

Kol Nidrei – “An Israel Sermon”
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
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Kol Nidrei – 5781

For as long as I can remember, the phrase “The Kol Nidrei Sermon” has always been synonymous with the phrase “The Israel Sermon.” The congregation that I grew up in has had only three senior rabbis, Rick Jacobs, Sue Ann Wasserman, and Serge Lippe. Going all the way back, I remember walking into the sanctuary each Kol Nidrei and hearing people ask one another, “I wonder what the rabbi will say about Israel this year.” Each year for 25 years I heard only sermons about Israel on Kol Nidrei. Then I went to Israel for seminary. I went to High Holy Day services at the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion’s Jerusalem Campus whose prayer space overlooked the walls of the Old City and the Jaffe Gate and I was betting that I would get a reprieve from the “Israel Sermon” and what do you think the rabbi spoke about? Israel.

When I came back to the States, I received a solo pulpit for the holidays at the Bates College Hillel. It was the first time I could choose what would be spoken about for Kol Nidrei! What would I do? Would I venture away from Israel or play it safe? I played it safe and spoke about Israel. When the service was over, one of the Seniors came over to me and said, “Nice sermon, but I was wondering, does your seminary tell you what to preach about, because it seems like you all talk about the same stuff for the same services every year?”

Eventually I made my way here as an Assistant Rabbi and what do you know, on Kol Nidrei, Rabbi Miller got up to this very lectern and what do you think he spoke about? Yup, you guessed it, Israel. The sermon would end and then would be followed up by the collecting of Israeli Bond pledges and a closing song of Hatikvah.

Keep in mind, I am good with this tradition, I think it’s important to speak about Israel. I bring this up because I am really curious about when and where did this tradition of speaking about Israel come from? Not just at Anshe Emeth, but collectively? And no, the Central Conference of American Rabbis does not send out a list of what topics we should talk about on which days (I get that question every year) and I do know of colleagues that either don’t speak about Israel at all or at least at some other point during these Days of Awe. For decades support for Zionism has been a cornerstone of the American Jewish civil religion, but that hasn’t always been the case. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Reform Judaism had largely

negative views on Zionism, but following Nazi persecution, global anti-Semitism, and then the formation of the State of Israel in 1948 that all changed.ⁱ

So yes, at some point in our congregation's 161 year history the rabbi probably didn't mention Israel from the pulpit and if he did, especially if it were before the 1930s and 40s it might have been to lambast the Zionist enterprise. Before the founding of the State of Israel, the comments of Seth Rogen and Mark Marion which stirred such controversy this past summer, would probably have been regarded as a mainstream opinion in the Reform Movement.

By the way, it's certainly understandable if you have no idea what the "controversy" is that I just mentioned. As a rabbi, I received countless requests to sign onto multiple condemnations and but also countless requests to sign onto positions applauding his comments. But for the rest of us, it was another day in quarantine. So, if you don't know what I'm talking about, this is what happened.

Marc Marion, a comedian, who is Jewish, has a podcast. In the end of July, he brought on to the show Seth Rogen, who is a famous actor and also Jewish, to talk about his new movie, *An American Pickle*, which is an incredibly Jewish movie. During the show, Seth and Marc started talking about Israel and this is what Seth said:

[With regards to his religious education] "[I was] fed a huge amount of lies about Israel." "To me it just seems [that Zionism is] an antiquated thought process. If it is for religious reasons, I don't agree with it, because I think religion is silly. If it is for truly the preservation of Jewish people, it makes no sense, because again, you don't keep something you're trying to preserve all in one place — especially when that place is proven to be pretty volatile, you know? It doesn't make sense to me. And I also think that as a Jewish person I was fed a huge amount of lies about Israel my entire life! They never tell you that — oh by the way, there were people there. They make it seem like it was just like sitting there, like the [explicative removed] door's open. They forget to include the fact to every young Jewish person."ⁱⁱ I will admit, I did remove an explicative in there, it is *Kol Nidrei* after all.

Instead of blasting Seth and Marc or bringing up the validity or errors of their statements or the responses, I want to examine it from a different perspective. Truthfully if you want to know more about the responses and condemnations all you need to do is google "Marc Marion, Seth Rogen, Comments on Israel" and you can read it all for yourself. I can't add anything more to the plethora of responses out there.

No, where my interest really lies, is with his comments on how he was taught about the State of Israel. I have often thought back to my own education as a Jewish teen, and I have thought greatly on what good education looks like when teaching a love of country, whether Israel or America. I think too many of us had teachers, that when it came to education about our nations' history, some may have confused education for indoctrination. Education opens the mind, opens the door for growth and thought, of probing and learning. Indoctrination, on the other hand, closes it. It teaches a mindless point of view that is typically black and white. These people are good, these people are bad. This country is good, or this country is bad. There is very little tolerance for nuance and when the curtain of understanding or awareness is pulled open, and we see the blemishes that everyone and every country and every people have, the indoctrinated mind has three choices. It can either reject the indoctrination that it was feed and move to the realm of education and discovery, or it can reject a truth that doesn't fit its world view or sitting in a world of disillusionment it can just cast off the subject all together. I think the latter is what has led a generation of our youth to completely reject Israel.

When it comes to both Israel and America, there are many who see our two countries differently now then they did twenty years ago. They aren't happy with its direction or are disappointed with new policies and decisions. They become disenchanted and disinterested, angry and resentful. How do we deal with that dissatisfaction? We all wrestle with the question of how we cope with what to do when our ideal is found to have flaws. Our ideal country and our ideal self. Yom Kippur is the day when the veil of lies we tell ourselves is supposed to be removed and we are to examine our misgivings and the flaws of our community. But the acknowledgement of these flaws is a good thing. Its why people like Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg^{z"l} was not only a patriot, but also a *Tzadik*. She saw the flaws of our society and instead of believing a false narrative around them or just accepting the flaws for what they were, she sought to right them. She understood the Jewish principle that we receive a world that is broken, and it is incumbent upon us to work to perfect it. We may never see that glorious moment, but we need to be part of the project, we cannot desist from it. The acknowledgement of flaws should be prized, but especially when they lead to activism.

I think we speak about Israel on Kol Nidrei, because today, more than other days, we are reminded of our Peoplehood. We are reminded that over the epochs we have been and continue to be a tribe wandering from country to country. That we are more than just a collective of

individuals who are bound together through a theology. We are a people and sometimes we resided in other countries and sometimes we reside within our own.

Tonight, we think about what it means to live a Jewish life and that means that we need to think about what it means to be a Jew living in the world around us. A world that is slightly broken, but still full of goodness. Our liturgy over the next twenty-four hours will be littered with questions of what it means when our society errs. What does it mean to be Jewish and to be a people who are oppressed but also a people with power? What does it mean to feel responsibility to other Jews and to other people? What does it mean to be an assimilated Jew and what does it mean to be a people with a country of our own that is supposed to live up to our Jewish ideals? We will speak of our vulnerability, but we will also speak of our strength. Tonight, is not a night for reaffirming our world view, tonight is a night when we challenge it.

Kol Nidrei is a time for reflection and it's a time for rebirth. It's a time for us to cast off the forces of indoctrination and to reject them. This is a time not for sermons that comfort us but cause us to sit uneasy at times. Almost all of our tradition is not about telling us what we should believe in, it tells us what we should do as Jews, what are Jewish behaviors and norms, and yes, we have redefined that in every generation, but it has always been redefined as we understand ourselves as being part of a great chain of tradition. How are you plugged into that chain? Israel is, for many, an embodiment of what it means for Jews to act in the world. It is supposed to be an ideal. When we disengage as a response to disillusionment, we abdicate our role in its growth and development; its evolution as a Jewish State. The same is true when we find ourselves to be cynics when it comes to America. Yom Kippur is the day when we reaffirm that actions matter and that they make a difference. Not just to us, but to others as well. It is also a day where we are reminded that we may not to be indifferent.ⁱⁱⁱ May we all remember, on this Yom Kippur perhaps more than any previous one, that what we say and what we do matter, let us reaffirm that we are a people raised on self-examination; on looking within and around us so that we can help heal and mend our society, whether here or in Israel, so that all may live in peace. Amen v'amen.

ⁱ Kaplan, Dava Evan. *The New Reform Judaism: Challenges and Reflections*. University of Nebraska Press as a Jewish Publication Society book, Philadelphia. 2013. Pg. 185

ⁱⁱ Seth Rogen on Marc Marion's WTF Episode 1143 on July 27th 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 22:3