

Sermon for Yom Kippur

Student Rabbi Yossi Elmackias, HUC

On Yom Kippur, the Torah reading comes from Parashat Nitzavim. Why from here: Lets see:

אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם בְּלַפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

Today, **all of you** are standing before Adonai your God: **your leaders, your tribes, your elders, your officials, and every Israelite.**

This includes your children, women, and the foreigners living inside your camp—from the wood chopper to the water drawer.

You are here to enter into the covenant that Adonai your God is making with you today.

Through this covenant, God confirms you today as God's people and promises to be your God, just as God promised you and swore to your ancestors—to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Lets read on from Nitzavim:

I am not making this covenant and its sanctions only with you.

It also includes everyone standing here with us today before Adonai our God, as well as those who are not here with us today.

I think we have chosen this reading because it expresses the status of the covenant between God and **all of Israel**. The people of Israel include **everyone**. For the avoidance of doubt, the text specifies: the elderly, men, women, children, people with official positions in the government alongside manual laborers, and strangers who are "within the camp" – even if they are not Jews. God's covenant **is with all of us**. Regardless of religion, race, gender, or economic status, **we are all equal before God.**

I would like to suggest that the phrase "*gerim*", strangers, being within the camp, because the Torah here wants to teach us about all types of 'invisible' people. Those who walk among us and sometimes we do not notice their existence. The woodcutters and water pumpers serve us. We sometimes take for granted those who cleaning the dishes from the tables in the restaurant, the bus driver, and the immigrant.

If we all have something to improve, it is just to pay attention to them: say hello to them, or good morning, and even "How are you?" Too often, we may even forget to say, "thank you." Let us try to really put these people in our field of vision, no longer invisible.

As we continue to read in the parasha, we can see that the reward for our part in the covenant is receiving the Land of Israel, the place which we can dwell safely:

Chapter 30, verse 5:

God will bring you into the land your ancestors possessed, and it will become yours. God will be good to you and make you more numerous than your ancestors.

Verse 16: Then you will live and flourish, and Adonai your God will bless you in the land you are about to enter and make your own.

Verse 18: I warn you today that you will surely perish. You will not live long in the land you **are crossing the Jordan** to enter and possess.

There can be no doubt: We are speaking about the land of Israel.

And I wonder: **Does the current situation in the State of Israel fulfill God's promise and intention?**

Is this the Promised Land?

For many years we are surrounded by enemies and terrorism.

But this is not the only problem of the State of Israel. We also surrounded by injustice and discrimination within our own land. Our leaders act blindly and oppress entire communities, supposedly in the name of the Torah and of some zealous, ill-defined messianic dream, in which Jews dwell alone throughout the so-called Greater Land of Israel.

Just a few brief examples:

Last month, two families from the West Bank village of Qusra were trapped in their homes for three days after settlers established an outpost extension near their homes, blocked roads, and damaged water and electricity connections. For three days, the army took no significant action to protect these innocent families. Activists from our

organization, Rabbis for Human Rights, were attacked by settlers when they attempted to enter the area unarmed to provide the families with water and food.

A second example: I volunteer in Jerusalem with an organization called JACC (Jerusalem African Community Center), which assists asylum seekers, who arrived in Israel fleeing wars in their home countries—primarily Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan. The state refuses to recognize them as refugees, yet they have nowhere to return to. And so, they live among us—much like the "Gerim", who performed menial labor, such as drawing water and chopping wood—relying on the kindness of volunteers to survive while awaiting a better future that currently seems nowhere in sight.

A third example: over the past few weeks, there has been a series of acts of harassment against liberal Jews in Israel. The Reform synagogue "Kol HaNeshama" in Jerusalem was broken into with the aim of removing the Pride flag displayed in the sanctuary; a stone was thrown, shattering a window at the "Darkei Noam" Reform synagogue in Ramat HaSharon; and in my neighborhood, the French Hill, the local community club was broken into and vandalized—simply because it is a pluralistic club that welcomes everyone.

So, if the situation is so bad, perhaps we should give up. Perhaps we should pack our belongings and leave Israel?

Absolutely not!

But why? **Why Stay in Israel? Especially Now?**

I want to suggest a few reasons:

1. Because Israel is still the only place where Jews are part of the majority — rather than a minority

More than 7.7 million Jews live in Israel today, in a country of more than ten million people. But being a Jewish majority is about more than numbers.

For thousands of years, Jewish life developed under conditions in which Jews were almost always a minority — sometimes welcomed, sometimes tolerated, and sometimes persecuted.

2. Because Israel is a place where Judaism is not merely a religion practiced by individuals or communities — but a living culture shared by an entire society

In Israel, Hebrew is a living language. It is the language of children, science, love, humor, literature, cinema, politics, and everyday life.

Despite the difficulties, Shabbat is part of the public sphere.

The Bible is part of the culture. Jewish holidays shape the rhythm of the year. And the argument about what Judaism means does not take place only in the synagogue.

It takes place in the Knesset, in schools and universities, in the army, in cafés, on the street, and around the family dinner table.

3. Because precisely now, there is a struggle over the character and future of the state

The great question is not only: **“What kind of Israel do we have today?”**

The greater question is: **“What kind of Israel will we have ten, twenty, or fifty years from now?”**

Israel is going through a profound struggle over its character and its future — over democracy, human rights, the relationship between religion and state, relations between Jews and Arabs, relations among diverse groups within Israeli society, and the meaning of Zionism itself.

This struggle can be frightening. But it can also be an invitation.

Because if we believe that Israel can be better, then we need to be here to help build it.

We should stay not because everything is right, but because we believe that Israel can be different.

Not because we want to defend every decision of the government.

Not because we believe that criticism of Israel is illegitimate.

But because we believe that this country is still ours — and that we have a responsibility for what it becomes.

And when I say ours, I mean all the Jewish people: in Tel Aviv, In Kiryat Shmona, in Kiev or New York, and of course here in Little Rock- the wonderful congregation Bnai Israel, with the leadership of Rabbi Block. Dear friends and partner of Israel.

4. Because Israel especially needs liberal, democratic, and humanistic Jews

I believe this very strongly:

Israel needs more people who believe in democracy. **It needs more** people who believe in human rights.

It needs fewer people who believe that Jewish tradition can coexist with pluralism, equality, and compassion.

Ultimately, this country will be changed by the people who live in it, with the help of Jews from the diaspora — by the teachers, students, activists, rabbis, parents, artists, professionals, volunteers, and ordinary Jews who refuse to give up on the possibility of a better Israel.

Staying can therefore be an act of responsibility.

5. Because Israel has an extraordinary civil society

Israel is not its government. It is not its politicians.

It is not even the headlines that appear in the international media.

There is another Israel — an Israel that is often much less visible.

Hundreds of thousands of people volunteer. They demonstrate.

They establish organizations. They help people who have been displaced.

They defend democracy. They help their neighbors.

We saw this in an extraordinary way after the massacre of October 7.

In a moment of enormous trauma, when the government was paralyzed or indifferent, ordinary people organized themselves to help others.

Food. Clothing. Housing. Transportation. Childcare. Medical assistance. Emotional support.

People simply asked: **“What needs to be done — and how can I help?”**

Let me emphasize one organization that is active in many ways for civil society- the Israeli Reform movement. It acts not just among reform communities but all over the country.

6. Because Israel is an almost impossible mosaic

Israel is a remarkable mixture of people and cultures:

- Jews from every corner of the world: Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews
- Religious and secular Israelis, Haredim (Ultra-Orthodox) and Reform Jews
- Jews and Arabs, New immigrants, and veteran Israelis
- Traditional Jews and atheists, Hebrew speakers, Arabic speakers, Russian speakers, Amharic speakers, and many others

7. And for the last: perhaps this is the simplest reason of all.

Because even now, Israel is home

Home is not a perfect place. At home, there are arguments.

Sometimes there is anger. Sometimes there is disappointment.

Sometimes you want to leave. Sometimes you look around and hardly recognize the place you thought you knew.

But home is also the place where you feel that you have a responsibility.

And perhaps this is what I want to say most clearly:

I am not suggesting that we stay in Israel because everything is all right.

I am suggesting that we stay because this place is too important to give up on.

We can criticize Israel and still love it. We can be angry with Israel and still feel responsible for it. We can oppose the government and still believe in the potential of the country.

We can fight for human rights and still believe in Zionism.

Not giving up on the country we have — but taking responsibility for the country we want to become.

And so, no—we will not give up on it. And as the wonderful song “Ein Li Eretz Acheret” (“I Have No Other Country”), which we will sing shortly, reminds us: **I will not be silent, for my land has changed its face.**

Gmar Hatima Tova