

Yom Kippur Morning: Racism as a State Policy

“Pave a road, pave a road. Clear a path! Remove the obstacles from my people’s path.” These are the words of the Prophet Isaiah that we take to heart on Yom Kippur.

Listen to the prophetic words of Emma Lazarus, prominently displayed on the base of the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” These words epitomize the authentic foundation and true spirit of the United States of America, a nation of immigrants.

Are we removing obstacles or are we creating them? When did we abandon the proud American dream of being a nation of immigrants and replace it with a flawed pride for building walls to keep the *other* out? When did we relinquish the dream of the melting pot and replace it with the fomentation of fear, threatening deportation of our neighbors, underwriting an inhumane policy of separating children from their parents and locking them in detention centers? What has happened to my country? We have lost our way!

On the 6th of Iyar 5708, the 15th of May 1948, Israel’s Declaration of Independence was signed. It says, “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.”

It is not a secret that Israel struggles with palpable systemic societal inequity that painfully colors the Arab Israeli experience. There are inequalities pertaining to quality education, community resources, and infrastructure. Notwithstanding these implicit challenges, there once was an understanding, albeit an incomplete one, that being an Arab Israeli guaranteed you legal equality in the Jewish State. It was always a source of particular pride for me that Arabic was an official language in Israel and that signage throughout the country was written in both Hebrew and Arabic. Since the creation of the State of Israel, Arab Israelis have been guaranteed rights as citizens. They have the right to vote, have access to health care and social services, matriculate at the finest universities in Israel, and hold portfolios as Members of the Knesset in the Israeli Government.

This summer’s announcement that the Israeli Parliament had voted to pass the Nation State Bill was nothing less than disgraceful. The bill downgrades Arabic from an official language and declares that only Jews are guaranteed the ability to thrive in Israel, safeguarding only the Jewish citizen’s right to self-determination, and effectively stripping Arab Israelis of their equal status as Israeli citizens.

It appears that the Nation State Bill is intrinsically linked to the rise of intolerance and illiberal forces throughout the world. Unlike Israel’s Declaration of Independence, the Nation State Bill is devoid of an express commitment to democracy and equality. These fundamental declarations

are replaced by incentivization for constructing communities, cities, and ultimately a country with an exclusively Jewish character, all while simultaneously stripping Arab Israelis of their basic rights. I dream of a Jewish homeland that sees the Arabic language as a cultural treasure rather than a threat. We have a choice, to alienate and delegitimize or to honor and be inclusive of Arab Israelis.

Even more disturbing, the debate around the Nation State law has deteriorated into a faulty test of loyalty by the suggestion that any person who speaks out concerning democracy and equality is somehow not loyal to Israel, not a good Jew, or not good for the Jews. I am a committed Zionist, I support Israel's right to exist and thrive. Yet it is critical for all of us to know and remember that Supreme court rulings in Israel have consistently given precedence to the State's democratic distinctiveness, even over its national Jewish identity. Israel without democracy fails as a Jewish State.

We must take to heart that being Jewish requires us to reach for the principle taught in Isaiah 49:6, to be "a light to the nations." What does it mean to be a Jew? What does it mean to be a Reform Zionist? Loving Israel calls us to pursue peace. Mishnah Avot 1:12 lays the Jewish ethical foundation for the importance of being *rodfei shalom*, pursuers of peace. The Nation State Bill not only fails to protect equality for all inhabitants, but also plainly accelerates polarization, increases tensions, and lays the foundation for misunderstanding, hostility, and violence between Jews and Arabs, as well as among Jews.

We cannot afford to create a further divided and unequal Israel. Equality for all citizens is the most basic tenet with which a democracy thrives. There are those who claim that the Nation State Bill is a proper and a necessary legislative anchor for the national character of the state of the Jewish people, a shield against those who seek to deny the Jewish people's right to a national home in its homeland. I am convinced that this type of legislation itself undermines the Jewish people's right to a national homeland, undermines the very democratic nature of the State of Israel, and contradicts the very essence of our Jewish values.

These are the words we will read this afternoon in our Torah reading: *V'ahvta l'rayeacha kamochka* "You shall love the other as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). The Torah reminds us repeatedly, "You must not exploit the foreign resident, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt." Israel's existence, legitimacy, and future is indelibly linked to the Palestinian people's ability to thrive and build a viable future for their families and communities.

Build that wall, deport those people. What are we talking about? In America today there are 11 million undocumented people living, working, studying, and serving in our country's military. Approximately two thirds of them have lived here for more than a decade. They are our neighbors; their children study with our children. They are homeowners, own businesses, and work in our community. They are, overwhelmingly, contributing members of our society. There's been tacit agreement that their presence has been mutually beneficial and, over time, many would have a pathway to citizenship. The policies of Zero Tolerance are nothing more than smoke screens to terrorize immigrants, to separate children from their parents, to strip asylum seekers of their rights. Reject the misnomer that immigrants are dangerous, that they undermine the welfare of America, that we are not safe because of immigrants with brown skin coming to

this country. These assertions are repeated, but they are just not true. It is a fact that undocumented immigrants have a lower crime rate than the general population. It is a fact that increased concentrations of undocumented immigrants are associated with statistically significant decreases in violent crimes. Reject the rhetoric that propagates fear of the *other*. Rather than paving a road and clearing the obstacles for immigrants, immigration enforcement has become a vehicle for engendering fear among immigrants, furthering divisions in our society, and bankrupting our country's values.

“For thus says the exalted and uplifted One who abides forever whose name is Holy; I abide in exalted holiness, but I am also with the contrite and downtrodden spirit, to revive the spirit of the downtrodden and to revive the heart of the contrite.”

Build that wall, deport those people, separate those children from their parents; my dear Jewish community, we have lived this terror in our own history. Never Again, that is our commitment. Whatever your political ideation, there are basic human rights that cannot be trampled upon. I am here as your Rabbi to remind us of that.

There are those who claim that deportation of undocumented immigrants is the only way to protect our nation. I am standing here to remind you that America was built on the backs of immigrants, Native Americans, and slaves, including our parents, grandparents and great grandparents. There are those who want us to believe that America's fiscal security is threatened by immigrants. I am standing here to remind you that our economy is dependent on immigrants.

For a state to thrive as a democracy, it must constantly work to protect the rights of its most vulnerable minorities. For America and Israel to be “right”, there must be unequivocal democracy, equality and protection for *all*.

Today, Israel and America are faced with the most basic question; how do we choose to define ourselves? What will the very character and soul of our two nations be? The very essence of democracy in both of my countries is being threatened.

What has happened to your and my Israel? Have we forgotten where we came from? Is our memory so feeble that we dare ignore the pain of discrimination, the insidious danger of base hatred? Have we forsaken our commitment to the *other*, to the vulnerable, to the minority in our midst?

When our Jewish ancestors came to the shores of the United States of America, they were greeted and settled by the Department of Immigration and Naturalization. I take my Confirmation students to Ellis Island, the Tenement Museum, and the Lower East Side to learn about the Jewish Community that settled in New York. I take my Confirmation students to the National Jewish Museum of History in Philadelphia as well as to the Touro Synagogue in Newport Rhode Island to learn about our Immigrant Roots and the ways in which this country provided for the Jewish community. I want my students to understand how we, the Jewish community, contributed to the success, growth, and triumph of the United States of America.

This spring, when I take this year's Confirmation class to Washington, D.C., we will go to the Holocaust Museum and the National Museum of African American History and Culture. We will discuss the rise of Fascism, how hatred can be harnessed as a political agenda, and how easy it is to enslave, persecute, and dehumanize the *other*.

In every period of history when human beings dehumanize the *other*, propaganda and lies are utilized to motivate the masses, instilling fear and squelching criticism. Reject lies, reject misinformation. We cannot tolerate governments that shut down or restrict criticism. Once we delegitimize the voices and the basic human rights of the *other* in our nation, we have begun a downward spiral toward a racist state.

I am proud of Israel's citizens, for their robust and animated protests of the Nation State Bill. Thousands upon thousands of Arab and Jews, have taken to the streets. I am proud of the protests in which I and many of you here have participated, speaking out against the inhumane policies of the United States Government. I am proud of this Congregation for speaking out, for taking a stand, for acting to protect the most vulnerable in our midst.

“Cry aloud! Hold nothing back! Raise your voice like a shofar.”

This morning's Haftorah portion admonishes, “Because on the day of your fast you are preoccupied with your possessions and oppress your workers. Because you fast amidst contention and strife, and strike vicious blows. You do not fast in a manner befitting this day, that your voices may be heard on high.”

“Is not this the fast that I desire: to open the bands of wickedness, to unfetter the bonds of the yoke; to let the oppressed go free, and whatever the yoke, to break it”

We can choose fear and division. Or we can choose kindness, integrity, compassion.

“Is it not rather to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your home; when you see the naked to clothe them, and don't hide from your own flesh and blood?! Then you shall call and the Eternal will respond, you shall cry out and God will say, ‘Here I am’ if you remove the yoke from your midst if you stop pointing fingers and speaking maliciously.”

In February of 2018, the United States Citizen and Immigration Services removed from its mission statement the phrase “America's promise as a nation of immigrants.”

Today on Yom Kippur I am asking you, “who are we and who do we choose to be?”