

I was in Tel Aviv, walking along the promenade, one late shabbat afternoon, and I stopped to watch the sunset over the water. The beach was packed with people, some also appreciating the view, but most on the sand playing volleyball. Though not playing volleyball as we often see people play, rather, they were playing volleyball with their feet. Hundreds of Israelis playing this amazingly impressive game while the sun set over the mediterranean behind them. I had just finished reflecting that Tel Aviv isn't as moving for me as Jerusalem, but with this sight, I started to tear up. In my head I heard the words, "*L'hiyot am chofshi b'arzeinu*" from Hatikvah, Israel's national anthem. To be a free people in our land.

I wonder, at the start of the whole State of Israel enterprise, if Theodor Herzl knew just how complicated this project would be. I imagine he would be proud of the way that Israel has, indeed, become a safe haven for Jews from around the world. I imagine he'd be proud that Israel is always the first to send aid and support to any country who suffers a natural disaster. I'm sure he would take pride in Israel's leadership in technology, agriculture, science, and medicine. He'd be proud of the start up nation. And proud how, over and over again, Israel seems to make the impossible possible. To make the desert bloom, to make the Jewish nation a force to be reckoned with. He'd be proud that the existence of the State of Israel has given confidence and pride not only to Israelis, but to Jews wherever we are.

And I imagine he would be deeply troubled by Israel's issues. The ongoing Palestinian tragedy; that long term solutions for full Palestinian autonomy have yet to be realized, and that there is no clear path to get there. I imagine he'd be disappointed to know that racism exists in Israel, among Jews and between Jews and non-Jews, and that Israel is unable to do more to support the African refugees that arrive seeking asylum. And, I think he'd be shocked to see that the biggest threat to the Jewish nation since the Yom Kippur War of 50 years ago, is an internal struggle for power. The current threat against Israel is coming from Jews.

I have never before lived through a time of existential threat for Israel. I have only known a world where Israel has been strong. I have only ever known the confidence Israel gives me as an actor in this world, as opposed to believing that Jews are always acted upon, at the mercy of others, always in jeopardy. Through every attack, every rocket, every incident of violence, I always believed that Israel would find a way. I was confident that Israel would survive. Until this year. Until "would be" dictators have come to power and it is questionable as to whether they can be stopped. For the first time in my life, it feels possible that Israel could meet its demise. And, it is because of fighting among Jews.

This is not the first time in our history where a battle among Jews led to destruction. 90 years or so after the war that we commemorate during Hanukkah, The war where we gained our independence, there was a clash and struggle for power between two brothers of the Hasmonean Dynasty. One of the brothers invited Rome to back him in the struggle. They decided to back his brother instead. The brother won, and the result was that the region became, in essence, a vassal of Rome.

Now, we have always credited Rome with our destruction; the plundering of the Temple, the bloodbath of Bar Kochba. And, maybe Rome would have taken over at some point. But, that didn't happen. Rome didn't conquer us, rather, a Jewish king actively solicited Rome's involvement. A Jewish king essentially invited Rome to take over because he was fighting with another Jew. That invitation led to our loss of autonomy and national freedom for 2000 years.

The situation today is different, but still an internal struggle of Jews against Jews. For those who may be unfamiliar with the Israeli government, their system is quite different from ours. They do not have clear divisions and checks on power. The legislative and executive branches are, essentially, one and the same. The prime minister is not elected individually, rather, parties run and seats are allocated to the parties based on the number of votes they receive. Usually, the person at the top of the most popular party's list becomes the prime minister. Then they put together a coalition with other like minded parties, and as long as they have the majority, the opposing parties never have a say in anything. They never all have to come to a consensus; the parties in the minority have no ability to block laws they oppose.

And, on top of that, Israel has no constitution. It has always worked off of the vision set out in the Declaration of Independence, and a set of basic laws. So, many of the safeguards other democratic countries have developed do not yet exist in Israel. Thus, the only check to the Knesset's power, then, is the Supreme Court.

As crazy as this sounds, it has generally worked in Israel for the past 75 years. Previously, the coalition process tended to push the government just right or left of center. Today, with so many small, yet extreme, parties. The current government created a majority by connecting these smaller groups together. The result is the alliance of people who have very narrow agendas, and they will go along with anything else as long as they get their way on the issues most important to them. As Yossi Klein-Halevi of the Hartman Institute explains, what we have now is a unique combination of corruption and zealotry. Those who seek to stay in power, no matter what, partnered with those who seek to control Jewish practice and Jewish life to meet their rigid and exclusive definition of Jewish tradition. Their extremist fringe Orthodox perspective, would eliminate the democratic process altogether; reducing women's standing in the country, delegitimizing liberal Jewish groups, and stripping minorities of rights. Together, they are taking over all aspects of Israeli life. They seek to overhaul the Supreme Court in order to remove the obstacles keeping their extreme vision a reality.

This was never the shared Zionist dream. Jews were to be a free people in our land, not a fascist theocracy ruled by power abusing dictators.

Now, we, as American and diaspora Jews, didn't play any official part in creating the situation as it stands now. However, we will be affected by it. The State of Israel is crucial in defining the Judaism of our time. When Israel's Prime Minister speaks, people hear him speaking for all Jews, not just the ones who live in Israel. When Israel is engaged in conflict or a clash with the Palestinians, anti-Zionist rhetoric often crosses the line into anti-Semitism, affecting all of us here.

Some of you may remember that, in May of 2021, Oakland Unified School District sent out an email to all staff, students, and parents to appreciate Jewish American Heritage month. But, before the appreciation, the District included a disclaimer that the email was in no way taking a stance on the events that were occurring in the Middle East, where Israel and Gaza were in the midst of a bloody and destructive clash. One of our high schoolers wrote to the Superintendent in the hopes of having a discussion about it. He explained that, "Celebrating Jews does not mean that you would be taking a stance on Israel, and combining the two turned a positive message into one that can be used anti-Semitically...." The email he received in response, from the communications department, said that they had to use a disclaimer otherwise other people

would be upset. They would have assumed that support for Jews was support for Israel. The student responded, "...by having to explain you were not talking about Israel when you said you supported Jews, you wound up supporting those who [inextricably link Jews with Israel, and then] use Israel to justify bullying, prejudice, and intimidation against us."

What happens in Israel makes waves that affect all of Jewish life, wherever Jews live. What happens with this government will greatly affect us and our standing as Jews.

I attended the World Zionist Congress this past April. The WZO, the World Zionist Organization, is made up of Israeli organizations and political parties, as well as diaspora Zionist groups. I was honored to represent ARZA, the Zionist branch of the North American Reform Movement. Now, the resolutions proposed and considered by the Congress do not create policy or law, but they do determine where certain money is allocated and who gets to decide. It affects things like whether Israelis visit our summer camps and schools and whether they are pluralistic Israelis or strictly Orthodox. It can affect what land the state of Israel acquires, and therefore, whether or not the state buys land on the other side of the green line, the other side of the green line being land that may one day be a part of a Palestinian state. ARZA belongs to the faction who would choose and have chosen not to purchase that land. Many of this year's resolutions sought to urge the government to maintain policies and practices that have been essential to diaspora and Israeli relationships. One resolution urged the government not to change the law of return, which is the law that enables Jews to become citizens of Israel, to exclude the grandchildren of Jews; people who our persecutors have always been deemed Jewish. Another resolution urged the government not to reverse a current law that recognizes conversions by Reform and Conservative rabbis. Right now, if you work with a Reform or Conservative rabbi for conversion, you will be recognized by the state of Israel as a Jew and would have full citizenship rights. We fear that this government might seek to reverse that law. There was also a resolution supporting the rights of LGBTQIA communities, in Israel and around the world.

Fortunately, our faction was strong and well organized, and the resolutions we proposed and supported all passed. But, opposing delegations took extreme measures to try to keep those resolutions from passing. Including accusing our delegation of cheating by voting more than once per person, and then by petitioning to have the vote counted through a roll call, which is exactly as it sounds. They wanted to call every individual name, of all 700 delegates, and have us vote one by one for each of the sixteen resolutions.

They did succeed in postponing the vote, as we could only do so electronically a month after the Congress, but we did vote. Our resolutions passed, and we voted down those resolutions that wanted to make the Congress express unconditional support for the current government. The message, however, from those who opposed us was clear: they want to silence us. They want to erase the names of our movements and organizations and delegitimize us. Supporters of the current government want a system that would no longer recognize most diaspora Jews as Jews. So, while it is ultimately Israelis who will determine the direction of the government, what happens will have repercussions for us all. We could have a situation where the state of Israel no longer sees us as Jews, and yet anti-Semitism against us and our communities increases around the world because of decisions the state makes.

Which means that, even if we don't feel connected to the State or if we have negative feelings about the state, every single one of us will be affected by what happens next. Jews have always been hyper sensitive to the variations between Jewish communities, but outsiders have never

cared that much about the differences. If we are Jews, we are in it together with other Jews, all of them.

And if we care at all about democratic values, rights for women and minorities, support for diversity and pluralism, and for the welfare of Palestinians and any hope for their autonomy in the future- in the form of a two state solution or otherwise- then we have to fight against those who are dismantling democracy in Israel.

It is crucial we support the Israelis who are fighting to maintain a democratic Israel, and we can do so in a number of ways. Visit the website of the Israel Religious Action Center, also known as IRAC (<https://www.iraac.org/>). It is the social action arm of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, our partner and friend who is aligned with the North American Reform movement on all issues. There, you will find more information, and a draft email you can send to key Ministers of the Knesset and to the consul generals throughout the US opposing the current government's actions. As a matter of pride, IRAC was the first religious movement to be involved in the protests in Israel, which have now been going on for 37 weeks. It is estimated that 19% of Israelis have participated in at least one protest. Proportionately, 19% of the American population equals 62 million people.

We can also participate in the protests that are happening all over the world. The organization, UnXceptable (<https://www.unxceptable.org/>), plans rallies to bring people together across the country, including here in the Bay Area. As you may have heard, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is actually planning to be in the South Bay on Monday, September 18th, the day after tomorrow. Pro-democracy protesters plan to meet him in full force to get our opposition across. I will be there, and hope that many of you will join me. Naomi Katz have flyers that will be available after the service. The updates to time and location will be accessible through the QR code. The schedule has already changed since the flyer was printed. Please email me if you want to coordinate travel.

Spiritually speaking, let's be sure we recognize the connection. The Jewish people, wherever we live, are still one people. Recognize that the fate of the state of Israel will affect all Jews. This is a battle for the future of the Jewish people. How hard will we fight to ensure that our liberal Jewish values of equality, pluralism, and democracy continue to be at the center of Jewish life for Jews worldwide? Will we claim our way of life as Jewishly authentic and worthy of support? Will we let others delegitimize us and take away our standing as Jews?

"L'hiot am chofshi b'artzeinu". It is still a dream to be a free people in our land. To uphold the rights of all people who live in Israel, whether they are Jewish or not, to support the variations of Jewish practice, and to ensure that the Jewish people maintain our ability to stand up for ourselves and decide our own destiny. It is still a dream, yet one worthy of pursuing. I'll end with a new prayer that was written for Israel by UnXceptable. One that is likely to be read this Rosh Hashanah by communities across the diaspora and Israel.

A prayer for our time:

May it be Your will, Eternal One, that the State of Israel be blessed and continue to exist as a liberal democracy, respecting all its inhabitants and all shades of Judaism.

May it be Your will, O God, that the leaders and people of Israel have the wisdom to listen to different voices and diverse viewpoints, manage the disputes, and take actions that benefit the community and the public as a whole.

May it be Your will, our God
and God of our mothers and fathers
the God of generations to come,
that we have the strength to
protect the judicial system's independence and
preserve equal rights for all people of Israel and
all Jewish people worldwide.

Amen