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Yom Kippur 5784 Evening (Kol Nidre) Sermon
Lessons from History: Israel in Crisis
Temple Sinai, Washington, DC - Sunday, September 24, 2023

There is a crisis in Israel today that is deeper than you may realize and far worse than you think. The problem with Israel's ruling coalition is a problem at the heart of Judaism itself. There is strand within Judaism that is violent, parochial, and extremist and it has been there since ancient days. There is also, within Judaism, a strand that is peaceful, pragmatic, and humanitarian and it, too, has been there since ancient days. While these strands have been woven together in a single fiber, they have always been at odds with each other and neither one has bested the other. The situation in Israel today is so concerning because it contains the possibility that violent extremists will finally win or, that in disentangling ourselves from that terrible strand, the fabric of Judaism itself comes undone.

It may be hubris to believe that we are the generation who will destroy something that has survived thousands of blows before ours. Our Scripture teaches: "The generations come and go and all that ever happens has happened before; there is nothing new under the sun," (Ecclesiastes 1:4-10). After completing their fifty-year project, "The Story of Civilization," historians Will and Ariel Durant summarized their lessons from history, writing, "History repeats itself in the large because human nature changes with geological leisureliness." Which, in our case, means we are not the first ones to lament one or both of those strands of Judaism. But the Durants concluded that among the lessons of history is this fact: "There is no certainty that the future will repeat the past," and, to put it bluntly, "Nations die."ⁱ

So, we should take seriously the idea that Israel is in crisis and I want you to follow this journey we're going to take. I know that sometimes during a sermon, you might wonder, "Where is this going?" Here is the outline: I am going to tell you some stories from the founding of the Reform Movement, from the destruction of the ancient Temple, and the founding of the State of Israel and then I'm going to come back to Will & Ariel Durant's lessons from history. Where this going is towards the unraveling of Jewish community and perhaps Judaism itself.

One of the characteristics of the birth of Reform Judaism was a movement to edit the prayerbooks in order to shorten the services and change the prayers to reflect modern thinking. Our prayerbooks have changed over the years from the *Union Prayerbook* to *Gates of Prayer* to the *Mishkan* series. Here's an example: A hundred or so years ago, the early Reformers cut a line from the morning prayer called *Yotzeir* and we, this generation, restored it:

Or chadash al Tzion ta-ir, v'Nizkeh chulanu m'heira l'oro.

אור חדש על־ציון תאיר וְנִזְכֶּה כְּלָנוּ מִהֵרָה לְאוֹר:

"May a new light shine upon Zion, and very soon we will all benefit from its light."

They cut that line because of its Zionist implications, and they rejected calls - this was in the late 19th/early 20th century - for a Jewish state. They understood that the concept of a Jewish home is a core principle of our faith. They also held a majestic vision of chosen-ness and the unique mission of the Jewish people. They believed that the historical yearning for a literal homeland was a relic of bygone days whose significance continued only as an allegory. Though they never used the line, they believed, "Home is where the heart is."

One of the greatest philosophers of that school, Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler, wrote: "The prayer for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the restoration of the Temple... no longer voices our religious hope." Instead, the fact that Jews had gained civil rights and equal standing as citizens in Europe and America in the 1700s and 1800s, signaled the arrival of, "a Messianic age, a time of universal knowledge of God and love of humanity that was intimately interwoven with the religious mission of the Jewish people."ⁱⁱⁱ It's amazing; breathtaking really, to imagine having such optimism for the world. They truly believed that humanity had reached its zenith and that the Hebrew prophet's vision had arrived: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples and... the whole earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord [from a Jewish perspective]." (Isaiah 56:7; 11:9).

Before we dismiss Kohler and his peers as naive and irrelevant, remember that he died in 1926. He never saw the Great Depression, the Holocaust, and the atomic bomb, or the climate crisis. His opposition to a Jewish state, his "anti-Zionism" if we must use that term, is completely different from the Jewish anti-Zionism of today. Kohler was not offended by the

chauvinism of chosenness. It was the opposite; he believed that creating a Jewish state was, "denying to [the Jewish people] its specific character as '*mamlechet kohanim*' - a 'priestly people' and a holy nation who is a light to all others." Kohler believed the whole world had absorbed Jewish teachings and that making a little Jewish state in Israel would be relegating us to a minor role. Long before Patrick Swayze, Kaufmann Kohler was saying about the Jewish people: "Nobody puts Baby in the corner."ⁱⁱⁱ

One of the great turning points of Jewish history seems to be on Kohler's side. Let's go back to Jerusalem in the year 70, this is just after Jesus and just before Masada. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai famously escaped the Roman siege of Jerusalem and saved Judaism. After three years surrounded and trapped within its walls, the Jews of Jerusalem were dying under a famine. Recognizing the impending doom, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai faked his own death and his disciples carried him out of the city in a coffin, which was the only movement the Romans allowed. He made his way to the Roman General Vespasian, and they reached a compromise. Rabban Yoḥanan asked only this: "Give me the town of Yavne and its Sages." Vespasian granted the request and shortly afterwards the Romans overran the city, destroyed the ancient Temple, and burned Jerusalem to the ground.^{iv}

Yavne marks a true paradigm shift. To that point, being Jewish meant offering animal sacrifices in the one Temple run by a dynastic priesthood as commanded in Leviticus. The genius of Ben Zakkai was in his willingness to walk away from Jerusalem with his life and to replace the biblical rituals with a system that could be followed anywhere - from Yavne to Washington, DC - a system of study, prayer, and ethical behavior. Ben Zakkai definitely was not a Reform Jew but he had this in common with Kaufmann Kohler: they both fervently believed that the sacred mission of the Jewish people transcends any specific place and that Judaism will adapt and thrive to whatever circumstances arise in the world so long as its adherents and leaders create and foster ways for everyone to be engaged in it wherever they are.

There was another group who lived alongside Ben Zakkai and they were called "The Zealots." Three years into the siege, the Rabbis like Ben Zakkai and the Zealots had a disagreement. The Rabbis said: "Let's go out and make peace with the Romans." The Zealots wouldn't allow it. They said: "Let's go out and fight the Romans." The Sages knew that was a

suicide mission so they refused. Then, to force the hand of the residents Jerusalem, the Zealots went and burned down the storehouses of food that had allowed the city to withstand the siege. That is what started the famine in Jerusalem and leads them all to death except Ben Zakkai and a few followers.

One of the other great sages in the Talmud, Rabbi Akiva, lived two generations after Ben Zakkai. He was a product of that Yavne revolution but became a fierce critic of Ben Zakkai. The Talmud imagines them in dialogue with Akiva insulting Ben Zakkai as a stupid and demands, "Why didn't you ask for more?!" to which Ben Zakkai says, "I wanted to save at least something." For Akiva, there is no compromising with the Romans and no true path to walk other than to sacrifice. In our day, Akiva would surely accuse Ben Zakkai of being an anti-Zionist and would try to cancel him. Akiva's religious certainty and fanaticism stand until the day he dies. He joins the Bar Kochba rebellion, the doomed last gasp of the fight against Rome. As he is tortured in the most horrific way, he relishes the moment and is ecstatic at the realization that reciting the *shema* while he dies so violently is a special opportunity given only to the most committed Jews. Ben Zakkai on the other reaches old age and dies surrounded by his many disciples who comfort him as he ponders whether he did the right thing and what the future will hold.

By 1948, both Akiva and Ben Zakkai's worldviews had been canonized side by side in the Talmud where they are not necessarily incompatible enemies but, "*elu v'elu divrei elohim chayyim*, both expressions of the Divine will. And by 1948, Kaufmann Kohler's belief that we had reached a universal messianic age was quite literally in ashes across Europe. The idea of the Jewish home took on a renewed urgency and an evolved sense of mission. Yehuda Kurtzerm, the President of the Shalom Hartman Institute and a great contemporary leader and thinker on Jewish identity, described the idea of Zionism at the time just before 1948 as, "audacious, taking on the project of no less than repairing the condition of the Jewish people. It was plural... and aspirational, dreaming of a different and often utopian future."^v It would have been understandable, maybe even smart, to make cynicism, survivalism, and misanthropy the foundations of Zionism after the Holocaust. Instead, the guiding vision for the State of Israel was about, "mobilizing a people into the project of remedying its condition, rather than languishing

in its limitations." Kurtzer draws out an important distinction about the goals of Jewish home: "Self-determination and sovereignty were prerequisites for realizing its moral aspirations, but they were never meant to be the end and only goal."^{vi}

What's happening in Israel today is a crisis that is rooted in the belief that self-determination and sovereignty are the ends and that the only thing that matters is preventing that lesson from history - the fact that nations die - from ever again applying to our nation. It is a problem that is even worse than many of you think. Israel's government is a fundamentalist Jewish theocracy that emphasizes extreme nationalism and militarism.^{vii} The fact that the ruling authority over the historical homeland of the Jewish people today is openly committed to Orthodox religious hegemony, homophobia, xenophobia, religious violence, and misogyny subverts an entire strand of Judaism and challenges us to define what it really means to live by Jewish values. This is no exaggeration, and the government is not hiding its position; they're proud of it. The Minister of Finance who is also in charge of civilian affairs in the West Bank celebrated in March when Israeli settlers burned a Palestinian village because, he said, "I think the village of Huwara needs to be wiped out [and] I think the State of Israel should do it."^{viii} The coalition has reduced the power of the Supreme Court and promises next to impose gender segregation in public spaces.^{ix} Their judicial reform expands the authority of state-run rabbinical courts to adjudicate nearly all civil matters but will keep Orthodox religious rules in place for those courts, barring women from being judges and from giving testimony in many cases.^x The Israeli government has made their position as clear as possible. They are not bluffing. They are true believers. In presenting their case before the Supreme Court last week, the government's solicitor argued that Israel's Declaration of Independence was a "hasty" document endorsed by unelected signatories and cannot be a source of legal authority binding future generations.^{xi}

Our decision to put *Or Chadash* back into the *yotzeir* prayer was more than an aesthetic edit to the text. It is a statement of our understanding of the Jewish mission today, decades after the creation of the State of Israel. *Or Chadash* is not a prayer for the establishment of a Jewish state, that's done, but our prayer is not disconnected from the Zionist dream either.

Kaufmann Kohler and the classical Reformers were wrong only in their timing and the breadth of their scope. It was not, as it turns out, the Messianic age and the world got worse

than they ever expected. Further, we Jews are not evangelists seeking to spread Judaism over the whole world; we're just fine as a tiny minority. Kohler, however, was right in the belief that Judaism has at its core something eternally good and beneficial for the entire world. At the outset of the sermon, I quoted Ariel & Will Durant's lesson from history that nations die. But, the Durants were not historical fatalists. The full lesson from history is that nations die but civilizations live on. Greece died but Greek culture was absorbed by Rome who bequeathed it to Western Europe which gave birth to America where Herodotus is read more widely than he was in his own day. Like Kohler, Ben Zakkai believed that there were values and ideals in Judaism that were so powerfully good that he should do whatever was necessary to ensure they would survive the death of the nation. The scariest part of today's crisis in Israel is not that the State of Israel dies, God forbid, but that it lives in such a way that the enduring Jewish civilization of which it is merely a seed, will be the violent, parochial messianism of the Zealots.

Judaism thrives when the strands of democracy and humanitarianism are woven into its religious fabric. The sacred core of Judaism is not meant to sit untouched like the lunar regolith nor kept behind the curtains of the ancient temple. The Holy of Holies is today in the homes and hearts of every one of us. As tomorrow's Torah portion describes us: *Atem nitzavim hayom kolchem* - "All of you stand inside this covenant: officials and heads, women and men, elders and children, strangers and citizens from every class and category of society," (Deuteronomy 29:9-14).

We need throw our full support behind the protesters and organizations who are fighting for democracy in Israel today because they are fighting for the soul of Judaism. Our members, especially those involved with our Committee for Israel Engagement and Social Justice, have thrown their time, energy, and money into this fight. As residents of the DMV (District of Columbia - Maryland - Virginia greater metropolitan area), we live where the protests happen and we have both the opportunity and responsibility to join more often and more vocally. Our congregation has given to the organizations that are fighting for justice and democracy and we should give more. I also think we have got to apply pressure on any organization that enables or supports orthodox hegemony, settler expansion, and the erosion of rights in Israel. You should look closely into the Jewish organizations that you support, see if

they give to projects that enable or encourage this government, and insist that they stop if they want to keep your support.

Or chadash al tzion tair. A new light has show upon Zion and the world. *V'nizkey chulanu me heira l'oro.* In the quick passage of 75 years, we have seen the merit and benefit it brings to all of us and we've also seen the shame and violence it can bring as both strands of Judaism live within it. Nations are but temporary and their rulers and policies change. Civilizations and their values continue. *Or chadash al tzion tair*, the light of Jewish civilization will shine long, long after we are gone. Whether it burns and destroys or is luminous and warm is up to us. *Nizkeh chulano meheira l'oro.* We must act quickly, all of us, for its merit and for ours. *Gamar tov.*

ⁱ Will & Ariel Durant, *The Lessons of History* (1996), pp. 88, 93, 94

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler, "Not the Nation, But the Soul." Reproduced in Plaut, ed., *The Rise of Reform Judaism* (1963), 145-46 altered slightly here for context and current language usage.

ⁱⁱⁱ From the climatic scene of the 1987 hit movie, *Dirty Dancing* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ypKSbnYOrwE>

^{iv} Gittin 56a-b

^v Yehuda Kurtzer, "Liberal Zionism and the Idea of the Idea," *Sources*, Fall 2022, accessed at <https://www.sourcesjournal.org/articles/liberal-zionism-and-the-idea-of-the-idea>

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} These happen to be two of the three core characteristic of fascist regimes. See Council on Foreign Relations, World 101 - Contemporary History Module: "What is Fascism?" accessed 9/20/2023 at <https://world101.cfr.org/contemporary-history/world-war/what-fascism>

^{viii} <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/israel-finance-minister-bezalel-smotrich-hawara-erased-west-bank-rcna72871>

^{ix} Carmiel Arbit and Yulia Shalomov, "Women Will Be the Biggest Victims of Israel's Judicial Reforms," *Foreign Policy*, 2 August 2023, accessed 9/21/2023 at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/02/israel-judicial-women-equality-netanyahu/>

^x Claire Porter Robbins, "Patriarchal, Biased," *The Guardian*, 13 June 2023, accessed on 9/21/2023 at <https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/13/patriarchal-biased-israeli-women-fear-loss-rights-rabbinic-courts-legal-overhaul>

^{xi} "Government Lawyer Spurns Declaration of Independence," *Times of Israel*, 13 September 2023. Accessed on 9/20/2023 at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/government-lawyer-spurns-declaration-of-independence-at-fateful-high-court-hearing/>