

The story is told of two elderly Jews in New York City, Abe and Shmuel, who ride the subway together every day on their way to work. Every morning, Abe and Shmuel sit next to each other, each one reading from the famous Yiddish daily newspaper, Der Forvertz. And, every morning, Abe and Shmuel bemoan the terrible state of affairs, the problems of the world and especially, the many depressing things affecting the Jews. One morning, Shmuel sits down next to Abe, each man opens his newspaper, but Abe looks up in amazement to discover that Shmuel this morning has brought a copy of Der Sturmer, the German-language Nazi newspaper. Dumbfounded, Abe shrieks: Shmuel, what the heck are you reading???

Shmuel says: Every day, we read in Der Forvertz how terrible things are, how hated we are, conflict between the Jews, poverty and illness. I picked up this paper today, and it says Jews own the banks, Jews run the government, Jews run Hollywood, Jews have all the power. Nu... is it a crime that it makes me feel a little better about myself???



And that, my friends, is Old Jewish Joke number 487!

[Groan] It's not in good taste, but the truly terrible thing is that this VERY old Jewish joke could just as easily be told today with digital media.

I want to talk today about the very tricky place that this joke traverses, what I will call “The Limitations and the Legitimacy of Particularism.” Particularism – it's a word that can have many meanings, but for the moment, I mean two aspects: the theological concept that only one specific group are saved or right; and the political or social ideology of having a primary allegiance and attachment to one's own group or people. This is a debate that is at the heart of the current, complicated situation in the State of Israel; and this is a debate that cuts to the center of what it means to be a Jew in the modern world.

First, a confession: There is a piece of our service that I almost never say along with you, because I simply can't bring myself to say the words. You probably haven't noticed, because I'm nearly always facing the ark when Aleynu comes around. But ever since I first closely studied meaning of this prayer, I have been uncomfortable with a particular phrase in our service – though I've kept it as the custom of Temple Isaiah for the last 11 years. Prayers are hard to change, habits are hard to break – you need a really good reason, or perhaps a specific opportunity, like – say, for instance – the arrival of a new assistant rabbi... one who likes to ask difficult questions!!!

In sitting with Rabbi Weiss this summer, reviewing the customs of Temple Isaiah, I said something like “Well, we always do the traditional version of Aleynu at the bottom of 586,

though I never say it, and I totally don't believe in it." And she said something earthshattering and complex like "Well, why don't you change that, Senior Rabbi Axler???"

Wait... I can *change* how we pray???

Aleynu, a prayer that for many means "Good, it's almost time for the Oneg." - was originally said only on Rosh HaShanah, maybe even in the First Temple, more than 2500 years ago. This makes it one of the oldest non-Biblical prayers that we have. Earlier in the service, Cantor Droller sang the "Great Aleynu" during the first of the Shofar calls, the distinctive tune and more pronounced bow done just on this sacred morning, recalling the ancient Temple worship.¹

But what do these words mean?

[Singing] - *Aleynu L'shabeiach LaAdon HaKol* : It is upon us to praise the Sovereign of the universe, and proclaim the greatness of the Creator of all... So far so good, at least for my own theology – I mean, a God who creates the universe? What better way to elevate and sanctify our commitment to environmental stewardship?!? But quickly we arrive at the lines I simply can't pray. [Singing] *She'Lo Asanu K'Goyei HaAratzot, veLo Samanu K'Mishpachot HaAdamah*: [Let us praise God] Who has not created us like the other nations of all lands, nor made us like other families on the face of the earth; Who did not make our lot like theirs, nor made our destiny like those other peoples.

Praying in Hebrew gives some the sense of a familiar warm blanket, the air of authenticity saying the same words for thousands of years, whether we understand them or not. However, is it okay to say words just because they are the tradition even if we wrestle with or wholly refute their meanings?

For me, the idea I reject here is the concept of Jewish superiority, that somehow the Jewish people were created by God as inherently better than other peoples. From time immemorial, the "Chosen People" has been a subject of debate. A positive spin can be claimed: God has designated the Jewish people to a level of responsibility, to the task of being "A Light Unto Nations" or similar.

However, with Aleynu, the authors had something more triumphalist in mind. Evidence of this is that earlier versions contained an additional phrase, one which few in this room have likely ever prayed. The traditional text of the prayer builds on the idea that Jews are special and different, saying:

שָׁהֵם מְשַׁתְּחוּיִם לְהֶבֶל וְרִיק, וּמִתְפַּלְלִים אֵל אֵל לֹא יוֹשִׁיעַ

"For they [that is, non-Jews] bow down to emptiness and vanity, and pray to a god who cannot save them."

¹ For a video of the "full bow" of the Great Aleynu, check this out: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=384444319408572>

Cue the uncomfortable groan! This was removed from Ashkenazi prayer books in the late 15th century. However, this colorful phrase has two additional elements. Many medieval Jews saw these words as coded references to Christianity and Islam, as their numerical equivalent in Hebrew could be equal to the names Jesus and Muhammad. And, if that’s not enough, among some communities, it was the custom to say this line, and then spit! The custom may come from the similarities between the word “VaRik” and Hebrew for “to spit.” Not something we considered with the recent renovations at TI, but some European synagogues actually had spittoons on the aisle to accommodate this practice!² I know, we missed a dedicatory opportunity there (Larry, Deborah, you paying attention?)!

As much as I make light of this, it’s relevant to note that while removed for centuries from the siddur, the most widely published orthodox prayerbooks³ in circulation today re-inserted the phrase in recent decades. The sentiment is alive and well among some Jews today.

For 200 years, Reform Jews have struggled with this particularism, either choosing to remove it completely⁴ or to reconstruct alternate versions. For those of a certain generation, you may remember the old Union Prayer Book: [singing] “Let us adore the ever-living God, and render praise unto Him; who spread out the heavens, and established the earth...” There are some of you who would like to keep going!

The translators working on the machzor in your hands sanitize the traditional Hebrew text with an interpretive translation: “Ours is the duty to praise the All-Sovereign, to honor the Artist of Creation, who made us unique in the human family, with a destiny all our own.”⁵

Creative liturgists have offered alternative versions the prayer, as an option in Mishkan HaNefesh appears: [singing] }*She-hu asanu l’Shomrei haAdama, veHu Samanu LiShlichei haTorah* – [we praise the One] who trusts us to be guardians of the earth and messengers of Torah; who gives us a destiny shared with all human beings, and who binds our lives to theirs.⁶ This is lovely, if a little cumbersome in the Hebrew.



For the moment, we at Temple Isaiah will begin by transposing the middle paragraph of Aleynu, a phrase familiar already to many, in place of the troubling phrases. As we conclude services this morning, and into the future, we will sing: *Shehu Noteh Shamayim veYoseid Aretz*,

² <https://judaism.stackexchange.com/questions/18990/spitting-in-aleinu-leshabeach>

³ All contemporary versions of the Artscroll prayerbooks include the phrase, as does the Israeli Rinat Yisrael.

⁴ As the Hamburg Temple prayerbooks of 1819 & 1841 as well as David Einhorn’s Olath Tamid both did.

⁵ Mishkan HaNefesh, p. 286

⁶ Mishkan HaNefesh p. 287

U'moshav Yikaro BaShamayim Mi'Ma'al - [we praise the One] who spread out the heavens and established the earth, whose seat of glory is in the heavens above, whose greatness is revealed throughout the world, You are our God, there is none else.

Changing familiar liturgy is difficult and often uncomfortable. Some might say “Great, I finally learned a prayer, and now the rabbi wants to change the words!” But change is one of the only actual constants in life, in nature, and yes, in Judaism. I believe this will allow me (and others who have been silently uncomfortable already) to join the congregation, singing these words together.

There are some who might also feel that I am not only making a “mountain out of a molehill,” but trying to make Judaism so universal, so pareve, that it is no longer special or distinct. Which is why I'd like to pivot at this moment.

Having begun with the Limitations, I'd like to also stand up for the Legitimacy of Particularism today.

I recently spent three days at the Rabbinic Zionist Coalition in Washington, DC. This relatively new gathering came about in part with the COVID-disruption of the AIPAC Policy Conference.

At the outset of this conference, the question was asked “why is there a need for a Rabbinic Zionist Coalition?” It was once an assumption that rabbis support Israel. This is not necessarily true today, as there are rabbis across the denominations – and particularly within our Reform movement – there are rabbis who proclaim that they need not support the idea of the State of Israel to be a leader in the Jewish community. There are synagogues that self-define as non-Zionist or even anti-Zionist in their ideology.

Not since the early 20th century has there been substantial support for a position that argues that Israel ought not exist – and in those days, it was advanced mostly by assimilationists anxious to dispel the charge of dual-loyalty, worried about damaging their standing as New Americans. And those early anti-Zionists advocated this position at a time when the Holocaust was beyond their most horrible nightmares.

But today... with full knowledge of the catastrophe that was Jewish statelessness, Jewish powerlessness the death of so many who attempted to flee the growing strength of the Nazis... Today, with an awareness of the forces of anti-Semitism that have grown in far flung places... and close to home... today, with a full assessment of history, to actively oppose the existence of the Jewish State... as a leader in our Jewish community?!?... as someone tasked with raising and educating the next generation of Jewish young people?!?... I simply cannot imagine it. But imagine it we must – because this reality is on our doorstep.



I want to make clear as well at the outset that I, by no means, believe that Israel is perfect or blameless, or uncomplicated.

But I'd like to start with a general proposal: The State of Israel, established just over 75 years ago in the perpetual ancestral homeland of the Jewish people, the State of Israel has a right to exist as a "Jewish and Democratic" state in this world, with defensible borders, international recognition and the ability to function as any other country in the family of nations.

Lacking this starting point, I have little else to say. But if we can agree on that, I'd like to make a case for the legitimacy of a specific point of particularism - that Israel is, as the doctrine known as Israel's "Basic Laws" proclaims, a "Jewish and Democratic state."

This principle of "Jewish and Democratic" is really at the heart of the current struggles in Israel. I want to emphasize something that I think needs to be said here and needs to be said by me for our community: there is no Israel that is not democratic; and there is no Israel that is not Jewish.

For some American Jews who have grown distant from, or even turned against Israel, it is precisely the idea of a Jewish state that rubs them wrong. But understanding the elements that make Israel a Jewish state is important: the use of the Hebrew-tongue as its official language; the incorporation of Jewish culture, tradition and observance into all aspects of the society; the "law of return" that promises any Jew has the ability to make aliyah or to seek protective refuge from persecution; a state whose decisive majority identify as Jews, while explicitly affording full citizenship to individuals regardless of their religion; none of these elements that make Israel a Jewish state necessarily "obligate the imposition of religious requirements by state law"⁷ on any of Israel's citizens.

In point of fact, it is precisely the counterbalance of Israel as a "Jewish *and* Democratic state" that ensures that Israel's Jewish character does not negate the rights of her non-Jewish citizens. This has been the 75-year history of our beloved Israel. Not perfect, and certainly not easy. There were moments that tried this very commitment. And yet, time and again the democratic nature of Israel has withstood one difficult test after another.

Which brings us to the current day, to the situation over the last 9 months during which Israelis have poured out onto the streets in demonstrations large and small, protesting *for* Democracy and supporting the principle that Israel remain a "Jewish and Democratic state."

On Temple Isaiah's trip to Israel this past spring, participants gathered in Jerusalem a short 36 hours after landing in protest outside of the President's residence, adding their voices to the chorus for Democracy. The following Saturday night found us in Tel Aviv where Pam and I spent several hours at the massive demonstrations that set off from Dizengoff Square. That night, an

⁷ As outlined by former Israeli Supreme Court Justice Aharon Barak, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_and_democratic_state

estimated 350,000 Israelis flooded the streets of Tel Aviv – in relative terms, that would be equivalent to 18.5 million Americans gathering for a single demonstration – nearly 4 times size of the largest US protest in history. But it was not just that week. Demonstrations of this size and fervor have been consistent since January and continue today.

So, what did we experience in that sea of humanity? It was a fervent pride in Israel; a deep patriotism and love for the flag; the diversity of participants – secular and religious; Jews of every ethnic background; All ages - smiling small children on shoulders and elderly veterans of Israel’s wars with walkers and wheelchairs.



Wikimedia Commons: Lizzy Shaanan Pikiwiki Israel

And what brought them out? It is a love for the State of Israel. For some, this state became their haven and homeland, fleeing from oppression and anti-Semitism

elsewhere. Others are the children of generation upon generation tracing back to the first waves of Aliyah, nearly 150 years ago. Still others trace uninterrupted family lines to Biblical times. They came out to defend and fight for the soul of the “Jewish and Democratic state” of Israel.

We were moved by the patriotism and optimism evident in these protests. As deeply challenging and depressing as these months have been for those who are fighting for this vision, most will also note a level of engagement and energy reborn among those in the center of Israeli society; an enthusiasm that had been dormant for many years, largely due to the failure of prolonged peace processes with the Palestinians. There is only so long that idealism can survive faced with cynical rejection on the other side of the table again and again. But a spirit of hope, a determination to wrest control of Israel’s future from her most extreme parties has been rekindled on the streets of the State of Israel. It will not be an easy or straightforward journey, but I am confident that the future is bright.

So, what to do from 5500-plus miles away? What to do as American Reform Jews sitting comfortably in the Diaspora? A recent letter penned by Israeli thought-leaders Yossi Klein Halevi, Daniel Gordis and Matti Friedman makes a point that I would like all in this sanctuary to hear today. This difficult moment is not a time to turn away from Israel. It is uncomfortable and complex, infuriating at times, heart-breaking at others. *Lamrot HaKol* – despite all of this, the current moment is one to *lean in* to Israel, not to turn away. The authors write to us: “With Israelis on the streets fighting for the liberal values they share with so many Jews around the world, this is no time for Diaspora silence or alienation. To the contrary: when someone you love is in danger, you draw closer. After many years during which the divide between Israel and

the Diaspora has grown, this is a moment for Diaspora Jews to find common ground with Israelis fighting for a country of which we can all be proud.”⁸

Lean in. Read, follow and educate yourselves on the history and the current events. Understand the complex nature of the Democracy protests. Learn the long story of Israel’s efforts to remain a “Jewish and Democratic state”; the struggles and the successes.

Last year at this time, I invited members of the congregation to join me and Pam on a journey to Israel. Once again, I am making that same invitation – though this time, I am thrilled to be inviting families with school-aged children to join us on a family mission. Due to the nature of our secular school breaks this year, we will land Friday morning in Tel Aviv, spend Shabbat and then celebrate Purim, the most joyous of celebrations, on the streets of the true “city that never sleeps.” Until you have spent Purim in Israel, you have not known Purim! We will hit all the highlights but also dig deep into the ancient and modern complexities of Israel.



Part of why I am excited for my first family trip to Israel is because I know helping our young people understand Israel on a visceral level, connect beyond the headlines, is one of the most important tasks we have as a Jewish community, one of my most sacred duties as a rabbi.

Lev was fortunate enough to travel to Israel on Birthright this past summer. Talking with our high school students who have spent summers or semesters in Israel, our college students whose Birthright journeys have opened their eyes, I know the ways in which adding complexity and nuance to their Israel education only fortifies their commitment to Israel’s strength and survival. Our Israel book club at TI has brought adults together to learn, discuss and engage. And I’m hoping to energize members to form a standing Israel Activities Committee of Temple Isaiah. Our new sh’lichah through Federation, Stav, will join us on the stage this afternoon at Rosh HaShanah in Our Park to emphasize the interconnectedness of our communities.

This is a time to “lean in” to that connection. And this is a time to emphasize the legitimacy of a particularistic notion, that Israel is, and must remain, a “Jewish and Democratic state.”

Rabbi Hillel taught: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And, if not now, when?

⁸ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/diaspora-jews-time-to-take-a-stand/>

A friend recently observed that, as Reform Jews, we are particularly good at emphasizing the middle of Hillel's three-part quote. There is not a marginalized group we do not stand with, not a cause far away that we can't get behind. While we skip right over the first part of the axiom. But being *for* yourself, your needs and rights, is nothing to be ashamed of.

And I don't think they're entirely wrong. Though, I will say that taking any one piece of Hillel's phrase and disconnecting it from the others is like separating head from heart from hands. They are all interdependent and essential.

The Legitimacy of Particularism – yes, it is valid for Israel to be a “Jewish and Democratic state.”
If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

The Limitations of Particularism – we need not see ourselves as inherently better or more holy than other peoples, as the God I want to affirm and praise loves all of humanity equally. If I am only for myself, what am I?

And the essential conclusion of Hillel: If not now, when? Lean in. Care. Stand up for what you believe, and stand beside your neighbors. Don't fear change, particularly when it moves you forward. You must not remain indifferent. If not now, when?!?

From me and my family, to you and yours, I wish you a Shanah Tovah U'Metukah - Blessings for a Good, Sweet and most-of-all Healthy New Year of 5784.