

To Be A Jewⁱ
 A Sermon for Second Day Rosh Hashanah 5782/2021
 By Rabbi Susan Grossman
 Beth Shalom Congregation
 Columbia, Maryland
 www.beth-shalom.net

Shanah Tovah.

What's in a name? We named our son after my husband David's grandmother, Yeva, a Hebrew teacher and early Zionist in Russia. Suffering nightmares throughout her life after surviving a pogrom (an anti-Semitic attack) in Russia, she knew why Jews needed a state of our own.

Using the first letter of her name, "Yud" or Y, we chose Yonatan, which means "God gave," fitting after years of infertility and a miscarriage.ⁱⁱ Yonatan was also King David's friend and we hoped father and son would also be friends, as they are. Yonatan also honored Yoni Netanyahu, the Israeli commander who died rescuing Jewish hostages in 1976, when Palestinian terrorists hijacked a plane to Entebbe, Uganda and released only its non-Jewish passengers.

David and I were in college on Yom Kippur, 1973 when Egypt and Syria attacked Israel. What a frightening time. Israel's survival was uncertain. That just three years later, Israel could rescue Jews was incredible. We wanted our Yoni to appreciate the importance of Israel's existence after thousands of years of Jewish powerlessness and be as committed as his namesake to defending the Jewish People and our homeland, Israel.

When we shared Yoni's names with my father, of blessed memory (his middle name, Lev, is after my father's father), my father smiled and asked for Yoni's English name. I explained he wouldn't have an English name because we didn't need to hide our Jewish identities, anymore. We believed anti-Semitism, at least in the US, was the exception, not the rule. My father replied, only having a Hebrew name might be a problem, someday.

I realize that, despite my work in Holocaust education, I was naïve in a way my father was not, having lived through the anti-Semitism of the 1930s and 40s. Anti-Semitism is the world's oldest and most adaptive virus. It grows undetected for decades and then breaks out in unpredictable ways. As violent attacks on Jews grow in Europe and now in America, stirred by anti-Semitic rhetoric, I see a tipping point that makes me concerned for my son and daughter-in-law, the children they may have, *b'li ayim hara*, and all our descendants.

That is why we need to talk about what it means to be Jews, or married to Jews; how we develop the kind of soul deep sense of meaning that sustained David's grandmother and so many generations through tough times; and how we fight rising anti-Semitism that threatens not just us but everyone, for what starts with Jews never ends with Jews, as we learned in the Holocaust and 20 years ago on 9/11, when Islamist terrorists hijacked planes to attack America.

Watching the rise of Nazism in 1930s Europe and America, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, wrote a book called *Judaism as a Civilization*. It identified three essential elements of what it means to be a Jew: to believe, to behave and to belong as Jews.

What does it mean to believe as a Jew? We could spend years exploring the range of Jewish belief. Our Torah reading contains two foundational beliefs: that our God demands we value all life and that we are a covenanted People with our own homeland. This is the origin of Zionism that David's grandmother supported in its modern political expression, the belief that Jews will someday live in peace and freedom in their own land, a belief that fills the pages of Hebrew Scripture and all subsequent Jewish literature.

There is a simple way to tell the difference between legitimate criticism of Israel and criticism that is really anti-Semitism in disguise: When it Demonizes, Delegitimizes and/or applies a Double Standard to Israel not applied to other nations. We need to know enough of our own beliefs, history, and history of ideas to recognize when others try to erase or twist Jewish belief and history to demonize or delegitimize Jews and the Jewish State. Don't buy the newest anti-Semitic trope that Zionism was a modern invention or a colonialist plot, for Jews have lived in Israel continuously for thousands of years, though often under foreign occupation, dreaming of being free in their own land.

Kaplan emphasized it is not enough to believe if we don't behave as Jews. That means not just acting ethically but engaging regularly in Jewish practice and tradition.

After the Holocaust, Rabbi Yitzhak HaLevy Herzog, Israel's Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, sought to recover Jewish children hidden by Christian rescuers. One day in 1946, Rabbi Herzog arrived at a monastery known to have taken in Jewish children. He thanked the Reverend Mother for saving these children's lives and asked they be returned to the Jewish People. The Reverend Mother agreed but asked how he would know which of the hundreds of children they had are Jewish? Much time had passed since their arrival; many came as infants.

Rabbi Herzog assured the Reverend Mother he would know. He asked that all the children be gathered in a large hall. He ascended the stage and cried in a loud voice: *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad!* (Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One). Immediately, dozens of children rushed to the stage, shouting "mama!" and "papa!" The sound of the *Shema* instantly brought back memories of reciting this central Jewish prayer with their parents every bedtime.ⁱⁱⁱ

Would our children have responded the same way? It is not enough to believe we are Jews if we don't behave as Jews, if we don't *do* Jewish daily and weekly, not just once or twice a year.

Jewish writer and former *New York Times* editor Bari Weiss writes, in her book, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, "Cultivating and strengthening your Jewish identity may not seem like an obvious way to combat anti-Semitism, but it is actually one of the most powerful...especially for parents who have the opportunity to raise educated, proud, and joyful Jews..."^{iv} I agree. Yoni and I recited the Shema each night when I put him to bed. I hope he will do the same with his children when the time comes. And that he and my daughter-in-law Maddie will continue to observe a joyful Judaism.

How do you want to behave as Jews in the coming year? Recite the Shema each evening with your kids or to yourself? Make Friday night dinner special? Attend services? Take a class or read a Jewish book? Volunteer at synagogue? Don't just believe, behave. Do Jewish for yourself, your children, your family's and friends' children, and our People's future.

Kaplan argued it is not enough to believe and behave if we don't also belong. We belong by joining and supporting Jewish institutions, like this synagogue, which is on the front lines of Jewish continuity, community, and advocacy. We belong by supporting other Jews and the Jewish People, as a whole. That is why Rabbi Herzog scoured Europe to bring Jewish war orphans to Israel and why Yoni Netanyahu sought to rescue Jewish hostages. As our Sages taught, *Kol Yisrael aravim zeh b'zeh*,^v "All Jews are bound with one another." What happens to Jews anywhere Jews everywhere. That's why rising anti-Semitism concerns us, even if it hasn't touched us personally yet.

In some ways, right wing anti-Semitism is easier to combat than left-wing anti-Semitism. Right wing anti-Semitism is more blatant and our progressive non-Jewish neighbors support us when it occurs, just as we support them when targeted. That is what happened after the 2018 Tree of Life shooting in 2018, the deadliest attack on Jews in US history. The community Vigil we hosted filled our building and parking lot with over 1400 neighbors. Many of the relationships we made that week continue in Courageous Conversations and other interfaith work we do as a Congregation. Never doubt that such interfaith work is essential to our wellbeing as American Jews, even as it is central to living our Jewish beliefs of building a better world and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Anti-Semitism on the left is often not as blatant and thus more difficult for us and our neighbors to identify. It may be dismissed as intersectionality, that Jews are too white to be oppressed, or cloaked as anti-Israel, excusing the barring of a Jewish star at the Gay Pride Parade and Hillel members from student government or assaulting students who wear yarmulkes on campus.^{vi}

Weiss warns us never to make excuses for those we might otherwise agree with, on the right or the left. Nor should we sacrifice part of our identity to be accepted by them. I agree. The early Russian Zionist Ber Berochov wrote, "Be a Zionist among Socialists and a Socialist among Zionists." That means advocate for our right to self-determination (Zionism) among our progressive allies and advocate for our obligation to care for others among your Jewish ones. Berochov was epitomizing Hillel's famous teaching, "*If I am not for myself, who will be? When I am only for myself, what am I?*" Unfortunately, too many of our own young people, nurtured on our beliefs to pursue justice and remember the stranger, only act on the last half of Hillel's teaching, to care for others, but ignore the first half, to care for ourselves.

We should never ask of ourselves what we do not ask of other nations or other peoples.^{vii} We Jews have a right to self-determination like every other people in the world. It is a right Palestinians claim for themselves, which is why I support two States for two Peoples. To deny to Jews what is justly claimed for Palestinians is anti-Semitism.

I have seen the suffering of the Palestinian people firsthand. I've visited Gaza refugee camps and protected Arab olive groves from Jewish extremists. I've also seen the bullet holes from Palestinian snipers over a child's bed in the Jewish neighborhood of Gilo and I've watched Hamas rockets head towards me and my congregants. We forget Palestinians rejected multiple opportunities for their own state, including when Israel withdrew from Gaza as a first step to withdrawing from the West Bank if Gaza remained peaceful. Instead, Islamist extremists dedicated to Israel's destruction immediately lobbied rockets onto Israeli towns across the border and continued to terrorize Israeli civilians there for years. Now those rockets reach almost all of Israel. No one should ask of us what they do not ask of themselves or others.

Jewish US Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg, once wrote, “While the Constitution protects individual rights, it is not a suicide pact.”^{viii} Neither is Israel’s Declaration of Independence a suicide pact.

Belonging doesn’t mean not being critical. It means not giving up on Israel even when Israel disappoints or troubles us. David Hartman calls those who love Israel and are troubled by some or much of what happens there as the “troubled committed.”^{ix} Israel needs us to be both troubled and committed. To push back against Jewish extremist influence, funded by American dollars, to help rebuild Israel’s ethical center by supporting organizations, like our own Masorti Movement, that promote and defend Israel’s founding commitment to democracy, pluralism, and equal rights for all in Israel. And, like Rabbi Herzog and Yoni Netanyahu, to defend the wellbeing of our People and our State.

To be a Jew means to believe, behave, and belong in ways that honor our past, enrich our present, and strengthen our future. I hope the Jewish life we modeled for Yoni, and the family and other stories we have shared, will guide, inspire and strengthen him as he faces a more uncertain future than either David or I did as Jews in the second half of the 20th century. May we all do our part to be the best Jews we can be, which includes supporting and defending Israel and the Jewish People. May our efforts inspire our children and those yet to be born to believe, behave and belong as educated, proud, and joyful Jews.

Shanah Tovah.

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ⁱⁱ See Susan Grossman, “Finding Comfort After a Miscarriage,” in Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut, ed., *Daughter of the King: Women and the Synagogue* (Phila.: Jewish Publication Society, 1992): 284-290.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shai Ben-Ari, “How 500 Jewish Children Were Returned to the Jewish People after the Holocaust,” *The Librarians*, https://blog.nli.org.il/en/rabbi_herzog/ (Accessed August. 31, 2021).

^{iv} Bari Weiss, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism* (NY: Crown, 2019): 201-2.

^v Babylonian Talmud Shevuot 39a.

^{vi} <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/01/09/more-than-headwear-my-yarmulke-symbol-faith-not-target-hate/>

^{vii} Weiss, *op.cit.*, 186.

^{viii} 1963 U.S. Supreme Court case *Kennedy v. Mendoza-Martinez*.

^{ix} Rabbi Donniel Hartman, “Liberal Zionism and the Troubled Committed.” *Sources: A Journal of Jewish Ideas* (Shalom Hartman Institute). <https://www.sourcesjournal.org/articles/liberal-zionism-and-the-troubled-committed>.

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