

A Forbidden Conversation  
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple  
Rabbi Philip Bazeley  
Kol Nidre 5780

Some of you might not be aware of this, and I completely understand if you aren't, but Thanksgiving is coming soon. It's actually about a month and a half away. I know that you might not realize this because you may be under the false belief that it already passed. I thought I had missed it too because just yesterday, I was at a Costco, and I was able to purchase decorations and noisemakers for New Year's Eve. I thought to myself, "New Year's decorations, why on earth would they be selling this now? Of course, I must have been in an accident. Perhaps I was touring one of the new high-rises in New Brunswick without a hard hat, and I got hit in the head and have no memory of the High Holy Days or Thanksgiving." But no, I checked my calendar, and it was still October. Therefore, Thanksgiving hasn't happened yet.

I would say that maybe half of you, when you hear the phrase, "Thanksgiving," either get excited or have an impending sense of dread emerge — excited for the turkey, stuffing, gravy, (I'll stop there because we just started fasting). Okay, not the food, don't think about the food. How about friends and family. I'm sure half of you are looking forward to reconnecting with people that you care about.

The other half of you probably feel dread when you hear "Thanksgiving." "I don't want to go to them. Why do we always have to go there?" "Is that woman really my aunt? Since when do I have an aunt?" By the way, that was actually something I said when I was age 6 or 7 when my mother was trying to explain to

me why we had to go back there for dinner. Here's one you'll probably recognize, "I bet you Cousin Herb is going to bring up politics again, why does he always have to bring up politics?" Or better yet, "I think I'm going to egg on Cousin Herb by bringing up the impeachment. He and Susan will start bickering at each other, and that should keep entertain me for a little while."

Well, you didn't miss it, Thanksgiving is still coming, and I'm sure this will be an interesting one. Growing up... well... I'm sure you can guess from my quote, but I didn't always like Thanksgiving. Then Alyson and I met, and we no longer did Thanksgiving the same way, and I love seeing new friends and family and people that I love spending time with. People that I've known for a significant portion of my life, certainly longer than I've been a rabbi. To them, I'm Philip, Phil. Most of the conversations that we have are regular conversations, "Hey Philip, how are the kids, how's the Temple?" "Hey, Phil, how's New Jersey, still smelly?" And no Seth, New Jersey doesn't stink, it's just off the turnpike in Newark. But sometimes the conversation changes and they give me a hint of it when it does. "So Rabbi, what do you think of..."

When I hear "So Rabbi" at the Thanksgiving table, I start to think of how to change the topic. Once I even tried: "Hey look! A diversion!" Between the coming election, the impeachment inquiry, and the elections in Israel, I am already working on responses. I'm sure you will all have much to talk about this Thanksgiving. May we all be focused on that which we are thankful for, rather than that which afflicts us this Thanksgiving. – Amen!

Politics were always a forbidden conversation at Thanksgiving, the third rail if you will. But Israel? Israel never was until recently. Israel now has entered the ranks of "Forbidden Conversations," too.

Not too long ago, I had a round table discussion with a group of rabbis for us to discuss what we were going to speak about for the holidays. We talked about a few topics; most of us were going to address anti-Semitism and the growing divide between us all. After a few back-and-forth's I asked, "So, who's going to talk about Israel?" To which nobody in the group replied, "I am." I was going to be the only one. And I am sure there are a few of you in the congregation thinking to yourselves right now that you wished I had joined them. I must admit, I have considerable uncertainty about talking about Israel. But why is it more comfortable for some of us to preach about anti-Semitism in America then it is for us to talk about Israel?

Perhaps it's because Israel now has entered the political arena in a way it hadn't previously. Maybe it's because there is now a partisan air between sides that support Israel. Conversations about JStreet and AIPAC are made with an "us versus them" mentality as if one were wicked and the other a savior. By the way, there are rampant misunderstandings about both groups. Perhaps some of us are left so uncertain on how to talk about Israel because things are seriously turned upside down when the AJC (the American Jewish Committee) and AIPAC join together and rebuke the Prime Minister of Israel. When AIPAC rebukes Israel, you know "we live in strange and uncertain times."

For me, perhaps the uncertainty is that I am left wondering if Israel still relevant for American Diaspora Jews, especially when it seems as though many America Jews are trying hard to distance themselves from Israel and try not to acknowledge our connection to her?

I thought that perhaps this year, I wouldn't speak about Israel and instead speak about global climate change. Then something happened two weeks ago during a climate march here in New Brunswick on the Rutgers Campus. There is a term that

I have heard a lot since 2016. The phrase is “Intersectionality,” and what happened was an example of it.

Intersectionality originally referred to intersectional feminism, which is a branch of feminism asserting how all aspects of social and political identity discrimination overlap. For example, race with gender in the case of a black woman. Now it also refers to how multiple causes can come together to support a particular issue. For example, how Black Lives Matter and the Women’s March have areas of overlapping activism. Or, its why many of you came to me last year looking for an alternative way to get involved with the Women’s March without being part of the Women’s March in DC because you didn’t want to be present if a speaker came up to talk about the so-called “human rights abuses of Israel.” Many of you were rightfully concerned that if you were there and then someone came out to protest Israel, you would then be an unwitting supporter of this anti-Semitic movement, which is exactly what B.D.S. is.

Well, this is what happened two weeks ago when one of our AEMT families went to the climate change march put together by the Central Jersey Climate Coalition hosted on the Rutgers Campus. The Central Jersey Climate Coalition is self-described as “a coalition of students, faculty and community members who are demanding action across all levels of power to take us off the path towards climate catastrophe.” All was going well until the last speaker came out. She began with the usual social justice tropes about combating climate change. She spoke about how climate change affects low-income areas faster than others - which is true. She told everyone that as we pressure our local government here in New Jersey and America that we need to remember that it’s also global as well – also true. Then She went on to say that Rutgers’s money is paying for a long-term contract with Caterpillar which is a construction company whose bulldozers had been used for

bulldozing Palestinian farms and knocking down Palestinian olive, almond, dates, and banana trees and is also used to demolish Palestinian homes in the West Bank. She also stated that Rutgers purchases Israeli Treasury Bonds, which meant that Rutgers was directly “funding the bombing and tear-gassing of Palestinians” as if the sole goal both Rutgers and the Israeli government is to hurt the innocent. She then demanded that Rutgers divest from all of these companies and went on to accuse Israel of environmental genocide. Not only did she stray away from climate change; she also strayed from the truth. When our fellow congregant asked where her facts came from, she was told, “These are the facts that I believe, and I don’t have to prove myself.” The speaker went on to harass our congregant, a 16-year-old teen and told her that she was oppressing them and should just leave.

The way you oppose Jews is every generation is different. We live in the age of the State of Israel; therefore, the attacks of anti-Semites will focus on that. Anti-Semitism is like racism, it is not fashionable and is illegal in many places in the world, but anti-Zionism is not, so it becomes a proxy for anti-Semitism. The B.D.S. movement is the most significant example of how anti-Zionism can be anti-Semitic because the movement seeks to delegitimize and demonize the State of Israel and sets for the State of Israel a hypocritical double standard. Out of all the countries responsible for climate change, at the CJCC protest, Israel was the only one that was called out by name and was accused of environmental genocide and climate apartheid. Israel, by the way, was just named the top environmentally friendly country in the Middle East and 16<sup>th</sup> in the world with policies in place to counter global climate change that are far better and stringent than that of the United States.

I think the proof of whether B.D.S. is anti-Semitic or not is in its outcomes. Does B.D.S. work? Well, if the goal is to encourage a two-state solution, the

answer is no. In fact, foreign investment in Israel is at an all-time high. If the goal is to end the conflict, the goal is failing. If the goal is to spread anti-Semitism through a population that may not even be aware that what they are saying, doing, or arguing is anti-Semitic, then the answer is clearly yes. As the rallies and protests have increased so has the reports of anti-Semitism. We have college-aged congregants who are now afraid of wearing a Jewish star around their neck because of the B.D.S. rallies and because of the vile remarks that are made to them about being Jewish and therefore supporting the State of Israel.

Sadly, I think we are choosing to disengage from Israel for the following reasons. First, our connection to Israel has become far more complicated in a world where intersectionality has grown tremendously. Second, many of us are left wondering how to lobby against B.D.S. when we can barely explain what it is or how it's anti-Semitic. And when we do raise our voices against it we get harassed and assaulted, verbally or physically, with a camera our face being told that we are denying someone else's freedom of speech as if freedom of speech only works one way and not for the Jew. It's left many of us feeling that it may just be easier to stay quiet then attempt to explain nuance to someone who doesn't care about nuance in a world that cannot tolerate nuance or even be able to have a calm discussion with someone who has a different point of view from you. And third, because Israel used to be seen as a religious imperative or a democratic cause that ran over political partisanship and lately it has been thrust into the political arena and don't we just want to stay out of politics?

To quote one of my colleagues, "I just don't know how to cut through the haze of Israel to figure out a way to talk about it, and I'm starting to believe that the Jews in the pews just don't care about Israel anymore."

I'm not sure if I'm doing much better, but I do think we need to come clean with our collective difficulties when it comes to Israel, even if individuals within our community see it a little more clearly. The Reform movement as a whole has a hard time connecting to Israel.

This January marks the next round of the World Zionist Congress Elections. The World Zionist Organization (WZO) was founded by Theodor Herzl at the First World Zionist Congress in Switzerland in 1897. Today, it serves as the Parliament of the Jewish People and designates representatives to The Jewish Agency for Israel, The Jewish National Fund, and other affiliates. The WZO utilizes the World Zionist Congress to establish its policies and internally elect leadership to the bodies that define executive policy, departmental direction, and budgetary decisions. Over these past High Holy Days, I have spoken to you greatly about the need to overcome our urges to disengage. And Israel is one topic that we are seeing Reform Jews quickly disengage from. Out of the 900+ Reform congregations in America, we are only 1 out of 65 who have made a commitment to vote in the WZC elections.

Our congregation's votes are critical to maintaining a significant Reform presence in Israel. The election is our chance to have the Reform Movement's voice and priorities heard in Israel. The Government of Israel allocates nearly 4 billion NIS a year to Orthodox and Haredi institutions with only 10 Million to non-Orthodox streams.

The American delegation to the Congress is the largest single delegation from outside of Israel, with 145 delegates. The decisions of the Congress influence hundreds of millions of dollars in funding, and the Reform movement currently receives over \$4 million each year.

The delegation appoints key professionals to carry out our Reform Jewish values within the national institutions that help implement Reform values such as Equality, Pluralism, and a commitment to a Two-State Solution. And it also joins with Israeli political parties to influence Israeli society in matters of conversion, marriage and divorce, religious pluralism, gender rights, and combatting racism.

On your seat are pledge cards, please return them to the ushers later or bring them back to the Temple filled in and we will email you a link and a reminder when it's time to vote. This easy act of voting makes a considerable difference for Progressive Judaism in Israel.

I consider myself a loyal Zionist. I don't think that I will ever want to make *Aliyah* to Israel, but I don't think you need to have the hopes of making *Aliyah* as being a prerequisite for being a Zionist. I see my connection to Israel as one of fraternal love. Israel is the home of our brothers and sisters, and I want to make sure they are safe in their land and that the country that we all look to is the land that its founders dreamed it to be. That dream was clearly described in the Israeli Declaration of Independence that proclaims that:

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....

....WE APPEAL - ...to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal

citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions.... The State of Israel is prepared to do its share in a common effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East.

When I say I am a loyal Zionist, to what am I faithful? I am loyal to the Zionist dream. As a Jew, as the inheritors of our Prophets' imperishable message of hope and justice, challenge and resistance, I see it as our sacred obligation to hold the countries that we love up to a mirror so that they can see how their actions differ from their aspirations. When we turn out on mass for the WZO elections that is precisely what we are doing. And while doing it, we are pledging to not disengage from the topics that sometimes challenge us the most. As Jews, we do not have that luxury.

May we all come together to bring Israel back to safe table talk conversations. We are a people who are supposed to be comfortable in the uncomfortable, but talking about Israel now gives us the hibbe-gibbes. Perhaps because we don't want to be judged by our peers or maybe it's because we are afraid that we will be inviting the attention of anti-Semites. Last week I went to the Highland Park Town Hall meeting to appeal a resolution that condemned both Anti-Semitism and the B.D.S. Movement. When I mentioned that I would be going I was met by some with concerns for my safety. That is exactly what those who hate us want. They want our fear, and they want our silence; let's not give it to them. And may our fearlessness be an inspiration for all who feel as though they must be silent.

Amen' V'Amen