

**From Broken to Whole:
Strengthening Israel and It's Democracy Together**
Rabbi Ariana Captauber, Yom Kippur 5784/2023

Moses has been carrying the tablets for weeks. His skin, soft and pliable with age, is now imprinted with the words of God's commandments engraved upon these two stones. The divine word is emblazoned in his mind, body and soul.

Finally, he nears the bottom of the mountain. He can see the camp before him. He takes a moment to pause and look at the tents, the people, the goats, and then he sees it: in the center of the camp, a flash of gold. He rubs his eyes. Yes, he sees clearly now, the tiny figures of his people, swirling in dance and prostration around the golden figure.

He doesn't wonder what it is, he knows. It is an idol, a false god. *You shall have no other God but Me.* He shudders, he screams. 40 days and 40 nights he has deprived himself, not eating, not drinking, following God's command. For what? The people are not ready. They are worshiping a statue.

He runs down the mountain, faster and faster, tablets in his arms. He pushes past the dancers and worshippers until he is beside the statue, a golden calf. With a deep, guttural yell that channels the depths of despair, he lifts the tablets above his head and smashes them to the ground. Then everything is silent.

There are moments when everything changes. Something breaks, irreparably. What do we do with something broken? Do we abandon it, throwing it away and seeking out something new? Do we cling to the broken shards, pretending nothing has changed? Or do we try to repair it, and create something both old and totally new?

The State of Israel is in a moment of crisis. Faith in the government and democracy has broken. Israel has always struggled, facing war, terror,

policy conflict, occupation. It has faced existential threats in our lifetimes. Fifty years ago tonight, the Yom Kippur War broke out, one of the greatest crises in Israeli history.

But this crisis is different. Israel's democracy is breaking, not because of an external enemy, but because of deep divisions within Israeli society. Eager to pursue its agenda despite these divisions, the current government is reforming the judiciary to curtail its power and eliminate the checks and balances of democracy. This government is holding democracy above its head, preparing to smash it to the ground.

"This is not about a change in policy," wrote Daniel Gordis, a top Israeli political commentator who has written books on Israeli history. "You can agree or disagree about policy...that's the nature of democracies. This is about changing the rules of the game so that the fundamental nature of [the country] is about to change."

The Brothers and Sisters in Arms are a group of Israeli army reservists who stopped showing up for duty in protest, and are now fighting what they call "a war within the country." Ron Scherf, one of its founders, said on 60 minutes this week that they never dreamed they would be fighting from within this way, "not even 9 months ago, not even 3 months ago. It's a situation that's deteriorating so fast, we could never believe it."

In this moment of crisis, we must not turn away. We must turn toward Israel with love, and help those who are working toward positive change. This summer Gordis joined together with Yossi Klein Halevy and Matti Friedman to plead with the diaspora to get involved. Each of these authors are ardent Zionists and political centrists, but they paint a dire picture of the current crisis: extreme voices who would not have been acceptable five years ago are now in power, and are dismantling democracy to forward their agenda. A brain drain has begun, with tech companies, intellectuals and talent leaving Israel, seeing the writing on the wall. Police tactics toward protesters have become more aggressive, using stun grenades and tear gas on protesters waving Israeli flags.

Matti Friedman calls this the “Lebanonization of Israel.” He fought with the Israeli army during the Lebanon war of the 90s, and he warns that what happened there could happen in Israel. Lebanon was once a flourishing economy and a nascent democracy, a westernized beach-side party capital. “If this sounds familiar to Israelis, it should,” he says. And yet by the 1990s democratic leaders had failed to unite the country and factionalism took over, with the corrupt government parceling out the country to extremist groups. Suddenly, Hezbollah had a stronger army than the Lebanese government. Today, Beirut is still a beautiful city but a shell of what it once was. “Lebanon is not just a neighbor,” Friedman says, “but a potential future.”

This is frightening, but from the comfort of our synagogue seats here in the United States, it’s easy to turn away. Indeed, during other times of political turmoil, Israelis have often asked American Jews to stay out of it. “We’re a sovereign nation,” they say, “let us figure it out,” or, “if you care so much, move here and vote.”

But this time is different, and protesters are calling out to the diaspora: please, stand with us. It has been ten months of weekly protests, every Saturday night, in the cold and the heat and now the cold again. Ron Scherf from the Brothers and Sisters in arms says he spends every day working on this, day and night, organizing all week. The protesters, who have been sacrificing time, money and prestige, know this is going to be a long slog, and they would like to know that Jews in America, Canada, Britain, France, anywhere, care about them and their cause. This outreach of Israelis to the Diaspora is unusual and significant, Yossi Klein Halevy said. If diaspora Jews don’t take this opportunity to renew and reimagine this relationship, then the Diaspora-Israel relationship could weaken or break.

When something is broken we need not throw it away. The rabbis teach that the broken tablets were not discarded, but rather carried in the ark through the desert and into the land of Israel, alongside the new ones.

Sometimes, in a moment of crisis, there is opportunity to build, to create something even stronger. Long-term fans of any team know this. Perhaps you first fell in love with the team because they were great, because it was fun to watch them play well, because they had awesome chants and tailgates, because you could share in the great passion for the team. Then one year the team wasn't so great: their best player got injured, the management changed, the tailgating got shut down because of COVID. But you didn't abandon the team. In fact, rooting for them while they were losing made you feel even more passionate about their wins. Missing out on tailgating made you even more excited to return. You became not a fair-weather fan, but a true die-hard fan.

This is the kind of relationship we want to develop with Israel. Jewish institutions are often afraid to present a complex picture of Israel, afraid that Jews won't love it, preferring instead to focus on falafel and beautiful beaches and holy sites. But I would argue that Israel's complexity and broken pieces might make us love it more, not less. In his book *Loving the Real Israel*, Alex Sinclair writes about different kinds of love: there is the love that we feel for a young child, pure and simplistic, in which we care for them unconditionally. Later, with a teenage or adult child, we develop a more complex relationship: we disagree with them, perhaps at times we don't like them, but we still love and want the best for them. I might also compare it to romantic love: there's infatuation, full of rosy illusions, and then there's long-lasting love, in which people get to know each other, warts and all.

I myself was able to develop this kind of nuanced love for Israel during my time living there. I spent a year working in Tel Aviv after college and another six months studying in Jerusalem during rabbinical school. I grew to adore Israeli beaches and food, and can still take you to my favorite hummus and sabich places in Tel Aviv. I drank in the spirituality and history of Jerusalem, as alive and present as the smell of fresh rosemary growing in the streets.

I had many moments of disillusionment, too, but they occurred in the context of living in and loving the real Israel. Like when I found a place to live in Tel Aviv that I was really excited about, a shared group house near the central bus station, a neighborhood home to many African refugees. My cousin picked me up from the airport and brought me there, but before I could get out of the car he looked around and said, “Ari, you can’t live here. Come stay with me until you find a better place to live.” I convinced him to let me out of the car, that I would be fine, but this was only the first of many encounters with Israeli racism that appeared when I mentioned where I lived.

During my Jerusalem year, I attended a “women of the wall” service for Rosh Hodesh at the Kotel, the Western Wall, that fairly scarred me. I had attended one such event years before; it was a lovely service in which women gathered to sing Hallel and read Torah to celebrate the new month at the holiest Jewish site. There were boos from orthodox worshippers but overall I felt moved and empowered.

When I returned for the event in 2017, the orthodox community had organized heavily against these services. Young women in long skirts linked arms and blocked the entryway to the women’s side of the wall. On the men’s side was an enormous loudspeaker where an announcer blasted insults, while others blew shrieking whistles. Israeli police had to wrestle us through the blockade, but once we got there we couldn’t hear one another and didn’t feel safe as people screamed and spat at us. All because we wanted to pray and celebrate the new month at the Kotel as women.

Yet through all of this, I still love Israel. I still dream of spending another year there someday, and feel I would move there if it were just a bit closer to my family here. The brokenness of Israel’s religious pluralism and racism doesn’t deter me, rather it allows me to see Israel as it really is, to love it as a real, honest-to-God country with problems to overcome. I don’t need to go on some Disneyland-esque trip or insist that Israel is perfect and blameless in order to like it. In fact, I prefer to move past the infatuation

stage to a real relationship, loving it with all of its flaws, wanting to help it be better.

Lately, my cousin, who is fairly unflappable, has been dispirited. “Ari,” he says, “Israel is not the same place it was when you lived here.” His wife, who spent her career working in the government with the military, goes to protests every week. She stands alongside the 7 million Israelis who have poured into the streets over the last ten months, opposing the judicial reforms. Though some 60% of Israelis oppose the reforms, the government, elected by only 48% of the population, continues to push them through, disparaging the protests and all who support them.

In the face of all of this, many American Jews have hesitated to respond. We are confused or overwhelmed or feel too distant to say anything. We fear being construed as anti-Israel or emboldening our enemies.

But Israelis need our help. They are asking for our help. They don’t want to be alone with the brokenness. Psychological helplines are oriented around this principle: in times of distress, it helps to have someone, even a stranger, to be with you, to listen, to encourage.

This call for companionship in times of trouble is echoed throughout our literature. In the desert, Moses becomes overwhelmed when he tries to adjudicate all of the Israelites’ issues on his own. His father in law Yitro intervenes. “What are you doing?!” he asks Moses. “The thing you are doing is not right: you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. The task is too heavy for you, you cannot do it alone.” Later, when Moses again becomes exasperated with the Israelites, he cries out to God, “I cannot carry this people all by myself, for it is too much for me.”

Moses needs judges, he needs helpers, he needs God. He can’t do it alone. When Moses did feel terribly alone, standing on mount Sinai looking down at his idol-worshipping people, he broke God’s tablets.

So what can we do to help Israelis feel less alone, to show that we are not fair-weather fans, to help them in this time of brokenness? Every morning Jews gather our tzitzit together, symbolizing the unity of Jews around the world, and say, “Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad,” Hear oh Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is one. In saying this, we, too, as a people, are bound together as one.

I heard a moving story of Israelis trying to find children who were hidden in convents and monasteries during the Holocaust. No one remembered anymore which children were Jewish, so the Israeli volunteers sang out, “Shema Yisrael!” and listened for those who would respond, “Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad.”

The call of oneness is the motto of our people. We must not turn away in times of trouble, rather, we must turn toward each other, to heal the brokenness and return to a sense of oneness.

So how do we do this? First, we can listen. We can go beyond the headlines and seek out the voices of Israelis. Many congregations are bringing Israelis who have been involved in the protests to speak at their shuls. Rabbi Muroff and I have begun planning a series of Israeli speakers, not specifically about the protests, but to share their stories of real life in Israel, beginning with Yiscah Smith’s visit on **November 4th**. I hope you will join us to hear them. I also hope to organize a Beth El trip to Israel in the near future, on which I hope we can visit not just the top tourist attractions but places and people that allow us to engage deeply with the real Israel.

Second, we can put our funding behind our values. Rabbi Angela Buchdahl of Central Synagogue in New York suggests that we give to organizations, and institutions that are fortifying the protests and building a more just, democratic, egalitarian, pluralistic Israel. Daniel Gordis reminds us that these protests, now stretching on many months, are not free. You can seek out appropriate organizations for yourself, and I will include some suggestions in the digital version of this sermon.

Third, we can blow the shofar in protest. This week Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu, who has spearheaded the judicial reforms, was in New York to speak with President Biden and the UN. Several major Jewish organizations including the Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative movement, the Union for Reform Judaism, and T'ruah, the Rabbis for Human Rights organization, gathered outside the UN to demonstrate solidarity with the protesters. Some 2,000 Jews waved Israeli flags, calling for accountability and democracy. Rabbi Jill Jacobs, the head of T'ruah, wrote, "This moment feels full of possibility. The past need not determine the future. It is not too late for Israel to recommit to the principles in its declaration of independence, and to commit to democracy and human rights for all."

Some of us might not feel comfortable with public protest. It can be complicated to express dissent around Israel in the U.S., where we fear validating political opponents and anti-Semites. But this doesn't mean we should do nothing. Yehuda Kurtzer from the Hartman Institute points out that there are religious actions we can take as well. In times of crisis, our ancestors blew the shofar, fasted, and cried out to God.

We have a prayer that we say regularly for Jewry in distress. Often we say it when Jews are being oppressed in non-Jewish contexts, or are suffering from things outside of our control, like natural disasters. This context is different, as the Jewish people are suffering distress caused by our own hands. As Ron Scherf puts it, "we are defending Israel against danger, and now the danger is from inside. It breaks my heart." Still, we can cry out to God on the Jew's behalf in any scenario, so the prayer is no less apt. Let's say it now together.

The words are:

אַחֵינוּ כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל, הַנִּתְּוִיִּים בְּצָרָה וּבִשְׁבִיָּה, הָעוֹמְדִים בֵּין בָּיִם וּבֵין בֵּיבְשָׁה, הַמְּקוּם
יְרַחֵם עֲלֵיהֶם, וְיוֹצִיאֵם מִצָּרָה לְרוּחָהּ, וּמֵאֲפֵלָה לְאוֹרָהּ, וּמִשְׁעֶבֶד לְגֵאֲלָהּ, הַשְּׂתָא בְּעַגְלָא
וּבְזִמְן קָרִיב.

Our brothers, the whole house of Israel, who are in distress and captivity

who wander over sea and over land; may God have mercy on them, and bring them from distress to comfort, from darkness to light, from slavery to redemption, now, swiftly, and soon.

Finally, our Israeli and American leaders urge us not to despair, never to give up hope. The Israeli National Anthem is called Hatikva, our hope. One of the lines states, “*od lo avda tikvateinu*” our hope has not yet been lost. Over thousands of years, through trial and tragedy, Jews have maintained hope for peaceful and free Jewish sovereignty, *lihiot am hofshi b’artzeinu*. And we must still maintain it now.

Beauty can still be made from brokenness, the shattered tablets can be carried in the ark alongside the new ones. If we do this right, we can even come out of this with greater strength, like a sports team emerging from a bad run.

There are many hopeful reports coming from the protests. The Jerusalem demonstrations have attracted a very diverse crowd, with speakers from the Negev Bedouins alongside representatives from the LGBTQ community, rabbis from a moderate right West-Bank Yeshiva and rabbis from the Israeli reform or Masorti movement, Palestinians from East Jerusalem and secular Jews from West Jerusalem. “These Israelis disagree about many, many things,” Matti Friedman says, “but they can meet in Jerusalem and agree that all of this will only be possible in a democratic state... And so there is reason for hope. “

Od Lo Avda Tikvateinu, our hope has not yet been lost. May we carry that Tikva with us always, and may it lead us to action, engagement, a stronger relationship, and a stronger democratic Israel. Let’s sing the Israeli National Anthem together.