

**Rosh Hashanah Morning 5771**  
**Forming a Personal and Modern Zionist Vision**  
**Rabbi Karen S. Citrin**

*L'Shanah Tovah.* In the days leading up to these High Holy Days, many of you have asked me two questions: Will you be telling us about your sabbatical month in Israel and, will you be sharing a story about the travel with your family?

As for the first question, this summer I was fortunate to study at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, a think tank where innovative scholars gather to offer new ideas and help shape Jewish life in Israel and around the world. I joined hundreds of other rabbinic colleagues from across the spectrum of Jewish denominations to explore this year's seminar topic, "Engaging Israel: Jewish Values and the Dilemmas of Nationhood." But more on this later.

As for the second question, since a tale of travel with my young twins has become somewhat of a High Holiday tradition, I didn't want to disappoint. Picture it for a moment: two rabbis, two three year olds, enough stuff for a month in Israel, sixteen hours of flying, one way. From the moment you step into the El Al terminal, you feel like you are in Israel: people shoving, children crying, men praying.

Now three year olds are obsessed with airplanes. As we walked to the gate, a chorus of chirping could be heard, "Airplanes! Airplanes!," the boys said with surprise and excitement. We did not want to spoil their sense of wonder, soon enough they will learn that, in fact, airplanes reside at airports. As we approached our gate, the El Al Boeing 747 came into view. All of a sudden Itai called out, "Look, it's a Jewish plane!" He had seen the large Israeli flag with the Star of David painted on the tail of the plane and in his three year old mind came to the conclusion that it must be a Jewish plane. Every time we see any airplane now, he asks, "Is it a Jewish plane?"

I am sure that when Itai made his announcement, Theodore Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, must have smiled in his grave. At that moment Itai had experienced Herzl's dream, a feeling of love for Jewish people and Jewish place. I couldn't help but join in my son's excitement and feel a sense of pride as we boarded our Jewish plane. It is true, being on El Al is like being in Israel, but finally landing in Israel is even better.

I love how the streets of Jerusalem tell the story of the Jewish people. Each street name has meaning: King David Street, Herzl Street, Menachem Begin Highway. I love seeing Jews of many colors. I love the food - the Middle Eastern spices, the rich cheeses and ice cream, cafes open into the late hours of night. I love hearing Hebrew. I love the hiking trails. I love the beach in Tel Aviv. I love the stones and trees and quiet of Shabbat afternoon in Jerusalem.

And while there is so much that I love about Israel, there are also plenty of things that frustrate me, that make me sad and angry. I am frustrated that as a woman I cannot pray out loud and read Torah at the Western Wall and that as a Reform rabbi, my weddings and conversions in Israel are not recognized by the State. I am frustrated by the government's undermining of religious pluralism in Israel and its empowerment of a single expression of Judaism. I am frustrated by the government's funding of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, as I believe this will impede future hope for peace. I am saddened by the poverty and corruption of leadership among the Palestinian people. I am saddened that each time I speak with Israeli parents I hear the same thing - how they do not sleep during the years when their children serve in the army.

And yet despite my frustrations, I am proud to call Israel my Jewish homeland. What Israel has achieved in its relatively short life span is astounding – the absorption of millions of immigrants from Europe and Muslim countries, the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia, the U.S. and Canada. Time after time Israel has contributed in international reconstruction efforts following earthquakes, hurricanes and other natural disasters. Today, Israel is home to the world’s highest number of scientists and engineers per capita.<sup>1</sup> Israel’s biotech sector has soared, with more clinical trials of stem cell treatments than any other nation. Israel is set to become the first country in the world to launch an electric car network. Dan Senor, co-author of the book *Start-Up Nation*, said of Israel: “It’s a very young country, very difficult environment, there are no natural resources, no access to regional capital or markets. If you were to paint a picture of the circumstances under which you’re not going to have a successful economic developing country, it would be Israel.” (*Start-Up Nation* by Dan Senor and Saul Singer)

It is against all odds not only that Israel exists, but also that it has experienced such exponential growth. Since declaring independence in 1948, Israel has repeatedly been forced to defend itself. In 2010, Israel continues to be surrounded by hostile nations and terrorist groups, all the while facing international challenges to its legitimacy. The recent flotilla crises provided yet another occasion for Israel’s detractors to quickly renew their campaign of criticism. Two facts must be stated: 1) As a fully legitimate member of the international community, Israel’s basic right to self-defense should not be questioned. And 2) Israel is the only democracy whose very existence has been questioned since its inception. Like all countries, Israel is not perfect. Israel makes mistakes. And yet, while it is acceptable to question and even critique some of Israel’s policies and actions, questioning Israel’s fundamental right to exist is intolerable.

But even for those who do not question Israel’s fundamental right to exist, disillusionment with Israel runs high. This is even true for many of us in the Jewish community. Several significant studies have charted the steep decline in attachment to Israel among the American Jewish community, especially among younger Jews. In the words of Steven Cohen of Hebrew Union College and Ari Kelman of UC Davis, “non-Orthodox younger Jews, on the whole, feel much less attached to Israel than their elders, with many professing a near-total absence of positive feelings.” In 2008, the student senate at Brandeis University rejected a resolution commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the Jewish state. (Peter Beinart, “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment”)

Let’s face it. Nowadays, the Z-word, Zionism, is not a common part of American Jewish parlance. How many of us really call ourselves Zionists? How many of us embrace Zionism as an integral part of our Jewish identity? What happened to that strong sense of pride in seeing a Jewish plane, the Israeli flag, or other symbols of the Jewish State?

This summer, the Shalom Hartman Institute aimed to address these questions. In a time when Jews are disengaging from Israel, we were challenged to engage Israel. As we gather today on this New Year, I ask you to re-engage with Israel. Last night Rabbi Eisner taught us about renewal and change. The kind of Zionism that was powerful in the past no longer speaks to this generation or the next. The world has changed, Israel has changed, and we have changed. And we cannot allow others to define Zionism for

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics from AIPAC

us. We would not want the *San Francisco Chronicle* or Fox News to define our Zionism. Nor is Zionism measured by the size of our *kippa*. We must redefine Zionism for ourselves, and by doing so, hopefully reignite our passion for Israel.

I wish to offer three perspectives that can reshape and redefine our Zionism. First, anti-Semitism and a sense of Jewish victimhood cannot be the only reason that Israel needs to exist. Even in Israel today, some have started to ask if we have taken the notion of victimhood too far. Avraham Burg, former speaker of the Knesset, and son of Holocaust survivors recently offered his perspective in a courageous and controversial book entitled, *The Holocaust is Over, We Must Rise from its Ashes*. Burg observes how the first stop for all official guests to Israel after landing at Ben-Gurion Airport is Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum and memorial. While he emphasizes the importance of honoring the memory of victims and survivors, Burg believes that living in a perpetual state of victimhood has inhibited the Jewish State's ability to move forward.

I am not saying that the memory of the Holocaust should not be upheld with the utmost honor and sanctity. Yes, the Jewish People has suffered immeasurably. But Burg asserts that the Israeli Defense Forces today is one of the strongest armies in the world. Israel's democracy is one of the most vibrant in the world. Even with the serious threat of certain neighbors, Israel today is more victor than it is victim. If this is the case, we must ask ourselves how Israel can use its power in a way that is consistent with the highest standards of Jewish values and morality because this will ultimately insure Israel's future.

Burg calls for a Zionism based, in a nutshell, on the principle: "What is hateful to you, do not do unto your fellow." His hopes are for, in his words, "a new humanism, a rejuvenated Judaism, for less traumatic interfaces of trust with the world." He writes, "I strive toward a Jewish people that say, 'Never again' not just for us Jews, but for every suffering victim in the world today..." He urges fellow Jews to move beyond fear toward trust and wholeheartedly believes that we would prefer to live with our neighbors in dignity and respect.

Burg's message appears easier said than done. The Palestinian track record leaves much to be desired – the failed Oslo peace talks, Kassam rockets fired into Israel, anti-Israel propaganda in the Palestinian media, not to mention Iran, whose intentions are well known. But if we continue to fear that everyone is out to get us, we will miss opportunities to build trust with our neighbors and ourselves. A new Zionism and a healthy Jewish identity embrace both the hardships of our past and the possibility of defining our own present and future.

If seeing ourselves differently is essential for redefining our Zionism, then the second perspective we must consider is how we see the other. On Rosh Hashanah, we read from stories in the Torah that shed light on difficult relationships. When we leave Isaac this morning, he is the rescued son of Abraham who remains alone on top Mount Moriah. Several chapters later, we learn that Isaac, himself, has children, Jacob and Esau. Before these children are born, we learn that Rebecca's pregnancy is fraught with conflict. Rebecca felt like she was being kicked from all sides. She cried out to God, "*Im ken lamah zeh anochi*, If this be so, why do I exist?" (Genesis 25:22) And God answered her: You're carrying twins! You are being kicked from all sides! "Two nations are in your body, two tribes from your belly shall be divided; tribe shall be mightier than

tribe...” (Gen 25:23) When the twins were born, Esau came out first with his brother, Yaakov, grasping at his brother’s heel.

There is an interesting irony with twins. I know this as a mom of fraternal twin boys. Your twin is there all the time, from the early days of sharing bottles and a crib, to sharing clothes, friends, teachers, parents, and always wanting whatever the other has. Your twin is both friend and foe. A typical day at our house features at least one episode of Wrestlemania. In a split second a friendly wrestling match can turn into a brawl, and a struggle can turn into an embrace. Twins walk a fine line between seeing oneself infinitely wrapped up in the other and wanting differentiation and distance.

Esau and Jacob grew into very different individuals. Esau was a hunter, a man of the field, and Jacob was a simple man, who preferred to stay at home. Their relationship became strained when Jacob convinced Esau to sell his birthright in exchange for lentil stew. But the relationship shattered when Jacob deceived Isaac and stole Esau’s blessing of the first born. Esau swore to kill his brother and so Jacob fled.

Years later, after Jacob had fared well by biblical standards –wives, handmaids, children, cattle, donkeys, and sheep – he seeks out his brother. When Jacob hears that Esau is coming to meet him in person, along with 400 men, he becomes exceedingly afraid. That night Jacob rose and brought his family across the river and he remained alone. A man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. The man told him that his name would no longer be Jacob, but rather he would be called *Israel*, one who wrestles with God. And Jacob named that place *Peniel* / Face of God, for he said, “I have seen God face to face.” (Gen 32:31)

With whom did Jacob wrestle? Could it have been Esau? Was it an angel of God? Or was it himself, a story of self-struggle and transformation? Personally, I believe he wrestled with his brother, a return to the womb, a return to the bitter and playful struggle of young twins, a struggle between brothers that ultimately transformed both Jacob and Esau.

The next day Jacob prepared to meet his brother. Esau ran to greet him, embraced him, flung himself upon his neck, and kissed him. And they wept together. Jacob offered gifts to Esau, and Esau replied, “I have plenty, my brother, let what is yours remain yours.” (Gen 33:9) And Jacob said, “I have seen your face as one sees the face of God.” (Gen 33:10) And thus the biblical story ends with each brother going his own separate way. They lived out the rest of their lives on separate lands, joining one more time to bury their father Isaac.

What can we learn from this story? That sometimes we need to go our separate ways and live on different lands. That it is possible to have enough – enough land, enough possessions, enough blessing. That it is possible to overcome a grudge. That trust can replace fear. That struggle can lead to transformation. That we can choose the sanctity of life over jealousy and fratricide. That the other is your brother. That in the face of the other we can see the face of God.<sup>2</sup>

There are places in Israel where this is happening. This is happening at Netivot Shalom, a village jointly established by Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel, where Jewish and Arab families co-exist and live as peaceful neighbors. This is happening at Friends of the Earth Middle East, an organization that brings together Jordanian, Palestinian, and

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<sup>2</sup> Ideas for reading this Genesis text in light of the Jewish-Arab conflict come from a class taught by Noam Zion at the Hartman Institute.

Israeli environmentalists. And this is happening at four bilingual schools where a Jewish and a Muslim headmaster operate as a team and all children have two classroom teachers, a Jew and a Muslim.

Today, Zionism must also include the other. A new Zionism means taking pride in the Jewish State, while also affirming the rights of minorities within the state. A new Zionism means preserving the delicate balance between what unites us and what makes us different. A new Zionism means seeing our neighbor as partner in reaching the goal of mutual security and affirmation.

We read the sacred stories of our past in light of the present. We, like, Jacob, must also become wrestlers, as we awaken to forge our own understanding of what Israel means to each of us.

The third perspective in reshaping Zionism urges us to find the “I” in Zionism, to find what is personally relevant and meaningful. There are many faces of Zionism. In today’s world of blended identities, scholar Gil Troy suggests that a hyphenated Zionism may bear more meaning. It is possible to be American-Zionists, Reform-Zionists, cultural-Zionists, feminist-Zionists, liberal-Zionists, eco-Zionists, entrepreneurial-Zionists. No movement is perfect, no state ideal. But today, as our teens or anyone who traveled to Israel this summer with Rabbi Eisner will tell you, Israel remains legitimate, inspiring, and relevant. If you have not yet been to Israel, I urge you to go, and go again. A visit to Israel will help you find your “I” in Zionism. In a world of dizzying identity choices, Israel and Zionism offer an anchor, a roadmap to a sense of belonging among the Jewish people, in our community, the United States, and in the world. As Gil Troy stated, “A century ago, Zionism revived pride in the label “Jew,” today, Jews must revive pride in the label “Zionist.”

This summer when I studied with Professor Troy, he challenged us to reflect on how we would respond to the question, “Why I am a Zionist”. He shared his thoughts:

- I am a Zionist because I share the past, present, and future of my people, the Jewish people. Our nerve endings are uniquely intertwined. When one of us suffers, we share the pain; when many of us advance communal ideals together, we – and the world – benefit.
- I am a Zionist because I am an idealist. Just as a century ago, the notion of a viable, independent, sovereign Jewish state was an impossible dream – yet worth fighting for – so, too, today, the notion of a thriving, independent, sovereign Jewish state living in true peace with its neighbors appears to be an impossible dream – yet worth seeking.
- I am a Zionist because I am a romantic. The story of the Jews rebuilding their homeland, reclaiming the desert, renewing themselves, was one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s greatest epics, just as the narrative of the Jews maintaining their homeland, reconciling with the Arab world, renewing themselves, and serving as a light to others, a model nation, could be one of this century’s marvels. (Gil Troy, “Why I Am A Zionist,” on Israel’s 60<sup>th</sup> Independence Day, 2008)

We need to add our own reasons to Troy’s list. Itai found his “I” in Zionism. What is your Jewish plane? What is your “I”? What is your child’s “I”?

I am a Zionist because only in Israel can Jews fully live in Jewish space and Jewish time. I am a Zionist because only in Israel does it feel completely normal to be Jewish, not other or different. I am a Zionist because I am part of an age-old

people with an age-old dream. I am a Zionist because the richness of Jewish music, art, film, and literature in Israel, and the vibrancy of the Hebrew language, enhance my spirit and soul. I am a Zionist because I believe all Jewish people are responsible for one another. I am a Zionist because I believe my Jewish identity is incomplete without Israel, because Judaism encompasses religion, spirituality, values, culture, our people, and nationhood. I am a Zionist because of *HaTikvah, the Hope*. I hold onto the hope that Israel will continue becoming a society that embraces the Jewish value of pluralism. I hold onto the hope that I will see peace between Israel and her neighbors in my lifetime.

My sense of hope is renewed by the current talks between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. The two leaders are scheduled to meet again in less than a week. Miracles have occurred before. Many of you will remember when Egyptian President, Anwar Sadat, made his now famous trip to Israel to speak before the Knesset. It is possible for sworn enemies to swear off war.

These talks are taking place during the Jewish season of *teshuvah*, the season of human responsibility to repent and change our behavior. The future is not preset and determined. Rather, human beings have the sacred power to transform our own lives. I pray that the spirit of this season will guide the leaders of both sides as they continue to meet face to face.

Yes, it sometimes sounds impossible. But this year as we commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Theodor Herzl's birthday, his words of hope still ring true, "*Im tirzu ein zo aggadah* – If you will it, it is no dream." Now is the time to will it. Now is the time to re-engage. Now is the time to take our own place in the ongoing story of our People. Now is the time for change and hope. *Amen*.