

Kol Nidre Sermon 2024

A Letter to the Next Generation

By Rabbi Judy Kummer

My friends, I usually start these talks with a joke -- but not this year. This year doesn't feel like a time for joking.

We in the Jewish community are reeling from the events of this past year. At this time last year, we had just celebrated Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur and had headed into next Jewish holiday of Sukkot -- and the promise of the whole year spread out before us, beckoning.

And then the attacks on October 7 happened, and it felt like the world had turned upside down. For many in the Jewish community around the world, it felt like those attacks were coming at us personally; the attacks brought up fears from traumas in previous generations, and we learned just how interwoven our Jewish community is. Where we in the US might speak glibly of there being "6 degrees of separation," many Jews found that we were only one or two degrees of separation away from those who had been murdered or had been taken hostage.

And since that time, it feels like things have only gone from bad to worse. The daily news reports are shocking and grieving both, and our human hearts -- or I will say my human heart at least -- is tired of bleeding.

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In approaching the High Holidays this year, I and many of my rabbinic colleagues have faced major challenges: what can we

say to our congregations? What wisdom can we offer? Where can we find solace and hope in the middle of all this miserable news? For all the learning I have acquired throughout my rabbinic training and during the course of my career, it is hard to identify teachings and wisdom that would offer much consolation - except to know that despite the many dark tragedies our Jewish people has encountered through the ages, somehow we, the Jewish people, have survived; we are here today to tell the tales of our survival and to dream together of a better future.

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I have been concerned about what the next generation has made of all of this. We all know that college campuses at this time are very difficult places for Jewish students, with the exponential rise of antisemitic incidents. And when antisemitism rises, it may make it harder for young Jews to even *want* to affiliate with the Jewish community.

As we all know, the particular form of antisemitism that is raising its ugly head now is garbed in the language of anti-Zionism, which may have left many young American Jews at a loss and questioning: why would so many attacks be coming my way? What does this country several oceans away have to do with me, and why am I being attacked for what Israel is doing? Why am I being held culpable for the actions of a country that I don't know a lot about and don't feel especially connected to?

For those of us who are somewhat older, who have now lived through some history and may have a wider lens to look through, we can ask, why is it that Israel holds such a central role for so many of us in the Jewish community?

And so I would like to offer some words in the form of a letter to the next generation, outlining my connection to Israel and why I hold it dear, and articulating what my hopes and wishes are for our Jewish people in the times ahead. As I speak, I will be wondering -- and perhaps you can ask yourselves -- what each of *you* would include in this kind of a letter of your own to the next generation—your own teenagers, college kids, your nieces and nephews, your young friends.

So here we go:

Dear young American Jews,

I offer you these words a year after the October 7 attacks, the most dire acts of antisemitism since the Holocaust. Although these attacks took place in another country, they have resonated deeply for many of us in the American Jewish community. I would like to offer some historical perspective and talk to you about why the country of Israel has always been dear to me and why it remains so. I would also like to offer you my hopes and wishes for the future you will be living into.

So many of you in the next generation may be unaware of how bad things were for Jews in Europe and around the world when Israel did not exist. In many countries Jews were 2nd class citizens; our ancestors suffered unending discrimination and persecution.

In the past century, when Jews from many different communities around the globe have been under threat, whole Jewish communities have been able to flee to Israel, turning to the country as a safe haven and a refuge. That is what Israel has stood for. It's our Jewish version of the Statue of Liberty, a beacon of light and hope against darkness and despair, a warm welcome in the face of persecution and pain.

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My own personal connection with the country of Israel began even before my birth in 1961. (And yes, if you do the math, you will find that I am 63.)

Before my birth, my parents spent the 1958-59 academic year in Israel; they lived there for my father's required year of Israel studies for rabbinical school.

I was born at the very tail end of the Baby Boom generation, a mere 16 years after the end of World War II. But at the start of the 1960s, we were busy looking forward and not looking back. In fact, so focused were we on looking forward from the 1960's on that I was actually in my 40's before I realized how soon after the end of the Holocaust I had been born.

A little historic background: you may know that the State of Israel was founded in 1948, three years after the end of World War II and after the end of the Holocaust.

So when my parents arrived there in 1958, Israel was only a decade old. It was still a brand-new country. Even at that young age, the country had already been through the pre-State conflicts and Israel's bloody War of Independence and the 1956 Suez crisis, and there may have been some sense of the Israeli population feeling somewhat battle-weary – but my impression from my parents was that when they arrived in Israel in 1958, there was a lot of idealism in the air.

In the years immediately following Israel's founding, not only was Israel absorbing refugees who had survived the Holocaust in Europe; rising anti-Semitism around the world had made it especially unsafe for Jews living in many Arab lands. In those

years following the end of WWII, approximately 900,000 Jews were expelled or fled as refugees from Muslim-majority countries like Iraq, Yemen, Morocco and Libya. Only because the state of Israel existed did they have a place to flee to.

Many Jews fled to Israel by boat, and Israel also conducted airlift after airlift, bringing out almost entire Jewish populations from these countries and resettling them in Israel.

Life was not easy for people living in Israel at that time. Where we in the US had lots of creature comforts in the 1950's and 60's, things like major appliances – refrigerators and washing machines and dryers and tv's -- and cars and suburban homes – things which made life easier and more comfortable, most Israelis had to make do without. In fact, even in the late 1950's, when my parents lived in Israel, they considered themselves lucky to have an old-fashioned icebox – an *icebox!* – to keep food from spoiling.

Like many decades before in the US, in the 1950's in Israel there were street peddlers who would deliver ice for the icebox year round and kerosene for the little space heaters you might be lucky to have in the wintertime.

Many new immigrants to Israel in the 1950's were being housed in tents in *ma'abarot*, refugee absorption camps. Imagine living in a tent, in the cold winters and in the very hot summers... My father used to go to teach Hebrew to Iraqi immigrants at one of these camps, and he would comment on how difficult life was for these new immigrants, living in tents in muddy fields, with little in the way of creature comforts – but the sentiment he often encountered was that they were grateful to be there, to have made it to Israel, because they felt safe at last.

Despite the lack of creature comforts and all of the other challenges that residents of Israel faced at that time, there was a sense of *chalutzik* pioneering spirit in the air, a sense that any obstacles could be overcome using the strength of will and ingenuity and some muscle, and in banding together to get things done.

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I grew up with my parents' love of Israeli folk music, with an association of singing Hebrew folk songs on car trips and around the bonfire, with a love of Israeli folk dance and of hiking the Israeli countryside and learning about nature in Israel, and bonding with the land of Israel in this way. Along with my family, I delighted in learning Hebrew conversational phrases, almost as they were being invented. Not only was the country of Israel new, the language spoken there was relatively new as well. Hebrew was no longer only a language from antiquity, spoken by our ancient Israelite ancestors 3000 years ago; Hebrew had been revived and reinvented as a conversational tongue that one could conduct regular everyday business in – and even kvetch in! -- in contemporary times. Just think about it: they had to invent words for radios and cars and motorcycles and movies, and more recently for things like computers and microchips.

At that time in Israel, there was such a sense of newness and idealism, a choice to turn away from the image of the victimized European ghetto Jew, to cast ourselves instead as a scrappy underdog. With the surprising victories in the Six Day War, this image of Israel as a valiant and scrappy underdog who could fight with grit -- and with wit -- was reinforced.

And then, in 1973, with the attacks of the Yom Kippur war, it felt like there was a shift; there was a feeling of Israel being put on

the defensive, being beleaguered. We grieved with Israel, and we hoped and worked for a better future.

I was a teen in the 1970's, and for me that decade was punctuated by several trips to Israel, through which I developed a firsthand love for the land of Israel and for its people.

I chose to spend a gap year in Israel in a program for Zionist youth leaders from around the world. One of the most important pieces of learning I came away with from that year was that the tent of Israel and of Zionism was incredibly large and broad, encompassing Jews of all ethnic backgrounds and all political and religious inclinations, and inviting others who were not Jews to participate in Israeli democracy as well.

One of the sad pieces of learning I have gained in the years since is that Israel is the only country in the world that has had to *defend itself for defending itself*. As we all know, the line between a defensive war and an offensive one is blurrier than we may wish; where the current Israeli government sees its actions in Gaza and in Lebanon as efforts to root out the terrorists that are threatening the lives of Israeli civilians, these actions are being condemned on the world stage as acts of aggression. I feel troubled by the double standards being applied to Israel -- but perhaps we ourselves have indeed expected that Israel would adhere to a high standard of morality – and in fact we should expect all of the other countries in the world to hold to that high moral standard as well.

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My decision to enter the rabbinate was a direct outgrowth of the desire to sharpen my skills to be a leader for the Jewish community. To the next generation: I will encourage you too to

look for the ways that you can offer the best of yourselves in order to help our Jewish people thrive.

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I have so many hopes for the future. I have hopes for you, in the next generation, I have hopes for our people and I have hopes for our beloved land of Israel.

I hope that the worldwide Jewish community will continue to grow and thrive. I hope Israel will be a place that is safe and secure and will be respected in the community of nations. I hope the country and citizens of Israel will have good reason to feel hopeful about a bright future for all of Israel's inhabitants. And I hope you will know that there is always a place for you there!

I encourage you, members of our people's next generation, to go to Israel yourself and see what it feels like to be there, in a place where being Jewish is not a minority experience, where you can feel Jewish in just walking down the street or in going into a supermarket.

See what it feels like to hear our ancient Jewish ancestors' language on the lips of everyday people speaking of contemporary challenges and successes, and listen for Israeli teenagers speaking Hebrew slang. Go to some of the places that are mentioned in the Bible, and walk in our Jewish ancestors' footprints. Don't only take the word of other people when it comes to describing the country of Israel or its people or what your connection to it should be. Go see for yourself!

And maybe, in this time when the Israeli labor force is stretched thin because so many people have been called up to serve in the army, think about going and volunteering in Israel. Lend your energies, make a difference there by working in the fields or in a

factory or in a civilian role on an army base. And who knows, you may make some new Israeli friends and learn a little Hebrew – a win-win situation if ever there was one!

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To members of the next generation, I say please look into some of Israel's history and draw your own conclusions. Learn about some of the many different viewpoints within Israeli society. You may be a proponent of "Israel right or wrong" – that is, standing with Israel no matter what actions the nation takes -- or you may be a proponent of "Israel can ONLY do wrong." However, it is also possible to embrace a more nuanced approach which differentiates the current Israeli government's actions from the will of an enormous segment of Israeli society. (There was an old song from my youth, "What the world needs now is love, sweet love." I am thinking that a contemporary update of this song would be "What the world needs now is nuance, sweet nuance!")

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And please, please do not accept the false dichotomy that you have to reject Israel and Zionism in order to feel any compassion for Palestinian civilians. To be a really good Jew is to be deeply compassionate. In fact, compassion is such a high value in Judaism that one of the names we ascribe to God is *Harachaman*, the Compassionate One. You don't have to turn away from Judaism and Zionism to embrace a compassionate stance – and at the same time that you are in favor of compassion towards others, remember too please to feel compassion towards your own people...

Members of the next generation, I hope you will help to create a future Israel that you will want to support and identify with. It is your homeland as much as it is anyone else's!

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As a rabbi and a chaplain, I am often looking to see where there might be hope in a challenging situation. So I will offer the question, where can we find hope in the miserable situation that Israel, and by extension the world Jewish population, are now in? I think of the great Golda Meir who said it is not possible to negotiate peace with someone who wants to kill you.

But we must remember that while Hamas and Hezbollah are terrorist organizations, *not all Palestinians are terrorists*. Just as there are many, many different Jewish viewpoints with regard to the complex Israel-Palestinian situation, there are also many different Palestinian views, and it is not fair to paint all Palestinians with the same brush. There *are* people among both the Israeli and Palestinian populations who are seeking a different future. I encourage you to be part of the building of that future!

I encourage you, my young friends, to join forces with one of the many organizations that are working for co-existence. And these are good ideas for the older generation also!

Here are a few suggestions:

- Look into Seeds of Peace, which brings together hundreds of emerging young leaders and educators from conflict regions to transform legacies of conflict into courage to lead change;
- There is the Neve Shalom/Wahat al Salam Oasis of Peace, an Israeli-Jewish and Israeli-Muslim coexistence community, which runs schools for children and a School for Peace for adults, with classes for adult Arabs and Jews to learn about each other and with seminars run by trained peace facilitators.
- Look into the Parents Circle, a grassroots organization of Israeli and Palestinian families who have lost immediate family

members due to the conflict. Together they transform their pain and bereavement into a catalyst for a joint mission of reconciliation and coexistence in the midst of ongoing violence.

You can Google “Arab–Israeli peace projects” yourselves and view the Wikipedia list I am citing from, where you can find listings of these and many other organizations working behind the scenes to create a different and a better future. There are organizations focused on the environment, classical music, science collaboration and even comedy; whatever your interest, there is likely a group that focuses collaborative work in that area.

While these organizations clearly reflect my political inclinations, I encourage you to consider your own approach and take a step into the world of activism. I do hope, though, that your choice will be one that is life-affirming.

Please know that we are counting on you, members of the next Jewish generation, to be a part of these efforts to make our world a better place – and we are counting on you to be a part of the Jewish future! Please help to build a future that you yourself will want to live in and that will support generations yet to come.

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That’s the end of the letter. My friends, we are facing a bumpy road ahead, and a very complex reality now. It’s like a jigsaw puzzle that is in the process of being assembled – and we don’t have an image of how it is supposed to look once it’s been assembled.

In a certain sense all of us as Jews are sitting at the table, facing the jigsaw puzzle of our Jewish life, each of us with our own

puzzle piece, trying to assemble the puzzle. It is clear that this puzzle needs your piece! It needs all of us to put in our pieces.

It is up to us all to build a different future. Our tradition teaches "*Lo echa ham'lacha ligmor*," it is not your responsibility to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.

May we all take our places among our Jewish people and among those of us who love our Jewish homeland.

May that homeland continue to be a shining beacon of justice and righteousness, and may it offer a warm welcome home. And let us say, Amen.