

Visiting Israel in an Emerging Era

Shabbat Vayeira 5786

November 7, 2025

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Professors Elsie Stern and Daniel Fisher-Livne, the editors of the New Reform Torah Commentary that we will pilot at Torah Study tomorrow morning, marvel at the disparate stories in this week's portion. Avraham challenges God, when יהוה plans to destroy all of Sodom for the sins of some. He negotiates a deal with Avimelech, a neighboring king, to secure rights to a well. Then, God commands him to sacrifice his son Isaac, and Avraham prepares to do so. Stern and Fisher-Livne suspect that the three stories developed separately and were put together by a later editor, perhaps to paint a picture of Avraham's character: "[H]is challenge to the intended destruction of [Sodom] demonstrates his moral courage; his negotiations with Avimelech at B'er-sheva demonstrates his political savvy; and the Akeidah [Binding], his near sacrifice of his son Yitzchak, demonstrates his piety."ⁱ

Last week in Israel—representing ARZENU, the global federation of Reform Movement Zionists, at the World Zionist Congress; attending ordination of our newest Israeli Reform rabbis at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem, and celebrating Shabbat with Rabbi Ayala Miron and the community of Congregation Bavat Ayin—I witnessed the morality articulated by Israeli and diaspora Reform Jews alongside our allies in the Conservative Movement as well as like-minded secular, Reconstructionist, and progressive Orthodox Jews, the awe-inspiring negotiating skill of Reform Movement leaders, and the faith that drives us all.

As you doubtless noticed when I urged you to "Vote Reform!" in the World Zionist Congress elections in the spring, the role of this gathering is poorly understood and hard to explain. Now, I can do a little better. First, a large portion of the land in Israel is owned by קק"ל, translated as the Jewish National Fund, though it's entirely separate from the JNF in North America. קק"ל holds all that land in trust for the Jewish people, and it has the responsibility to develop the land for our collective welfare. קק"ל's leadership is elected and its policy is established by the Congress. Moreover, the Congress determines how money collected for the benefit of Israel and Zionism worldwide is and is not spent.

For example, last week at the Congress, the Reform delegation and our allies prevailed to forbid any institution under the Congress's control from providing support to Jewish civilian occupation of the Gaza Strip or in a part of the West Bank known as E-1, where settlements are proposed expressly for the purpose of making any future creation of a Palestinian State geographically impossible. Those

actions have direct consequences: The Israeli government would be at pains to build settlements without funding from these long-dependable sources.

Throughout a contentious plenary, our delegation and its allies were consistently victorious. We addressed the rights of Jews who wish to worship in their accustomed style, people of all ages and genders together, at the כהל, the Western Wall of Jerusalem's Temple Mount, in a separate section designated for that purpose. In 2018, a large stone fell in that portion of the כהל, hurting nobody, but understandably causing that section of the כהל to be closed for repairs to assure safety. That work was completed within six months; but without explanation, access to the egalitarian כהל has yet to be restored. We know the reason: discrimination against religious Jews like us who are not Orthodox. The Congress demanded that our ability to touch the כהל again be restored forthwith.

These initiatives suggest criticism of the way that Israelis run their country. You have heard me, too, call out Israeli injustices, something that most but not all of our congregation can understand as criticism out of love. After all, I also speak with pride about my family in Israel and about my Israeli rabbinic colleagues, some of whom you have been privileged to meet.

Still, it's also true that much criticism of Israel comes from those who seek to brand Israel as somehow uniquely evil among the nations of the world. At its worst, Israel hardly compares to oppressive regimes from China to Sudan, North Korea to Iran, and Russia to Venezuela, many of which go unchastised by Israel's sharpest critics.

Rabbi David Kimchi addressed that moral relativism in his interpretation of Avraham's rhetorical question to יהוה about the proposed destruction of Sodom, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal Justly?" Kimchi says that Avraham mentions "all the earth" to insist that God apply an equal standard to injustice wherever it is found, not only in the Land of Israel.ⁱⁱ

When people gather **as Zionists**, though, as supporters of the right of Jewish self-determination in Israel, we have not only a right but a responsibility, like Avraham's, to demand justice in a nation founded on a Torah that proclaims צדק צדק תרדף—"Justice, justice shall you pursue." If Avraham can have the *chutzpah* to demand that יהוה be righteous, surely by extension we may demand the same of the Jewish State.

I went to the Congress above all to live out my partnership with our Reform Movement in Israel. Members of מר"ם, Israeli reform rabbis, are my teachers and inspiration. For two and a half years, they have raised the voice of Jewish morals in Israel's public square, leading public Havdalah ceremonies, setting a spiritual tone,

stunningly embraced by throngs of supposedly secular Israelis who are gathered for demonstrations that demand the protection of democracy and fairness for every citizen of Israel and for Palestinians living under Israel's control.

What I did not expect when I went to the Congress was to be successful. Yes, our Reform delegation was the biggest from the United States, larger still when we joined with the Conservative Movement. Still, the combined strength of anti-Zionist ultra-Orthodox and far-right Zionist parties outweighed ours. Like Avraham making a pact with Avimelech to secure his well, the leaders of our delegation demonstrated extraordinary skill, making alliances, even strange ones, without ever abandoning our moral vision. In the words of the senior rabbi of a large Reform congregation in one of our neighboring states, "I thought we were sitting *shiva* after the election, but we're not just winning; this is a beat-down."

Forty years ago, when I was a first-year rabbinical student in Jerusalem, there was much talk about a program to train Israelis to be Reform rabbis, but fewer than a handful had been ordained, with another handful in the pipeline. When we visited a Reform congregation, the prayers were in Hebrew, but all the explanations and instructions, not to mention the Shabbat dinner conversations, were in English, and not only for our benefit. The congregants' accents were American and Australian, British and South African.

In those days, it would've been hard then to imagine a day like I had last Friday, when, at the service before the Ordination of Israeli Reform rabbis, the Hebrew Union College Chapel was full to overflowing. While nobody present would embrace a piety that leads a man to bind his son for sacrifice—indeed, one of the newly ordained rabbis spoke out for a Torah freed of the Binding of Isaac—their faith is clear.

An increasing number of Israeli Reform rabbis serve communities that they have created with support from the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism. These rabbis serve entire regions with multiple smaller communities, mostly kibbutzim and moshavim in the north and south of the country. One of the women ordained last Friday, my friend Rabbi Yael Schweid, is the first rabbi for the Eshcol Regional Council. That name won't ring a bell until I tell you that among its communities are Be'eri, Nir Oz, and other kibbutzim that Hamas massacred on October 7.

Imagine the faith required to go serve devastated communities that never had or thought they wanted or needed a rabbi. They call themselves secular, after all. There will be days when Rabbi Schweid may think she has accepted a call, לְכִי-לךְ, get up and go to pass some horrific test of faith like God's call to Avraham to

sacrifice his son. Instead of wood and a butcher's knife, Rabbi Schweid will take her synagogue-in-the-trunk-of-the-car: a Torah, סידורים (prayer books), and other holy books. On most days, though, her piety will be like Avram's and Sarai's when God called לך-לך, "Get up and go" to a land of promise. And there, like so many children of Avraham and Sarah before her, Rabbi Schweid will make the desert bloom with words of Torah.

Amen.

ⁱ Elsie Stern and Daniel Fisher-Livne, *The New Reform Torah Commentary*, pilot study packet for *Parashat Vayeira*, p. 2.

ⁱⁱ Radak on Genesis 18:25.