and strays and strives again to realize the timeless teachings of Torah, to navigate the blessed messiness of democracy, and to pursue an ongoing national *teshuvah*—a struggle to return to the perfected path of a more perfect union.

I am a lover of Israel because we speak prophetic truth to power, because we understand that it is “...not by might, nor by power, but by the spirit...” that we become worthy of the land and the covenant—and that we must meet extremism, corruption, and hypocrisy with the power of a justice that rolls down like waters and a righteous that cleanses like a mighty stream.

And I am a lover of Israel because the inherent value of each individual as created *b'tzelem Elohim*—in the image of God—defines the Jew and non-Jew

alike, the ally and the enemy, those whose lives we must take of necessity, and those whose lives we must save by righteous obligation.

I am a lover of Israel because the Zionist ideal aspires for it to be both a light unto the nations and proud amongst the family of nations, set apart and bound as part of a new and better world, envisioned by God and made real by humanity—the ultimate product of a sacred partnership.

And I am a lover of Israel in my celebrations of its gifts and my condemnations of its sins, in my pride for its singular achievements and my sadness for its fall from grace and goodness. It is a mature, enduring love—far more genuine and true than passing passions, shallow rhetoric, or narrow-minded neglect.

This authentic kind of love is expressed through Torah in the proximity of 2 passages. In Leviticus Chapter 19, before we learn of that great teaching-- love your neighbor as yourself--we are taught of *tochecha*—the need to rebuke others who err or hurt us—sharing a healthy corrective rather than harboring a percolating resentment. It is a mitzvah of constructive care for the conveyor and the recipient. And it is the firm foundation of truly enduring bonds.

As the great modern sage HaRav Kook taught: *If the Temple was destroyed because of sinat chinam—causeless hatred, it will be rebuilt because of ahavat chinam—causeless love. For love needs no cause; it is its own cause.* As goes the Temple, so goes the Jewish State and so goes the Jewish people.

My son Ben is having an incredible, life-changing experience in Israel. He is clearly meant to do be on this path: He is compassionate, scholarly, intellectually curious and ideologically open to engaging multiple views. Please forgive a father's excessive kvelling in the guise of mere observation.

Ben is also making the most of the intention of this first Year in Israel rabbinic program beyond the obvious immersion in the Hebrew language. He is immersing himself in all that is Israel: Its culture, its politics, the blessings and the burdens, the sources of pride and the causes for deepest concern.

He has met and engaged more people and more varied experiences in 2 months than I did in the entire year that I spent those 40 years ago. Some of this is due to the fact that he is far more mature and better adjusted than I was back then. And some of it emerges from the intensity and complexity of the current situation.

Ben has very deliberately connected with Israelis of many perspectives and ideologies—from idealistic peaceniks to dedicated settlers, from the Reform community to the more observant. He's been as comfortable amongst the literati of Jerusalem's coffee shops as he's been committed to standing with Bedouins in the West Bank as part of the efforts of Rabbis for Human Rights, offering support and protection from the increasing settler violence that terrorizes the population.

He is the embodiment of the kind of openness to conversation and relationship building that Rabbi Weisman so eloquently described on Rosh Hashanah as the “winning of witnesses”—a desire to respond to rhetoric with reason, to an angry cry with a sincere invitation, to baseless hatred with abundant hope.

In so many ways, I see Ben and his generation of proud, thoughtful, committed, and courageous young Jews as the true *Ohavei Yisrael*—Lovers of the Israel that has been and the Israel that could be—the Israel of our faith and the Israel of our future—the Israel we’ve built and the Israel that will continue to build us. Ken y’hi ratzon—may this be God’s will. Amen.