

Symbols: the meaning of our lives

A sermon for Kol Nidre 5788

Delivered by
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I had given thought to starting tonight's service by draping myself in an Israeli and an American flag, donning a NY Giants helmet, and taking a knee or two. Then, I would have simply said, "talk among yourselves," and waited until it was time for the closing song. I suspect you would have had much to talk about for a couple of hours. I chose not to do this, but I did give it serious thought.

Symbols, symbols, symbols. Oh, what power they have. Symbols have a way of getting to raw emotions. Symbols are incredible tools for stating an understanding of values. Symbols, can be effective instruments for good or for evil, for good or for bad. Symbols can be the instruments that define culture wars, religious wars, political battles, and even family strife. Yes, there is great power in symbols.

In recent days, you and I have certainly been witness to the power of symbols. After Charlottesville, torch lights will never be understood as just tools for giving light. The tablets that Judge (now senatorial candidate) Roy Moore of Alabama kept in his courtroom were symbols, too. So many symbols, and often so many meanings to those symbols.

As I look around the sanctuary I see symbols. I am sure you do as well. The prayerbooks you hold in your hands are symbols, representations of the yearning of the souls of the Jewish people throughout the ages. The menorahs, the seven branched candelabrum that have graced our bimah going back to the Temple's original building on Albany Street. These menorahs are depicted in the Torah, as ornaments of God's centrality in our lives during Temple times in Jerusalem. The seven-branched menorah is the oldest symbol of the Jewish people. And the Ner Tamid, the symbol of God's eternal presence in our midst, the light that never goes out. Even the Israel Bonds Cards that you hold in your hands are symbols; they represent one of the expressions of commitment to the building of a strong and vibrant Jewish future in the land of Israel.

I

If you look directly at the center of the bimah, the focal point of the entire sanctuary, you see our beautiful Aharon Hakodesh, the Ark, symbol of the holy vessel that carried the tablets of the law; and inside, of course, are the scrolls of Torah, undoubtedly our most important and powerful symbol. For there is no Judaism without Torah. If you and I wished, we could gaze

upon so much here in the sanctuary and talk and discuss the meaning of all of the symbols. There are many and they are powerful indeed.

Tonight, however, I want to ask you to join me in focusing on two specific symbols, the flags that stand in our midst; one, the stars and stripes, representing America; the other, the blue and white flag of the Jewish homeland, the State of Israel. Can you imagine our sanctuary without them? There once was a time, when the Rabbi of Anshe Emeth, Rabbi Keller, and the lay leaders of our Temple, fought over the placement of the blue and white flag. Rabbi Keller was known to be an outspoken Zionist. Not all of his congregants were the same. The story is that on Fridays Rabbi Keller would bring the Israeli flag into the sanctuary and on Sundays, someone put it downstairs. I know nothing more about the story. But I am told that the battle raged for a number of years. There must have been some very interesting conversations around this controversy. I am sure the argument must have been about whether or not we are loyal Americans if we display affection and affinity to another nation state.

These flags do serve as powerful symbols. I love it when I see the Israeli flag and the six pointed Magen David emblazoned on it. I get the chills every time I drive on the NJ Turnpike, passing the airport, and seeing the El Al plane. That symbol gives me a deep sense of pride and a feeling of safety in knowing that after two thousand years, the Jewish State of Israel exists, and that it is a place of safety and refuge for the entire Jewish people. And I love to see the American flag unfurled. I stand proudly when it is marched into any venue and we sing the Star-Spangled Banner in its presence as we honor America. I am overwhelmed every time I see the soldiers lifting the flag atop Iwo Jima, and when it is lifted during the summer or winter Olympics. And I trust that all of you feel the same sense of pride as do I.

These flags are most certainly iconic but they are not idols. They have no value in and of themselves. If we were to idolize them we would be committing an act of idolatry. And the Jewish prohibition against idolatry is one of the two mitzvot that we are not permitted to violate, even upon penalty of death. The flags are symbols of the values that we hold dear as both Americans and as Jews. That, for me, is what gives real power to these symbols. They serve as symbols of our identity as American Jews.

What does the Israeli flag represent? Well, here are the words inscribed in Israel's Declaration of Independence:

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.¹

What I have just shared with you is the official aspirational language of the Jewish People's Homeland and miraculous modern nation in our time. It is not some pie-in-the-sky notion to be ignored. Lives have been lived and lost in holding to such aspiration.

And our American Declaration has aspirational language, too. You know it:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.ⁱⁱ

How easy it would be for us to ignore the dreams and hopes and aspirations of the founding generation of each nation? Is it possible that they attested to such language by their signature but didn't believe it was their bond? Were these vows taken *bli neder* (without obligation)? If that were the case then both Israel and America have been founded upon an extreme cynicism that should make their very foundations quake with fear.

You know that in all of my years of being with you, the foundational values of my faith, together with the aspirational values of the America that I love and the beloved Israel that I cherish have been central to the core of my existence. I have taught such values to you, to your children, and to your grandchildren. I have tried to live by such values in my personal life and in my professional work. I find injustice to be intolerable, and I abhor the actions of those who try to undermine the values that we as Americans and Jews hold dear.

That is why I detest those in Israel who try to prevent religious pluralism. Truth is that they are not interested in religion; they simply want to maintain power and control over the country, holding it hostage to their political will. I will not call them orthodox, for they demean those who truly are orthodox in their practice. These people are religious zealots and fanatics who care more about themselves than they do about the people and children of Israel. Their desire is to disenfranchise us, push away from our love for Israel. No Jew, neither Reform, nor Conservative, nor Orthodox can allow them to do so. It is a tyranny of the minority. For if they do, they will bring the third Jewish commonwealth to its destruction. Israel, the Israel that is enshrined in its declaration is in our Jewish DNA, I cannot imagine what the Jewish People is today without the State of Israel being central to our core.

And the extremism that we are witnessing in America, both political, religious, and anti-Semitic should be anathema to us all. Those taking a knee have good cause just as we have cause to call out hatred and racism when we see it. If the NFL were to fire its players for making a silent but powerful statement against racial injustice that in particular affects mostly men like them, whose color is black, then shame on the NFL,

and shame on all of us. But thank God that owners and players joined together. Let the entire country take a knee together, and then get working to bridge the racial divide. After three hundred years, it is time. The Declaration of Independence didn't say that only white men are created equal.

II

It's a new year and a new day. Tonight, is the last time that I will speak to you on Kol Nidre. Let none of us mourn; rather, let us rejoice in all that we have done and shared and built together. Let there be no physical symbols of what we have created. They are already here enshrined in our sanctuary, throughout the building, and by the work of our hands. Let the symbols speak powerfully to each of us here tonight. And, let these two flags stand as soldiers at arms to protect and defend what we hold dear and what determines who we are.

In this new year, let the symbols remind us that equality, religion, race, and nation belong to all Americans and in Israel to all Jews.

In this new year, let us, the vast majority of Jews and of all Americans, the majority, open our mouths, walk with our feet, and shout down those who would control our spirits and destroy our nation's belief in being kinder and gentler and welcoming, the hands and arms of the Divine to a world so desperately in need.

In this new year, let the spirit of our Jewish souls bring us closer to Israel than ever before. Our love for her is unconditional, yet we will work each and every day to bring about an Israel that is open to all Jewish streams, that despite existential threats, commits itself each and every day to discovering modern miracles of science, how to bring water to the entire earth, and dares to live with its neighbors in true peace.

In this new year, let each of say to our neighbors, we are with you, we are one, we bleed the same blood; we care the same for all of our children, that they will live in peace and unafraid, and we share the same hopes for cities and streets that are safe and where no one goes hungry without a roof over their head.

May this new year bring to us a true sense of fulfillment in all that we do, making promises to ourselves and to humanity, promises that we can keep, to work towards a day when all will know that we have created a world truly worthy of the Divine.

III

My friends there are two additional symbols that I share with you tonight. They are in the form of poetry and song. The first was written by Naftali Imber in 1886. It was originally called Tikvateynu and it was sung at the First Zionist Congress in 1897, a hundred and twenty years ago this past summer. Theodore Herzl didn't like it because

he disliked Imber, who was a ne'er do well and died as a homeless person on the lower east side of New York. The Religious Zionists didn't like it because it was too secular and didn't speak of God's power. And others disliked it because the melody was borrowed from a piece by Czech composer Smetana and so it wasn't Jewish enough.

The piece was later called Hatikvah, and its last words were changed at Israel's birth. Believe it or not, it did not officially become the National Anthem of Israel until 2004. You and I have sung this symbolic anthem as a powerful expression of our love and connection to Israel. As far as I know we are the only congregation that sings Hatikvah at the conclusion of our worship on Kol Nidre. I cannot imagine us not singing it. Like the flag it is aspirational, its sound and its words speak to us of a power that the Jewish people behold now, after 2,000 years. It speaks of the yearning of every heart, a yearning and a hope now come true of "a people free to be" as they wish, "in a land of our own in Zion and in Jerusalem." ⁱⁱⁱ

And the other symbol, is also in song and verse. I recall the last time we sang it here in the sanctuary, on Rosh Hashanah eve sixteen years ago, just a few days after 9/11. It is not a song about power or destruction; like Hatikvah it is a song of hope. I trust that you all know the first verse and the refrain: O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain...

The words were written by Katherine Bates, a teacher at Wellesley College in 1893, during the same era as Hatikvah. As she climbed Pikes Peak the words came to her: For purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain.

But do you recall the other stanzas? They speak of aspiration, too. The words hail the pioneering forbearers who beat a "thoroughfare of freedom... across the wilderness" of America. And they yearn for mending "every flaw" to confirm our souls "in self-control, thy liberty in law." Oh yes, America, America we honor our heroes "who more than self their country loved... May God, our gold refine, "till all success in nobleness, and every gain divine." Yes, America, America, the patriots dream is to see the alabaster cities gleam, (we hope) undimmed by the pain of human tears, to crown thy good with true brotherhood, from sea to shining sea.^{iv}

IV

And to each and every one of you here tonight, you are symbols, too. You are the symbols of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. You and me, all of us, we are the couriers of meaning, the carriers of our story, and the keepers of the faith bequeathed to us by those who crossed the treacherous seas and planted roots in this special land, of those who returned to the land of our ancestors and planted again in the sacred soil. We are the beneficiaries of all that was done and now we pass it on to the generations to come. In the years ahead, may future generations say of us, that in our time, we carried the torch of liberty, we spread equality to all, we fed the hungry, protected the

needy, and welcomed the stranger. And in doing so, we waved the flags of freedom, with pride, with dignity, with purpose, and with meaning, each and every precious day that it was ours to behold!

ⁱ Israel Declaration of Independence, May 14, 1948

ⁱⁱ American Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

ⁱⁱⁱ Hatikvah, words by Naftali Imber, melody by Samuel Cohen, 1886

^{iv} America the Beautiful, words by Katherine Lee Bates, 1893; melody by Samuel Howe, 1904