

Sermon on Israel, Rosh Hashanah Morning 2023

Rabbi Paula Feldstein

July 22, posted on FB: “These are wild, trying, scary times in Israel. These photos don’t effectively capture the 170,000+ Israelis who stood alongside me and my family in Tel Aviv tonight. The 80,000+ who marched up to Jerusalem in the heat, holding flags. The tens of thousands more who protested across the country. The 10,000 reserved soldiers (and counting) who are stepping back from their service. The dozens of army generals and Ministry of Defense executives who took a public and official stand.

Israel’s future is on the line. Democracy. Liberal values. Women’s rights. LGBTQ+ rights. The checks and balances that ensure the government is operating within reasonable bounds.

I don’t know what the future holds.”

July 23, posted on FB: “A reported 100,000+ protesters in Jerusalem today (having been there, our personal assessment was that there were far more). Doctors who are threatening to strike. 150 of the of the biggest business leaders in the country who are suspending their business operations. Tech leaders who are closing their offices tomorrow. 10,000+ reserve soldiers who are stepping back from service. Military, academic, and judicial leaders who are all sounding every possible alarm. All protesting the government’s actions.

I’m feeling existential fear, heartbreak and despair. But, these people are the reason I still try to have hope.”

These posts were written by my friend Daphne who is living in Israel right now. She has lived part of her life in Israel and part in America. I met Daphne when we were both working for the Union for Reform Judaism. Daphne was living and working in New York when Covid hit. She was terrified of getting sick. She lived alone in a pretty lousy apartment in Queens. So, she put on 3 masks and jumped on a plane to Israel. She went to Israel for two reasons. First, to be with her father during Covid. Second, the health care in Israel is much better than what we have here. They have a national health care system.

Daphne is still in Israel. She has been out demonstrating with her family, friends and thousands of other Israelis. I know she sees this as a life or death situation for Israel because Daphne becomes very anxious in crowds – it is taking a lot of courage and determination for her to get out with thousands of other people to demonstrate.

Truth be told, I am often torn about what is happening in Israel. It is one of the most complicated places in the world. You know the saying, “if you have two Jews you have three opinions?” Imagine a whole country trying to govern itself like that. The plight of the Palestinians is heart breaking and seems to have no solution. The Arab citizens of Israel continue to suffer considerable discrimination. The Ultra-Orthodox Haredim already control most religious life in Israel, having been given that power through the chief rabbinate at the founding of the state. These Ultra-orthodox communities are using their political clout to suck billions of shekels a year in tax dollars to fund their yeshivas, while their young people are exempt from military service – a situation that is economically and militarily unsustainable. Meanwhile, they suppress the Reform and Conservative Movements, denying them legitimacy

and denying our rabbis the right to officiate at weddings, funerals and conversions. As you can see, there is plenty to complain about.

On the other hand, I don't live there. I didn't have to send my children into the army, fearing for their safety. I don't have to run with my family into a bomb shelter when Hamas starts bombing Israel. I'm not there to demonstrate or vote or fight with the Ultra-Orthodox for religious freedom. It is very easy to be critical from a distance.

This year, we celebrated Israel's 75th birthday. It was sadly, mostly overshadowed by the political unrest, demonstrations and internal strife taking place in the country. But, it's not just that. The problem is that as time has passed we have more and more forgotten why Israel was founded in the first place and why it was and continues to be so incredibly important to us as American Jews and Jews around the world. Let me explain.

It is easy to forget that Israel is a miracle. The fact that it exists at all is nothing short of miraculous. The idea of creating a modern Jewish state came from Theodore Herzl in the late 1800's, long before the Holocaust. Before that, for a couple thousand years, Jewish tradition held that there would be no modern State of Israel until the Messiah came and made it happen. But the early Zionists, like Herzl were not willing to wait any longer for the Messiah to come. They saw Zionism as a matter of life and death. The Messiah was nowhere to be found and Jews were dying – in pogroms and suffering all over Europe. P. 274 After the Holocaust it became even more urgent and clear, "The purpose of the State of Israel was to save the Jewish people." Gordis Xvii

As we know, the situation for the Jewish people was dire after World War II. A Jewish home was urgently needed to save what was left of Europe's Jews. In his recent book, Impossible Takes Longer, Daniel Gordis explains, "The future of the Jewish home was uncertain as was the fate of thousands of homeless Jews who had survived the Holocaust and were refugees in DP camps after the war. No one wanted them – the United States and Canada had closed their borders during the war. The British had tried to stop Jews from emigrating from Europe into Palestine during and after the war. Ships with hundreds of Jews on board sailed the open seas with nowhere to dock, with no port willing to take in what the British called "surplus Jews." Thousands of Jews were in DP camps with nowhere to go and borders were closed everywhere". Pp 5-6

Despite the desperate need for a safe haven for those who had survived the Holocaust, Israel almost did not come to be at all. On November 29, 1947 there was a vote of the General Assembly of the United Nations. They approved a plan which would divide Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. It barely passed....And it is worth noting that as soon as it passed there were many powerful people in America and England trying to get it struck down. Within 3 months the leaders organized to write a Declaration of Independence, figure out how to lead their new country and prepare an army to defend Israel, as they knew as soon as the British left they would be attacked on all sides. Sadly, that is exactly what happened.

Israel's first success is simply that it exists at all. Because it exists it has succeeded in saving Jews over and over again. In the 1950's Israel took in thousands of Mizrahi Jews – Jews from North Africa, Yemen, Iraq and Iran who were facing rabid anti semitism. The Jews of these countries had lived in peace with their Muslim neighbors for centuries and yet their neighbors

turned on them forcing them from their homes. They arrived in Israel poor and heartbroken. During the 1990's 1 million immigrants came to Israel from the former Soviet Union where they had no religious freedom and were outsiders. During the 1980's and 90's Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Israel. They had also experienced the hatred and persecution in Ethiopia and were desperate to get out. Israel has been the safe haven for the Jewish people. And with the rise in anti semitism here and around the globe, it is important to recognize that this is not just history but a continuing story.

Providing for the basic needs of thousands of immigrants was an incredible challenge. But over the years they made the desert bloom and today, Israel has one of the strongest economies in the world. It is also a leader in the fields of medicine; the environment, International disaster relief, and many areas of technology. Israel has been given the nickname "Start Up Nation."

And then there is the current situation.

Israel is a democracy but it is different from ours in some very significant ways. Israel has many, many political parties, not just two. Remember when I said, "two Jews, three opinions?" What happens in Israel is that after the election the party with the most votes gets to try and form a government by getting other parties to join with it so they have a majority.

The reason Israel has had so many new elections in the last few years is that if one of those parties pulls out of the coalition government then the government falls apart and there needs to be a new election. Last year, Benjamin Netanyahu shocked many members of his own party and of those who voted for him by forming a government with the most right-wing and

Orthodox parties. In order to keep his government together and functioning he is under tremendous pressure to give them what they want. Gordis points out the seriousness of this situation for the future of Israel. “Avi Maoz (Noam Party), unapologetically homophobic, became head of the office of “Jewish National Identity.” Itamar Ben G’vir (Jewish Power Party), previously indicted forty-six times and convicted six times for crimes such as rioting, incitement to racism, and support for terror, would oversee the border police. Bezalel Smotrich (Religious Zionist Party), arrested for suspected Jewish terrorism during the Gaza disengagement, would control civil affairs in the West Bank. Aryeh Deri (Shas party), slated to become finance minister two years hence, had already gone to prison in 2000 for taking bribes and had been convicted of tax offenses in 2022.”

These are the people Netanyahu would have nothing to do with in the past but in order to stay in power he was willing to form a government with them. But what is the agenda of this lovely group of leaders? The ultra-Orthodox parties want the country to be run according to their version of Orthodox Judaism. They would begin by taking away the rights of women and the LGBTQ+ community. Other very right-wing members of this government would like to make the West Bank permanently part of Israel and push out the Palestinians.

And Netanyahu? His main goal is to stay out of jail. He is under indictment for corruption and as long he is in government, he cannot be prosecuted. He has made an alliance with this immoral and dangerous group and if they leave his government, there would be a new election. If Netanyahu were to lose that election, there is a good chance he could end up in jail shortly thereafter.

So what is all this business about Israel's Supreme Court and the court reforms that Netanyahu and his new friends are pushing? Israel has a Declaration of Independence, a wonderful document modeled after the US Declaration of Independence. However, due to an inability to agree on certain key questions, Israel was never able to ratify a constitution. Without a constitution, much is unclear.

In the current situation legislation may be passed and the Prime Minister may enact certain policies and the only way to stop something that they might do which is unjust is to appeal to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court is currently the only check on the Executive branch of the government. That is why Netanyahu and his government want to take power away from the Supreme Court. So they can do whatever they want. Many would argue that the Supreme Court was in need of reforms and it seems clear that Israel really needs a constitution but making the Supreme Court powerless gives Israel a government with no checks and balances.

There are two ideals that Israel was founded on: that it would be a Jewish country (whatever that means) and that it would be a democracy. This is why so many Israelis are outraged right now. This is why so many Israelis are demonstrating week after week....Israel's democracy is at stake.

But this is not just about Israel remaining a democracy. It also raises the question: will Israel remain a Jewish state and what exactly does that mean? There is no separation of church and state in Israel. The Ultra Orthodox have become more and more powerful for several reasons. First, they have a lot of children, their population is

growing faster than the population of the non-Orthodox Jews of Israel. Second, many Israelis consider themselves secular, their Jewishness comes from living in a Jewish country, with Jewish culture and speaking Hebrew. Many of them believe that if you are going to be religious you should do it right and be Orthodox. So they are willing to let the Ultra Orthodox make any and all religious decisions. Unfortunately, while many “secular” Israelis resent the Ultra Orthodox, they have not been willing to take steps to curb their power.

Many voted for Netanyahu because they credit him as making their economy thrive and as defending the state during times of emergency. They never realized how far he was willing to go: to change the nature of Israel’s democracy in order to keep his coalition together and stay in power. Many, many Israelis are now saying they deeply regret voting for him.

The irony and danger of this situation is that now that a law has been passed to weaken the Supreme Court....that very court has to rule on whether that law is “kosher” or not. Of course, the biggest question is....what happens if the Supreme Court strikes down the law which is designed to weaken them? Netanyahu has said that he will ignore the Supreme Court’s ruling. This is what everyone refers to as a “Constitutional crisis”.

But what is a constitutional crisis in a country that has no constitution? According to Daniel Gordis it means that no one knows who is in charge. No one knows who is running the country. This would be dangerous enough but in a country on guard against the terrorism of Hamas and the threats of Iran it could be devastating. There is no doubt that this is a life or death situation

for the State of Israel. A situation which will define what Israel is and what it will be in the future.

I asked my friend Daphne what I should say to you today. She has often expressed frustration with American Jews who are quick to criticize Israel and slow to give support. She said the following that she wants us all to know and remember:

1. **Israel has the right to exist and a need to exist.** After all that the Jewish people have been through, having a safe haven in the world is something that every people has a right to have. Even in America, where there is a rise in anti-semitism we should not be complacent about our safety and security here. As Rabbi Don Weber once said to me, “Every Jew should have a valid passport.”
2. **Israeli’s are not their government.** How many times have we disliked the party in power in our country? That does not make us hate America, it just makes us work harder to make America better. We need to separate out what the Israeli government is doing from what the Israeli people think – remember two Jews, three opinions. It is unfair, to say the least, to paint Israelis with one brush.
3. **Americans can and should criticize the Israeli government.** One of the ways that many Israelis say that we can support them is to do just that. Write letters expressing our disapproval of what the Netanyahu government is doing to their democracy. As Yossi Klein Halevi, another great Israeli writer, thinker and activist says, “Diaspora support for Israel has traditionally taken the form of support for its government. But now the greatest threat facing Israel IS its government. Jews in the Diaspora can no longer support Israel without asking which Israel they are supporting.” He goes on to say, “To

treat Israel's present leadership as a normative government is to be complicit in the self-destruction of the Jewish state. Diaspora Organizations and leaders who continue to meet politely with government ministers and pose for photographs with the prime minister are failing the Israel that the Diaspora communities helped create. At this fraught moment, Jewish organizations conducting business as usual are placing themselves on the wrong side of history."

When we make our donations to Israel and organizations that support Israel we must be careful of who we are giving to and where the money is going. Is it going to the Israeli government or an independent group within the Israeli population fighting for democracy?. There have been and there will continue to be demonstrations here in America. Netanyahu is coming to the US next week to speak at the UN. There are many protests planned. There is much to do even for us here in the United States.

I want to close with this passionate plea from Yossi Klein Halevi: "With Israelis on the streets fighting for the liberal values they share with so many Jews around the world, this is no time for Diaspora silence or alienation. To the contrary: when someone you love is in danger, you draw closer. After many years during which the divide between Israel and the Diaspora has grown, this is a moment for Diaspora Jews to find common ground with Israelis fighting for a country of which we can all be proud". (Times of Israel article) Ken Y'hi Ratzon, May this be God's Will.