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This has been a hard week. And regardless of where you stand, on American politics, on Israel, the violent and horrific death of two young people with such promise, and hope is heartbreaking. It is an interesting thing about us rabbis, when the unspeakable happens, we tend to speak. We try to say the right things; express the feelings of our people, informed by our Jewish traditions. Sometimes we get it right, and at other times not.

When it comes to Israel, during these very fraught times, it's hard to get it right. The way that we talk about Israel seems to have morphed. We've moved from a robust, heterogeneous conversation, infused with the passion that a tough existential debate certainly merits, to an all-or-nothing battle, where we're prone to quickly discredit a speaker with whom we disagree, and freely dismiss ideas and perspectives that are deemed "outside of the camp." This is a dangerous time for Israel, and for the Jewish people— a time during which Israel is imperiled at once by hostile neighbors and by existential questions about Israel's morality and democratic identity. And, even in times such as these, this is not the time for fewer ideas, it is a time for *more* ideas.

Arguing about Zionism and Israel is our birthright. At the first Zionist congress in August 1897, in Basel, Switzerland, Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau, the leaders of this burgeoning Zionist movement had an argument...*about the dress code*. Herzl had orchestrated the event carefully, this was not a schleppy shtetl event— the dress code explicitly asked guests to arrive in "a frock coat" basically, a tuxedo, a white bowtie and a top hat. Max Nordau arrived under-dressed for his own party.¹

Herzl records the event in his diary, "Nordau appeared on the first day dressed in a riding jacket! And he expressed absolutely no desire to return home and dress in a frock coat. I pulled him aside and implored him to do it for my sake. I said: The Zionist Congress is still without substance; it is our responsibility to create it all. But the people must view this Congress as a most noble and festive spectacle. He acceded to my request and I hugged him gratefully. A quarter of an hour later, he returned wearing a frock coat".²

On the one hand, it's a funny story about two guys arguing over the dress code for their party. On the other, a debate about the sartorial expression of what Zionism would be- was it a movement for Western elites, emancipated Europeans who knew how to dress? Was it for the Jews who

¹ Rabbi Josh Beraha told me this story, which he had read in *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn* by Daniel Gordis.

² <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/bjmfac700a>

were ready to shun the hunched over Jews of the *beit midrash*, a muscular Judaism born of a deep internalized antisemitism?

These guys debated everything...not just Herzl and Nordau but those early ideologues. It is *hard* to imagine something, a movement, a country, where there was mostly nothing. An answer to “the Jewish question,” a way forward for an embattled Jewish people. Even if we set aside those who categorically opposed the idea of a Jewish state, and those who didn’t want to get involved in this radical, agitational idea, even the true believers – believed a lot of different things.

That first White Tie Zionist Congress laid the foundation for the World Zionist Congress election in which our congregation participated over the past several months. This is also known as “The Parliament of the Jewish People.” This year’s election for the 39th congress was beset with trouble. Never mind the present struggles of the Jewish people in Israel and abroad. The election was marred with allegations of voter fraud and unsanctioned voting incentives.³ We have yet to learn the results of this competition.

Voting irregularities aside, there is something in the discourse that feels broken. In Yehuda Kertzer’s recent piece in “Sources” a publication of the Shalom Hartman Institute, he writes of the shift that we are experiencing: “[Zionism] was *plural*, encompassing a variety of competing ideas, and *aspirational*, dreaming of a different and often utopian future. The annual Zionist congresses were not, as they often are today, pep rallies; they were contests between different visions for the future of the Jewish people. The only thing that bound these Zionisms together was that they were rooted in dreaming and imagining that future as dramatically different *from-* and better *than-* the Jewish present.”⁴

The election in which we just participated was for the allocation of 152 seats to American voters, distributed in proportion to the number of seats each slate receives. 200 additional seats go to Israeli representatives and the remaining 173 seats are given to other global Jewish communities.

It is an audacious, illogical idea. One that has been refined ever since that first conference in 1897. But it is an attempt to do something extraordinary, to bring together the global Jewish community for the sake of Israel.

This year, there were 22 platforms- across a varied spectrum of views about the best path forward for Israel and the Jewish people. There is over a billion dollars of funding at stake, and I wanted my values and priorities to be represented in that chaotic assembly of global Jewry. I believe, strongly, that what *I* want for Israel is right. Peace, democracy, and pluralism. An end to

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<https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/2025-05-05/ty-article/.premium/amid-massive-fraud-allegations-zionist-supreme-court-urged-to-intervene-in-u-s-wzc-vote/00000196-a078-d1bb-a5d6-a6fc3d4e0000>

⁴ <https://www.sourcesjournal.org/articles/liberal-zionism-and-the-idea-of-the-idea>

the occupation, an end to this war. I supported ARZA, the Vote Reform slate, though there were others that also closely aligned with my values. And there were some that were antithetical to my values.

In Yerhuda Kurtzer's piece, he went on to say that while political Zionism largely succeeded, many of those other early Zionisms have "suffered." He reminds us that a facet of that foundational political Zionism was liberalism. To be clear, he writes of a liberalism that tolerates ideas that are different from your own. He cites the preamble to Israel's declaration of Independence:

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

Doesn't it sound great? And aspirational, and contradictory, and likely, impossible! But when we stop dreaming, when we stop arguing, when we batten down the hatches and accuse those with other ideas as threatening and un-Jewish...we lose the creative potential of that audacious dream. We lose the ability to come up with a different path forward when a different path is sorely needed.

When I think about the Israel Shabbat of my youth, of Yom Yisrael at camp- I remember those times as characterized by joy and celebration. But, to be honest, I speak to you tonight with a broken heart. My heart breaks because as we worship tonight, 58 hostages remain in Gaza, at least 20 of whom are believed to be alive and in unthinkable conditions. My heart breaks because of the reservists and the teenagers who are fighting and dying in a war that seems unwinnable. My heart breaks because people are starving in Gaza, innocents— children are starving and dying in Gaza. My heart breaks because I believe that a different Israel is possible, and yet it feels so far away.

My heart breaks because this week, in our city, two senseless murders occurred. On a street where many of us have stood, in front of a museum that we may have visited, at an event that we might have been attending. My heart breaks because this week I entertained the fleeting thought- is my daughter safe at school, here at Temple Sinai. Not because we haven't taken every precaution and complied with every protocol recommended by security experts but because the world right now is a scary place.

And, my heart breaks because time and time again you have told us that since October 7th, you feel lonely. Across the political spectrum, with widely varying views on Israel, you've told us that your Judaism, your beliefs, your commitment to, or your criticism of Israel, makes you feel alone.

There is a lot of this broken heartedness that we cannot remedy. But we do not need to be alone. We are a cantankerous people- it goes all the way back to the Bible. Next week we start the book of Bamidbar and read the tales of those difficult, stiff necked Israelites rebelling and fighting in the wilderness. We've been arguing with ourselves for centuries. It is in our DNA. But in order to feel less alone, we need to be able to tolerate a little more friction.

Immediately after the first Zionist Congress, Ahad Ha'am wrote in *Hashiloach*, his Hebrew language literary journal, that he found much of it disappointing- in particular what he called, "the commitment to diplomacy over prophecy." He disagreed with the Congress's prioritizing statecraft and nationalism, over collective culture and justice. Ahad Ha'am remained a critic of Theodor Herzl. And, ultimately, Herzl's dream became a reality, and Ahad Ha'am's did not. The diplomats got their way, and prophets have always been harder to find.⁵

But Ahad Ha'am explained the first Zionist Congress like this, "We did not come to Basle to found the Jewish state today or tomorrow. Rather, we came to issue a great proclamation to all the world: the Jewish people is still alive and full of the will to live. We must repeat this proclamation day and night, not so that the world will hear and give us what we desire, but above all, in order that we ourselves will hear the echo of our voice in the depths of our souls."

"The Jewish people is still alive and full of the will to live... We repeat this proclamation... In order that we ourselves hear the echo of our voice in the depths of our souls."

We don't need to be alone. We can tolerate difference. Imagine what Herzl would make of the dress code at the 39th World Zionist Congress, *peyes* and *shtriemels*, and blue jeans and women wearing kippot. An impossible dream. At a heartbreaking and scary and isolating time, we need to find our way back to each other. To embrace and channel our difficult, argumentative ancestors. To speak with passion and confidence about what we believe is right. And to listen to those we believe are deeply wrong. This is the path to new ideas, to new Zionisms, and to a world in which we don't feel so alone. A world where we can affirm together, "The Jewish people is still alive and full of the will to live."

⁵ *The Jew in the Modern World*, "The First Zionist Congress," Ahad Ha'am. PP 541-543.