

## Our movement taught me Ahavat Yisrael

Sermon by Rabbi Nicole K. Roberts

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So this evening, I was meant to fly to Israel to meet my sister and her family for a holiday. Last week, however, they decided to cancel their trip. So I've reverted to my original plan of going in February with a contingent of fellow Reform rabbis from North America. My *emotions* surrounding the planning of this journey have gone from extreme to extreme—first elation and excitement, then crushing disappointment, and now, thankfully, anticipation rekindled. Planning a trip to Israel—unlike most holiday destinations—is always a total emotional roller coaster.

In light of these *very* strong feelings I had about the trip, it makes my blood boil a little whenever I hear someone questioning American Reform Jews' love for Israel—and perhaps by extension, that of Progressive Jews elsewhere; I find it *grossly* inaccurate when I read the occasional article erroneously suggesting that *Ahavat Yisrael* (love of Israel) and support for *Medinat Yisrael* (the State of Israel) are somehow lacking in our movement, while my own experience indicates that *nothing could be further from the truth*. In fact, the American Reform movement is almost entirely responsible for my own attachment to the State of Israel, and my profound love, support, and prayers for our homeland and those who dwell there.

I grew up in a fairly secular Jewish family, who believed that while there may *one day* come a time when we could visit Israel, for now—meaning the 18 years I lived under their roof—it was just “too dangerous.” It wasn't until I was living on my own as an adult and became involved in the Reform movement, attending its Study Kallah and Biennial conventions, that I finally found myself surrounded by people who were traveling to Israel for extended stays on Reform kibbutzim and raving about their experiences; that I started to encounter Reform Jews who were moved to tears talking about how proud they were of their children who'd made aliyah; that I heard kids at Reform Jewish summer camps singing and dancing euphorically to songs they'd learned on Reform youth group trips to Israel, or that their Israeli camp counsellors had introduced them to; that I saw Reform young adults raising money for causes in Israel after their Birthright trips. It was our movement that taught me that Israel wasn't just a dream, but must become a very real part of my Jewish identity.

By then, I was too old to qualify for a Birthright trip, but my time would come when I turned 36—double *chai*—and was sent to Israel by my Reform seminary for a full year of study and immersion. It is a *requirement* of the rabbinical, cantorial, and Jewish education program of the Hebrew Union College that *all* students spend the first year of our studies at the campus in Jerusalem, mere blocks from the Old City. This requirement has been in place for almost *half a century*, as immediate past president Rabbi David Ellenson affirms, “Israel constitutes the linchpin in this educational process of religious formation.” Why the first year and not a later one? Because developing an attachment to Israel is seen by our movement as

the foundation and framework for all we learn to become leaders of Reform and Progressive communities.

And what did we encounter that first year in Israel? An entire faculty of role models—Reform and Progressive Jews who'd made aliyah from America, the UK, Canada, and South Africa because they wanted to help shape the Jewish destiny by building the land and nation of the Jewish people. They wanted this life despite its costs—despite the fact that it required army service of them and their children; despite the fact that it required them to leave parents and grandparents behind in their countries of origin; despite the challenge of learning a new language. These were our role models, mentors, rabbis, and teachers, that first year of rabbinical school.

These teachers taught us the origins of Zionist thought, introduced us to Israelis and Israeli life, and took us all around the country—to army bases to converse with soldiers, to high schools to talk with teenagers, to absorption centres and women's shelters. They danced with us on the shores of the Kinneret, and led us wading through ancient water tunnels. They took us to the Kotel on Tisha B'Av, to Jaffa and Rosh Pina, S'fat, Keisaria and Tiveria. To Independence Hall, the Palmach museum, the Begin centre, and Yad VaShem. To Bedouin tents and Israeli Arab villages. To kibbutzim in the Negev. Our teachers were devoted to cultivating in us a meaningful connection to the State, the land, and the people of Israel, and helping us gain a sophisticated understanding of Israeli society.

Our teachers at HUC also introduced us to what our movement *officially* has to say about how Reform Jews should relate to the Holy Land. From our movement's centenary platform in 1976: "We are privileged to live in [a] time, [when] a third Jewish commonwealth has been established in our people's ancient homeland. We are bound to...the...State... by innumerable religious and ethnic ties... We have both a stake and a responsibility in building the State of Israel, assuring its security, and defining its Jewish character. We encourage aliyah for those who wish to find maximum personal fulfillment in the cause of Zion."

From our 1999 Statement of Principles: "We are committed to Medinat Yisrael, the State of Israel, and rejoice in its accomplishments." "We encourage *aliyah*—immigration to Israel." "We urge Jews who reside outside Israel to learn Hebrew as a living language and to...deepen their relationship to the Land and its people." "In all these ways and more," this section concludes, "Israel gives meaning and purpose to our lives."

And from one platform dedicated exclusively to the relationship between Reform Judaism and Zionism: "The restoration of Am Yisrael to its ancestral homeland... represents an historic triumph of the Jewish people, providing a physical refuge, the possibility of religious and cultural renewal on its own soil, and the realization of God's promise to Abraham.... [W]e pledge continued political support and financial assistance.... [and] stand firm in our love of Zion.... When God restores the fortunes of Zion we shall be like dreamers. Our mouths will fill with laughter and our tongues with songs of joy."

These are just excerpts from much longer statements, all of which attest to our love for and commitment to Israel—something that should never be doubted. Rather, these should be *acknowledged* for persisting even in spite of the spiritual dissonance we sometimes experience as religiously liberal Jews there. During my Year in Israel, complete strangers would *yell* at my female classmates for wearing kippot—yet we’d been taught our whole lives that kippah was a normal expression of Jewish identity. Taxi drivers would *laugh* at us when we’d tell them we were studying to become rabbis, a career choice that everyone in our *home* communities was immensely proud of. Leaders of our movement have faced physical intimidation at the Kotel. We have been referred to as dogs and “worse than Holocaust deniers” by the religious establishment. We’ve seen women erased from billboards and advertisements. These acts create, for us, a spiritual dissonance, yet *still* we persist in our love for the Holy Land. These affronts sting that much more bitterly *because* of our love. Because we, too, want so much to have a portion in Zion—a share in this land we cherish, and its gifts. So if, occasionally, Reform or Progressive Jews do offer critique of something we find concerning or spiritually hurtful, our criticism should not be misconstrued as lack of loyalty; it comes from a place of love, as anyone shaped by our movement can well attest.

Arthur, in a moment you’ll receive a few gifts from our congregation. One of these is a significant voucher from Youth 2 Israel, which aims to send every Jewish child on a trip to Israel in Year 10. My charge and prayer for you, on this day of your bar mitzvah is that you’ll make use of this generous gift and visit the Holy Land. While any trip to Israel is meaningful, there is nothing quite as life changing as going there on a well-crafted program with peers and teachers. Develop your relationship with Israel—the State, the land, and the people. You can start now, by doing what you did so well for your bar mitzvah: teaching yourself Hebrew. This time, learn Modern Hebrew, so you can enter into conversation with real Israelis that you meet, and more fully understand Israeli society. Begin reading about Israel’s modern history and the works of its great poets and contemporary authors. Maybe even join us for Israeli dancing on Wednesday nights, come February! There is so much to love, and *you* have a share in this inheritance. Play an active role in making the dream a reality, so that *your* mouth may fill with laughter and your tongue with songs of joy.

Mazal tov, and Shabbat shalom.