

**Rabbi Mark Cohn**  
**Yom Kippur Evening 2019 / 5780**  
**Love of Israel**

Love. Remember the idea? A quick refresher from Rosh HaShanah. Love is not about some romantic dreamy vision of life with hearts and bottles of wine. Love as we understand from the Torah is about commitment, covenant, obligation, loyalty. When I spoke on Rosh HaShanah about the love of earth and the love of our community - I spoke about our need to serve and to respect, to honor and work out of obligation - even (or especially) sacrificing part of ourselves for the greater good, recognizing the benefit we gain by committing ourselves to the larger whole.

And it is with THAT idea in mind for which I say:

I love Israel. I love both the Land of Israel and the State of Israel. That is probably not a shock to anyone here.

I love the terrain: the hard rocks in the Judaeen hills that have been made into agricultural terraces for millennia, the volcanic rock of the Golan, the ubiquitous wildflowers in the desert beginning in middle of winter.

I love my friends and relatives there.  
I love the feeling of being in a land and a state where Jews are the majority.  
I love being in a land that our people have lived in, held in our prayers, and calendared our holidays by for over 3,000 years.

I love that stones tell stories.  
I love hearing and speaking Hebrew as a language that has existed since antiquity but was brought into the modern era in the early 20th century and flourishes as we speak. Literally.

I love that the word for cell phone is a contraction of wondrous event (peleh) and phone (pelephone) and that the commandment from Leviticus to “rise before the aged,” is on buses and trains. I love that Arabic words are in the slang brought by the million Jewish refugees from Arab countries and that Yiddish influenced Hebrew so if you want to have a nosh (small bite) you m’nashneish. And I love that when you conjugate in Hebrew there is no verb to be in the present tense. Things just are. Why bother with a verb? And of course - sometimes we can’t get away from English even in Hebrew: after all - the way you say ‘big deal’ in Hebrew is ‘big deal’.

I love that Tel Aviv’s name came into being because of Nahum Sokolow’s translation of Theodor Herzl’s utopian vision of Jews in the “Old/New Land” (Altneuland). Tel=archeological mound; Aviv=Springtime. It had been called Achuzat Bayit (Homestead) originally.

I love that hummus is pronounced chummus. And it is better in Israel than anywhere else. Period.

I love that Israel is telling its story right now in song - as just this past week a celebration of music - highlighting Jewish religious poetry of the siddur and machzor was held at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem - Givat Ram campus with the National Library. And who attended? Israelis from Jews to Christians to Muslims and Druze to Mizrahi and Sefardi, men and women, secular and religious, young and old. Israel is \*the\* crossroads of East and West and its mix is sadly overshadowed by politics but its culture is unlike anywhere in the world. And those are our people - our cousins - our relatives - in our homeland.

And relatedly ... I love that the hottest songs in Israel today are by Jews from Arabic speaking countries and Israel has begun to accept and dissect its difficult history with how Jews who came from those Arab countries were mishandled in the early State.

I love that some of the best rap music in Israel is political and social commentary and is heard by multiple generations.

I love that a part of young men and women's Army time is spent learning about various communities who live in Israel - including Reform Judaism.

I love that there is a high-rise section in Tel Aviv called "midtown".

I love the open air markets in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem where you can buy the best challah you will ever find.

I love the food in Israel. I love that the produce tastes better because it is better. I love that even in gas stations, coffee is an artform and for the kosher-observant among us - finding a milchig or fleishig or better yet: chalavi or b'sari restaurant is easy.

I love that Israel is a functioning democracy as witnessed by two elections in the last five months.

I love that Israel is our homeland and that it is at once holy and mundane: like being in Jerusalem and literally standing where King David stood and while you are there you can order a popsicle, buy a coffee, or shop for dish soap.

But. Let's be clear. There is a lot about Israel I do not love. There are things I do not like about Israel and literally keep me up at night. Much of what I am about to mention does not foster a sense of loyalty or connection for those who love Israel - or want to love Israel - and are actually at the core of what is driving a schism between Israeli Jews and American Jews.

I don't love that the poverty rate in Israel leaves no fewer than 1 in 5 children without food. I don't love that checkpoints are dehumanizing for both the Israelis and

Palestinians but particularly awful in making life anywhere from difficult to impossible for Palestinians simply trying to earn a living. I don't love that east Jerusalem, which is largely Arab, receives a lower level of government funding and civil services than west Jerusalem. And I definitely don't love that such is the case essentially on either side of the Green Line when it comes to Arab versus Jewish towns. I don't love that Jews are trying to Judaize parts of east Jerusalem by buying homes and making themselves very well-known, with no modesty, alongside Arab neighbors who have lived there for generations.

I don't love that Arab kids and Jewish kids - by and large - go to separate and unequal schools. And I don't love that Arabic is not regularly taught in Jewish schools and there are places of business in Israel where employees have been told not to speak Arabic. I don't love that Israel built a security wall with absolutely no regard to making room for an easy resolution to the conflict with the Palestinians in the West Bank. I don't love that Jewish kids are growing up in Israel thinking that orthodox Judaism is the only proper form of Judaism, thanks to a government that endorses orthodoxy as the only accepted form of Judaism.

I don't love the quickening sharp divide of wealth.

I don't love that the religious communities essentially pay zero attention to environmental matters. And for that matter, I definitely don't love that Israel may have made the desert bloom but it is complicit in causing untold damage to the Dead Sea, which is shrinking at alarming rates - a result of pulling minerals from the sea in evaporation pools as well as drawing its source water (the Jordan) long before it ever reaches the Dead Sea.

I don't love the traffic in Israel. Shocking. I don't love the traffic in NYC or SF either. I don't love that signs in stores and restaurants in Israel are increasingly in English and I don't love that the massive development of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv has taken away a lot of the character of older neighborhoods. I don't love that some of my Israeli friends are, quite frankly, racists and I don't love how they refuse to listen to the Palestinian narrative.

I don't love that Israel gets ZERO credit for the MASSIVE amount of humanitarian relief they do to help Palestinians in Gaza as well as Syrian refugees.

I don't love that women's rights are under attack in Israel - particularly in the religious communities. And I don't love that people assume that just because Golda Meir was a prime minister (nearly 50 years ago!) that women's roles in society are equal to those of men. Or that just because women are conscripted they are equal to men.

I don't love that the average Israeli is completely uninterested in Diaspora Jewry.

And I don't love that I've been attacked for thinking my life in the U.S. is sufficient as a Jew and why am I not making aliyah - especially because there are times I wonder if it is sufficient - and it's a hard struggle for my soul.

I don't love that Israel treated and still treats its Jews from Arab countries as second class. I don't love that the orthodox still control so much of the religious dialogue in Israel. I don't love going to the Western Wall and despite its best efforts for the last ten years, I don't love Israeli craft beer.

And so.

With all of that.

With all that I love and all that I do not love about Israel. I continue to be pulled to Israel. While I have a long list of places in the world I would like to visit, I keep going back to Israel. I've been to France and I've been to England. I've been to Italy and I've been to Hawaii. They are lovely, meaningful, significant places. If I had a chance, I might go again. But it is to Israel I return on a regular basis. When I'm there - my soul is complete. I cry when I land in Israel and I cry when I leave - a piece of me is there - I realized that when I first went in 1984 and I realize it every time I arrive and depart. Despite all those dislikes and discomforts, it is home and there is no place I would rather return to again and again. There is no land like Israel.

I have spent two years of my life living there and I would love to do it again some time. In Israel I am alive like no where else.

When my fellow American Jews claim that "they are done with Israel" they are only seeing Bibi Netanyahu and his Congress-gate or responding to the Knesset passing the Nation-State-Law. My fellow American Jews think that Bibi is Israel but he is not. And clearly, the last two elections (within four months) showed that Bibi is not Israel. He is all about Bibi and maintaining his power and his staying on the good side of Donald Trump, according to leading columnist and political commentator, Danny Gordin, among others. Israel is much larger than any one politician or any one religious experience.

The last election as well as that in April showed how a functioning democracy works and for all of Israel's quirks and troubles, woes and amazements - it is a thriving and growing place where over half the population comes from countries that are not democratic and yet over 70% of the electorate votes regularly, with a marked increase among Arab voters in the last election. Israel is to be respected for its adhering to democracy in a neighborhood where democracies do not thrive. Israel is to be respected for its imperfection while striving for perfection. If you spend your time wallowing in checkpoints and Bibi decisions you are in very good company of Israelis who feel the same way and manage to stay in the country and live there and not say, "I'm done here."

My anger is tempered by my love but my love is not blind because my love is based in loyalty and connection, obligation and the covenant of our ancestors.

That line: “I’m done with Israel,” which I have heard more than I care to admit, is made even more dangerous by those American Jews who support the Boycott, Divest, Sanction movement, which seeks to delegitimize, demonize, and establish double-standards for Jews and Israel. BDS squarely succeeds in accomplishing the three classic d’s of antisemitism. To fight against Israel, as a Jew, is to turn your back on family. And we know the impact of the one who turns his back. The family will stay together. The family will survive the one who walks away. You may take your love and think you are the bigger and better for it. But you have allowed the love to be emotional only and not grounded in loyalty, commitment, determination, connection, covenant.

We don’t have the luxury to give up on Israel. We who are fortunate enough to witness the miracle and the messiness of the State of Israel — we do not have the right to give up on or worse - to undermine - the land that gave birth to our people, our heritage, our sense of humanity, our traditions: the land and the people of Israel.

In Israel our people’s destiny and greatest challenges are being played out. Before we had a state the fate of the Jewish people was dependent on other governments. We were subjects or tolerated guests not citizens. But with the birth of the State of Israel, the Jewish people have the opportunity to determine their destiny. And yes enormous challenges are being played out every day.

Israel is not an experiment in nation-making and it is a legitimate state despite what is being taught at our own local Wake Forest University, as I had the displeasure of hearing first hand from an instructor who said, “Israel has been in violation of international law since its inception in 1948.” Yes. That is what is being taught. This same teacher referred to Jerusalem as occupied territory. And when I attempted to challenge one of the teachers in that course and express an alternative viewpoint seeking a balanced approach, I was called a bully, insulting, and disruptive. Such is the cost of love.

Friends, Israel continues to fight for its right to exist and simply be recognized and while a single class at WFU matters not in the grand scheme of things - this approach is echoed across academia and throughout much of Europe and the Arab world. And that matters enormously.

Israel is deeply entrenched in the reality of nation-making. And it has all the complexity and trash and sex trafficking and drugs and insanely good technology and world class arts, food, theater, research. It has non-profit organizations that work to heal the environment, that support humanitarian efforts among Jews and Arabs, that advocate for women, and that protect young children. Israel has an infuriating bureaucracy that any modern country currently has and it has people who care like no where else I have seen. It has national healthcare - imagine that! - and it has far more national parks per capita than the U.S. It has human rights’ abuses and it has exceptional treatment of humanity.

And I choose to love Israel.

Love - as with our community and earth and ourselves and our enemies.  
Love is a choice.

I choose to love Israel because I am a Jew. I am a Jew who has the good fortune to be alive during a time when we have sovereignty - for the first time in 2,000 years. For 2,000 years (nearly) we were without control of the land - let alone a land of our own. And we longed for it, we directed our prayers towards it, we told stories about that land. We raised money - always - to keep a remnant of our people there. But as a response to European antisemitism in the late 19th century - the same antisemitism that led my family and many of yours to America - took in many Jews under a range of Zionist ideologies and sometimes simply out of necessity back home: to eretz yisrael. And when the United Nations approved a Partition Plan with a Jewish Palestine alongside an Arab Palestine, suddenly Jews in Arab countries where their families had been residents - in some cases - longer than the Arabs themselves, were kicked out, often, without being able to take more than the clothes on our backs. But with that sovereignty comes responsibility - despite the harsh realities of what our neighbors have served us.

As MLK Jr said: "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic." We have to bring Israel to become consistently a loving state, exercising responsible power rather than promoting politicians who love power and govern irresponsibly.

It is upon us to love Israel even when we don't love parts of Israel. This is not about sentiment. This is about obligation. This is about honesty. This is about maintaining relationship. Have you ever stopped loving your parent or your child because they weren't 100% of what you expected them to be or even what they expected themselves to be? If you choose to walk away from Israel, you choose a life devoid of opportunity to rejoice in hard-fought and honest successes. You choose a life abandoning one of the oldest principles of our people.

There are many things I love about Israel.  
There are many things I don't love about Israel.

But I refuse to abandon our people and our land and the 5,000,000 non-Jews in our shared lands. I don't think we can abandon the work. I don't think we have that luxury. And I don't think we have that option.

So the Prime Minister refused entry to two U.S. Congresswomen who are avowedly anti-Israel and support a movement that was created by an avowed anti-semitic. Since when has that stopped us from supporting a greater concept and reality that is ours?

I have watched countless Jews visit once - and check the Israel box off and some of those same folks return to skiing in the Alps or sunning along far away shores more regularly. Our challenge - as Jews who clearly have decided to make our homes away from our national home - is to find ways to understand, to connect, to partner, and to uplift and be uplifted by a land and a nation that is always in formation and coming into itself. We need not be impotent or angry cousins - we have the chance to ... well, be angry cousins but loving and intentional cousins as well.

Our task - and I invite you to please join me - is in finding ways to make Israel relevant in the lives of this Diaspora community in which we work diligently to create a meaningful and relevant Jewish life. Israel is central to the fate of our people. The hope is as real today as ever before - unless we choose to absence ourselves from a vibrant and on-going conversation of what Israel means or can mean. The modern State of Israel was a response to antisemitism and the best response we can make to those who hate us today is to live our Jewish lives most fully. Positive engagement is a sign of our love of Israel and a chance to develop a well reasoned answer to the question of why should I and how can I love Israel? Join me in the task to find ways to love our people's land - and I suspect, we will find ways to understand one another and our obligation as Jews.