The Tribe That Wrestles
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
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There are words that become difficult to say because we no longer know what the person hearing them will assume. Israel has become one of those words. Say "Israel," and one person hears home. Another hears conflict. One hears refuge. Another hears occupation. One hears Hebrew songs, grandparents, family photographs, summer trips, and prayers facing Jerusalem. Another hears Netanyahu, Gaza, settlements, war, and political arguments that seem to have no end.

For some Jews, Israel is woven so deeply into Jewish identity that questioning the relationship feels almost incomprehensible. For others, especially many younger Jews, the relationship feels increasingly difficult to claim. They may feel anger, grief, estrangement, or even hostility toward a country they were once told they were supposed to love.

And many of us have become afraid to speak honestly. We don't know what one sentence will cause someone else to assume about everything we believe. We worry that if we express love for Israel, someone will hear indifference to Palestinian suffering. We worry that if we criticize Israel, someone will hear abandonment of the Jewish people. We worry that if we name antisemitism, someone will accuse us of silencing debate. We worry that if we name the moral failures of an Israeli government, someone will accuse us of giving ammunition to those who hate Israel. So we either shout or go silent. And neither shouting nor silence has helped us build a healthy Jewish relationship with Israel.

Tonight, on Kol Nidre, I want to ask: Is there a way to develop a relationship with Israel that isn't based primarily in politics? Not a relationship without political opinions. Politics shapes lives. Governments make decisions with moral consequences. To refuse to speak about those consequences would itself be a political choice. But Israel is more than a political position. Israel is a relationship. And relationships are larger than approval.

Several years ago, the writer Dara Horn offered a provocative way of understanding Jewish identity. She described the Jewish people as a tribe—not a race, not merely a religion, and not simply a collection of people who happen to share certain opinions. A tribe.

That word may make some of us uncomfortable. We live in a society that often uses "tribalism" to describe everything wrong with public life: loyalty without reason, insiders against outsiders, people defending their own group regardless of truth or justice. That kind of tribalism is dangerous. But that isn't the only meaning of tribe.

A tribe is also a network of inherited relationships. It is a group of people whose stories have become entangled, whose memories are carried collectively, and whose fate cannot easily be separated. You don't choose every member of a tribe. You may disagree with them, be

embarrassed by them, struggle with them, or feel that they have failed you. But you can't simply turn them into strangers.

To belong to a tribe isn't to believe that your tribe is superior. It's to recognize that there are people whose lives make a claim upon you. This is close to what Jewish tradition means by Am Yisrael, the People Israel.

Before Judaism was a statement of faith, it was the story of a family. Abraham and Sarah. Isaac and Rebecca. Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, Zilpah, and their children. And what a family. They love one another and deceive one another. They reconcile and betray. They compete for blessings, play favorites, hold grudges, and sometimes save one another's lives. The Torah doesn't present the first Jewish family as harmonious. It presents them as bound together. At Sinai, that family becomes a people.

As we discussed on Rosh Hashanah, Rashi imagines them standing "k'ish echad b'lev echad" like one person with one heart. Not one mind. One heart. Israel has always had many minds. The Jewish people have never agreed about much of anything for very long. Our sacred literature is filled with arguments. Our communities have divided over theology, law, language, modernity, emancipation, Zionism, and what should be served at the kiddush.

Yet beneath all that disagreement lives a stubborn claim: Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh. All Israel is responsible, one for another. That responsibility isn't based on agreement. It comes from belonging. The challenge is that we use one word, Israel, to describe three related but distinct things.

There is Am Yisrael, the People of Israel. There is Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel. And there is Medinat Yisrael, the modern State of Israel. They overlap. They shape one another. But they are not identical. The Jewish people is more than any government. The Land of Israel is more than a set of borders. And the State of Israel, precious and necessary as it is, is a human institution led by human beings, capable of extraordinary achievement but also grave moral failure.

Confusing these three Israels creates impossible expectations. If loving Israel means endorsing every decision of the Israeli government, many morally serious Jews will walk away. If criticizing an Israeli government means severing oneself from the Jewish people, then we have made Jewish belonging impossibly fragile. If Israel must be perfect in order to be loved, then no human relationship can survive. And if love requires silence about wrongdoing, then what we are describing is not love. It is idolatry.

Jewish tradition has never believed that a Jewish ruler is beyond criticism. Our civilization begins with resistance to Pharaoh. Pharaoh is more than a cruel individual. He represents a political theology: the ruler who treats himself as divine, who turns vulnerable people into tools, who fears demographic change, who lies without consequence, and who believes power exempts him from moral limits. The Exodus story teaches that no ruler is God.

Dara Horn describes Jewish civilization as anti-tyrannical and nonconformist. The Jewish refusal to bow before idols is also a refusal to bow before human beings who demand absolute loyalty. Abraham argues with God. Moses confronts Pharaoh. Nathan rebukes King David. Elijah challenges Ahab. The prophets stand before kings and tell them truths that kings do not want to hear. The Torah itself limits royal power. A king must not accumulate endless wealth, horses, or wives. He must keep a copy of the Torah beside him so that "his heart may not be lifted above his brothers."

The Jewish suspicion of tyranny doesn't stop when the ruler is Jewish. No prime minister is Pharaoh. Historical analogies must be used carefully. But the behaviors our tradition associates with tyranny should concern us wherever they appear: contempt for legal restraint, attacks on independent institutions, the politics of fear, the treatment of opponents as enemies, and the conviction that one leader alone embodies the nation.

Benjamin Netanyahu is not the State of Israel. He is not the Land of Israel. And he is certainly not the Jewish people. He is a political leader whose choices can and must be evaluated morally. Many young Jews have watched his governments and concluded not merely that they oppose particular policies, but that Israel itself has betrayed the Jewish values they were taught it represents. We should take their anguish seriously.

Too often, the Jewish community responds by questioning their loyalty rather than listening to their moral concern. And yet I also want to challenge the decision to turn anguish into abandonment. If Israel is only a political position, then when its politics become intolerable, we can select another position. But if Israel is a relationship, we must do something harder. We must wrestle.

The name Israel is born in a wrestling match. Jacob spends the night struggling with a mysterious being. At daybreak, wounded but still holding on, Jacob is given a new name: "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Yisrael, for you have struggled with beings divine and human and have prevailed." Yisrael means the one who wrestles.

To wrestle is not to stand at a safe distance. Wrestling is intimate. The people involved are entangled. They strain against one another. Neither can pretend the other is irrelevant. Jacob leaves the encounter limping. Real relationship changes us. Sometimes it wounds us. But the wrestling itself becomes our name. Criticism of Israel can be an expression of Jewish relationship. Protest can be an expression of Jewish relationship. Grief, anger, and disappointment can all be expressions of Jewish relationship. The opposite of relationship is not criticism. The opposite is indifference. And this is where tonight's prayer speaks to us.

Kol Nidre is one of the most emotionally powerful melodies in Jewish life. Yet the words themselves are not a grand theological declaration. They concern vows and promises we make that may prove impossible to fulfill.

At the beginning of Yom Kippur, we acknowledge the danger of absolute declarations made by complicated human beings. We know the kinds of vows people make when they are hurt: “I will never forgive.” “I will never trust again.” “I am finished with them.” “Nothing could ever change my mind.”

Some vows are necessary. There are relationships from which people must step away for their own safety. Forgiveness cannot be coerced. But other vows imprison us inside the worst moment of a relationship. Tonight, perhaps we need release from two sweeping vows about Israel. The first is: “I will defend everything Israel does.” No country deserves that vow. No government should receive it. It asks us to silence conscience in the name of belonging.

The second is: “I will have nothing more to do with Israel.” That vow reduces a people, a land, a language, a culture, and thousands of years of longing to the behavior of a government in one painful period. Both vows end the wrestling. Both collapse a relationship into a verdict.

Kol Nidre asks whether we can make room for teshuvah. Teshuvah for ourselves, for other Jews, and for Israel. What might a relationship with Israel look like if it were grounded in peoplehood rather than political agreement?

It would begin with actual people. Not “the Israelis” as an abstraction, but Israelis. Families whose children serve in the army and families who protest the government sending them. People who hid in safe rooms on October 7 and people who have spent years demanding a different future for Israelis and Palestinians. Jews from Morocco, Iraq, Poland, Ethiopia, Russia, Iran, Yemen, Argentina, France, and dozens of other places whose stories cannot be compressed into one Western political category. Religious Jews, secular Jews, Palestinian citizens of Israel, Bedouins, Druze, Christians, Muslims, activists, artists, doctors, teachers, and children who did not choose the conflict into which they were born.

Relationship requires curiosity about lives more complicated than our slogans. It would also mean learning. Many Jews know more about Israel’s controversies than about its poetry, music, history, religious creativity, internal divisions, or moral debates. We know the statements of politicians but not the language in which Israeli parents sing lullabies to their children. We know how to argue about Zionism but not how Zionism emerged as a response to Jewish vulnerability, longing, and political powerlessness. We know the failures, but not always the impossible dilemmas in which decisions are made. And sometimes we know the Jewish pain while failing to learn the Palestinian pain, or know the Palestinian pain while treating Jewish fear as manipulation. A mature relationship must make room for both peoples’ humanity.

Finally, relationship means responsibility. Tribal belonging at its worst says: My people are always right. Jewish belonging at its best says: My people are my responsibility. Because I belong, I celebrate their flourishing. Because I belong, I mourn their dead. Because I belong, I cannot remain silent when fear, vengeance, or power causes them to betray our deepest values.

Because I belong, I refuse to surrender them either to those who demand uncritical loyalty or to those who seek their disappearance.

I want younger Jews to know that there is room inside Jewish life for their questions. There is room for anger. There is room for grief over Palestinian suffering. There is room to oppose occupation, settlements, war, and leaders whose conduct they believe is destructive.

But I also want them to know that walking away comes with a cost. It leaves the meaning of Israel to its most uncompromising defenders and its most uncompromising enemies. It abandons the wrestling that has always defined us. And I want older Jews to understand that demanding uncomplicated love from the next generation may ensure that they choose no relationship at all.

We have to offer something more honest: Israel is not perfect. Israel is not reducible to its failures. Israel is part of us. And because it is part of us, we will love, challenge, defend, grieve, visit, learn, argue, and remain.

That is the tribe I want us to become. Not a tribe organized around superiority. Not a tribe that excuses cruelty when committed by its own. Not a tribe held together only by fear of enemies. But an anti-tyrannical tribe that remembers the Exodus. A tribe that refuses to bow before absolute power. A tribe whose loyalty creates responsibility rather than silence. A tribe with many minds and a single, complicated, wounded, persistent heart.

Tonight, we stand together before the open ark. There are people in this room who hold profoundly different beliefs about Israel. No sermon will resolve those disagreements. That isn't my goal. My hope is smaller and, perhaps, more difficult. That we will refuse to exile one another from the Jewish people because of them. That we will speak honestly without delighting in one another's pain. That we will listen for the story beneath the position. That we will make room for moral clarity and humility. That we will remember that the person with whom we disagree also carries part of the Jewish story.

On Rosh Hashanah, we began with America and many minds searching for a shared heart. Then we asked whether antisemitism would define Jewish life, and we chose life, Torah, community, and joy. Then we turned inward and asked whether fear and outrage were the only ways to live, and we sought a soul spacious enough to hold grief without being consumed by it.

Tonight, the circle closes around our people. Can we remain one people when we no longer know how to agree? The Jewish answer has never been one mind. It is covenant. It is responsibility. It is wrestling. It is the refusal to let go before the blessing comes.

May this Yom Kippur release us from vows that have made our hearts too small. May it give us courage to love without idealizing, criticize without abandoning, and belong without surrendering conscience. May we become worthy of our name, Yisrael as the people who wrestle with God, with power, with one another, and with ourselves. And even when the wrestling leaves us limping, may we still emerge together: many minds, one people, and a single heart.