

All the People of Israel

Shabbat T'zaveh 5784

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“Synagogues would be great,” the joke goes, “if it weren’t for the Jews!” Yes, if you get two of us together, there will be three opinions, and from time to time, those differing views can lead unpleasantness. Tonight, as we welcome and celebrate our Jewish Federation’s new Executive Director, we know that Marcy has a weighty job. Our statewide Jewish community embraces Jewish Arkansans across a broad spectrum of ideology, background, and religious practice.

Marcy, of course, isn’t the first leader to carry a heavy weight. We read this Shabbat about the burden upon Aaron, Moses’s brother, the high priest—a physical burden, representing his tough job. Aaron had to wear an ephod, a ceremonial apron, laden with two lapis lazuli stones bearing inscriptions of the names of Israel’s twelve tribes. As if that weren’t enough, the ephod’s breastplate held twelve precious stones, one representing each tribe.ⁱ Symbolically, the priest had to carry all the people of Israel around with him as he attended to his functions.

Most of those twelve tribes long ago receded into our people’s past. Still, we have our “tribes.” Most relevant today are distinctions based on our religious affiliation—Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and the like.

The ephod and the breastplate emphasized that the High Priest who wore them was responsible for the whole people of Israel, including every tribe. Similarly, we do not imagine that our obligations extend only to our fellow Reform Jews, or to Jews in Arkansas or the United States, but rather that we are deeply connected to our diverse people worldwide.

We are taught, כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה, “All Jewish people are responsible for one another.”ⁱⁱ Assuming that responsibility requires that we accommodate and tolerate one another across differences. For example, when our Jewish Federation convenes for a community-wide function, the food is kosher to a standard that the most stringent among us observes. More challenging is knowing that some with whom we gather don’t recognize the Jewish status of many in our congregation. Lest that sound like Reform Jews are the only ones making a sacrifice, I would emphasize that the tolerance is reciprocal: Orthodox folks never challenge the Jewishness of individual Federation participants. Some points of difference remain more challenging.

These issues, though, pale in comparison to those that confront our people in Israel. In the Jewish State, for example, there is no civil marriage. Instead,

marriage law is placed in the hands of religious authorities—Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and others. The trouble is that the only Jewish authority is the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate. An increasing percentage of Israeli Jewish couples are ineligible for Orthodox weddings and therefore have no way to be legally married in Israel at all. Israeli Reform rabbis officiate at weddings regularly. However, the couples they marry either forego legal recognition of their marriages or they have additional weddings—most often, outside the country; or, for those who qualify, with a rabbi recognized by the Chief Rabbinate.

Many Israelis are increasingly fed up with what they perceive as requirements that they accommodate extremists. Another example: According to the Israel Religious Action Center, more than seventy percent of Israelis want their public transportation systems to function on Shabbat. However, the current Israeli government increasingly prohibits that, meaning that people who do not have their own cars and cannot afford taxis cannot visit family and friends or pursue leisure activities that are not within walking distance.ⁱⁱⁱ

Religious favoritism and discrimination in Israel increasingly pit Jew against Jew in the Jewish state. Mainstream Israelis, many of them Orthodox, are outraged that, in the midst of a מלחמת מצוה, an obligatory war in response to terrorism, the current government is seeking to enshrine in law “the exemption for ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students and those who claim to be yeshiva students from enlisting in the Israeli Defense Force.”^{iv} Moreover, because of the army’s increased need for personnel, popular gap year programs have been suspended, meaning that high school graduates will have to go directly into the army. Israelis, understanding the urgency, did not object until they learned that ultra-Orthodox gap year programs would be exempt.^v

Israeli religious scholar Dr. Tomer Persico describes extremist Israelis—neofascist Kahanists, ultra-Orthodox nationalists, Hilltop Youth, and Temple Mount Faithful, whose “political convictions and religious ideas...are as dangerous to Judaism as...to the state.” Members of those groups carried out a pogrom, “set[ting] dozens of houses, businesses, and cars on fire and attacking the” residents of the Palestinian village of Hurawa, one year ago this week.^{vi} Representatives of these extremist groups occupy high positions in the government, including Finance Minister Betzalel Smotrich and Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir. Smotrich has cut budgets for rebuilding communities devastated on October 7, for example, in favor of new funds to ultra-Orthodox schools with no core curriculum.^{vii} Ben-Gvir has called for ethnically cleansing Palestinians from Gaza and rebuilding Israeli settlements there.^{viii}

Dr. Persico has now asked North American Jews to partner with mainstream Israelis who reject extremism and extremists. For example, I have increased my support for Israel in recent months, but I have turned away from Israel Bonds, since Betzalel Smotrich, as Finance Minister, is now the Chairman of Israel Bonds, and I will not support his extremist and exclusionary fiscal priorities with my investments. These extremists misrepresent Judaism as a religion of bigotry and vengeance. Worse, they act upon their beliefs violently, a חילול השם, a desecration of God's name.

Since all Jews are responsible for one another, we must, under most conditions, seek to accommodate and tolerate one another, to maintain כלל ישראל, a community of the whole people of Israel, even at the risk of some discomfort. On rare occasion, though, we best take up that responsibility by disavowing evil extremism among our own people.

In the weeks ahead, we will celebrate Purim, recalling a day when the Jewish people turned sorrow into joy, as groundless hatred was thwarted, and our people was saved. For the last fourteen months, mainstream Israelis have devoted themselves to rooting out the evil extremism that threatens the Jewish State, our Jewish people, and Judaism itself. Let us join them, as best we can from afar. Then, may we celebrate, as on that first Purim, when, upon vanquishing the evil Haman, ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה וששן ויקר, “The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, joy and honor.”^{ix}

Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 28:6-21.

ⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud, *Eruvim* 39a.

ⁱⁱⁱ Orly Erez-Likhovski, “It’s Time to Make Change in our Cities,” email to supporters, February 20, 2022, <https://mailchi.mp/irac.org/its-time-to-make-change-in-our-cities?e=af9f75c8e6>.

^{iv} Anshel Pfeffer, “Two Draft Laws That Could Bring Down Netanyahu’s Government,” *Ha’aretz*, February 19, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-02-19/ty-article/.premium/two-draft-laws-that-could-bring-down-netanyahus-government/0000018d-c019-dfd7-a9fd-f39d96c60000>.

^v Rabbi Donniel Hartman and Yossi Klein-Halevi, “Israel at War –The Hareidi Dilemma,” *For Heaven’s Sake Podcast*, Shalom Hartman Institute, February 14, 2024.

^{vi} “‘A Natural Act of Vengeance’” Settler Violence and Two Types of Jewish Extremism, *Sources*, Fall 2023, <https://www.sourcesjournal.org/articles/a-natural-act-of-vengeance-settler-violence-and-two-types-of-jewish-fundamentalism>, and “Israel and the Threat of Jewish Fundamentalism,” Shalom Hartman Institute podcast, February 21, 2024.

^{vii} Charlie Summers, “Knesset protest against wartime budget cuts takes aims at Hareidi earmarks,” *The Times of Israel*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/knesset-protest-against-wartime-budget-cuts-takes-aim-at-haredi-earmarks>.

^{viii} “U.S. Views on Gaza Would Be Different ‘If Trump Was in Power’: Far-right Minister Ben-Gvir Says in WSJ Interview,” *Ha’aretz*, February 4, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-02-04/ty-article/far-right-minister-ben-gvir-says-in-wsj-interview/0000018d-72ea-d971-a38f-73fa99c30000>.

^{ix} Esther 8:16.