

Why I'm a Zionist- Kol Nidre 5780

## **Why I'm a Zionist**

Parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents generally exhibit *nachas*, that feeling of pride for their children, grand-children, and great-grandchildren. I think though, that were he alive today, my great-Grandfather Stanely Sundheim, who I used to call "Didi" would hate what I'm about to say. In fact, I'm pretty sure he would yell at me, and he might even feel a bit ashamed.

I didn't know my great-grandfather Stanley all that well. He died at the ripe old-age of 93 when I was in the third grade. I remember him being in a wheel-chair, I remember visiting him in the hospital, and I remember that he was a rather stern guy, even after having mellowed a bit in his older years (so I'm told).

Stanley Sundheim was chairman for the membership committee of the American Council for Judaism in Philadelphia in the 1940s, which in case you haven't heard of it, was an ardent anti-Zionist Jewish

organization that championed the idea that Jews are only nationals to the countries in which they live, and that Judaism, is solely a religion with no ethnic or national aspirations.

Most importantly though, Stanley and a significant part of the American Jewish population in the 1940s, worried that Jewish power couldn't be wielded in the same hand as Jewish values. His Judaism championed the prophetic and universal values, not ambitions of statehood. In his view, you could either have Judaism, or you could have a state for the Jews, but you couldn't have both.

He saw Zionism and Judaism as antithetical, not complimentary. It should be pointed out that there are many Jews today who still feel the same way. Stanley never softened in his anti-Zionist tone, and would likely still share the same views were he alive today. Certainly, he would be troubled in what I want to share tonight.

I am a proud Zionist. What does that mean? I believe in the spiritual connection of the Jewish people to the land of Israel. I believe in the right for the State of Israel to exist. None of this should be a shock to you. I'm a Zionist, and an American. You don't need to make Aliyah

to be a Zionist. America is my home, but Israel is my homeland.

Zionism, I believe, is the most revolutionary and game-changing Jewish ideology of the 20th Century, and should continue well on into the 21st, and beyond. And the most important piece of this puzzle, is that I believe the politics of the State of Israel shouldn't define Zionism.

This past year, I taught a class on the History of Zionism. We looked at an array of different thinkers, ideas, and influences that shaped the current landscape of Zionism. We explored how Zionism is a multi-vocal chorus of ideas, much like Judaism holds different ideas, beliefs, and disagreeing personalities. Herzl may have been ONE of the founders of Zionism, but his ideas were only part of the diverse voices that brought Zionism to life.

There was Ahad Ha'am, the spiritual and cultural Zionist, A.D. Gordon, who championed the connection of identity to land and soil through agricultural development. There was Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the famous religious Zionist, who believed the founding of a Jewish state was a messianic imperative. Rabbi Judah Magnes and Martin Buber, who believed in founding a bi-national democratic state.

Just as the identity of being Jewish carries with it a host of possibilities from culturally Jewish, to a part of a denomination, to just a feeling that is a part of identity, being a Zionist comes in a whole host of flavors.

Don't believe me? Just look at the mess of political parties in Israel that are fighting to form a coalition in the wake of the election on September 17th. Each brings a different vision of Israel, each balances and prioritizes Israel's Jewish character, its democratic character, and its national character in different ways. What unites just about every party, however, is their self identification with Zionism.

Zionism for American Jews isn't dependent on a political support for the

Israeli government, just as being an American isn't dependent on support for the American government. Zionism, at its core, stems from

an age-old connection to the land and people of Israel, and it has existed

long before the founding of the Jewish government; the sentiment has been within the Jewish consciousness long before Hertzl; and the feeling

has resonated with Jews before Nathan Birnbaum coined the term in

1882. Just look within the words of our liturgy:

הַבִּיאֲנוּ לְשֵׁלוֹם מֵאֲרָבַע פְּנֵפוֹת הָאָרֶץ, וְתוֹלְכֵנוּ קוֹמְמִיּוֹת לְאֶרֶץ־נוֹ

Gather us from the four corners of the earth, and lead us upright to our land.

הִיטִיבָה בְּרִצּוֹנָהּ, אֶת-צִיּוֹן; תִּבְנֶה, חוֹמוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם . . . . כִּי מִצִּיּוֹן תֵּצֵא תּוֹרָה, וּדְבַר יי  
מִירוּשָׁלַם

Find favor in Zion, Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem . . . . For Torah goes forth from Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem.

Zionism isn't dependent on Israeli politics, it's within the Jewish soul!

I want to share with you why I am a Zionist. I'll start out by saying that one of the most powerful pieces on Zionism that I've ever read was an impassioned article by Gil Troy, who titled his piece, "Why I am a Zionist" in the Montreal Gazette in April of 2001. In it, Troy uses a refrain that I would like to borrow. "I am a Zionist because...." You'll hear me share with you my own story that has led me to the same idea started by Herzl and continued by Chaim Weitzman, Ben Gurion, Zev Jabotinsky, Menachem Begin, Yitzchak Rabin, and generations of

thinkers who have all come to the same romantic conclusion: Israel is in our bones, and only in the 20th Century have the Jewish people added the flesh to found and live out this remarkable dream.

I am a Zionist because . . . .

From the moment I stepped foot on Israeli soil at the docks of Haifa, I felt I was in a special place. Like many Jews who first get to Israel, I kissed the ground. That's the only time and place I've ever done that in my life. I can't tell you exactly what my 16 year-old self was thinking, but I can tell you what I was feeling. I felt at home in a place that I had never previously been. I felt a sense of belonging with people with whom I had never met. And I felt safe, even though the news cycles told me I should feel otherwise. I'm a Zionist, because I feel an inextricable connection to Israel that exists beyond all politics and ideology. Israel is part of my Jewish soul.

I'm a Zionist because when I stand at the Western Wall, I feel a connection to the Jewish people that dates back thousands of years. Each stone is a mirror into my own people's past, and each stone's permanence stands as a reminder of our immovable connection to the wall. Does God hear my prayers there better than he does anywhere else? I wrote a note... Maybe it will be answered, but I sense that the wall is so much more than a dwelling place for God. It's our history. It's our experiences. It's an uplifting symbol despite being the ramparts of a destroyed Temple. I stand there with the 2000 year old hope that we sing about in Hatikvah, and I realize that it has been partially fulfilled. We have a state, it's flourishing, and now it's the next step, keep the hope alive and going.

I'm a Zionist because I've studied the annals of antisemitism, the pogroms, the blood libels, the ghettos, the expulsions, the forced conversions, not to mention the Holocaust. I know that we might feel comfortable, but we are never completely out of the reach of violent antisemitism. Charlottesville, Pittsburgh, and Poway remind us that we

can never be too comfortable. Israel is the insurance card that costs next to nothing, and is in every Jew's back pocket.

I'm a Zionist because I've visited Auschwitz. I've walked around Birkenau, the vast 425 hallowed acres of a killing center at Auschwitz where 1.1 million Jews were murdered. I saw the stolen possessions—suitcases, eye glasses, combs, shoes, clothing—that were displayed in mountainous piles in the museum there. I walked through the remains of the crematorium, and I will never forget.

I am a Zionist because I believe in the Jewish people. I have always felt a sense of *Klal Yisrael*, the feeling that despite our differences, there is something that unites each and every Jew across the world. Whether a Jew who has dark skin from Ethiopia, a black hat hassid from Brooklyn, a secular Israeli, a Jewish yoga instructor with dreadlocks, or anyone here in this tent, I feel an inexplicable bond that unites us beyond simply being co-religionists; we are a people with a shared history and heritage. Israel is the place where I share this bond with every Jew who walks through the streets . . . even if they are a stereotypically pushy, overly-direct, and seemingly rude, as some

Israelis are. Jews have always been a people without a land, now we are a people with a place that brings us together, that nurtures our identity, that infuses ethnicity into our bones, brings our history to life, and where the ancient language of Hebrew is reborn as the new Jewish lingua franca.

I'm a Zionist because I believe in the dream and vision of Israel. I know that that it doesn't always live up to that dream. I know that Israel is imperfect. And I respect everyone who seeks to voice their opinions as to how we establish Israel as a Democracy, and at the same time, a center for Judaism, and a safe-haven for the Jewish people. That includes those who might disagree with any given administration. God knows Jews don't see eye to eye, they shouldn't be expected to do the same in Israel. Is Israel's forum of voices not a microcosm of Judaism's plurality of voices?

I'm a Zionist because despite the realities of discrimination that I face as a non-Orthodox Rabbi when I'm in Israel, and that non-Orthodox Jews

face throughout Israel. I believe pluralism is a part of Israel's democratic character, and that Israel too often fails to live up to treating its founding principle to ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex," and to "guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture." I'm a Zionist so that I can help perfect these flaws, and encourage those who simply point them out, to be a part of making Israel a more Jewish and more democratic State.

I have always been a Zionist despite injustices in Israel, and I always will be regardless of who is running the Government. The former is not dependent on the latter. Zionism is the realized dream of the Jewish people, the one that we should cherish and protect, and must work at to make sure that great-grandfather wasn't right in thinking that Jewish power would ultimately corrupt the Jewish people.

Many of Stanley Sundheim's fears may have come to fruition. Israel has had to live through realpolitik, taking a pragmatic approach to security at the cost of ideological and religious considerations. The

occupation of the Palestinians has been a sad reality that has resulted. If I were to be able to talk to him today, I would tell him the prices that we pay for a Jewish homeland are steep, but they are unquestionably worth it.

Friends, I am unequivocally and unapologetically a Zionist. I am no doubt a romantic, a dreamer, and an idealist who may be speaking to pragmatists, realists, and maybe even cynics. You may even be anti-Zionist like my great-grandfather Stanley Sundheim, and I don't think that makes you any less Jewish. But we are a people of dreamers. **היינו כחולמים**, we are like dreamers, declares a Psalm for ascending to Jerusalem (Psalm 126). Hertzl famously declared, "if you will it, it is not a dream," and he was right.

Now we dream of maintaining our homeland, forging stronger relationships with the Arab world, making peace with the Palestinian people, modeling Jewish and democratic values in the Middle East, and deepening the connection between Judaism and the land of Israel.

Zionism was perhaps the greatest story of a dream in the 20th Century,  
and perhaps it could be in the 21st as well.

G'mar Chatima Tovah