



LeoBaeckTemple

Rabbi Ken Chasen
“What It Means to Be Pro-Israel”
Leo Baeck Temple
September 22, 2025
Rosh Hashanah 5786

Tonight marks the twenty-third time I’ve stood on this bima to welcome a new year with you. Those of you who have been here for most or all of those twenty-three know that I typically don’t start apologizing to everyone until it’s Kol Nidre. But tonight is different. This year is different. I have to begin this sermon with an apology not for what has already transpired, but for what is about to transpire, even though it is not my wish.

You see, the reality – not just for me, but for every rabbi standing before any congregation as this new year dawns – is that we’ve been assigned an impossible task. In an era where billionaire inventors have conditioned us all to curate out of our lives anyone who dares to puncture our sterile algorithm of affirmation – to unfriend any friend, any family member, any rabbi who goes where our feed does not – the rabbi is asked to stand before you and speak to what is on your soul on this Rosh Hashanah.

Doing so guarantees that most and possibly all of the algorithms in this room will be agitated – and at a moment in history when the stakes are so high, and there is so much money to be made and power to be claimed by making us all hate each other, we’ve gotten really bad at tolerating anyone who even pokes at the hornet’s nest where our hardened conclusions live.

Some rabbis are no doubt approaching this dilemma by choosing not to speak to what is on your soul as the year 5786 arrives under tonight’s new moon, hoping their listeners will be placated by being unprovoked. The rest of us are going to take our best shot at doing what you’ve always expected us to do, albeit in less fractious times, and count upon the human currency between us to hold the discomfort and perhaps even make it holy. My part in that contract is to acknowledge my regret for being an unenthusiastic provocateur to people I know and love. You are my home, and I take no pleasure in saying things you’ll find difficult to hear, and worse, I know that different parts of what I say – and don’t say – will unsettle different people who are dear to me. But I suspect we’d all agree, even amid our differences, that we’ve arrived at a moment of unusual consequence as both Jews and Americans as the year 5786 begins. Your synagogue is supposed to be one of the important homes to your

inner wrestling at such moments, as synagogues have been for Jews throughout history.

So I ask your forgiveness for what feels hard tonight – and your trust that I bring you these thoughts from a place of sincerity, not judgment. And together, let us prove yet again that we can be better than the entrepreneurs and tacticians take us to be, and wrestle together with what our tradition is saying to us about this moment in time.

There have always been members of this congregation who have looked upon the state of Israel with tremendous devotion, just as there has always been a much smaller but no less passionate group that sees Israel as more of a problem than a solution for the Jewish people. But as recently as maybe three or four years ago, there was also a small group who looked upon Israel as “just another foreign country” – who did not feel much affinity or enmity toward the land and its peoples, its place in our history and liturgy, its impact in our lives as American Jews.

It is this third group that has largely evaporated during the two dark years we’ve endured since October 7th. With antisemitic hate surging all across the globe while Israel’s war with Hamas lumbers on, necessarily turning synagogues like ours into armed fortresses, it is no longer possible to assert that Israel has little or nothing to do with us. It has everything to do with us, no matter how we may feel about that. It is, of course, unvarnished bigotry that “the Israeli government” and “the Jews” have become synonymous to vast numbers of people who know few or no Jews – and even to many who know plenty of Jews – but we don’t get to pick what others think about us as a people. Our lives are directly impacted by Israel. It is beyond debate.

This is a big part of why those who feel such passion for Israel and believe in its primacy in the fate of Jews all over the world are so determined in their pro-Israel activism, however that activism might take shape. After all, if Israel and I are inextricably bound up with one another, whether I like it or not, why wouldn’t I choose to be pro-me?

If that may have once felt like a fairly plain calculus for an American Jew to make, it is decidedly less plain now. I don’t say that as a matter of opinion. I’m just describing what is. There has never before been the kind of gaping fissure within world Jewry that exists today – between those who defend Israel’s actions as an expression of their Jewish values and those who condemn Israel’s actions as an expression of their Jewish values. Both groups are firmly convinced they are pro-me. And both groups are carrying a growing rage at the other for being anti-me... for literally endangering me in an increasingly dangerous world, especially for Jews.

The truth is that if our sages of the Talmud are right, then both groups are also right. We've discussed here before the ancient rabbinic teaching that the destruction of the great Temple in Jerusalem by the Roman Empire, and the resultant scattering of the landless Jewish people throughout the world for the ensuing 1900 years, was caused by *sinat chinam* – by an unbridled, internecine hatred that grew between Jews. Our greatest collective loss as a people was brought about by our hatred of one another. Not our hatred of others, nor their hatred of us. The rabbis taught that when we Jews are cast homeless into a hostile world, it is something that we bring upon ourselves.

It is with that harrowing reminder resting heavy upon my heart that I wish to challenge the definition of what it means to be pro-Israel, pro-me, at this critical juncture in the Jewish story, with the hope of proposing a way, at least in this moment, that we might diminish the *sinat chinam* that threatens to destroy our people and its reunion with its historic land, now as imperiled as it has ever been during the modern state's seventy-seven years.

You see, throughout most of the first seventy-five years of Israel's existence as a reborn state, the definition of pro-Israel was pretty baked in for us Diaspora Jews. Pro-Israel people backed the state of Israel in its behavior as a democratic regime. That doesn't mean that every pro-Israel Jew supported every action of every Israeli government. That, of course, would be impossible, since Israeli governments have themselves differed from each other so widely on policy. But even when a pro-Israel American Jew might have differed strenuously with the direction Israel took under a particular prime minister, there was always this tacit understanding that, for better or worse, that government represented the will of the Israeli people. As such, critique could never subvert the Israeli people's unique stake as the ones who face the bullets and the bombs, the ones who must put their lives on the line in a people's army, without which Israel would inevitably cease to be.

Those of us in the Diaspora who have participated in resistance to any Israeli policy in any era have grown accustomed to respecting that distinction. It is a part of our Jewish muscle memory that calibrates the tenor of our activism. It tells us that to be pro-Israel is, after all the debating is said and done, ultimately to stand with the Israeli state, particularly when it is being roundly assailed throughout the world, sometimes by those whose motives are less specifically about Israel and more than we'd like about Jews.

So what does a pro-Israel American Jew do when it becomes clear that the Israeli government does *not* represent the will of the people? What do we do with that muscle memory of ours when we are forced to choose between standing with the Israeli government and standing with the Israeli people?

There was a time not all that long ago when Israel's citizens, despite how disgusted many of them were with their government, were not really at odds with their leaders. Yes, they blamed the prime minister for failing to prevent their butchering on October 7th, but they were loath to oppose a war while their daughters and sons were risking it all in Gaza. This was Israeli muscle memory, developed over decades.

Perhaps you are among those who were more comfortable earlier in this war, when Israelis were more united with their leaders, despite their misgivings about them. Or maybe you are someone who was disappointed or even furious at the Israeli people when they were more aligned with their government about this war. One thing is certain: Israelis are not aligned with their government about this war anymore.

A widely publicized Israel Democracy Institute poll released just three weeks ago confirmed that approximately two-thirds of Israelis would support a total IDF withdrawal, enabling the nightmare in Gaza to end, in exchange for the return of the hostages. But if you're disinclined to trust the polls, then let me tell you what I saw with my own eyes just last month.

As some of you know, I recently visited Israel, as I usually do in the summertime. This trip was with a small delegation of American rabbis and cantors under the banner of our Reform movement in Israel. We met with scholars, activists, and political leaders, both Israeli and Palestinian – and when Saturday night came, I had my first chance in a full year to see the Israeli protest movement again for myself.

Four key things seemed to have changed since the summer of 2024. First, the protests were noticeably larger and more numerous all throughout the country. While I was a part of the largest demonstration in Israel's largest city, Tel Aviv, estimates from the Saturday night of my visit were in the vicinity of 500,000 Israelis in the streets, gathered in cities and towns from north to south. A couple of weeks later, some reports suggested the numbers had swelled to a million Israelis nationwide... in a country of only ten million citizens.

Think about that. It would be akin to 34 million Americans demonstrating on the same night against the actions of our government. If ever such a thing were to take place – and nothing remotely like it ever has – would it be pro-America to stand with the government or with the people?

A second thing that had changed... there was a marked increase in awareness of and concern about the unimaginable apocalypse in Gaza. Now, I want to be clear – the mass casualties, starvation, and displacement among the Gazan people are not by any means the primary motivator of this enormous popular uprising in Israel. To be

sure, it is disappointing that conditions in Gaza are not a larger focus at these protests; it would be redemptive to our Jewish souls here, half a world away, if they were.

But it is also incumbent upon us on this Rosh Hashanah – also known as Yom Hadin, this Day of Judgment – to refrain from judging either the Israeli or Palestinian peoples more harshly than we would judge ourselves. After all, it was just eleven days ago that we marked the twenty-fourth anniversary of 9/11 as has become customary – with ceremonies and tributes and documentaries recounting the horrors of that day, along with its heroes and its dead. What we didn't spend much time discussing was the more than 70,000 civilians who died in the war that followed in Afghanistan... the more than 400,000 civilians who died in Iraq, which had no part in the 9/11 attacks.

Many are quick to impugn Palestinians for a lack of sufficient compassion over the depravity heaped upon the Israeli people on October 7th, but are less critical of Israelis for their relative quiet about the agony in Gaza... or vice versa. We humans are not at our empathic best in times of war. That's not something Jews are either uniquely guilty of or immune to. So I did take some very real comfort when the calamity in Gaza at last became a sincere topic in the Israeli streets, even from the microphone in front of the masses, after I'd heard so little about it a year earlier.

The third difference I noticed this summer was a weary lack of trust in whatever military mission the prime minister insists still remains in Gaza. You see, Israel has no experience with wars that last for two years. Why? Because Israel is not a country that can wage a war by sending only those who have no better options to do its fighting. The front is populated by practically every young adult who isn't ultra-Orthodox – and by call-ups to reserve duty... young parents leaving their kids behind, middle-aged businesspeople torn from their workplaces, women and men and people we prefer still to think of as children uprooting their lives at a moment's notice. This was designed to work for six days or even six weeks, not twenty-three months. So when you're asked to do the impossible, the unreasonable, you start asking questions.

Perhaps you read the testimony twenty-three days ago of Yotam Vilk, a reserve captain in the IDF who served with honor for an entire year in Gaza. He encountered the ruthlessness of Hamas face to face as a tank platoon commander and then as deputy to the entire company's commander. He led terrifying ground maneuvers, dismantling tunnels and weapons depots. It was a just fight to disrupt a terror network, to save lives... until it wasn't.

A year on, Captain Vilk could see that he was now being asked to fight "because (his) leaders were never planning to stop." And after watching Gaza descend into lawlessness, with "little effective oversight of the military and almost

no personal accountability for soldiers"... with no timeline, no attainable goals, no exit strategy... he joined a group of 130 soldiers who declared their refusal to serve in light of "mounting evidence that the government was deliberately sabotaging hostage deals."

Thousands of reservists, Vilk reports, have now stopped showing up. Some have been imprisoned. Many more are afraid to speak out, fearful of contributing to the collapse of the compact that would enable Israel to protect itself from its next threat. But make no mistake – with more than 900 soldiers already dead since October 7th, the protests are filled with Israelis who do not wish either to kill or die for a regime dominated by messianic religious extremists that has decided to prioritize its own political survival over the will of its people.

Which leads us to the final difference I noticed in the streets this summer – the demonstrations are not only larger; they are angrier and more desperate. Why? Because while the majority of Israel's Jews see themselves as secular, they study a whole lot more rabbinic literature growing up than we do here in the states, and they know that arguably the greatest rabbi of all time, Maimonides, taught in the starkest terms: *"Ein l'cha mitzvah g'dolah k'fidyon sh'vuyim"* – there is no mitzvah, no commandment in all of Jewish tradition, greater than the redemption of hostages.

Maimonides explains why in a manner that rings achingly true in our time: "The redemption of captives," he teaches, "receives priority over sustaining the poor and providing them with clothing. For... all of the different aspects of charitable gifts are included in the redeeming of captives. A captive is among those who are hungry, thirsty, unclothed, and he is in mortal peril, for at any time, his captors may take his life."

So if you've ever wondered why the Israeli government in 2011 traded 1,027 prisoners for the release of one Gilad Shalit, now you know why – because Israelis can hear Maimonides' plea for the freeing of captives shaking in their souls. They know there is nothing more shameful in our tradition than for Jews to abandon captives.

Now, the Israeli government will tell you that they're fighting to free the captives. The captives' families know better, which is why they are featured speakers at every giant Israeli demonstration, begging through tears and screams, begging the Jewish state to honor Judaism by bringing their loved ones home. They know that the IDF has only rescued eight hostages over these past two years, while more than eighty hostages have died brutally in Hamas' hands, and more than a hundred hostages have come home via ceasefire negotiations. The Israeli people know what will get their loved ones home, and they know what will get their loved ones killed.

All of this explains why Israel is ignited in weekly protests that dwarf anything we've ever seen for any cause here in the United States. But the louder the cry has gotten, the more determined the government has been to ignore it.

The IDF's own Chief of Staff advised that invading Gaza City would place the hostages in unacceptable danger and claim the lives of more Israeli soldiers and Gazan civilians; the prime minister authorized the invasion anyway.

The Mossad vehemently opposed the surprise attack on Doha, deeming it a death knell for the hostages and for any hopes of a brokered end to the war; the prime minister attacked anyway.

There comes a point, you know, where one need not be an expert in military strategy to assess what is happening. It is as simple as can be. For the hostages and their families... for the soldiers, who have no more to give but their lives... for the civilians in Gaza, whose desperate plight is turning the Jewish state into an embattled pariah across the globe... for Jews all around the world, who are paying with our safety for this endless misery... and for themselves: the Israeli people want this war to end. Their government wants it to continue. And so we are left to choose. What does it mean to be pro-Israel today?

I will not be cowed by accusations of disloyalty from the disloyal, and neither should you be. There is nothing more pro-Israel... nothing more pro-me... than calling for the withdrawal of Israel's troops from Gaza, in exchange for the return of Israel's hostages to their loved ones, and food relief for every Palestinian civilian facing the perils of starvation. And when you join in that outcry, you are not only choosing to align yourself with your religious tradition and your fellow Jews in Israel – you are contributing to the diminishment of *sinat chinam*, of the rupture that has crippled the Jewish people, that has ripped apart families and severed the generations and left us all accusing one another of heresy. After two long years of bitter disagreement, the Israeli people are practically pleading with us all to agree.

So at the dawning of the new year 5786, we find ourselves in that rare moment when it is possible to append to a growing, unifying consensus of the Jewish people, which demands that our captives be prioritized and that our name no longer be contaminated by a rogue regime. All it will take is to defy our Jewish muscle memory, which is presently being exploited to undermine our own will.

The hard part, of course, is how. How do we join ourselves to that consensus in ways that might actually matter? Admittedly, it isn't easy. The Israelis returning every week to the streets can attest to that. And we know that there are activists – some well-intentioned, and some frankly not – who are doing it as wrong as it can be done: witness Hollywood's 4,000 so-called "Film Workers for Palestine," who might more aptly be named the "Film Workers for Netanyahu," since I can imagine nobody

more delighted than he is by a cultural boycott aimed at silencing the very artists who do Israel's boldest truth-telling.

No, it is not easy to stop a government that has willfully abandoned its people. I am sure I will run into that face first when I return to Jerusalem next month as one of America's 155 elected delegates to the World Zionist Congress. But there are most definitely ways we can all join our voices with the Jews of Israel from across the miles.

Your rabbis and a goodly number of your fellow congregants have already joined with others in the Los Angeles streets to send a message to our Israeli siblings that we are with them. And I can assure you they are watching, and it matters. We will continue to bring you opportunities to do so.

We will also continue to offer you ways to use your money, not only to bring relief to the starving but also to support the engines in Israeli society that this government seeks to crush – the thinkers and storytellers and reporters and coexistence organizations upon whom we depend to convert the demands of this massive movement into reality.

There are absolutely things you can do to make this outcry in this one unique moment larger and mightier. The only question, as we head into our tradition's ten days of deepest soul-searching, is whether you are pro-Israel... truly pro-Israel... enough to do them.

In 1976, Yehuda Amichai, generally regarded as Israel's most universally renowned poet, wrote the following words, whose unique resonance in this moment a half century later he could scarcely have even imagined:

The diameter of the bomb was thirty centimeters
and the diameter of its effective range about seven meters,
with four dead and eleven wounded.
And around these, in a larger circle
of pain and time, two hospitals are scattered
and one graveyard. But the young woman
who was buried in the city she came from,
at a distance of more than a hundred kilometers,
enlarges the circle considerably,
and the solitary man mourning her death
at the distant shores of a country far across the sea
includes the entire world in the circle.
And I won't even mention the crying of orphans
that reaches up to the throne of God and
beyond, making a circle with no end and no God.

The circle of pain and time threatens to engulf us all on this Rosh Hashanah. We have lived two years with no end and no God. Let 5786 return us – and them – to life.