

Cantor Rachel Rhodes

Kol Nidrei 5786

I asked my 8-year old son Oren recently if he “feels Israeli.” He looked incensed and replied, “Ema. I don’t feel Israeli. I AM Israeli.” I am not sure why I was surprised by his response- he’s a very literal guy, and he’s right- he is Israeli, along with my 4-year-old Lev and my husband Dov. Dov grew up in Northern Israel in a progressive Kibbutz-like idyllic enclave. Sharing his Israeli identity with our boys was important for both of us and is why we arranged for their citizenship after they were born. But our Israeli-ness goes beyond just passports- we speak Hebrew in our home- Dov exclusively and I speak Hebrish. We only eat homemade hummus, and we call it that- chummus. We host Israeli family and friends for weeks at a time, often. Over the summer, my kitchen felt like the shuk each morning- so many Israelis, all speaking Hebrew, getting their Nescafe coffee and eating tomatoes and cottage cheese for breakfast at our dining room table.

And, our lives are deeply rooted here in America. Our friends and most of our family, our children’s social lives and their schools, this Temple Sinai community- all of it binds us here, happily. My family lives in the creative tension of holding true to multiple identities during complex times- just as all of us do, each in our own way.

I will share honestly with you that the nearly two years since October 7th have challenged my previous notions of identity for myself and my family. While I do not hold Israeli citizenship like they do, I have spent significant time there

and feel connected spiritually and emotionally to Israel. When gazing at the Israeli flag in my formative years, I would think proudly of the line from Hatikvah, the national anthem: *lihiyot am chofshi b'artzteinu*- to be a free people in our land. Now, I look at the flag on our bima and question those words. How can we be a free people in Israel in the face of so much corruption, violence, and segregation?

Then I look to the other side of our bima and see the American flag. I feel similarly angry, alienated, and honestly terrified about the future of this country that I call home- fear expressed expertly and passionately by Rabbi Roos on Rosh Hashanah morning (go watch that sermon if you haven't yet).

Here these two flags stand on our bima and I find myself estranged from both, somewhere in the messy middle, shishkabobbed between them. When I see them, they reveal to me an uncomfortable truth- I am in exile. I am spiritually unmoored, yearning for a homeland that no longer feels like home, a God who seems silent in this moment of need, and a people with whom I feel increasingly distanced.

Luckily, Exile is a very Jewish place to be. And while there is some comfort in its familiarity, Exile is generally thought of as a negative state of being in our tradition. The Torah begins with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The rabbis of the post-Second Temple period grappled with how to keep Judaism alive without the central tether of the sacrificial rite at the Temple in Jerusalem. Early Zionists used Exile as the main impetus for the creation of a Jewish nation state by arguing that Jews could not remain in Exile in perpetuity and survive.

To be untethered from a physical homeland, spiritually disconnected from God, and always set apart from neighbors and friends is a challenging reality in which to live. And we have resided in this deeply uncomfortable state of displacement for the majority of Jewish history.

But not all Jewish thinkers have felt negatively about Exile. The great philosopher of ethics, Eugene Borowitz — and our teacher at Hebrew Union College — recognized that this place of discomfort can fuel necessary change. He said: “Anybody who cares seriously about being a Jew is in Exile and would be in Exile even if that person were in Jerusalem. That Exile results because our Jewish ideal is unrealized anywhere in the world.” To know Exile, we need to at least have a concept of what true belonging could feel and look like. Turn to so many of the inspiring words of our prayerbook- Bayom hahu yihiye Adonai Echad... on some great future day, there will be One God, with One Name. Or, וְתִתְחַזֶּקֶה עֵינֵינוּ בְּשׁוּבְךָ לְצִיּוֹן בְּרַחֲמִים... "May our eyes behold Your return to Zion in compassion." In our everyday prayers we imagine a world where God feels close, where our eyes witness a reality governed by compassion in an ancient homeland renewed. These very hopes for that world are embedded in both flags on the bima- which is why we do, and should, feel so close to them emotionally and why it is so damaging to our spirits when they fall short of the world our prayers yearn for.

Living in the messy middle reveals to me that I am not ready to disavow either flag, nor am I prepared to align myself entirely with the values either of them have come to represent. I am learning to embrace the largeness of the creative tension in which I live- a tension that kindles honesty with my family,

friends and community, discernment about my values, deep learning, and hopes for what might yet come to pass. I want better for us all, for Israel and for America.