



HOLDING ON:

A PLEA TO STAY IN THE CONVERSATION

Yom Kippur

This is a sermon for those who have had enough. You've watched as the Jewish community has grown angrier, narrower, more defensive and more oppositional. You're tired of the politics of fear, which you sense are driving much of the conversation around Israel. You're sick of hearing Jews call each other Kapo and Nazi and warmonger and idiot, disgusted by the rancor and the yelling. You're done with the pandering, propagandizing and politicizing. This sermon is for those who are tired of being told there is one way and one way only to show your love of Israel or to address questions of Israeli and American national security. This is for those of you who watch the trends on your FB feed and read the paper with a growing dismay. With each community flare-up, you feel an increasing sense of alienation from the Jewish conversation. Those who are so fed up you're all but ready to walk away.

And for the rest of you, those who feel well represented in the mainstream, feel comfortably a part of the establishment, I hope you'll listen anyway... One, because you're here already, so you may as well. And two, because this sermon is about your kids, who will one day get to college campuses where they'll be confronted with a vigorous challenge to everything they've been taught about Israel and Judaism. They'll likely find themselves forced to choose between increasingly hostile camps. On one side, they'll be held personally responsible for every decision and action of Israel's government, they will be told that Israel is a pariah state and pressured to support BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions). On the other side, if they dare speak out against Israeli policies or actions, they'll risk being deemed anti-Semites and entered on blacklist databases purportedly dedicated to exposing bigotry on campus. In either case their instinct, as has been the case for so many before them, may be to walk away altogether. You won't like everything I'm going to say (I apologize in advance if I upset you). But I hope you'll listen anyway, because it may help make the conversation with your kid or colleague or friend a little more productive.

Last night I gave us all permission, in this New Year, to walk away from what's no longer working, rather than continue to endlessly to bang your head against the wall. But today I'm taking it back. I'm going to beg you to stay, at least in this conversation. To not give up so quickly on this particular dream. This is a simple sermon: I'm going to give you the four best reasons I can think of for you to stay:

1. Israel is a really good and really important idea.

The revolution of Zionism was the promise of the transformation of the Jew from a passive, apologetic, self-abnegating nebbish to the strong, self-confident, self-realized Sabra. Israel is the response to the powerlessness and lack of agency that defined much of the diasporic condition. The searing image painted by Haim Nachman Bialik after the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 was of the pale, fragile Jew, hiding beneath the bed while the Cossacks attacked his wife. It was that image of the Jew – helpless and afraid – that fed the Zionist imagination. The Jew needed to reclaim his humanity. His masculinity. Her agency. Her visibility in history.

And that was before the Holocaust, the catastrophic disruption to the Jewish sense of self. Rabbi Harold Schulweis wrote that: “The Holocaust is the dominant psychic reality in our lives.”¹ The trauma of the destruction of European Jewry, the murder of millions, brought about a tectonic shift in Jewish history. It has informed every subsequent conversation, every decision, every action regarding the Jew’s position in the world – in Israel, in Europe, in the United States. The Holocaust is so deeply embedded in the consciousness of the Jew that former head of the Shin Bet Ami Ayalon has said that when Jews count our dead after an attack, we don’t count 1, 2, 3. We count 6,000,001, 6,000,002, 6,000,003. Every Jewish death is felt by the whole nation – each loss is all of our loss, every murder falls on the open wounds of the past, each one reinforcing our eternal vulnerability as a people. Our people’s great collective trauma does not fade into the past because it regenerates itself with every rocket, every kidnapping, every shooting, whether in Be’er Sheva, Paris, or Kansas City.

Every year, the Israeli Air Force flies over Auschwitz on Holocaust Remembrance Day, symbolizing that our people has been reborn out of the ashes. Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi spoke at Auschwitz on this occasion in 2008:

Sixty-three years have passed since the end of the most horrible war humankind has ever known. Sixty-three years after the atrocity. The Star of David is no longer a mark of disgrace, but a symbol and a sign of the resurrection of the Jewish people. As the commander of the IDF, the fighting force of the mighty Jewish state, I stand here with pride and honor and pledge: “Never Again!” Never again shall we stand helpless, crying for the mercy of others. Never again shall we beg to be defended. Never again shall we allow our sons and daughters, our parents and our grandparents to be erased from the face of the earth. Never again shall the frightened eyes of Jewish children look with ghastly dread through the barbed wire fences of concentration camps. Never!²

A strong, secure, Jewish State transformed the dream of a place in which the Jew could defend himself, herself, their family from fantasy into reality.

And lest we believe for a moment that the need for Israel as refuge has lived out its utility, think of the terrorist attack in the kosher market in Paris this winter, which many saw as a reminder

¹ Rabbi Harold Schulweis, “Letting Go/ Holding On,” *In God’s Mirror*.

² Gabi Ashkenazi, *Speech at Auschwitz*, 2008.

of the ever-present dangers facing the Jewish community. This is particularly important for us, progressive American Jews, to remember. Peter Beinart wrote this winter that the experience of post-Holocaust, post-Six-Day War, American-born Jews has been “freakishly fortunate... Twenty-first-century America is not only not anti-Semitic; it’s wildly philo-Semitic...”³ He argued that “our liberalism is a product of that experience. It naturally inclines us toward a more benign view of gentiles and of human nature itself. And it shapes our view of Israel...” Had we spent the last several decades facing daily threats of anti-Semitism and terrorism, we too would be cynical and distrustful. Beleaguered and defensive. As Beinart says: “If you’re a young Jew living in the United States today, you may have contemplated moving to Israel out of ideological or religious fervor. But unlike many young Jews in France, you’ve never contemplated moving there out of fear.”

And even still, Israel was not intended to be only a refuge. In the language of Ben Gurion, Zionism was nothing short of a “revolt against destiny” – a chance not only to survive history, but to “master our fate... [to] take our destiny into our own hands.”⁴ This State was built on a dream – the dream that Jewish morals and values, prophetic insight, creativity and imagination could manifest themselves in the public square. The Zionist vision is not just a safe haven, but a cultural center, a spiritual heartland and homeland for the Jewish people. A source of intellectual, artistic and religious inspiration for Jews everywhere, a place for Hebrew language and culture to flourish. A precious opportunity for Jewish values to finally be fully realized.

2. In the pursuit of this really good and important idea, Israeli and American Jewish leaders have done a lot right, and have made some terrible mistakes.

You’ve heard about many of the extraordinary achievements of the past sixty-seven years, from the breathtaking advances in medicine and technology, to the against-all-odds success of the start-up nation, to the ingathering of millions of refugees and immigrants, Jews whose home countries were no longer safe or hospitable to them, Israel absorbing in its first few years hundreds of thousands of survivors from Europe, and in the next several decades nearly 1,000,000 Jews who fled or were expelled from Arab lands, 100,000 Ethiopian Jews and more than 1,000,000 from the former Soviet Union. You’ve heard about unimaginable triumphs, marvels and miracles. But none of that is enough to keep you in the conversation. Because what you long for but don’t hear enough of is honest self-reflection, *heshbon hanefesh*. You’re tired of spin. You don’t trust the PR. You want – and deserve – more.

Israel, for all its great achievements, has yet to live up to its own greatest aspirations – the dream of the early Zionists and Founders: a Jewish and democratic State based on freedom, justice and peace as envisioned by the prophets of Israel, one that ensures complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants.

³ <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.636851>

⁴ David Ben Gurion, “The Imperatives of the Jewish Revolution,” 1944.

The occupation of the West Bank is now in its 48th year - older than many of you and older than me. It's not something American Jews like to speak about, not something you probably heard a whole lot about at home or in religious school. Yet I know it's at least part of the reason you're all but ready to walk away. That's what I've heard from so many of you.

Here's what you need to know: Many serious, committed Zionists and serious, committed Jews, people who live in Israel and people who love Israel, believe from the core of their being – *our* being - that the treatment of the Palestinian people, the restriction of rights, the daily humiliations, the stubborn expansion of the Settlements throughout the West Bank and the dual systems of justice, threaten to destroy Zionism and make a mockery of Judaism. We need to own this. We need to acknowledge that for all the unfair and disproportionate criticism of Israel from critics around the world – some of whom, yes, are actual anti-Semites – at the end of the day Israel does not just have a PR problem, it has a policy problem.

And the American Jewish establishment has made a major miscalculation regarding this policy problem. For many years, community leadership thought it was doing the right thing by silently acquiescing when one Israeli government after another supported settlement expansion, thinking we'd eventually trade land for peace. But the peace didn't come: Arafat dodged and evaded. Rabin was murdered. And now there are nearly 400,000 Jewish settlers living in the West Bank. Initially, many were there for the view and the cheap rent. Some still are. But the script did not adjust even as the settler population began to grow more ideological, more religious, more violent and more committed to staying forever. Instead, we built blinders and focused on growing European anti-Semitism, the Iranian nuclear threat and the failures of the Palestinian leadership.

But in doing so, we did not calculate that we would lose you. You, frustrated by the double standard. Witnessing the Jewish communal pride in its focus on the poor and vulnerable in Haiti and Katmandu and Liberia, but confounded by the communal moral blind spot when it comes to the poor and vulnerable in our own backyard – like in Arab East Jerusalem, where 79% of the population lives in poverty.

This summer I taught an extraordinary group of young European Jews in Sweden, at Paideia. One woman spoke about how she grew up in Jewish camp, waving the Israeli flag, singing Hatikva, celebrating Yom HaAtzmaut. She was so deeply in love with Israel that as soon as she was able, she went off to study in Jerusalem. When got there, she said, she encountered for the first time Arab Israelis and Palestinians. She heard their stories and saw their struggles, and felt not only deep sadness but also anger. She felt that she had been lied to her entire life.

Some of you have felt the same way. "Did they not think we were smart enough, strong enough to hold the complexity?" you have wondered. Know that nobody was trying to trick you or deceive you. But they knew that this is painful and complicated and hard to hear. Your parents, your day school teachers and rabbis were concerned that if you heard it all, you'd lose sympathy for the Jewish narrative. Instead, you'd throw up your hands and walk away. What

they didn't realize is that not knowing can be even worse... because you feel now as though you've been actively misled.

3. There are many Israelis and Palestinians who are working – together - to change the script.

It may seem to you that there is consensus around how to support and defend Israel, much of it aligned (especially lately) with right-leaning politics both in Washington and Jerusalem. It is important that you know that there is a strong opposition to the status quo - both here and in Israel, among activists, artists, rabbis and even military specialists who have a different sense of how best to support Israel. We met with many of them on our trip to Israel this summer. These people fight every day for Israel to realize its great promise and potential – to embody the dreams of its founders as a Jewish and democratic State. Thankfully, Israel remains a place in which those voices are still heard.

There's Avner Gvanyahu from [Breaking the Silence](#), who took me to Hebron last summer. I wanted to visit the Cave of Machpelah, the ancient burial site of our ancestors, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob and Leah. Hebron holds centuries of tears and memories and yearnings for the Jewish people. It is also the site of Baruch Goldstein's massacre of Muslim worshippers in 1994. Today, Hebron is one of the most contested cities in the world – a city in which 650 Israeli soldiers guard 750 extremist Jewish settlers living in the midst of 200,000 Palestinians. Avner served as a paratrooper in Hebron for three years, so he knows the streets intimately. He showed me the Casbah, once thriving, now shuttered, and the new Jewish Settlements that have been established in the last couple of years. I asked him why he bothers shuttling Israeli and American Jews to Hebron several times a week. "I do this for the same reason I served in the IDF as a paratrooper," he told me. "I love this country enough to fight for it."

There's Anat Hoffman from [IRAC](#), Israel's leading champion of pluralism and religious freedom, who, when she met with our group in Jerusalem this summer, implored us not to give up on Israel. She asked us to amplify the efforts of the courageous folks fighting for Israel to honor and uphold its Jewish and democratic commitments. "Israel is too important to be left to the Israelis," she said. We nervously chuckled. "I mean it!" she said.

There is my beloved friend, Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum from Jerusalem, who told our community, when she came to IKAR in the spring, that the question of the future of Israel stands in the center of her life:

The Israeli world that I come from is a society in grief. I belong to a world of hundreds and thousands of Israelis who are social activists, who work hard every day alongside the poor, the refugees, the elderly, the children, Jews and non-Jews, and ask themselves if they can find the energy to keep holding the miracle on the verge of disaster called

the state of Israel. Many are in despair, many are exhausted, many see the challenges and cannot believe we will overcome them.⁵

She talked about how she created her community in Jerusalem, [Zion](#), in response to that despair. “We decided to create a community that would... take a leap of faith into the future. To create the life we wished for and to show our children that this is what we were supposed to do in Eretz Israel.”

There are also many Palestinians working every day to bring about a non-violent resolution to the conflict. They reject Palestinian terror and extremism, and risk their lives and livelihoods to make space for a different kind of conversation between Palestinians and Jews. One of them, my friend Ali Abu Awwad, who came to IKAR twice last year and will be back in the spring, says that his whole life became meaningful the moment he saw a grieving Israeli mother weep and realized that Jews also had tears. Since then, he has dedicated his life to [building connections](#) between Israelis and Palestinians – how can we make peace if we can’t even see the humanity in one another?

We also met Sami Awad from the [Holy Land Trust](#), who introduced us to his daughter – maybe 8 years old. When she walked away he told us that she’s been asking, lately, about seeing a real live zebra, or an elephant. The problem is, as Palestinians living in Bethlehem, they can’t get a permit to travel to the zoo in Jerusalem. It’s important for you to know that Sami is so committed to the path of non-violence, believes so deeply in the possibility of peace, that he will not tell his daughter the reason they can’t go to the zoo. Instead, he tells her that he’s too busy with work, maybe they’ll go another day... In other words, he *lies to his child* – rather than plant seeds of hate in her young mind.

The existence of Palestinians like Ali and Sami does not negate the serious threat of Hamas and other terror organizations, who aspire to wipe out Israel from the river to the sea. But it’s crucial that we know that there are Palestinians who believe deeply that through non-violence we can reach a fair and just end to the conflict.

These are the voices I want you to hear. These are Israeli Jews and Palestinians who share our Jewish and democratic values, who are fighting tirelessly for justice and peace and who are not willing to give up. How can we walk away when they have lost so much and continue to fight?

4. **There is room for your voice. We need your voice.**

Finally, a word about the myth of consensus. The Prime Minister stood up this year and claimed to speak for all the Jews. I can’t even speak for all the Jews at my dinner table. Jewish agencies and organizations claim to speak on behalf of us all. Some take out full page ads in the New York Times claiming to represent the interests of the Jews. Words like “unity” are thrown out a

⁵ <http://www.ikar-la.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Tamar-Elad-Appelbaum-Zion-Ikar-5775-1.pdf>.

lot in the public Jewish space. If there exists such a thing as a Jewish conversation, you've frankly been made to feel that you're not a part of it.

Don't believe it.

In the Jewish community, we have a surplus of certainty and a deficit of humility.

That's why we need you. We need your challenges, your questions. We need your creativity, your imagination, your sense of urgency. Your uncertainty. Just because you're still figuring it out doesn't mean you have to leave the conversation. We need your Jewish heart. Your ability to hope and dream. Your moral sensitivity and compassion and perspective. We need your voice. Curious, open-minded, humane.

So today I am asking something of you: rather than walk away, step in. Read. Learn. Visit. Engage. Imagine with me a different kind of communal conversation. We can hear one another's voices. We can listen, with compassion, offering alternative perspectives without nastiness, self-righteousness or judgment.

Some will tell you that you're naïve. That the world criticizes Israel disproportionately, that there are far more egregious crimes being committed in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran and Egypt.

You can tell them that they're right. And even still that the Jew builds a moral compass not based on the standards of criminal regimes on its borders, but based on our own values, articulated in Torah, fine-tuned over the course of thousands of years. And that when policies are enacted in the Jewish state that are fundamentally and dangerously incompatible with those core values, we all have an obligation to speak out.

They'll tell you that speaking out against Israeli policies is dangerous and irresponsible, that airing our dirty laundry only fuels hatred of Israel and gives fodder to the anti-Semites.

Well, you can tell those people that the jig is up. We've hit the tipping point. Israel's rightward shift is no secret – and after the Jewish terrorist attacks at the Jerusalem PRIDE parade and the firebombing of the Palestinian home in Duma, to *not* speak out about the growing threat of Jewish extremist violence is what's dangerous and irresponsible.

Others will say that BDS is the only way to change Israel's policies, the only way to end the Occupation.

You can reframe the conversation by pointing out that you, too, support ending the Occupation, as do most Israelis and American Jews. But like many of them, you do not believe that BDS is the right strategy to achieve the outcome we're hoping for: a safe, secure and democratic Jewish state living peacefully beside a Palestinian state. You can tell them that many of us are troubled that BDS singles out Israel for a level of opprobrium as though it is the world's worst state actor and, while non-violent, acts as a sledgehammer rather than a scalpel. That many see that the threat of BDS enflames the

debate, strengthens the radical right, further entrenches Israel in an isolationist narrative (the whole world is against us), and will handicap the very people who can actually help bring about a two state solution: Israeli academics, artists, activists and entrepreneurs.

Some, when you speak about compassion for Palestinian children, will call you a traitor, a Kapo, a Nazi. They'll accuse you of throwing Jewish babies into boxcars.

You don't need to respond to those people. They won't hear you anyway. Just delete them from your page and go get yourself a glass of wine.

Sometimes it happens that the day before Yom Kippur, you get scooped by Ari Shavit. What he wrote yesterday in Haaretz was so powerful it bears repeating, in part, here:

...Those who fought for peace, freedom and equality [in Britain, France and the United States] did it while loving their homeland and expressing pride in their nation, at the same time demanding that it change its ways. So it should be in Israel, too.

There are bad things happening here that must be opposed. But there are also innumerable things that inspire and that must not be ignored. Israel is indeed fighting for its culture, its morals and its soul. But we shouldn't be defeatist in these battles, because they can still be won. Israel's existence may be threatened by its prolonged rule over another people, but that control cannot be ended by hatred, but only with love, pride and with our heads held high.

Our grandparents, parents and siblings have performed miracles in this land. It's our responsibility not to let these miracles slip into the depths.⁶

Shavit's charge is as critical for American Jews to hear as it is for Israelis. It is important for you to know that there is both an [organizational](#) and intellectual foundation for a thoughtful, progressive Zionism, one that honors the promise of the State and is willing to fight for its better nature. So please, don't walk away. We need you to be part of the conversation.

⁶ <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.676231>