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KN 5785 - Sholom 20s & 30s

**An Israel Sermon for a 20s & 30s Service on Yom Kippur 2024
Or: What Kind of Year has it Been?**

I have avoided writing this sermon for some time now.

In fact, I didn't sit down to write until less than one week before Yom Kippur.

That is not my usual style, but this has not been a usual year.

I've been pondering and contemplating and deliberating and mulling over what to say for months now.

I give one sermon for our 20s & 30s community through the Days of Awe; how can I possibly capture everything that we need to talk about in one sermon?

What if I alienate somebody by saying something that offends them or hurts them?

What if I alienate somebody by not talking about something they expect me to talk about on Yom Kippur 2024?

What if I'm not eloquent enough to capture all the myriad feelings we've experienced over the last year?

I hate sermons that begin by telling you the process of writing a sermon. You get it. At some point this was a blank document and now there are words on it and I'm reading them to you. It's not rocket science.

But I'm breaking my own rule of never starting sermons by talking about the process of writing a sermon because I think this year requires it. I need you to know that I contemplated and deliberated and that I'm scared I won't get everything right. In fact, I know I won't get everything right.

I wondered and debated if I should really write a sermon about Israel when there are so many chances and ways to get it wrong.

I'm asking you to stay with me these next several minutes, even if I don't get every word right.

I'm hoping that these words can be the start of a conversation, not the end of a relationship because we may have different views or different ways of expressing ourselves.

I'm praying that these words will be meaningful.

I know I don't have to tell us about how hard the past year has been. We've marked one calendar year since October 7, 2023, and though I don't know the future, I can't imagine that in our lifetime or in our children's lifetimes that October 7 will ever be a regular day again.

What I am most missing from this past year is nuance.

Either you're pro-Israel or anti-Israel.

Either you want to free Palestine or you support genocide.

You read the right news sources or the wrong news sources.

You can be a staunch Zionist or a proud anti-Zionist.

You post too much content on social media and people are sick of it. You don't post enough content on social media and therefore you don't care.

Where are the stories of the once-staunch-Zionist turned conflicted Zionist because their views have shifted? Where are the stories of the once-proud-anti-Zionists who have reexamined their relationship with peoplehood and history over the last year?

What I fear most is certainty.

I am overwhelmed by the number of people who seem certain about how we should respond to the events of the past year.

I don't trust people who don't have the humility to acknowledge they might be wrong.

What I want most is to be part of communities that wrestle with ideas and that are comfortable with complexity.

Here are two complexities I'm sitting with this year:

First, which voices do we listen to? Whose stories do we hear?

If you have spent the last year listening exclusively to Israeli voices, reading Israeli news, and feeling sadness only for Israelis, I urge you to widen the circle of care you feel. I understand the impulse to lean into our solidarity with Israelis in a moment when there is so much rising hatred for Jews and Israel around the world. We need to widen our circle of care to include Palestinians who have been killed, physically injured, and emotionally wounded this past year. Grief is not a competition—we can hold all kinds of grief at once.

If you have spent the last year listening exclusively to Palestinian voices and ignoring or rejecting Israeli voices, I urge you to widen the circle of care you feel. I understand the impulse to lift up a community that has been devastated by this war and not to look away from challenge and complexity. We need to widen our circle of care to include Israelis who have been killed, physically injured, and emotionally wounded this past year. Grief is not a competition—we can hold all kinds of grief at once.

For a long time, Jews have been known as the People of the Book. The moniker comes from the centrality of the Hebrew Bible to our religious identity. But I think “People of the Books” is a better name for us because we are a people who have been deeply attached to reading, writing, learning, and transmitting. Jewish Scripture, before it is anything else, is a collection of stories, and we are called to be storytellers and story-listeners in this world. Whose story gets told is as political as anything, and we deserve spaces where all kinds of voices—Jewish Israeli, Christian Israeli, Arab Israeli, Druze, Bedouin, Christian Palestinians, and Muslim Palestinians, to name a few—get to tell their stories. All stories are holy.

Here’s the second complexity I’m wrestling with this year: what role does Israel play in our Jewish identities?

Some of us have thrown up our hands and (understandably) said, “This is too much. I cannot engage with this anymore.”

Some of us feel strongly that we are Diaspora Jews, that we have built our lives outside the land of Israel, and we are grateful for the opportunity to live in Diaspora. We don’t call it *Galut*, Exile, on purpose, because we don’t see our nationality as a negative.

Some of us never had opportunities to learn about Israel’s history and so have sat back quietly this year, afraid that our lack of knowledge would reveal something about our American or Jewish identity.

About half of the world’s Jews live in Israel.¹ If we care about peoplehood (and we should—peoplehood has been what has enabled us to survive and thrive throughout history), we must care about the 7.3 million Jews who live in Israel. Our lives and our destiny as Jews are intertwined. Perhaps it goes without saying, but Israeli Jews should care about us too—the experience of antisemitism in America, Canada, Europe, etc. should matter to them because we are One People.²

¹ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/worlds-jewish-population-hits-15-8-million-on-eve-of-rosh-hashanah/>

² I have a wild dream that someone someday will fund my poorly named idea: Reverse Birthright. Buses of young Israelis would travel to North America for 10 days to learn about the American Jewish experience, pray with peers, and ask big questions about Jewish identity. And eat bagels.

If you have cut Israel out of your Jewish identity entirely, I hope that 5785 can be a year of connecting and reconnecting with land, state, and people of Israel.

If Israel is the entirety of your Jewish identity, I hope that 5785 can be a year of connecting and reconnecting with Jewish tradition, history, prayer, song, ritual, culture, and community.

For 2000 years, Jewish life flourished outside the land of Israel. Most Jewish text—from the Talmud to Alex Edelman's one-man show—was written outside the land of Israel. As a rabbi, I hope that people's connection to our religion and our community extends beyond connection to a modern-day nation state.

Some of us connect with a modern-nation state and a political entity more readily than we connect to ancient texts.

Some of us feel such urgency at the dire need for aid, advocacy, and solidarity that it can crowd out our connection to other parts of our Jewish identity.

In Jewish communal spaces, rabbis are often expected to have The Answers. Sometimes we happen to know the right blessing or know interesting and relevant quotations about the big questions of our lives, but we don't inherently have any more correct answers about Jewish peoplehood or Jewish identity than anyone else. Throughout our history, rabbis have taken years to study and immerse ourselves in Jewish tradition, but unlike in other religions, we're not endowed with any special ritual powers or a stronger connection to God.

My goal tonight was not to deliver answers. It was to be honest about my experiences this past year, and to ask us all to have nuance and complexity as we navigate our identities in 5785.

I hope that these words can be the beginning of a conversation. Much of this sermon developed out of conversations with folks in this room and lots of folks not in this room right now. We deserve spaces where conversation—meaningful conversation—is an essential part of community. I believe that we are all learners, and the best way to learn is through dialogue. If these words sparked something for you, I hope you'll reach out so we can continue to talk about it. (If you could wait until next week, when Yom Kippur is over, to reach out, I'd be eternally grateful.)

Let me end by telling you a few things are giving me hope this year.

In 5784, several Reform synagogues together piloted a new Shabbat initiative called The NYC Shabbat Collective. Hundreds of Jews under 40 gathered to sing, pray, eat, and schmooze.

In 5784, we gathered for Shabbat in bars. We lit Shabbat candles and prayed for hostages and peace while music blared from the other private room because our generation knows that Shabbat can exist anywhere we want.

In 5784, dozens of people began their journey of conversion to Judaism here in our community. At one of the most difficult times for the Jewish people in modern history, people are choosing to belong to this peoplehood.

In 5785, I know we will continue to do all of these things.

I also hope that this will be a year of connection: a year of connecting to Jewish tradition and community and to each other.

I hope that this will be a year of learning: a year in which we challenge ourselves to learn, to engage, to read, and to being open to changing our minds.

I hope that this will be a year of intention: a year in which we actively choose what our Jewish community and Jewish traditions look like. A year in which we build the kind of community we want to be part of.

And I hope that this is a year of peace: a year in which all inhabitants on this earth, everyone who resides on this planet, lives in peace and tranquility.

Ken y'hi ratzon—may it be so.