

Love your neighbor as yourself, You said  
As You told us the laws by which we should live

Yet  
Young boys are taught  
That they have the right  
Nay  
That they are commanded  
By You  
To taunt me on the street  
When I wear my faith for you  
On my head  
A covering  
With no sacred meaning  
Except the one that Your people gave to it

My star around my neck gets no response  
And my male friends  
Who wear a covering but no tzitzit  
Are not chastised for being *reformi*  
But if I was to dare  
In this city  
To wear my love for you daily  
On my head  
Or on my body  
I would be pushed and shoved  
Not only at the Kotel  
But on the street

For how dare I  
A woman  
Show my dedication to You  
My Rock and my Redeemer

I wrote this poem in 2014 during my time as an intern with Women of the Wall in Jerusalem. Titled "Rainbow Kippa" I wrote it after a particularly frustrating street crossing where a group of middle school boys yelled at me while shoving their bikes into me. At the time, I had forgotten that I had left the safety of the College with the kippa still on my head but I quickly realized my mistake as I stood waiting for the light to change. This experience was not an isolated one, as

both myself and my classmates had many interactions with Israelis who wished to let us know that we were not Jewish enough. Yet, I also had the experience of being mistaken for a modern Orthodox woman in my jean skirt, sneakers and long sleeve t-shirt while praying at the Kotel. For, it is easy enough as a white American woman to pass in Israel as something I am not. For me it is a recognition that people all too often want to see only what is on the surface and do not wish to dig deeper. It is for this reason that I wish to give depth to the following statement this morning: I am a Zionist.

I have been a Zionist since before I knew what it meant to embrace such a label. My love of Israel was cultivated both at home and at summer camp, so much so that the idea of not supporting Israel's right to exist - and the importance of having a Jewish homeland - has never been something that I could comprehend. Have I often been disappointed in the government of Israel? Absolutely. I used to believe that as an American Jew I had no right to be outspoken against Israeli policy but after having the opportunity to live in Israel as a rabbinic student I have come to understand, with thanks to both Israelis and Diaspora Jews, that my voice is important. That our voices as Diaspora Jews are important in the fight for an Israel that is both Democratic and Jewish. The most recent survey by the American Jewish Committee of American and Israeli Jews found the following:

- 39% believe that the current balance is fine between the Jewish and the Democratic aspects of Israel
- 42% said strengthen the Democratic side
- 19% said strengthen the Jewish side

What does this all mean in the current context? The news out of Israel in the past few weeks and months has been difficult for me as a Zionist. Between the rockets and protestors on the Israel Gaza Strip border, the passing of the Nation State Law (a law on par with a Constitutional Amendment in the United States) and the passing of a surrogacy law both of which led to massive protests by the Israeli population. The surrogacy bill, "enacted by a vote of 59 to 52, expands eligibility for state-supported surrogacy to include single women but excludes single men and gay couples. Previously state support was only given to married heterosexual couples."<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Talia Avnon-Benvinisti, an Israeli Reform Rabbi, shared the following on her belief of the Centrality of Israel for Jews in the Diaspora:

Israel was established as a place that can hold a utopian society. America was founded as a place of the promised country for the world. With all these promises

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Surrogacy-bill-passes-Netanyahu-flip-flops-on-homosexual-surrogacy-562810>

of existence. Of freedom. It is probably agreed that both these countries have shifted away from their original intentions. Because of the words, deeds, the power of people. It could be moved back to utopian societies in both of these countries by the words and deeds of the people. These days of Awe, are our opportunity to follow in the visions of our ancestors. Follow in the footsteps, turn both of these countries to utopian societies.<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Avnon-Benvinisti is right, our country has shifted away from being the new Israel that it was often seen as by the settlers and founders of this country. Just as Israel has shifted away from its founders' vision for a Democratic and Jewish society. As Americans we recognize that disagreement and protest is patriotic, as Jewish Americans we need to recognize that the same is true for Israel. Israel needs our support in order to be the best it can be, Israelis need our support in order to continue the work they are doing.

As Americans we recognize the role citizens play in a participatory democracy. But what does it look like to participate in Israel's political structure as American not Israeli citizens? What does it mean to believe that as Jews we have a stake in how Israel treats her citizens, both Jewish and not? These are big questions, ones that often cause us to respond with our emotions rather than our logical thoughts. But, if we wish to have a relationship with half of the Jewish world then we have a responsibility to help make Israel the place it was established to be. A homeland for the Jewish people and a democracy that recognizes the importance of every human being regardless of their religion or lack thereof. Regardless of ethnicity, skin color, gender or sexuality. As members of the Jewish family, we have a responsibility to share our understandings of what being Jewish means with our Jewish family both here and abroad. Israel is more than just another country, because as American Jews - or Jewish Americans - we are a part of Israel's story. Whether we want to be or not, we are seen as Jews and as members of Israel, citizens or not.

It is said that the current youth of the American Jewish community no longer feels a need to be active in supporting Israel. And many blame the education American Jews have received at temples and summer camps for instilling a utopian view of Israel that is shattered when young people either visit Israel or engage in political activism. I do not disagree with this assessment and so I have chosen to spend a significant amount of time not only analyzing my own views and understandings but learning how to teach about the State of Israel in a comprehensive way. I believe that I have failed as both a rabbi and as an educator if a student of mine is shocked by the reality of life in Israel, in Gaza, in the West Bank. There are many wonderful parts of Israel and I enjoy the time I spend there and love the friends and family who live there. But just as America is not perfect neither is Israel.

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<sup>2</sup> CCAR "Centrality of Israel" Conference Call

I believe it is important as a Zionist to also note that while anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism are not *always* the same thing too often they are one and the same. With a rise in anti-Semitism in this country and throughout the world, it is important to continue to be vigilant. As members of a Jewish community it is important that we educate ourselves and those around us about both the Israeli/Palestinian conflict as well as the State of Israel. Israelis are not of one view and neither are Palestinians or Americans for that matter.

I hope you will join me in regularly praying not only for our congregation and country but also for the State of Israel, which is traditionally done during the Torah Service, both on Shabbat mornings as well as during various services over the holidays. If you would, please turn to page 274 in your machzor.