



Rabbi Ken Chasen
“We Are Bar Kamtza”
Leo Baeck Temple
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Those of you who have been with us here at LBT the longest will remember well the preaching of our Founding Rabbi, Leonard Beerman, of blessed memory. He devoted his entire career to this congregation, and even after his retirement, he spoke from this pulpit every year on Yom Kippur Morning. I was among his listeners for the final twelve of those years – just long enough to assimilate the arc of his messages to us.

Invariably, he would open gently, sometimes even comically, and ease into some variation of: “This is not the sermon I would wish to give today.” This, of course, was the clear sign that he was about to let it rip – and once I had realized that, I remember occasionally thinking, “Oh, why not give us the sermon you *would* wish to give today?” That one surely would have been easier – on him and on us. But these High Holydays aren’t for easy. And sometimes, in fact, the topic does choose us much more than we choose it.

This is not the sermon I would wish to give at the dawning of this new year 5784. But it is a sermon that is being given, in one form or another, in synagogues all around the world, for when the Jewish people... and the land which serves as our collective face across the globe... stands in existential peril, it is irresponsible for that crisis to be met in synagogue with silence.

“Existential peril?” you may wonder. “Isn’t the State of Israel always in conflict, always in peril? *Mah nishtanah*,” you may be asking: “What’s so different about this moment of crisis?”

Everything is different about this moment of crisis. For 75 years, the State of Israel has faced relentless threats from so many peoples surrounding it in a dangerous neighborhood. Most of that danger has been directed at the Jewish State *because* it is the Jewish State. Some of that danger has been created or exacerbated by Israel itself, when in the name of self-preservation, its leaders have inflamed hostilities and

catalyzed violence. But Israel now faces a greater, more imminent danger than any neighboring people presents, and I don't say that lightly. Israel now faces the greatest danger it has ever faced in its 75 years... the danger from within.

I understand that it's hard to imagine any danger from within Israel being greater than the dangers confronted across decades of war, from rockets falling to buses exploding, from enemies invading to Iran racing toward a nuclear weapon. But Israel has survived all of those threats and is well poised to continue to do so. The current threat is the one without precedent – that is, without precedent unless you look to the only time the Jewish people ever had a land of its own and then lost it.

We are members of a people that was dispossessed for almost two millennia. Before 1948, the last time the Jewish people had a home in the world was the year 70. History books will tell you that an act of zealotry led, in the narrowest sense, to the destruction of Jerusalem and ultimately the expulsion of the Jewish people by the Roman Empire. But that's not the story Judaism itself tells. The rabbis of the Talmud were more interested in what created the vulnerability the Romans exploited, what enabled this particular attack on the Jewish homeland to succeed where others had failed. The story they tell is of *sinat chinam*. The words literally mean "senseless hatred," but their intent is to describe the internecine battle between Jews, which of course is constantly bubbling beneath the surface religiously, politically, communally. Our sages teach that when that battle bubbled up above the surface – when it became the defining trait of the Jewish people, not just a collective illness kept at bay – this is when the Jewish people was weakened enough to be defeated and dispossessed.

Believe it or not, the Talmud traces the destruction of Jerusalem and our expulsion by the Romans to a dinner party gone awry. The host meant to invite his good friend, a guy named Kamtza. Instead, his enemy Bar Kamtza was invited. An easy mistake to explain, but not a mistake the host was willing to tolerate. He ordered the forcible removal of Bar Kamtza from the party. None of the other guests, including the rabbis who were there, objected. Bar Kamtza stewed in his humiliation and anger at his fellow Jews. Nobody sought to restore harmony. And hungry for revenge, Bar Kamtza went to the Romans and warned them that the Jews were conspiring against them. He laid a trap for his own community which had betrayed him, using his knowledge of Jewish law to set the Jews up to appear like they were a threat to Rome. And amid all the dissent and distrust and disunity, the Jews saw their Temple destroyed and their city ravaged. And they were banished from a homeland to which their descendants would not return as a free people until 1948.

A legend? Perhaps. But those sages of the Talmud lived only a couple of centuries after our people's expulsion from our land. To them, the destruction of Jerusalem wasn't some sort of ancient history, as it is for us. So they surely had their reasons, rooted in a commonly held understanding of what had led to our people's

demise, for teaching that *sinat chinam*, a spiraling mistreatment of one another, poses the greatest risk to the survival of the Jews.

Still, if you don't want to take their word for it... or mine... perhaps it is instructive to hear these words from one of Israel's most renowned journalists and a winner of the National Jewish Book Award, Yossi Klein Halevi. Some of you have learned with Yossi on one of our temple Israel trips. He has been my friend and teacher now for nearly twenty years, and this past summer in Jerusalem, he told a couple hundred of my colleagues and me that this is by far the worst, most traumatic experience he has had as an Israeli.

This is a man who made Aliyah more than 40 years ago... who spent part of his life aligned with Israel's furthest right-wing extremists... who patrolled the Gaza Strip for the IDF during the First Intifada... who authored arguably the most celebrated book about the Six Day War... who established the foremost initiative bringing North American Muslims to Israel to learn about Jewish life and Zionism there. So Yossi is no random ideologue. He's seen it all and reported on it all, from just about every imaginable political vantage point. And to him, this is the worst, most traumatic experience he's had as an Israeli, the one that causes so many among Israel's thought leaders insomnia. And why? Because unlike all the other moments of crisis that Israel has faced, none of the previously held assumptions about what binds Israelis together seem to be true anymore.

That should sound familiar, because it's exactly what we are seeing and fearing so greatly in America right now. But as deeply concerned as we all justifiably are about our own democracy's future, it pains me to say that Israel faces an even greater and more immediate danger to its survival as a democracy than America does. This is why I am devoting my words tonight to describing that danger, explaining its importance in our lives even half a world away, and asking you to join me in doing all we can to intercede before it is too late.

"How could any democracy be at greater risk than America's?" you might be wondering. The answer is actually rather simple. For all that we might wish our American Constitution said to safeguard us against those who are savaging our democratic norms, at least we *have* a Constitution. Israel has none. What's more, our founders ensured that destroying democracy in America would require the assailants to overcome countless layers of checks and balances. In addition to our president, we have an independently elected Congress with two chambers; sometimes, as is the case right now, there are checks and balances even between those two chambers, much less between them and the White House. And then there is the judiciary, which, even with its badly exposed flaws, provides yet another leg to the balancing act of our federal government. And all of this is to say nothing of the fact that America is a republic. This country contains fifty independent executives, legislatures, and judiciaries, which serve to create some measure of balance within each state and, by extension, within the

country as a whole. So those who desire to overthrow democracy to grant themselves permanent power in this country have several foreboding mountains to climb.

In Israel, they do not. There is but one mountain to scale, and it has already been breached. You see, Israel is a parliamentary-style democracy, such as you see most commonly in Europe. There are no fifty states with their own governments – just one national government, and in it, the executive and legislative branches are not independent of each other. They are one. Whoever controls the Prime Minister's office also controls the Knesset. And with no Constitution to determine what is and isn't permissible, the lone check on an overreaching regime is Israel's Supreme Court, guided by what is known as the "Reasonableness Doctrine" – is the government's action reasonable in a country obliged to serve all of its citizens? This is a doctrine used in many of the world's great democracies – Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, among them. As of this past July, the Knesset voted to strip the Supreme Court of its power to declare actions unreasonable. They apparently want the power to redefine the word "reasonable" as "whatever we want to do."

Incredibly, this new law is but one of the current regime's plans for overhauling the autonomy of the Israeli judiciary. They also want the power to install the judges they want and to remove independent legal advisors from Israel's various ministries.

Now, it's fair to say that judicial reform is a necessary part of any functional democracy. The question, though, is which regime is seeking to make the reforms. The current Israeli government is by far the most extreme, either left or right, in the state's 75 years. Its Prime Minister is seeking to reform the judiciary while he is under indictment for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust. He regained power by welcoming into his governing coalition political parties whose ideological mentors were barred from even running for office due to their overt racism, their history of violence, and their penchant for fascism. They were political partners with Yigal Amir, who assassinated Yitzhak Rabin, and with Baruch Goldstein, who mowed down 29 Palestinians praying in a mosque in 1994.

These are the people now controlling major ministries in Israel's government.

Itamar Ben Gvir, a man who the IDF refused to draft because it was considered too dangerous to put a gun in his hands, now has control over the police and has been promised a private militia.

Bezalel Smotrich, arrested in 2005 on suspicion of participating in an attempt to blow up Israel's Ayalon Highway, is now Israel's Minister of Finance.

This would be akin to someone like Enrique Tarrio, the head of the Proud Boys, recently sentenced to 22 years in prison for his role on January 6th, being appointed U.S. Defense Secretary and David Duke serving as Secretary of the Treasury.

A debate over judicial reform is legitimate and worthy in a democratic state. But this is not a regime that has any authority to shepherd such a debate or implement any changes to Israel's judiciary, any more than anybody in this room, from conservative to liberal to anywhere in between, would support Enrique Tarrío reforming America's courts.

So as you can see, this isn't a matter of left, right, or center – which is why Israelis across the political spectrum are now nearly one year into a sustained protest movement whose likes have never been seen before either there or here. With polling consistently demonstrating that two-thirds or more of Israelis want the Supreme Court to retain its authority to strike down laws, hundreds of thousands of Israelis have taken to the streets every Saturday night since November. This is not a protest against Israel, mind you. It is an eruption of Israeli patriotism, with flags flying... a protest of love and protection for the Israeli dream.

Hundreds of thousands at a protest rarely happens in the United States. The legendary March on Washington in 1963, where Dr. King shared his dream, gathered approximately a quarter million people. That many or more are gathering *every Saturday night* in the streets of Israel, a country with just nine million people. So imagine, if you will, a protest in the United States in which ten million people participate every single Saturday night from coast to coast – because that's the per capita equivalent of what is happening in Israel, given the difference in the two countries' size. Nothing close to ten million Americans have ever demonstrated once for anything. It's happening every weekend in Israel. I pray that if our American democracy should ever, God forbid, face the magnitude of peril that Israel's presently does, we will resist with the passion and the numbers being seen in Israel's streets every week.

Which brings us back to Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. You see, democracy ensures that even the most vulnerable members of a society retain their rights. It prevents a tyranny of the majority – and that's what keeps the Jewish community from descending into *sinat chinam*, into all-out war with one another. When we lose an election, we know we could win the next one, and even while awaiting that opportunity, we know there will be agreed-upon limits to the cost of our defeat. When those guardrails are removed, you get today's Israel, where a minority is seeking to inflict its will, and a majority is fighting desperately to keep the senseless hatred at bay... to prevent a history of destruction and exile from repeating itself on our people's historic land.

Our congregation is large and diverse. There is little about which we would all agree, and even less about which we would all agree where Israel is concerned. Some in this sanctuary bristle at almost any suggestion that Israel has done wrong; it is taken instinctively as a targeting of Jews, even when the critique comes from Jews, and it is therefore reflexively rejected. Others here today bristle at almost any suggestion that

Israel has done right; it feels to them like a whitewashing of Israel's offenses against the Palestinians living under Israeli control. And if the research is right, there is an ever-growing number of you who really don't care a lot about Israel and don't wish to hear much of anything about it. What a rare opportunity this is, across all of that diversity, to unite with one another in supporting Israel's fight to stay that kind of place – where no one vantage point is installed with impunity over all the others, where the peace between us survives because the debate is fair and civil, and there is always another chance to win the day.

For us as American Jews, then, that leaves just two questions. Why should we, who live halfway around the globe, get involved in this quest to save Israeli democracy? And how can we get involved in a way that would matter?

Why? Well, one would hope that the political agenda of the extremist parties upon which this Israeli regime depends would be enough to answer why. They demand the annexation of the West Bank, ending any hope for Palestinian self-sovereignty. They call for the deportation of Arab citizens of Israel they deem to be insufficiently loyal. They support Jewish settler violence on Palestinian land. They seek to end Pride parades and oppress the LGBTQ community. They call for an end to women's reproductive rights and assert that women can best contribute to society through marrying and mothering.

One might hope this is enough to explain why. But if you didn't hear yourself targeted on that list, it is worth noting that the extremist parties now in power want to install ultra-Orthodoxy as the only valid Jewish religious expression, making Israel one of the few countries on Earth where you and I would not be permitted to live our Judaism as we are doing tonight, where our conversions and our marriages won't count.

Perhaps that might be enough to explain why. But if not, maybe a brief reminder is needed about the nearly 2,000 years of world history in which Jews had no address on this planet. We all know about the endless string of catastrophes and genocides that befell our people in an Israel-free world. With antisemitism once again rising, are we prepared to find out what might become of Jews in the most embattled corners of the world if the Jewish people were once again without a home?

And what about the dangers that would find us here in America and elsewhere if Israel's government were to enact that political program I just described? Throughout Israel's 75 years, the state has been the dominant symbol of Jews to those who may not know many or any Jews. When Israel is seen as a bad actor in the world, antisemitism increases everywhere. Jews everywhere suffer. *We suffer*. We become easily divided. We lose political power. We are targeted by hate speech and hate acts. You might wish to disown Israel when you feel it is misbehaving, but history has shown that the world will not let you.

So there are more than enough reasons why we have a personal stake in joining this patriotic movement to preserve Israeli democracy. In the coming days, we will answer the question of how by sending you some specific actions you can take that will make a difference. The institutions of Reform Judaism in Israel need our funding and support. There is also now a 501(c)3 corporation which funds the actual protests in Israel – which pays for the stages and sound systems and security. And of course, best of all, you can show Israelis you care by visiting them – by joining Rabbi Berney and her family this coming June on our “LBT at 75, Israel at 75” congregational trip. These are all ways we can make our presence felt on the ground in Israel.

We can also make our presence felt on Capitol Hill. House Resolution 61 would commit Congress to supporting Israeli democracy and its defenders in the streets. We must call our representatives and ask them to sign on as cosponsors.

And we can make our presence felt right here at home – because every Sunday at 11 am, a solidarity protest is held outside the Israeli consulate in West LA. We’ve already organized together as a congregation for one of these Sunday rallies, and we will do so again, but you need not wait for a special LBT delegation... just go on any Sunday that is convenient for you, for Israelis are watching these gatherings around the globe, and they are heartened to retain their resolve by knowing we are with them.

I want to conclude with a personal story, just to amplify what we’re up against. Some of you know that in April, I was honored to serve as a delegate to the World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem. The Congress is the one true microcosmic gathering of world Jewry – a few hundred voting delegates from all across the globe, from all across the political spectrum, and both religious and secular in every way those terms are defined.

The Congress promised to bring fireworks, because the forces attacking Israel’s democratic norms know they are outnumbered both in Israel and throughout the world. This is why they want to do away with democracy. So when it came time for the plenum to vote on resolutions opposing the judicial reforms, censuring the racist words and acts of those in power, safeguarding the rights of minorities and women and the LGBTQ community, and defending the place for non-Orthodox Jews like us in the Jewish state, the outcome was not remotely in doubt. Only a couple of hours would be needed to demonstrate the will of the world’s Jews democratically. But when the plenary began, the extremists revealed their plan to subvert that democratic outcome. They manipulated an arcane rule in the Congress’s procedures to demand a voice vote on every resolution, which would be impossible in the time allotted. This instantly brought the Congress to a halt, as the Presidium met to determine a path forward.

There was a method to their madness. You see, the Congress was scheduled to visit Israel’s President, Isaac Herzog, that evening following the vote. The President in Israel is a largely ceremonial head of state, which means the extremists have no use for

him – and he opposes their attack on the judiciary anyways. But they knew that the majority of us do have respect for the presidency and would not be comfortable embarrassing the President of Israel by not showing up at his home. Once that became clear, our Reform movement leaders on the Presidium began texting us frantically. “DO NOT LEAVE THE ROOM,” they pleaded. “If you leave, they will conduct the vote without you and call it a democratic outcome. They’re *counting* on us to walk out. That’s their strategy. Please stay put.”

Indeed... they’re counting on us to walk out. They’re counting on *you* to walk away from Israel in disgust. They’re counting on you to give up and let Israel become the ultra-Orthodox autocracy they want to make it. That’s their strategy. Disgusting you enough to quit. Will you do their bidding?

You and me, we are Bar Kamtza, and they’re trying to throw us out of the dinner party. We already know what happens when Bar Kamtza storms away in anger. Instead of burning down the mansion in a fit of righteous rage, let us unite across all the boundaries that so often divide us to ensure that nobody gets thrown out of this party. That will make this a new year that will forever be sanctified in history.