

Israel: Moving beyond myths
Rabbi Adam Zeff. Rosh Hashana 5775

This is not the talk I intended to give today.

As many of you know, this day of Rosh Hashanah begins the year of *Shmita*, the seventh year of a seven-year cycle, the sabbatical year. According to the Torah, in the sabbatical year, lands are to lie fallow; the owners of the land are not allowed to work the land, till the soil, plant crops, or harvest them. Instead, the land is allowed to rest, and whatever grows in the land of its own accord belongs to everyone, not just the owner. Slaves are set free and debts are forgiven. These laws from the Torah do not apply outside the Land of Israel, and even in Israel they have often been neglected, but lately there has been new interest in reviving the spirit, if not the details, of the sabbatical year both inside and outside of Israel. We will have several programs this year that will address different aspects of the sabbatical year and what it can mean to us in our time, including our Arthur Bregman program on Yom Kippur afternoon with Rabbi Mordechai Liebling and our Rabbi Elias Charry Memorial Shabbat with Nati Passow of the Jewish Farm School and Hazon. The sabbatical year touches on economic justice, labor rights, environmental sustainability, land-use planning, and more. There is so much to talk about.

As you know, I will be taking a sabbatical in Israel this year, beginning right after Yom Kippur. Since this will be my personal sabbatical year, today seemed a perfect time for me to explore the *Shmita* year with all of you. I had planned on addressing what the idea of the sabbatical year can do for us spiritually. What would it mean for us to think of our lives in periods of seven years? How could this long-term thinking change how we evaluate our lives and how we live them? I have just completed my seventh year as a rabbi at Germantown Jewish Centre, and I thought of looking back on those years and forward to the next seven years to examine what we have accomplished together and what lies ahead. I am also about to begin the seventh year of the seventh seven-year cycle of my life, and I imagined looking back over those seven cycles to see the different character of each one. How will the next seven years look for me and my family? How will they play out for all of us together in this very special community? That is what I

had been thinking about for many months. That was the talk I had planned for this morning.

And then... And then war erupted in Israel and Gaza this summer. And then I and my family spent three weeks together in Israel in the midst of that war. And then a ceasefire came into effect, and I came back here to prepare for the High Holidays, leaving my family in Israel. And then I found people to be confused, horrified, fearful, despairing – you each could surely add other emotions to this list of how Jews in the United States and around the world have been feeling about Israel during and after this summer. And then I thought to myself: What more basic lesson can we learn from the self-examination that comes with this season than that the world always outruns our intentions for it? So I found that I needed to put aside the talk I had planned. Maybe I will come back to it in seven years. That talk can wait. This morning, we need to talk about Israel.

Yes, I know I talked about Israel last Rosh Hashanah. I outlined the diversity of Jewish views and imaginings of Israel through the ages, and I urged us to open ourselves to conversations within our community based on that diversity and rooted in the principle of *mahloket l'shem shamayim* – “a controversy for the sake of Heaven.” I asked us not to stay silent in the name of avoiding conflict but instead to speak to each other about Israel while rooting all of our conversations in an ethic of mutual respect. And based on that talk, President Mitch Marcus created an Israel Programming Group co-chaired by Joel Sweet and Josh Peskin that worked diligently throughout the past year to initiate substantive programs on Israel that engaged us in conversation with each other. I am so grateful for their efforts, from a “speed-sharing” program in which more than 30 congregants had 3 minutes each to share their connection to Israel, to a regular viewing and discussion about an important Israeli TV series here at the Centre. The Israel Programming Group did a remarkable job of sparking conversation within exactly the respectful framework I had in mind, and I know that the group has exciting plans to build on that work in the year to come.

But this is a different talk about Israel. Today I want to talk about how we can each go deeper in our understanding of Israel and in our engagement with the land, the state, and the people who live there. To do that, I want to go back and lift up one thread

of the conversation about the sabbatical year that I had intended to have this morning. When the Torah talks about the forgiveness of debts in the sabbatical year, it uses a phrase that has been ringing in my mind and heart this season: *tashmet yadecha* – literally, “let it drop from your hand.”¹ The Torah is teaching us that instead of holding tight to what you think “belongs” to you, you must open up your hand and release it. The Torah reminds us that our “ownership” – of land, of money, of ideas, of anything, really – is actually an illusion. In the larger scheme of things, everything belongs to God. We are only taking care of those objects and concepts that come our way for a short time until they are passed on to those who will come after us. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we are placed on this earth to care for it and for each other. We are caretakers, not owners. In the sabbatical year, we have the opportunity to put this attitude into practice by opening up our hands and letting those things and ideas to which we normally cling so tightly slip from our grasp.

The sabbatical year gives us the opportunity to undergo a profound spiritual shift. We have the chance to open ourselves to new ways of being and thinking. Unburdened by expectations, prejudices, and the rut of experience, we can see and understand as never before. My thinking about the Shmita year has been deeply influenced by the writings of the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, especially his important book about the sabbatical year published in 1909 and entitled *Shabbat Ha-Aretz* – “the Land’s Shabbat.” Rav Kook was trying to articulate how the sabbatical year could influence the Israel of the very early 20th century, even while he was arguing that observing all of the requirements of the law was impossible at a time when Israeli agricultural production was in its infancy. In place of detailed observance of the agricultural law – which he firmly believed would be possible in the near future – Rav Kook suggested that the sabbatical year could be observed in a spiritual way that could have an equally strong effect on Israeli society. He argued that in the sabbatical year, we are commanded to let go of the outward verities of our lives – what we think we know – and to return to our moral center, looking with new eyes at the world around us and our part in it.

¹ Deuteronomy 15:3.

This is what I am asking you to do with me today with regard to Israel. For too long we have allowed our visions of Israel to become more and more distanced from the actual land and people about whom we care so much. We have clung to comforting but outdated illusions, to simplistic talking points provided by the media, and to sharp polemics offered by one group or another. We have become too sure of what we think we know, what everyone knows about Israel. So today I want us to talk together about the myths we have allowed to take over our discourse about Israel. These myths are not simply outdated or mistaken. They are actively harmful to our understandings of ourselves and of Israel, and they undermine the very real power we have to effect change. I am here today to plead with you to engage with Israel as it is. Israel needs our active engagement, now more than ever, and we can make a difference in how Israel's future is shaped. But – *tashmet yadecha* – we need to open our hands and let the myths about Israel drop from our fingers. We need to look at Israel with new eyes and to help it move forward in partnership with Israelis and with other Jews around the world. It is too important to us to ignore, to give up, or to turn away. Together, today, let us open our hands, open our eyes, open our hearts, and open our ears.

Myth # 1: Israel is a land of Jews

From the time that I first heard from my father about Israel as a land where “even the bus driver is Jewish,” I thought of Israel as the land of Jews. Unlike in my small town, where Jews comprised about a tenth of a percent of the population, in the Israel of my imagination, Jews stretched out as far as the eye could see and filled every conceivable role in society. Even after I lived for a year in Tel Aviv, in a Yemenite family in which Arabic was the parents' native language and whose connection with Arab culture was undeniable, I still thought of Israel as the land of Jews and Jews alone. My host family reinforced this view, talking disparagingly of “Arabs” in a way that puzzled me, given their close connections both to Arabic language and culture and to individual Palestinians with whom they worked. This was the 1980's, when such connections were still common in Tel Aviv and elsewhere in Israel, and I couldn't understand how my family distinguished between the good relationships they had with the very decent Arab individuals they knew and the extreme hostility they had to Arabs

as a group. Still, this “us and them” view of Israel persisted in my mind for many years. Israel was about Jews.

This view was finally shattered in my time in Israel this summer. People often ask why I decided to live in Haifa during my sabbatical year rather than the more common rabbinic destination of Jerusalem. My answer is that I wanted to live in a place of cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. But more than that, I wanted to live in a place where – as in Mt. Airy – these very different sorts of people actually interact with each other. I can’t speak for the rest of Israel, especially Jerusalem, where religious and political tensions often make interaction between dissimilar people the exception rather than the rule. But in Haifa, this kind of interaction happens every day. When I go to the beach with my family, nearly half of the people in the water are speaking Arabic. The same is true of clerks in pharmacies, convenience store workers at highway stops, families enjoying parks in the Galilee during summer vacation, and more. Since we live high up on Mt. Carmel, near the University of Haifa and close to Haifa’s southern border, we are actually closer to the Druze villages of Isifiya and Daliyat el Carmel than we are to downtown Haifa, and we have already made wonderful connections with several Druze families. They have taught us about their centuries-old ties to the land, their close families, and their devotion to the State of Israel and service to it, especially service in the Israeli Defense Forces. We have also learned about the difficulties in the lives of these non-Jewish Israelis, whose school systems, housing, and health care often are at levels far below those of the Jewish majority. Modern Israel is so much more than just the land of the Jews.

Even in the time of the Torah, when it first started to be viewed as the Promised Land for the Israelites, this little strip of land was filled with other peoples – the Jebusites, Hivites, Hittites, and others that we hear about so often in the Torah. Although the book of Deuteronomy calls for the complete destruction of all other peoples in the Land, we know from the very next book of the Bible, the book of Joshua, that the Israelites never followed that strategy. Instead, they fought against some groups in order to settle parts of the land and made treaties and agreements with other groups to enable them to peacefully occupy the land that they held. Rather than separation from or destruction of the other inhabitants of the Land, the Biblical narrative shows that the

Israelites' primary impulse was to figure out ways to live with them in varying degrees of conflict and peace.

The ancient rabbis of Palestine lived with this reality as well, as they found their way among the Romans, Greeks, Syrians, and other peoples who inhabited the land in their time. In medieval times, the Holy Land became filled with European Christians, Middle Eastern Muslims, Jews, and other groups vying to control the land for both strategic and religious reasons. In modern times, the Ottoman Empire's administrative control over the Land of Israel ensured that a complex mixture of religions, ethnicities, and viewpoints remained a key feature of the place, and the British Mandate over Palestine depended on keeping these different groups in tension with one another. As a scholar of India, I am always aware of the numerous parallels between Israel and India in their paths to becoming modern nation-states. Both were administered for years by the British, and both became independent at nearly the same time. In both countries there were two main groups that were opposed to each other, and in both situations, the solution proposed by the British was a partition to divide these opposing groups from each other and to give each one an area of political control. In both cases, the moment of partition was a difficult and violent time that saw transfers of populations – sometimes voluntary, sometimes not – from one side of the line to the other. And in both cases, when the dust settled, the resulting population of the land remained diverse. Partition never resulted in a homogenous state. Diversity became an integral feature of both countries. It remains so today. Yet when we think about Israel, when we imagine Israelis, we often see exclusively Jewish faces.

The State of Israel currently has a population of almost nine million citizens. Jews account for about 75% of those, which means that 25% - over two and a quarter million of Israel's citizens – are non-Jews. We know that the 6.75 million Israeli Jews are not homogenous. Jews from Ethiopia, Yemen, South Africa, Morocco, India, Argentina, the U.S., and Western and Eastern Europe are just a small sampling of the ethnic and cultural diversity within Israel's Jewish majority, not to mention the bewildering variety of Jewish religious identifications that make up Israeli society. The 2.25 million non-Jewish citizens of Israel are similarly diverse. Ethnically, they identify as Druze, Bedouin, Arab, Palestinian, even European. Religiously, they are Catholics,

Muslims, Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, Bahai, and more. This is the reality of Israel today.

These, too, are Israelis. Theirs, too, are the faces of Israel. Any plan or vision for Israel's future has to include them and their needs and hopes. We cannot connect to Israel without acknowledging the identity of a quarter of its citizens. We need to see the continuity between the diverse population of the land in the time of the Bible, the same diversity in ancient, medieval, and early modern times, and that very same diversity right in front of us today. The inhabitants of Israel are complex, diverse, and multi-faceted, just as they have always been. Closing our eyes may make our thinking simpler, but it will not make that reality go away.

Myth #2: The religious-secular divide

When I was living in Israel at the age of 17, my religious situation was complicated. I had been raised as a Reform Jew who loved the holidays, believed in God, and connected deeply to prayer and tradition. I lived with atheist Yemenite Jews who kept kosher, celebrated some of the holidays, and had a Passover seder, but who also ridiculed their more observant relatives. I sometimes spent Shabbat with those relatives, studying Torah, and sometimes spent it with my host family, watching TV. Sometimes I wore a kippah, sometimes I didn't. But on those occasions when I did, I often got the question: "*Atah dati?*" The *Atah* part is easy – "Are you...?" The *dati* part is considerably more complicated. The Hebrew word *dat* can mean "religion, faith, belief, or law," so in theory *dati* could mean "religious, faithful, believing, or law-abiding. In modern Israel, though, *dati* refers to being a member of a community that follows a particular path of Jewish observance, a path we might identify with orthodoxy. I was always torn about how to answer this simple question: "*Atah dati?*" I saw myself as a religious person, but not exactly in the same way that the *dati* community saw itself. I didn't really feel comfortable putting myself into either of the available categories. Later, in college, I came up with a word I thought I had invented to describe the odd

combination of modern and traditional that I was becoming: “heterodoxy.”² But when I was 17 and an Israeli asked me, “*Atah dati?*” A long silence usually followed.

When we arrived in Haifa this August and moved into our apartment in Haifa, we found that there was a brand-new synagogue only about 100 meters from our apartment building. After a few days of struggling with jet lag, I went over to the synagogue to see if I could find out anything about it and when services were held. Someone greeted me, and we talked a little about the synagogue and its schedule. Then he looked at me carefully and – you guessed it – asked the fateful question: “*Atah dati?*” After a brief internal struggle, I replied, “*Lo b’diyuk... - Not exactly...*” As I was about to explain more, he saw my kippah. He said, “Oh, I see that you’re wearing a kippah; that’s enough.” Then he never mentioned it again. When I went to the synagogue for minyan the next morning – at 6:00 AM! – I explained that I was a Conservative rabbi from the U.S. who was living in Haifa for the year. Everyone simply nodded. The same happened when I went there with my not-*dati* family for Friday night services and met the rabbi. No one raised an eyebrow at my not-really-*dati*, not-really-secular status. Now, when people in Israel ask me, “*Atah dati?*” I have no problem answering right away: “*Lo b’diyuk – Not exactly.*” Then I explain who I am. I can say a lot of things about myself – I am *shomer Shabbat*, an American, an advocate for religious equality – but I am perfectly comfortable saying that I do not fall neatly into the available categories. As I am finding, many Israelis don’t either.

My younger sons, Avi and Mati, are attending Israeli public school close to our apartment in Haifa. Like all Israeli Jews, one of their required courses is Tanach – Bible. At the beginning of the school year, Mati’s Tanach teacher began with a general discussion of the subject they would be studying. She talked about how the Bible contains all sorts of laws, traditions, and mitzvot, but “we” – meaning “we secular Jews like me” – of course, reject all of that, and that’s good because “we” have freed ourselves from being bound by outdated rules and regulations that really have no relevance to our

² “Heterodox” comes from the Greek *heteros*, meaning “different,” and *doxa*, meaning opinion or belief. I was unaware at the time of the usual usage of the word “heterodox,” which normally means “opposed to a standard.” I did not mean that I was opposed to orthodoxy. I meant that I combined in myself many traits and characteristics that came from different places and were not usually found together.

lives. For example, she went on, none of us observe Shabbat, right? None of you observe Shabbat. Now, here's where the story gets interesting. About half of the students raised their hands and started to push back. We do observe Shabbat, they said. We like observing Shabbat. One girl talked about how she felt better about herself when she observed Shabbat than when she went out on Friday night. A boy talked about how he enjoyed driving to synagogue with his family on Saturday morning. The teacher wouldn't give up. No, she said, none of you observe Shabbat. You are all secular! But the students wouldn't give up either. They insisted that while they might not call themselves *dati*, they wouldn't call themselves secular either. They are somewhere in the middle.

What is our definition of living a Jewish life? Is it all or nothing? Is there one standard and one way to live a meaningful Jewish life? Can all of us neatly divide ourselves into "religious" or "secular" Jews? The existence of this Centre is predicated on the proposition that such sharp divisions are not only impossible but also irrelevant. We want Jews to find meaningful paths to living Jewish lives, drawing on Jewish traditions, texts, and values. We want to raise children who question and create, who learn and transform the Jewish heritage that is being passed down to them into something new, fresh, and exciting. We want to see in new Jewish rituals, new practices, and new traditions the flowering of the Jewish people's millennia-old quest to live meaningful lives and to shape the world more like the vision of justice, freedom, equality, and truth that we learn about from Torah. If we truly believe in this vision, we cannot allow ourselves to be trapped in the old ways of thinking, the habit that says that some people are "religious" and some people are "secular" and we know who is who. We have to open our ears to those people – like Mati's classmates – who are telling us there can be a "yes, and..." approach to Jewish life that is as authentic and as real as an orthodox lifestyle or a Hasidic lifestyle or any other Jewish way of being.

And we have to do more. We must partner with Israelis to create an Israel in which Israeli Jews can connect to tradition and to Jewish life outside of the limiting categories of "religious" and "secular." We can't stand by and let generations of Israelis turn away from Jewish life for lack of alternatives that speak to them. There is so much more than one way to be Jewish, and we have to make sure we are doing all we can to

open up all of those ways to our sisters and brothers in Israel. The government of Israel does not – yet – provide support for liberal Judaism. We have to take it on ourselves to support the Israeli groups and institutions that are trying so hard to move Israeli society in that direction.

Myth #3: There is one and only one legitimate way to support Israel

We arrived in Israel this summer at a time of war, and it was widely reported in the international press that a large majority of Israelis supported military action in Gaza. But when we were actually in Israel, we found that everything – even whether this military action was a “war” or an “operation” – was subject to vociferous debate within Israel, debate that was mostly left out of international news reports. Political parties to the left of the ruling coalition held rallies criticizing the government for not doing enough to protect the embattled residents of the south. Ministers who were members of the governing coalition disagreed violently over the conduct of the operation. Parents of soldiers killed in action publicly broke with the Defense Minister over strategy. Parties on the right and left of the Prime Minister loudly disagreed over what the terms of any ceasefire had to be and over what should happen next.

The day after the ceasefire that finally, thank God, ended this round of fighting, the Prime Minister’s approval rating dropped from 80% to 30%, and his political rivals all attacked. The right argued that the ceasefire should never have been accepted and that fighting should have continued deep into Gaza until Hamas was destroyed, whatever the cost. The left argued that the fighting had been completely unnecessary because the terms of the ceasefire could have been achieved earlier in the summer without a single casualty. The center attacked the Prime Minister for, alternately, being indecisive and making the wrong decisions. 54% of Israelis polled thought that neither Israel nor Hamas had won the war. The Prime Minister never asked his security cabinet to approve the ceasefire because he knew that they would not agree, and the members of the coalition attacked him for that. Members of Knesset accused each other of treason and called for each other’s arrest. During the fighting, we saw footage of Israelis cowering in bomb shelters and Israelis at the beach. We saw Israeli Jews demonstrating alongside Israeli Arabs under the slogan “Jews and Arabs refuse to be enemies,” and we saw Israeli Jews

carrying signs that said, “Death to Arabs, Death to Leftists.” We saw bands of Jewish vigilantes roaming Jerusalem attacking Arabs, and we saw bands of Jews organize to protect Arab institutions from those vigilantes. After the fighting, we followed the debate over what the war will mean for the economy, for education, and for social justice initiatives.

When Israelis look to the future, they see and advocate wildly different visions of what Israel will look like. From two states to one state to a bi-national state – ideas abound. There is even one prominent political voice advocating for a single state with joint Arab and Jewish participation in the government and administration. Who is this radical voice? As it turns out, that voice is none other than the current President of Israel, a member of the Prime Minister’s Likud party. Even within one party, within one coalition, within one family, there are always multiple paths forward.

I just said that we would never stand for people telling us that there is only one way to be Jewish. We decided that decades ago, and this synagogue community is a living argument that diversity strengthens – not weakens – our connection to Jewish tradition and to the multiple ways of living a Jewish life. Yet we have allowed American Jewish life to become dominated by the idea that there is one and only one legitimate way to support Israel. That is a dangerous and pernicious idea that is preventing so many Jews – thousands of young and old and in-between Jews – from identifying with Israel at just the moment that Israel needs our engagement the most. Israeli society itself demonstrates that an unshakeable commitment to the State of Israel can co-exist with a huge range of disagreement about what that State should be and do. The American Jewish community needs to recognize the same truth. If there were only one legitimate way to support Israel, and all other views were “anti-Israel,” then most Israelis would stand convicted of being “anti-Israel.” There are as many ways to support Israel as there are Israeli opinions on Israel, and we have to be open to that wide range of views – far wider than the discourse on Israel in the U.S. – if we hope to be engaged in Israel’s future. We cannot wish diversity of opinion out of existence in some mistaken belief that only unity of opinion leads to strength. Instead we must engage, engage, and engage with Israel in all of its multiplicity and diversity.

Whatever your opinion, I assure you, there is an Israeli who shares it, one who opposes it, one who is advocating for it, and one who is organizing against it. You support the settlements? So does one group of Israelis. You want to express your pain at the destruction of Gaza? There are Israelis doing exactly that. You want to see Israeli Arabs and Jews come together? There are multiple Israeli organizations trying to make that happen. The question is not whether or not you agree with the one-and-only-one legitimate way to support Israel. The question is, how are you going to help move Israeli society forward toward a new, progressive vision of the future?

Get involved!

So I am asking and begging and pleading with you, for our own sake and for the sake of Israel, to move beyond these myths about Israel and to get involved! And I'm not just going to leave it at that. Here are some concrete ways that you can engage with the real Israel today.

First, you need to get informed about all the complicated things going on in Israeli society. For the most part, the American press does not cover these debates and controversies; you usually won't find them in the Philadelphia Inquirer or even the New York Times. So you need to read the Israeli press. There are several very good newspapers in Israel that have on-line, English editions, including Yediot Ahronot – through their website ynet.co.il – and Haaretz. Look at them, even subscribe to one of them, and scan the headlines regularly. See the complexity behind the snippets that make it out to the American press. And when you see something that you like or something that you don't like, take action to make a difference!

Next, Israel Bonds. This is the point at which I ask everyone to take out the Israel Bonds envelope that you picked up when you came into the sanctuary. This year, for the first time, that envelope contains information about both Israel Bonds and other ways to get involved. Now I know full well that every year, three quarters of you don't even pick up the envelope. So this year, if you are one of those people, I'm going to ask you to pick that envelope up when you leave the sanctuary today and look at it! Israel Bonds are an investment in Israel's civil society. By law, Israel Bonds cannot support political goals, the military, or settlements. They can only support the infrastructure that allows

Israeli society to function, from tunnels and highways to water projects and desalinization plants. These projects have, among other things, allowed a desert nation to grow affordable vegetables and fruits to feed its people, benefitting all sectors of Israeli society. They give Israelis hope for the future. Recent infrastructure projects in Israel – ones I have seen and used – have made a huge difference in Israelis' lives. Like U.S. Treasury Bonds, Israel Bonds are a safe investment that provides decent returns. Unlike U.S. Treasury Bonds, which can support any obligations of the U.S. government, Israel Bonds are restricted to the most basic projects that support the infrastructure of the state. I urge you to consider them as an investment in Israel's future. You can take the card, fold down the tab of the investment you choose, and drop the card in the boxes in the lobby on the way out. Nothing could be easier, and nothing could be more important.

The second card in that envelope contains examples of organizations in Israel that are pushing for progressive interventions in Israeli society. The Masorti Movement (www.masorti.org) – the Conservative Movement's sister organization in Israel – is not only advocating for religious pluralism and an opening up of Jewish life on the local level and in the Knesset; it is also working to promote understanding between Jews and non-Jews. For example, in Haifa this fall, Rabbi Doby Hayoun of the Masorti congregation Kehilat Moriah is organizing a joint study series with the imam of the mosque across the street, to be held alternately in the synagogue and the mosque, in order to help each group understand the other. The Israel Trauma Coalition (www.israeltraumacoalition.org) provides training and services to help Israeli Jews and non-Jews recover from the trauma of accidents, terrorism, and war, and it has been particularly active in working with residents of the southern border communities that were so heavily affected by this summer's fighting. Leket Israel (www.leket.org), based on the Biblical commandment to allow the poor to gather leftover crops in the fields, tries to address the growing inequality in Israeli society by providing food to the poor. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel (www.acri.org.il) advocates for human rights for all sectors of Israeli society, including Jews and non-Jews, Arabs and Bedouin, and Palestinian residents of Israel-controlled areas. Adam Teva va-Din (www.adamteva.org.il) is Israel's Union for Environmental Defense, trying to bring awareness of environmental issues to the Israeli public and to pressure the government to take environmental considerations into account

when making decisions about energy policy, land use, and more. Naamat (www.naamat.org.il) is Israel's largest and leading women's organization, working to advance and strengthen the status of women in the family, the workforce, and the nation. Naamat recently partnered with other groups to successfully petition the Israeli Supreme Court to stop the erasure of women's voices from the airways on a government-supported radio station.

These are just a few of the many, many organizations at all points on the political spectrum that are doing important work to change Israeli society. I could easily have chosen another six organizations or six hundred, and I know that some of you will see that a favorite organization is not on the list. The point here is not to endorse these organizations above others. The point is to encourage you to partner with Israelis to create the kind of Israel you would like to see come into existence. You can get involved by getting educated, by donating resources, by adding your voice to advocacy, or by visiting the organization and joining in its work when you visit Israel. But get involved. We cannot sit on the sidelines. We need to be in the game.

A word about hope and despair

Since I came back to the U.S. early this month, many people have asked me how it is possible to have hope. "Even if all that you say about the diversity and multiplicity of views in Israel is true," they ask, "how is it possible not to give in to despair given all of the enemies and challenges that face Israel today?" Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught his followers that at the worst of times, when all seems hopeless, it is still forbidden to despair. We simply cannot give ourselves the option of not seeking solutions. Our rabbis taught that despair comes from the *Yetzer Ha-Ra*, the "evil inclination," the side of ourselves that whispers to us that all is lost and that there is no point in trying. Instead of giving in, we must look to those who continue working to move forward in spite of it all. In the darkest times comes the greatest opportunity for change. We must maintain the hope – *Ha-Tikvah*, the hope of which Israel is the symbol – that if we do the work

necessary, progress is possible. We are not required to complete the task, but neither are we free simply to turn away.³

In the prayer for Israel that we say each week, we ask that God protect the State of Israel, *reishit tz'miḥat g'ulateinu* – the beginning of the flowering of our redemption. May the actions we take and the paths of engagement with Israel that we follow this year truly lead Israel to flourish. *L'shanah tovah tikateivu* – may we and our brothers and sisters in Israel and Jews around the world be blessed with a year of engagement, hope, debate, hard work, progress, growth, learning, and peace, and let us say: Amen.

³ Paraphrase of Pirkei Avot 2:21, the teaching of Rabbi Tarfon.