

Yom Kippur Morning 5786 (2025)

Dear Roni, Tom, Danielle and Yonatan,

I spent the last few days rereading all the letters I have written to you over the last 13 years. I started when Yonatan was born, Roni and Tom - you just celebrated your Bat Mitzvah and Danielle started first grade.

It's hard to believe 13 years passed and now Roni and Tom, you are amazing 26-year-old women. Danielle is a soldier in the IDF, and in three weeks Yonatan will become a Bar Mitzvah.

I read over the letters—letters about prayer, fear, honesty and hope. About antisemitism, the environment and gratitude. I shared with you my thoughts about what it means to be a Reform Jew and the place of politics in temples.

I love writing to you, even when it's about difficult topics. Last year about God and October 7th, and the year before about my own wishes to die with dignity. But none was as hard to write as this one.

A letter about Israel.

Hard because we are living in such uncertainty as to what is going to happen.

Hard because I will be reading this letter to my congregation, among whom the issue of Israel has become full of tension, raw emotions, and the explosive potential to end relationships.

Hard because I love Israel so much, and as big as my love is, so is my pain.

Knowing how madly in love I am with this crazy, colorful, vibrant, complicated country, I find comfort that at least no one could blame me for being anti-Zionist.

As a child I grew up in Jerusalem. The smells of the alleys of the Old City and the taste of the hummus and rugelach at Mahane Yehuda market are engraved in my memory. I cried as an 8-year-old when Israel, for the first time, won both the Eurovision song contest and the European title in basketball. I stood silent year after year in the memorial ceremonies for the fallen soldiers that took place in my high school, noticing how the list of fallen soldiers among the graduates became longer and longer every year.

And when it was my turn, I joined an elite unit of paratroopers, and I put my life at risk in operations in Lebanon and facing the angry mobs of the First Intifada, the Palestinian uprising in 1987.

I hiked all around Israel, always with a Bible in my backpack, learning and understanding the deep connection of our people with the land. I slept many nights in the desert, gazing at the same stars Abraham did as he entered into a covenant with God.

And then as a tour guide, it became my life mission to cause people to fall in love with Israel. I continued to serve my country as a fighter in the reserves while always believing and fighting for peace—even after Rabin was murdered, even when buses exploded in Jerusalem, even

as my own friends became the names being read on the list in that same memorial ceremony at my high school.

I love Israel more than words can describe. Only Israeli music makes me cry. Only Israeli comedians make me laugh. I read the Israeli papers before I open the American ones, and I still dream mostly in Hebrew.

No one can blame me that the words I am about to share with you are not coming from a loving heart.

A few months ago, Morli asked me a hypothetical question. She asked me: what would I say if I could make the decision about where, you my children, should live as adults? If I had the power to make the decision for you, where would I want you to live?

Roni and Tom, soon enough you will start building your own families. Danielle, soon enough you will be out of the army and the world will be your oyster (a kosher oyster under rabbinic supervision). And Yonatan, in five years you will have to go into the army. And I am already losing sleep.

So where would I want you to live?

Morli was very surprised when I said Israel.

Not that I don't want you close to me, God knows how much I miss you. And it's not that I think that you wouldn't have an amazing life anywhere you chose to live. But living in Israel is the most unique Jewish experience of our time.

We are living in historic times.

For 2,000 years our people could only dream about living in Israel.

They wished each other "Next year in Jerusalem" at the end of Yom Kippur and Passover Seder. They prayed facing east and broke a glass at the end of their weddings pledging never to forget Jerusalem.

But that dream became a reality.

The State of Israel was established, and its founders spoke about creating a just, egalitarian society—a "light unto the nations." They believed that from Zion Torah shall come forth. And they had a reason to believe so.

Because for 3,000 years Jews have had a role in making this world a better place. We introduced to the world the concept of monotheism, of the weekend, the Ten Commandments, and what it means for society to accept a minority living among them. We taught the world: "V'ahavta l'reacha kamocha"—love your fellow human as yourself and "Justice, justice you shall pursue."

We, the little, tiny, insignificant in numbers, who survived against all odds, persecution and pogroms and the Holocaust—we taught the world something about resilience, faith and hope. About the value of debate which is practiced on every page of Talmud and of speaking truth to power. And we were the first to demonstrate how education can serve as a means to advancement rather than military power.

We, only 0.2% of the world population, represent over 20% of Nobel Prize recipients. And ours are Kafka, Chagall, Hannah Arendt, Beruriah, Einstein and Freud, countless amazing people who made significant contributions to the world in every possible field.

And so, when Israel was established, just imagine the potential of all this talent being able to concentrate in one place, dream, speak and create in Hebrew. And indeed, very fast, Israel became a source of light to the world. A little country that started from nothing and was able in three-quarters of a century to provide groundbreaking technology used all over the world in agriculture, water desalination, medicine, military technology, computing and cybersecurity.

The State of Israel—with all its challenges and complications and meshugaas, with all its imperfections and "we don't know what standing in a line means" Israelis—somehow, against all odds, fulfilled its destiny. To become a light unto the nations.

But that light is dimming. The flame that once blazed is now flickering.

For today Israel is experiencing a crisis.

It is Professor Yuval Noah Harari who coined the term in an interview he recently gave. He said that he believes Judaism is facing its biggest "spiritual catastrophe" since the destruction of the Second Temple, describing and warning of a potential doomsday scenario that could

"destroy 2,000 years of Jewish thinking and culture and existence," not just in Israel.

He warns that this battle threatens to change "the very meaning of Judaism all over the world."

What Harari is referring to is the ideological battle taking place today within Israel between the values and principles on which Israel was founded and a rising messianic movement that proclaims Jewish supremacy.

He is talking about the normalization of zealot, fanatic, extreme, Jewish racist supremacists within Israel and the Jewish world.

I think I can explain this by looking at the story of Meir Kahane. Kahane, an American Orthodox rabbi, formed in 1968 the militant Jewish Defense League. In 1971, after being sentenced for conspiracy to manufacture explosives, he moved to Israel and founded a political party named Kach.

He failed to gain enough votes in the 1973 general elections, but in 1984 his party won 1.2% of the vote, just barely passing the electoral threshold and winning one seat in the Knesset—the Israeli parliament.

While in the Knesset, Kahane was largely boycotted by other members, who often left the chamber during his speeches.

In 1988, he was suspended from the Knesset for threatening an Arab member with a noose. Shortly after,

the Israeli law was changed and Kach was disqualified from running in the 1988 elections, ending Kahane's parliamentary career after just one term. That was in 1988.

Fast forward 34 years to 2022—to the moment where Benjamin Netanyahu, in order to form a coalition government, appointed Itamar Ben-Gvir as the minister of national security in his government. For those who do not know, Itamar Ben-Gvir is a devout student of Meir Kahane.

Itamar Ben-Gvir, who is known to have a portrait in his living room of Baruch Goldstein, the man who massacred 29 Palestinian Muslim worshipers in Hebron in 1994. The same Itamar Ben-Gvir who in a video clip from 1995, filmed on Purim, is seen dressed as Goldstein and saying: "He is my hero."

In 1994, in an address to the Knesset, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin denounced Goldstein and declared: "You are not part of the community of Israel," and called him "an embarrassment to Judaism." Shimon Peres called the murders a "horrific act which stands out in shocking contrast to our basic Jewish values." Rabin's response reflected the mainstream Israeli and Jewish reaction of revulsion toward Goldstein's actions.

Tragically, Rabin himself was assassinated less than two years later, in November 1995, by another right-wing Jewish religious extremist.

Thirty-four years after these fierce words, Benjamin Netanyahu caused Yitzhak Rabin to roll in his grave as he



invited Itamar Ben-Gvir into his government, alongside Bezalel Smotrich and their political parties, and gave them the kind of legitimacy and power they could have never dreamt about.

These two, Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, are among the main reasons that Israel is being treated as a pariah and being blamed for committing genocide. For it is these two who, time after time, whenever given a microphone, promote the idea of "occupation, settlement, and encouragement of emigration" as the way to "solve the problem of Gaza."

These two who, when given the opportunity, at best close their eyes and at worst encourage violence and human rights violations against Palestinians in Judea and Samaria.

These two, are responsible for committing the greatest sin of all, one I do not think they can ever be forgiven for - These two and their respective party members, have done all they could and can, by threatening to throw down the government, to stop any hostage release deal that requires Israel to stop its military actions in Gaza and to release Palestinian terrorists from Israeli prisons.

A horrible price, and I say that again, a horrible price that 80% of Israelis are willing, unwillingly, to pay.

And what is so painful to know is that these two together only represent about 11% of Israeli voters. It is only because of the political system in Israel that requires the building of coalitions that these two received so much power in the government. It is only because of



Netanyahu's desperate need to remain in power that he legitimized the same people that only three years before he promised the Israeli people "will never be members of my cabinet." This, my children, this, my friends, is the spiritual catastrophe that Yuval Noah Harari is warning us against.

I don't have a solution to what is happening now in Gaza. Like 80% of Israelis, I want this war to end. I want the hostages home—achshav—now. But I also want to ensure that Hamas is no longer capable of risking Israeli lives, that they no longer have the ability to hold the people of Gaza as their hostages, hiding behind women and children who have paid the highest price in this war so far.

I don't have a solution, but I do have a deep conviction that no matter what happens, no matter how traumatized we are by the events of October 7th, we need to go back to the basic teaching of our prophet (Zechariah 4:6): "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the LORD of hosts."

My dear children, my dear congregation—on this holiest day of the year, as we stand before God and before each other seeking forgiveness and renewal, I want to tell you what I believe with every fiber of my being:

We are facing challenging times. There are evil powers in Israel that are causing the entire Jewish world to be attacked. These powers are small in numbers but mighty in their vision to create a different vision for Israel. But the story of Israel is not over. The dream is not dead.

Yes, we are living through a dark chapter. Yes, the moral clarity we once felt has been clouded by extremism and fear. Yes, the voices of hate have grown louder, and the center has struggled to hold.

But I have seen Israel rise from the ashes before. I have seen her children choose hope over despair, dialogue over violence, coexistence over division.

I have witnessed ordinary Israelis—Jews and Arabs alike—who refuse to let the extremists define who we are. I have seen hundreds of thousands of Israelis that march every week in the streets, despite being ignored, despite being called traitors, despite being demonized—and they march not because they think anyone in the government is listening to them.

They march so that they do not despair, so that we do not despair. They march to keep the flickering light alive. As one of my friends said to me: "I march not because I think I can change the government, I march to make sure I DON'T CHANGE."

The Israel I love, the Israel I want you to live in, is not the Israel of Ben-Gvir and Smotrich.

It is the Israel of the multitudes who gather in the streets calling for peace and democracy. The thousands who volunteer to help the wounded soldiers, the post-traumatic children and the struggling spouses of those in the reserves.

It is the Israel of people like Sigal, whose son Asaf has been serving as a front unit soldier in Gaza for two years. Sigal

hasn't slept well for two years, and yet both she and Asaf understand that living in Israel requires the willingness to make sacrifices beyond any normal human capacity.

It's the Israel of those who value and love the land, but value peace and life even more.

It's the Israel of those who want Judaism to belong to all Israelis, not just Orthodox Jews, those who don't claim superiority over women or over Reform Judaism. The Israel of those who understand what collective responsibility means and are willing to carry their fair share in protecting the country holding a gun on the border, not the Talmud in the yeshiva.

It is the Israel of doctors and nurses who treat every patient equally. It is the Israel of teachers who educate for tolerance, of soldiers who maintain their humanity even in the midst of war, of artists and writers and thinkers who refuse to surrender to hate.

We are entering a crucial year. Sometime in this coming year there will be elections held in Israel, and these elections will determine if we defeated or succumbed to the moral catastrophe of Jewish messianic supremacy. We are in the last two minutes of the fourth quarter. We are running out of time. So, this Yom Kippur, I am making you a promise:

A promise to do all I can here in the United States to make sure American Jewry does not abandon Israel to those who would pervert its meaning.

A promise to make sure that we will not let fear silence our voices.

A promise that we will speak up for the prophetic vision of justice and compassion, even when it is difficult, even when it costs us friendships, even when it makes us uncomfortable.

A promise to remind anyone willing to listen that loving Israel means demanding more from the leaders of our own organizations, from federations to AJC and AIPAC, from religious movements to our representatives—to demand them to denounce any leader who will win the election and choose to endorse racist and extremist political parties. Any leader that will choose his own narrow interest of political survival over building a large coalition that represents the 80% of Israelis that want to see Israel marching in a different direction.

A promise to hold fast to this truth: that the battle for Israel's soul is not over. The outcome is not predetermined. Each of us has a role to play. Each voice matters. Each act of courage, each word of truth, each bridge we build makes a difference.

So yes, my children—I still want you to live in Israel.

Not because she is perfect, but because she is yours to shape.

Not because the work is done, but because the work desperately needs you. And I can't think of any one better to do the work.

Not despite this painful moment, but because of it.

This is what our tradition teaches us on Yom Kippur: that change is possible, that we are not prisoners of our past, that tomorrow can be different from today if we choose to make it so.

May this year be a year of turning—for Israel, for our people, for all who yearn for peace. May we have the courage to speak truth with love, to criticize with hope, to demand justice with compassion. And may we never, ever stop believing that the light we carry within us—the light of Torah, of justice, of human dignity—can overcome the darkness.

And I'm asking you to make one promise to me: stay safe, and watch over each other, because I love you more than anything in the world.

G'mar chatimah tovah. May we all be sealed in the Book of Life.