

Israel and the Golden Calf, 2023

Shabbat Ki Tissa 5783

March 10, 2023

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Seeing the golden calf for the first time, the Children of Israel exclaim, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!” Aaron builds an altar in front of the calf and proclaims, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to Adonai!”ⁱ The Israelites do not imagine that they have created a new god or turned to worship a foreign deity. Instead, their idolatrous wrongdoing is that they have applied the Divine Name to an object that is not God. They have violated the second clause of the second commandment, bowing to a graven image—not the first clause, worshipping a different god.

Israel’s current government is eager to commit a nearly identical sin. They propose to apply the sacred name, “The State of Israel” to something that is not at all the Jewish State that celebrates its seventy-fifth anniversary next month.

Yes, I just said that the State of Israel is sacred. For two millennia, our people prayed to return to the Land of God’s promise, where our ancestors served Adonai by establishing a society grounded in Torah. Israel is the gift of visionaries who understood, decades before the Holocaust, that the Jewish people could not be permanently safe anywhere but in a land of our own. Israel was purchased with the blood of martyrs who gave their lives so that our people, rising from the ashes of the Holocaust, could find refuge at last. In each of its eight decades, Israel has enhanced its sanctity, welcoming and embracing Jewish people and their families who faced expulsions, antisemitic violence, discrimination, and poverty.

No, Israel is not perfect. The Jewish State lives in this world, not the Garden of Eden. Continually missing opportunities for peace with its Palestinian neighbors is Israel’s greatest failure, though also not entirely Israel’s fault, living as it does in the world’s most dangerous neighborhood. Inhumane rule of Palestinians in the Occupied West Bank competes with inequality for Israel’s Arab citizens for the title of Israel’s greatest shame. And Israeli women, queer folks, and Reform and Conservative Jews continue to struggle for equality. These issues are hotly debated in Israeli’s vibrant if imperfect democracy. Voices for peace and equality do not always prevail, but they are not silenced.

Now, though, Israel’s democracy is threatened. And if it is not a democracy, the resulting nation will no more be Israel than the golden calf was God.

Israel’s Declaration of Independence includes these words: “The State of Israel...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.”

Now, though, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his coalition are rushing a judicial overhaul through the Knesset. This proposal is no mere “judicial reform.” It is a *coup d’etat*. It would eliminate the judiciary’s independence and empower the Knesset to overturn any Supreme Court ruling. Government leaders claim that this judicial revolution would enhance democracy, because it would place all power in the people’s elected representatives. A necessary feature of any democracy, though, is the protection of minority rights.

The Israeli Supreme Court, like its American counterpart, has often provided relief to minorities suffering from injustices perpetrated by the majority. It has ruled that women cannot be relegated to the back of buses or forced to move to a different seat on an airplane because of the wishes of an ultra-Orthodox man. It has required the government to treat Reform and Conservative rabbis and congregations equally in limited circumstances. It has upheld the rights of Arabs to remain in their ancestral homes when the government or army had different plans.

Those rulings are not the only potential victims of the judicial coup, though. Because Israel does not have a constitution, this legislation would enable the Knesset to do, well, anything. Many Israelis believe that Prime Minister Netanyahu’s goal is selfish, namely that he seeks to escape the corruption charges for which he is currently under indictment. Other fears are greater. If the Knesset majority feared that new elections could install a different government, they could simply cancel elections—forever, if they wished—replacing democracy with dictatorship by the current government. A simple majority in the Knesset could abolish freedom of speech, of the press, and of assembly. Israel could become an authoritarian state.

This past Saturday night, some 250,000 Israelis, the *per capita* equivalent of eight or nine million Americans, took to the streets to oppose the judicial upheaval, the ninth consecutive week of pro-democracy demonstrations, with crowds growing each week, never with any appreciable violence. The Saturday before that, I was among scores of Reform rabbis who joined approximately 160,000 people gathered in Tel Aviv to protest the judicial coup. For the first time, the rally was addressed by a Jewish leader from outside Israel—our own Union for Reform Judaism President, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, speaking in excellent Hebrew, cheered by tens of thousands of Israelis and doing us proud. These protests are patriotic

events. Alongside clever signs, the most common symbol in the crowd is the Israeli flag, carried by at least half of all gathered.

Two weeks ago tonight, I attended Shabbat services at Congregation V'ahavta in Shoham, a suburb near Ben-Gurion airport. There, Rabbi Rinat Safania said, "My job as a rabbi is to offer hope." She led Shabbat worship with enthusiastic singing, exuding joy with a broad smile on her face throughout the service. She was speaking to a congregation who, like her, had all been to at least one protest during the previous week and were headed out again the next night. She didn't speak about the threat to Israeli democracy; she didn't need to.

After services, I went with two of my American colleagues to the home of a family in that Israeli Reform congregation. Our host, Asaf, is an attorney with a Ph.D. He is also on the Board of the congregation, and he shares the hope that his rabbi radiates. Asaf insisted that the judicial upheaval will not be adopted. "Israel is and must be a democracy. If it is not a democracy, it will not be Israel. So we must win, and we will win." I asked him why, if he's so confident, does he continue to go to protests? "We must go, because that's how we are going to win."

Many of us have relatives and friends in Israel who join the front lines at least weekly. All of us are connected to Reform Jews in Israel who are deeply engaged in this fight and who ask for our support. Even Israeli centrists, including Matti Friedman, Daniel Gordis, and Yossi Klein Halevi, almost nobody's idea of progressives, have begged North American Jews to support of Israeli democracy actively. Eleven Jewish members of Congress, led by Representative Jerrold Nadler, took them up on that, writing an open letter to Israel's president, prime minister, and opposition leader to oppose the judicial coup.

We, too, can act, above all by donating to the Israel Religious Action Center, which mobilizes people for protest at least weekly and continues to advocate for justice, rights, and democracy in the courts. Standing up for democracy is the most Zionist action we could take in this moment, joining hundreds of thousands—cumulatively, millions—of Israelis who continue to express *Hatikvah*, the hope, that Israel will survive, and once again thrive, as a democracy.

May that be God's will. May that be our will. And let us say, Amen.

Please rise for *Hatikva*, "the hope," Israel's national anthem, page 374 (or 678).

ⁱ Exodus 32:4-5.