IN DEFENSE OF ZIONISM
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Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iE1Sdr5D4do

It was the most powerful moment of a powerful experience.

It was during our Temple Sholom trip to Israel — and it happened just two weeks ago.

There we were — in Tel Aviv — in Beit Haatzmaut, Israel's House of Independence.

The room is simple, but it is also awesome. The dais, with its bank of microphones; the Israeli flags, like the doors of the Holy Ark flanking a picture of Theodore Herzl, that looms over the room like a Ner Tamid, the eternal light. It was there, beneath his watchful eyes, that David Ben Gurion proclaimed to the world.

"We, members of the people's council, representatives of the Jewish community of Eretz-Yisrael and of the Zionist movement…hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Yisrael, to be known as the state of Israel."

He continued, "[The State of Israel will]…*foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations."*

After decades of Jewish ambivalence about Zionism, the Holocaust had created an instant consensus for a Jewish state, galvanizing what was left of world Jewry, rousing it from depression—and shielding it from guilt.
At that moment, a nation was born. Two-thousands years after the destruction of the last Jewish nation in our ancestral land, only two years after the Auschwitz, our people returned, returned to our land.

Returned not as a vindictive or hateful people, hell bent on doing to the world what the world had done to us. No, we returned as Jews, as Zionists, aspirational, visionary, hell bent on removing from the world the tribalism and nationalism that had so many times been used as a cudgel against us.

The tribes of Israel had come home to embody the Zionist dream, *l'hiyot am hofshe b'artzenu* to be a free people in our own land, not only for ourselves, but as an *Or Lagoyim* a light, a model for the other nations of the world to follow in our shining example.

The Zionist dream was the manifestation of the 614th Commandment, NEVER AGAIN! Never again to us, never again to human beings anywhere. We can be better than our most tribalistic impulses, we can be holy.

That is what grabbed my mind and soul during our time in Israel.

Zionism has something powerful to say – not only to us as Jews – but to all of us, every nation, every human being as citizens of the world. We aspire to be a light to the nations. Zionism is that light.

What is Zionism? It starts as an idea that people should live together as nations — that we are a collection of tribes, bound together by shared values, history and dreams. Not universal, but distinct, distinctly Jewish. To quote Ari Ben Canan, Paul Newman's character in the movie Exodus, "People are different. They have a right to be different." a community cannot exist without any boundaries—it's as useless as a house with no walls.

The truth is — you cannot get away from the idea of the tribe. Tribalism is the default human experience. For the overwhelming majority of our time on this planet, the tribe was the only form of human society. That was how we lived, as a race, for tens of thousands of years. We lived in compact, largely egalitarian groups of around 50 people or more. We were connected to each other by genetics and language, usually unwritten. Most tribes occupied their own familiar territory. They shared food. There was no private property. Every tribe had its own leaders. Every tribe had a myth, a sacred story. Of how it started and how it got to where it was. The tribe's story determined what we did every day. It shaped what we thought every hour.

And that's who we are, we Jews. We know it. It's part of how we think of ourselves. Our parents and grandparents would speak of it this way — the MOT — the member of the tribe.

But — and this is key; disparate tribes **<u>are not</u>** the optimal way of organizing a people, for too often it can lead to tribalism, that sense that the tribe is its own reason for being — and therefore, that the tribe is most important above all else.

As Jews we have always guarded against this temptation of tribalism.
Do you know why? Because it is too narrow, too self-centered, tribalism is not holy, it is the opposite of holy, it is profane.

Let's talk about our tribes — or, rather, the original twelve tribes of Israel. Each tribe had its own territory — in fact, when we were riding on the tour bus in Israel, we would occasionally see road signs that would identify which ancient tribal territory we were driving through.

Every tribe settled on the west side of the Jordan River. Except three tribes decided to settle on the east side of the Jordan — because they were shepherds, and that was where they found good land for grazing.

The three tribes asked Moses to let them remain on that good land with their tribes. They wanted to live in prosperity and in comfort. They didn't want to have to join the other tribes and fight to enter the land of Israel.

Moses refused. Don't be tribalistic, don't give in to tribalism, he said. Your moral obligation is to work for the entire people — not just your own narrow concerns; and so, they crossed over and joined the fight to settle the land before returning to their own.

The Jews left Egypt as tribes but crossed over in to the promised land as a nation.

Nationalism replaced tribalism. In its purest form nationalism can be a bond of loyalty between all citizens rather than the fear and hatred of the other that lives beyond your borders.

But, people and nations are so often driven by fear, driven by greed. We never have enough, never feel safe, enough. Once you have a land that is yours you then need to protect yourself from others worried that the other nations will come and take what is yours, so we created armies, we go to war. That happened in the Torah as well, it's part of Jewish history.

When you're afraid the "others" may take away your food, your home, your family you create a wall that separates you from the world. You start seeing "the others" as a different beast that threatens your peers.

These ever-higher walls can be in the form of laws, citizenships, religions, borderlines, currencies, weapons and even fences or actual walls. And if a nation can't build the wall high enough they move it further out, to protect the 'homeland'. That was where colonialism comes in. That was where imperialism comes in.

Where are we today — as a world, and as a civilization? And what does that have to do with Zionism?

We are heading back toward tribalism, dressed up as nationalism, bordering on fascism. We are back to leaders who engage in racist rhetoric; separating ourselves by our differences, rather than finding our shared humanity. Who are the targets of that rhetoric? The widow, the orphan and the stranger in your midst — the people whom the Torah tells us to take great pains to protect.

This is what I want to tell you.

The tribalism we are witnessing and experiencing today around the globe it is corrosive. It is self-centered, it requires you to hate the other group in order to be a part of the one you're in.

Think about it, for a moment. What is racism? When you really get down to it? Racism is tribalism. It is when one tribe is afraid of other tribes and believes that it is superior to all other tribes.

What is war? War is tribalism run amuck. It is tribalism as a video game. The most violent and vehement form of war/genocide. We are not only afraid of the other tribe. We not only believe that we are superior to all other tribes. We must now kill those who are not us.

Welcome to the world today. In America today, in Europe, yes even in Israel, and more and more here in Canada, every group feels that every other group is a threat: whites and blacks, Latinos and Asians, men and women, liberals and conservatives, religious and secular, LGBT and Hetero, Jews and Christians and Muslims and so on. Everyone feels persecuted. On the left, this has given rise to increasingly radical and exclusionary rhetoric of privilege and cultural appropriation. On the right, it has fueled a disturbing rise in xenophobia and ethnic nationalism.

We have built our civilization on the idea of progress. That is not what we are doing. We are heading backward. We are reverting to tribalism.

So, how should nations live?

It is what our group encountered and heard under the looming eyes of Herzl.

The answer is Zionism.

Not just for the Jews.

But as a model for how every nation and people should act.

To quote Gil Troy, Professor of History at McGill University:
"Zionism celebrates nationalism as a force for good, cherishes religion and tradition as valuable anchors, providing meaningful "software" of values and beliefs running on the "hardware" of belonging. And Zionism celebrates the virtues of having red lines to respect, as well as blue-and-white lines to affirm. It rewards togetherness and demands loyalty in many ways"[1]

For what does Zionism try to do? In its truest form, Zionism seeks to bring people together under shared values, shared history and shared purpose without trying to make others join us; out of fear or greed.

Think of how the Jews are different. It is what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has called "the dignity of difference."

We represent the only great civilization in history that has never sought expansion for its own sake. In biblical times, the nation of Israel had a very limited territory. Compared to Babylonia, Greece, and Rome — we were nothing.

Moreover, as the political theorist Yoram Hazony has written, we had to respect other nation's territories. What was Edom's was Edom's; what was Moab's was Moab's.

[1] Gil Troy, "The Continuing Promise of American Zionism" Commentary Magazine April 16, 2018

Unlike other civilizations, we never expected or even wanted everyone in the world to obey our laws, our customs, and our religious practices. That was never our intent nor our need. We never expected that the world would become Jewish — only that it would become ethical, that Israel would the example, the light unto the nations our prophets envisioned.

We can study, debate and work to make sure that modern Israel lives up to its Zionist ideals, and we do that regularly here at Temple Sholom and as a Reform Zionist Movement.

But Zionism still has something holy to say to the world, particularly a world that seems enamoured with populist rhetoric, tribalism and strongman leaders.

Zionism is an ethical nationalism in which the nation of Israel, echoing the prophetic call of Isaiah, aspires to be an *Or Lagoyim*, a light unto the nations.

I am under no illusion that we have fully achieved the Zionist ideal of Herzl and Ben Gurion.

Fifty years of military occupation and the internal strife between left and right, secular, religious, Arab and Jew in Israel has cast a shadow on that vision.

As my friend and colleague Rabbi Sharon Brouse wrote last month in the Los Angeles Times:

Israel is a Jewish state, yet moral leadership tends to come not from its official rabbinate, but from its artists, academics and activists.

It is a proud, striving democracy that fails to uphold basic democratic norms for many under its control.

It is a young nation of exemplary ingenuity, imagination and frankness that has failed to use that same creativity and honesty to seriously deal with what sovereignty means when one profoundly traumatized population holds great power over another."[2]

The supporter of Israel in me cannot and will not dismiss these inconsistencies with the Zionist vision. **But neither do most Israelis**. The vast secular pluralistic majority know that the ultra-Orthodox and the right-wing coalition government have conspired to hijack Zionism in the name of tribalism.

We need to support those Israelis who are acting like the biblical prophets, who are standing up, and who are saying that tribalism is not Zionism; is not Israel.

I ask us to push back against the encroaching desert of despair. Because, in so many ways, the desert that is Israel, continues to bloom with the hope of the Zionist dream. That desert blooms when Israel strives to pursue justice and peace - to embody an ethical nationalism — *l'taken olam b'malchut shadai*, to repair the brokenness in the world, remaking it as God envisioned it to be, as its founders promised it would be.

[2] Rabbi Sharon Brouse, LA Times August 27, 2018

That is why I believe that Zionism, as envisioned by its founders, though not yet realized but us its inheritors is the best form of political organization humanity has yet discovered. That is why the world, Israel included needs Zionism, not nationalism, not tribalism.

Because the nations of the world can learn the greatest lesson that Zionism has to offer — that nations must be ethical, and that nations must restrain themselves in their ambitions, and not seek world dominion. Nations must, though comprised of many different tribes, nations must be united by shared values and a mission, that echoes the Jewish imperative, to leave the world better than we found it, to be a blessing.

Zionism acknowledges that group differences are real. It fights the deep inequities that divide us. That is the legacy of Talmudic Judaism (Hillel & Shammai) and modern Zionism, a vigorous debate, about how to bridge our divides, to expand the tent, building bridges wherever possible amongst the disparate tribes of Israel instead of walls.

Zionism invites us to be loyal to a higher aspirational vision of the world as it could be. Zionism and Judaism demand that we not rest till that vision is realized.

That is Zionism. That is the dream of Israel.

What is it that we need to do? What can we do – from here? We can never give up on working for that dream, that hope of 2,000 years, never letting the light of Zionism, that light unto the nations, be dimmed by the gathering storm of today's tribalism and nationalist fervor.

When done right and understood properly, Zionism is dramatically different than the nationalism and tribalism that characterize our politics today. At its best, Zionism infuses democratic ideals into the natural tendency for people to clump together with those like them and adds to the mix a moral-ethical imperative to live up to the divine ideal, inspiring other nations to do the same. To be that light.

A resurrected, refreshed, Zionist conversation, one that focuses on what Israel does for us, the model that Israel can be for the world, even as we grapple with and debate its imperfections will not only help Israel fulfill its founding purpose, it will help diaspora Jews find ours as well.

A new Zionist conversation will also help Jews and people everywhere see Zionism as a tool to unite a divided community and a critique of the moral failings of Tribalism and Nationalism.

The dream of Zionism calls us **and the world** to be more determined, more purposeful, and more ethical than we have been as tribes or nations—precisely what Ben Gurion envisioned standing in front of those microphones in Tel Aviv a little more than 70 years ago. In an unredeemed world, Zionism urges humanity to live together is such a way so as to be worthy of redemption.

Im tirtzu, ein zo agada. If you will it, it is no dream.