

I Won't Back Down
Rosh Hashanah 5787 – Day 2
Rabbi Rebecca Birken Yussman

Shanah Tovah. Happy New Year.

We don't make resolutions on Rosh Hashanah – at least, not exactly. We do *teshuva* - we reckon honestly with the year behind us, and then we set goals for the year ahead, not resolutions. A resolution is private, and it's forgivable if it quietly disappears. A goal is something for which you are more accountable, because next Yom Kippur when we're standing here again, we are expected to answer to ourselves and name our failures.

Naming our goals is pretty easy to do – be more patient, give more tzedakah, show up more often for our community. These are all things we need to say out loud and then put into practice. As many of you know, I have spent this part year working with a cohort of Reform rabbis from all over North America, focusing on how Jews relate to Israel in a post-October 7th world. I have loved Israel since I can remember, but have come to the realization that loving Israel isn't a feeling you either have or don't have. It's a practice, the same way teshuva is a practice, and it deserves the same kind of intention.

This morning, we did what we do every Rosh Hashanah. We opened to the middle of the book of Genesis and watched a father walk his son up a mountain.

Vayehi achar had'varim ha'eleh, v'ha-Elohim nisah et Avraham. Sometime later, God tested Abraham. I want you to sit with that word for a second: tested. Not asked. Not invited. Tested. And a test, by definition, is something you can fail.

We're often taught that this story is about obedience - that the test Abraham passed was the test of faith, that he was willing to do the unthinkable because God asked it of him, and that's supposed to be the whole point.

But here's what bothers me every year when I turn to this story. This is the same Abraham who, one chapter earlier, stood toe to metaphorical toe with God over the fate of two cities, home to his cousin Lot and hundreds of strangers he had never met. *Chalila lecha*, he said. Far be it from You. *Hashofet kol ha'aretz lo ya'aseh mishpat.* Shall the Judge of all the earth not deal justly? He talked God down from total destruction to saving the city on the merit of fifty righteous people - then down to ten righteous people. Abraham protested the injustice of God's plan. He argued. He pushed. He would not let it go.

So why, when it's his own son on the altar, does he go quiet?

Unsurprisingly, sages and thinkers throughout the ages have considered and debated this question. I don't think there is a one capital-A answer that is the one eternal capital-T truth. Maybe Abraham's silence was the deepest expression of faith our tradition has to offer. Or maybe the real test wasn't whether he would raise his hand. Maybe it was whether he would use his voice, the same voice he used for

I Won't Back Down

Rosh Hashanah 5787 – Day 2

Rabbi Rebecca Birken Yussman

strangers, on behalf of the person he loved most. If so, on that count, he came up short.

Right now, I am faced with a test – in fact, all Jews are faced with a test -not with a knife and a bundle of firewood, thankfully, but with a question about what we are willing to hold onto when holding onto it becomes difficult.

We are living at a moment when supporting Israel can feel complicated, uncomfortable, and, in some circles, downright unfashionable. We are being told that Zionism is incompatible with progressive values, that Jewish self-determination is uniquely illegitimate, that to love Israel is to align ourselves with the very ideology that sought to annihilate us.

This is our test - in 5787, how will we respond to this challenge?

I Won't Back Down

That's my Rosh Hashanah goal for all of us this year – a refusal, despite the narratives being pushed on social media, to back away from my firm belief in Zionism and our homeland in Israel. In 1902, more than a hundred years ago, Theodore Herzl wrote *Im tirtzu, ein zo agada*- if you will it, it is no dream. I believe this is still a dream worth defending.

Lech lecha, God said to Abraham. Go forth, from your land, your birthplace, your father's house, toward a place I will show you. That place became the homeland for our people – first for our *avot v'imahot*, and then as the refuge for Israelites freed from slavery. We built our holy civilization there, including the Great Temple in Jerusalem. And when we were exiled by conquering nations – first the Babylonians in 586 BCE and then in the year 70 by the Romans – we continued to pine for our homeland, to pray its safety, and to hope for our return. *Od lo avdah tikvateinu*, wrote Naftali Imber in 1887 - *Hatikvah bat shnot alpayim*: Our hope is not yet lost, our hope of two thousand years. But this wasn't the kind of the hope that meant just waiting – the *chalutzim*, pioneers, worked to make the hope take shape. They drained the swamps and made the deserts bloom. Golda Meir put it plainly: if there are forests, it is because we planted the seedlings. A language nobody had spoken as a mother tongue for 1,700 years was brought back to life on purpose, within a single lifetime.

This past winter, I visited the Tel Aviv Museum to learn how that now-bustling town was founded on April 11, 1909, when 66 pioneering Jewish families gathered on the sand dunes north of Jaffa to distribute land plots using a famous lottery with seashells. Less than a hundred years later Tel Aviv became known as the hub of technology and innovation.

It was this kind of Jewish ingenuity and perseverance that made it possible for Israel to win its War of Independence, fighting back against the five Arab countries

I Won't Back Down
Rosh Hashanah 5787 – Day 2
Rabbi Rebecca Birken Yussman

attempting to defeat the fledgling state in 1948 and then again 1956, 1967, and 1973 – that welcomed the influx of Jewish refugees fleeing or expelled from Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria – that continued to innovate, bringing the world drip irrigation and other ecological marvels, giving rise to Waze, ICQ, the USB flash drive, the pill camera, and the commercial firewall – just to name a few. Plenty of people shouting loudest for a boycott of Israel are, right now, using Israeli innovation to do it.

I Know What's Right

With apologies to Beauty and the Beast lyricist Howard Ashman, I believe that antisemitism is the true tale as old as time. Antizionism – the claim that Israel has no right to exist as a Jewish homeland – is the current popular manifestation of this ancient hatred.

David Harris, former CEO of the American Jewish Committee, describes antisemitism as an enduring and infinitely adaptable conspiracy theory. It ascribes to Jews, as a group, malevolent characteristics and aims. We are, apparently, constantly engaged in secretive or subversive behavior, collaborating with whoever is the enemy of the moment: Freemasons, Bolsheviks, globalists, cosmopolitans, etc. Dara Horn names the pattern the Big Lie, roughly 2,200 years old: Jews are destroying what you value the most. Capitalists, then communists, now colonizers. The costume changes. The accusation doesn't.

Today, we are facing antisemitism from both sides of the political spectrum. A popular right-wing commentator claimed that Israel had advance knowledge of September 11th and that "Zionist" actors control our government. A liberal mayor called AIPAC "monsters" moving dark money. A Republican congresswoman blamed the 2018 Camp Fire on Camp Fire on a space-based solar generator funded by "the Rothschilds." After a terror attack in Michigan was perpetrated by a man who blamed Israel for his family's suffering in Lebanon, a Democratic then-senate candidate shrugged it off, saying "hurt people hurt people."

This is called the horseshoe theory –when it comes to antisemitism, that the far-left and far-right – despite sitting on opposite sides of the political spectrum – bend closer together in their adoption of anti-Jewish prejudice. And yet when we call out antisemitism when we see it, Jews are often told to stop being victims, or reminded that other minorities have it worse than we do.

But I know what's right – and it is important to call out antisemitism when we see it. It is not okay to hold Israel to a different standard than any other nation as she attempts to defend herself against not only Hamas and Hezbollah, but against the power behind both of those terrorist organizations, Iran. Lest we forget why the Gaza

I Won't Back Down

Rosh Hashanah 5787 – Day 2

Rabbi Rebecca Birken Yussman

war started in the first place on October 7th, 2023, with the most depraved and incomprehensible attacks on Jews since the creation of the state.

I'll Stand My Ground

We live at a time when many people are eager to tell Jews what Judaism means. Others are equally eager to explain Zionism to Jews, often without much curiosity about how Jews themselves understand either term. We hear constant arguments about what constitutes authentic Jewish identity, acceptable Jewish practice, or legitimate Jewish connection to Israel. And in a world where people were told to listen to women who reported experiencing abuse or misogyny, and where we were told to listen to people of color as they described their lived experiences with prejudice and microaggressions – we're finding the definition of Zionism being left to people who don't live it or even understand it. Zionism is racism, it is Jewish supremacy, it is colonialism. It seen as almost laudable, in some circles, to shout "all Zionists are racists" or "death to Zionism."

So let's talk for a moment about what Zionism is NOT:

Zionism is not colonialism. Jewish presence in Israel dates back millennia. Some of our oldest prayers speak of our yearning to return. We end each Seder with *lashanah haba'ah b'Yerushalayim*. You cannot colonize what is yours.

Zionism is not apartheid. In fact, 20% of Israeli citizens are Arab, with full rights conferred by citizenship. They attend university, are employed in all facets of Israeli society, and serve in its military and government. Israel left Gaza in 2005, dismantling some 21 Jewish settlements – sometimes dragging out the residents one by one. Yes, Israel has a secure border with Gaza, but so does Egypt and I don't hear many protesters shouting about that.

Zionism does not support genocide. Despite what you may hear on social media, there is no recorded effort to eliminate the Palestinian population. We know that Israel goes to every effort to warn citizens of Gaza to clear areas that will imminently become targets, and we also know that Hamas uses hospitals, schools, and the like to store arms. The global Palestinian population has increased nearly 10-fold since 1948, growing from roughly 1.4 to 2 million people in 1948 to approximately 15.2 million today.

Zionism is not white supremacy. Leaving alone, for now, this new concept that Jews are white, At least 45% of Israeli Jews are Mizrahi, with roots in the Middle East and North Africa.

I Won't Back Down
Rosh Hashanah 5787 – Day 2
Rabbi Rebecca Birken Yussman

In so many cases, the line between antizionism and antisemitism is shrinking or disappearing.

Every social media post about a Jewish topic garners dozens, if not hundreds, of "Free Palestine" comments, even when the post had nothing to do with Israel. College campus protestors proudly denounce "Zios," blissfully – or willfully – ignorant of the fact that the term "Zio" was popularized by none other than former KKK leader David Duke. They fall for the newest iteration of the blood libel, such as the atrocious accusations levied this year by Nicholas Kristof in the New York Times. They chant "from the river to the sea" without knowing which river or which sea, and definitely without knowing – or maybe EVEN knowing – that this slogan advocates for an Israel that is *Judenfrei*. Does that sound familiar?

The terrorists who breached the security fences to attack villages, kibbutzim, and people dancing at a music festival did not shout "Free Palestine!" or even "two state solution!" They screamed, "Kill the Jews," all the Jews. Today, college students report being afraid to let friends and professors know they are Jewish, to visit Hillel or other Jewish organizations on campus, or even to wear Jewish jewelry. Many, many Jewish people find the need to say "I'm Jewish, but..." or "I love Israel, but... I don't support Netanyahu, or the settlers, or Smotrich, or Ben Gvir."

That is not to say that legitimate criticism of Israel is not valid. Our Torah teaches *hocheach tochiach et amitecha*, one must reprove one's fellows. In fact, because we are Zionists and because we love Israel we should continually work to make the nation better reflect our values. I believe we are obligated to object when we are disappointed or alarmed by Israel's actions. We should object when the Israeli National Security Minister says, of Arabs "They shouldn't live. They're not even people." We should express disapproval when Israeli citizens of the West Bank enact violence against their Arab neighbors. We should keep pushing back against a Chief Rabbinate that still won't recognize Reform and Conservative rabbis. Most importantly, we should grieve the loss of Palestinian lives in this most recent iteration of the conflict. We should engage thoughtfully with those who disagree with us

But there is a difference between listening to others and allowing others to define us.

As Jews, we inherit a tradition that is thousands of years old. We inherit a peoplehood that has survived exile, persecution, and repeated attempts to erase it. We inherit a relationship with the Land of Israel that long predates modern politics and will, God willing, outlast today's arguments.

That does not mean we all think alike. Judaism has never demanded uniformity. But it does mean that we have the right, and perhaps the responsibility, to define ourselves rather than allowing others to do it for us. As Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch wrote,

I Won't Back Down
Rosh Hashanah 5787 – Day 2
Rabbi Rebecca Birken Yussman

"We cannot give credence to gaslighting efforts that seek to sever Zionism from Judaism."

Author and activist Noa Tishby puts it simply: Zionism is the Jewish people's right to have self-determination and self-governance on parts of their ancestral land. That's it. Every other people on earth claims that right without controversy.

We are told, over and over, that we are the exception. That asymmetry is not a footnote to antisemitism. It is antisemitism.

I refuse to back down – to allow Zionism to be redefined by those who do not understand it. I refuse to be pushed around by those who see Israel as some kind of litmus test for progressiveness. I stand my ground that we can and should rebuke Israel and its leadership, allowing Israel to be – like every other nation – a work in progress.

Zionism was built on a dream - that Jews could revive our culture, our identity, to reclaim our ancient language, and stand among the nations of the world as equals. And we made that dream come true. To be a Jew and to feel safe in the world – in America, in Argentina, in Australia, in Germany, wherever we go – is to share in that Zionist dream and benefit from its truth. It is to feel connected to our long and history and to embrace our role as living page in the story of the Jewish people - and it is to connect our own stories to those of generations of Jews before us and to Jews around the world. We all breathe easier, able to live as proud Jews because of the dream of Zion and its reality. And it is to visit Israel, to support Israel, and to help shape it into the thriving, values-driven, democratic nation we deserve it to be. That is our dream. That is the longing that has sustained us for two thousand years.

So here we are, back with Abraham on the mountain, being put to the test. Will we speak up for Israel? Will we love it, despite its imperfections? Will we push for change when change is needed?

Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world, still, gratefully, unfinished. Israel's story is its own unfinished creation, still moving toward whatever we help it become next. That hope, *od lo avda tikvatenu*, did not retire in 1948. It isn't ours to retire now. This year, I won't back down. Neither should you.

Shanah Tovah.