

# Israel's Fate is Hanging in the Balance

Yom Kippur Kol Nidrei Sermon 5784

Rabbi David Lerner

Saturday, October 6, 1973, was a brisk Fall day with clear skies as my mother walked down First Avenue toward my father's shul on 14th Street.

She noticed that the front pages of the papers at the newsstand she passed were announcing something important about Israel and heard people on the street talking about it: a surprise attack on Israel by Egypt and Syria.



My mother felt that my father, who was officiating at Yom Kippur services, needed to know, but she wanted to tell him discreetly. So she went up the back steps of the shul and waited behind the bimah for him to come out.

She was so discombobulated by this terrible news that she forgot about Yom Kippur and took a drink from the water fountain.

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50 years ago today, on Yom Kippur Day, American Jews mostly found out about the war in *shul*. Israelis also found out during the course of our most sacred day.

Israel found itself unprepared since the government and the military had miscalculated the chances of a war.

As is still the case today, most of Israel's army is in its reserves, which need to be called up. With most of the country observing Yom Kippur on some level or another, it was left to the small

number of young Israeli troops on the front lines in their bases in Sinai and the Golan Heights to respond.

Israel's fate was hanging in the balance.

Those young soldiers and those who were able to support them most quickly - many from *Emek Yisrael* - the Jezreel Valley like the small [Kibbutz Beit Hashitah](#), which lost 11 of its young men - made a great difference.

Syria's tanks overran Israel's defenses in the Golan Heights and quickly approached the center of Israel in the North. It was only luck that Syria stopped there, having accomplished their first goal so quickly that they did not have their next orders.

In the small bases of Sinai as well, Israel experienced many losses.

The Arab world said they would "throw the Jews back into the Sea."

And on that Yom Kippur, it seemed plausible.

Maybe even likely.

Israel's fate hung in the balance.

The prayers that year were intense, filled with tears and fear of what would happen to Israel.

All of American Jewry was united in support of Israel. In the days after, my mother crocheted balaclavas to send to keep the soldiers in the north warm; my father and grandfather raised money for Israel.

Israel turned back the attack and survived.

The bravery and resilience of its people, the support of American Jewry, and the large US airlift of weapons - one plane was flown by our own Barry Seidman, z"l - saved the country.



But that came at a great cost - 2,656 Israelis were killed in action, may their memories be for a blessing, 7,251 were injured, and 294 became prisoners of war -- many endured terrible torture.

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Thirty years ago, just last week, another milestone in Israeli history occurred when Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the PLO's Yassir Arafat pledged a different course in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

There would be two countries living side-by-side in peace.

And it seemed possible - the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty was already almost 15 years old, and in the following year, Israel made peace with Jordan. I was living in Israel at the time, and there was a sense that we were on the cusp of a new future, a more peaceful one.

Israel was becoming an economic power - a start-up nation filled with commerce, technology, and biotech companies.

And amidst all the conflicts, Israelis have built a glorious culture filled with its own cuisine, music, and literature—the greatest hope of Jewish existence and independence since the Maccabees 2200 hundred years ago.

Its beauty, its history, its archeology, its spirituality are on full display. It has protected the holy places of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.





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But, as we know, the past thirty years have not been positive on the peace front.

Several wars.

Many terrorist attacks.

The assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, z"l.

Neither side fulfilled its obligations, with Israel's settlements growing in the West Bank.

The hopes of 1993 – two countries living side-by-side vanished into hate and acts of aggression on both sides.

While I don't equate terrorism and wars initiated by Hezbollah and Hamas with Israel's response, the net effect has been to tear down the modicum of trust that was just beginning 30 years ago.

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But as we gather 50 years after the Yom Kippur War and 30 years after that famous handshake, the greatest danger facing Israel is upon us right now.

It is not the threat from Iran - which is real.

It is not the rocket fire from Gaza, as terrible as that is.

It is the internal threat.

Just as it was 2,000 years ago when Israel fell and Jerusalem was destroyed largely because of internal discord, we are heading into a similar situation.

Israel's fate hangs in the balance... again.

By a narrow margin, Israel's Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox (people who gladly take away the minimal rights we have as liberal Jews in Israel) have joined with ultra-nationalists and some of Israel's more mainstream right-wing to found the most extremist government in Israel's history.

This is a government filled with criminals - literally.

It is led by a Prime Minister who has been indicted three times. Its ministers include avowed racists and homophobes.

Itamar Ben-Gvir, who was not allowed to join the army due to his extreme-right political background, is the Minister of National Security!



Back in 1995, he brazenly stole the hood ornament off of Rabin's limousine, creating part of the atmosphere that led to Rabin's assassination a few weeks later.

This new government's policies and statements have encouraged a situation where there is terrible violence against Palestinians, including the first *pogrom* perpetrated by Jews on the West Bank against the Arab village of Huwara last spring.

But perhaps most frighteningly, this new government is hell-bent on limiting democracy in Israel. Its primary effort is to reduce the power of the Israeli Supreme Court, which has served as a bulwark against racist and immoral laws and protecting the rights of minorities in Israel and the Palestinian territories. While there might be the need for modifications in the Judiciary, it is not a good idea to do that when Prime Minister Netanyahu is under indictment.

It seems clear that Bibi is making a deal with the extremists to save himself from prosecution.

We see him cavorting with those who support anti-Semites, like Elon Musk.

Bibi does not care about American Jewry and does not seem to understand that his actions will alienate the remaining American non-Orthodox Jews who still care about supporting Israel.

And that will come back to haunt Israel.

Even as there is talk of a peace deal with Saudia Arabia - which I don't think Bibi's coalition will go for, the internal divides will not go away.

Israel's fate hangs in the balance.

Let me lay out clearly what Netanyahu and his government are doing:

He has built a coalition of extremists in pursuit of a zealous agenda.

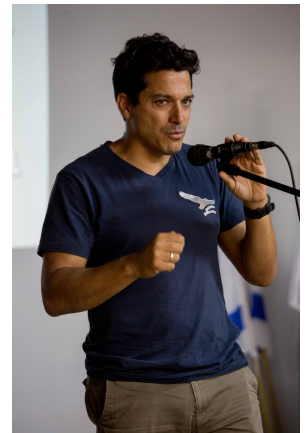
He has appointed the aforementioned Ben Gvir, a self-declared Kahane supporter, who was convicted eight times of violations that include supporting a terror organization and inciting racism.

He has appointed Bezalel Smotrich, an ultra-nationalistic zealot who is pursuing a plan to annex the entire West Bank and to eradicate the Palestinian national enterprise, and made him his government's minister responsible for civilian affairs, including settlements in the occupied West Bank.

That's a great fit.

He has supported his Minister of Justice Yariv Levin in his campaign to eviscerate Israel's Supreme Court and weaken Israeli democracy.

He appointed and is backing Amichai Chikli, his Minister of Diaspora Affairs, who has literally given the middle finger to



American Jews literally (and metaphorically as well) -- this is the Minister of Diaspora Affairs!!!

He is supporting his Minister of Communications, Shlomo Karhi, who wants to curtail the freedom of the press by having the government supervise TV channels.

He has accused the protestors who are trying to save Israel of “joining forces with the PLO and Iran.”

He has hurt Israel’s relationship with the US, making support of Israel into a partisan issue.

He is pushing a slew of undemocratic laws, including one fully adopted by the Knesset, which makes it virtually impossible to declare a prime minister unfit to serve. Given that he has been charged with fraud, breach of trust, and accepting bribes, this seems like a law helpful to him.

All of this at the same time as the country hurtles toward a civil war.

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Israel’s fate hangs in the balance.

All of this is why Israelis in the center, on the left, and some on the right have come together in a coalition against this immoral government.

These protestors have reclaimed the Israeli flag, as they have demonstrated what it means to be a Zionist.



Every Saturday night, there have been major protests all around Israel, with hundreds of thousands participating, reaching a number that would be the equivalent of 30 million Americans rallying. Think of that. Wow.

When our Emunah trip was in Israel seven months ago, many of us joined in a peaceful protest in Haifa to lend our support.

This was a first for our trips and for me as well.

It was powerful.

It was meaningful.

It felt like we were playing a role in the fight for Israel's future.

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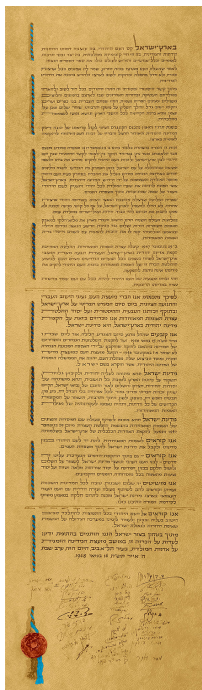
There is a reason that companies are leaving and/or not investing in Israel now; there is a reason that Israel's reservists, especially the most critical, skilled, and elite soldiers, are not showing up for duty.

They are fed up, and this is the final straw.

The irony of 1.5 million Ultra-Orthodox who do not serve in the military, many of whom do not pay taxes, as Israel subsidizes their *yeshivah* learning, while the rest of the country risks their lives to protect them, and now this group wants to jeopardize the fragile balance of Israel being a Jewish and democratic society.

Israel's Declaration of Independence states explicitly that it should be a "Jewish and democratic state" - not one or the other.

When its pilots do not want to fly, Israel has a big problem. And there's a direct connection. Unlike most armies, soldiers in Israel's army CAN disobey an order if it is immoral. In the shadow of millions of soldiers who fought in WWII and said "they were just following orders," Israel said no to that.





In fact, you are supposed to disobey an immoral order - like if you are told to attack innocent Palestinian civilians, but if the Supreme Court will no longer enforce that, then who will defend these soldiers?

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You know you have a problem when your scientists are leaving.

You know you have a problem when your doctors are scrambling to leave the country.

Today, **these** are the threats to Israel, a country that could easily slide into an ultra-nationalist, fundamentalist, religiously extreme country like many of the Arab countries in its neighborhood.

It's sad.

It makes me want to cry.

I love Israel intensely - I lived there for three years, many in my family live there, my soul is there, but I can also see when it is threatened - even from within.

Israel's fate is hanging in the balance.

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I have joined and spoken at the regular Boston protest against this government, and this week, we saw many more protests; I am proud of my friends and colleagues.

American Jews and, now, its mainstream leaders are protesting this government, its leaders, and its policies at the United Nations and in other places during Netanyahu's visit to the US and to the UN General Assembly.

Our movement, led by the Rabbinical Assembly, has joined together with the Reform Movement and other groups in an unprecedented manner in support of these protests.

American Jewish leaders are speaking out against the Israeli government in a way that has NEVER happened before.

Israelis living in America are coming together in large numbers with non-Orthodox Jews.

The center-right Jerusalem Post wrote,

“And considering how (Monday will mark) [we are marking] the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, the country’s bloodiest debacle, it is hard to understand how our political leaders still don’t get it. In 1973, we were surprised by our enemies due to hubris, and as a result, we paid an unimaginable price.”

And 50 years later,

Israel’s fate hangs in the balance.

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So, if we care about Israel, about the 9 million Israeli citizens and its 7 million Jews and this fragile 75-year experiment of the third Jewish commonwealth, the modern state of Israel, it’s time to act.

We can help.

We can protest.

We can donate.

[Click here to donate to the protestors - https://www.unxeptable.org/](https://www.unxeptable.org/)

Donate to those who are fighting this racism.

Donate to the peacemakers, the bridge-builders.

We, who are in the center of American Jewry, have not done enough to support the center in Israel - our own Masorti Movement or the NGOs building a more just, democratic, pluralistic Israel.

I will send out an email with some actions to take.

Here is a good example of the depth of the problem. [The Parents Circle](#) - a group of Israeli and Palestinian parents who lost their children in this conflict - come together to share their stories of pain and their loss.



When we met with them on our trip, there was not a dry eye in our group.

They are sharing a model of a different future - of acknowledging the pain on both sides of this conflict.

This can build a new foundation that can build trust and reconciliation.

What does this government do?

It bans the Parent Circle from going to visit Israeli schools - why?

Because it might soften the hate that this government traffics in.

So donate to them.

As the American writer from an Egyptian family Suzy Kassem wrote:

“If you want to bring the world closer to peace, be a peacemaker by creating peace whenever you can.

“If you find yourself engaged in an argument that only stirs anger in the heart, quickly make peace and carry on.

“We'll let our friends be the peacekeepers, and the great country called America will be the pacemakers.”

It's time to act.

Those who defended Israel 50 years ago - don't let their deaths be in vain.

Israel's fate hangs in the balance.

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What will you do?

Let us stand with the people of Israel - protecting it from those who would destroy it and its values from within.

50 years ago, we were on the sidelines; today, we should be on the front lines.