The Next Zionists
Rosh Hashanah 5776 – Temple Sholom
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This sermon is also available on YouTube: https://youtu.be/2eQcGXYwHqo?t=1s

Ari Shavit wrote this summer in the Israeli Daily Haaretz, that Israel's fate will not only be determined on the country's southern and northern borders, but on the quads of North American campuses." I would amend that to, not only the fate of Israel but the fate of Judaism, both rest in the hands of our children.

It's always been this way.

The midrash teaches that when Moses received the Torah on Mt Sinai God asked him who would guarantee that Judaism would continue from generation to generation?

First Moses said that the memory of our ancestors would guarantee that Judaism would continue.

God said that wouldn't be enough

Moses then suggested the Prophets and the leaders of the community would guarantee that Judaism would continue from generation to generation.

God said that too wouldn't be enough.

Moses then said the children would guarantee that Judaism would continue from generation to generation.

God said,….. yes.

Friends, we are losing our children. They are walking away from Judaism, in fact some are running and what is leading them out the door is a deep generational divide with Israel.

A recent Brandies University study found that 20% of Jews aged 18-29 did not feel at all connected to Israel, compared to 13% of Jews aged 45-59 and just 7% of those above 60. This suggests a declining connection. We are losing our children more and more every year.

Young American Jews face a trying reality on college campuses. Universities have become the focal point of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction Israel Movement (BDS) – the global effort to delegitimize Israel. One observer refers to BDS as an "amoeba-like takeover of all Jewish life on campus".

Being Jewish on campus is no longer just about Shabbat dinners and Jewish dating – though certainly that still goes on. Ari Shavit is right, it has become a war zone, Hillel houses have become central command in the war for Israel on Campus.

As BDS groups lobby student governments to divest from Israeli companies, Jewish University students are faced with a difficult choice: As American Diplomat and conservative foreign policy advisor to Reagan and Bush, Elliot Abrams explained, a young Jewish student must choose between being a pro-Israel Jew or their liberal values. It seems that most are choosing the latter.

Jewish students who (still) love Israel and (still) feel close to it, are asking tough ethical questions that Israel has no answers for and the Jewish establishment forbid them to express – because to do so aides the enemy.

When Shavit made his dramatic statement this summer about the front line in the war for Israel being on University Campuses he did so after interviewing hundreds of students across North America.

He summarized what he heard with the following statement from one student:

"We feel like we've been abandoned on the battlefield. The anti-Zionists and BDSers are accusing us of collaborating with evil, but Zionism doesn't understand us and doesn't speak to us; instead, it's busy building more and more and more settlements." What are we supposed to do?

That's why their internal struggle is so agonizing and their pain so deep. That's why many of their in-depth conversations come to tears, and many more don't even want to talk about it.

The contemptible, sophisticated and well-oiled offensive by the BDS movement is a strategic threat to Israel. If it isn't halted, it could position the democratic Jewish state as the apartheid-era South Africa of 2020. But the real existential threat facing the Jewish people is the increasing tension between the liberal identity of most young North American Jews and the distorted image of Israel as an unjust oppressor and occupier.

As a result of this tension, some come out against Israel, some are confused and many are simply indifferent.

Rabbi Bregman says that the biggest challenge he and the staff at Hillel had during the BDS fight at UBC was not the pro-BDS camps, it was the apathy amongst Jewish students and Jewish faculty who just didn't show up. It may be more than not caring; it may in fact be that they feel abandoned by Israel.

This alienation is not the outgrowth of any single, particular event, such as the latest Gaza War or proclamation *du jour* by an Israeli politician. There is something more

profound going on today in the lives of the next generation of Jewish adults, and it may be going on for you, their parents, as well.
There were two fundamental events that defined world Jewry in the 20th century:

- the Holocaust,
- and the creation of the State of Israel.

These two events are at the core of your Jewish identity and why you are here this morning, but in a different but related way, how we view these events is also why your children are largely not in shul here or anywhere this morning.

Three-quarters of Jews 65 and older cite the Holocaust as a core aspect of their Jewish identity.

More than half of those same 'older Jews' say caring about and supporting Israel is central to their Jewish life.

But amongst younger Jews and Jewish university students, the Holocaust is 30% less important than it is to their parents and grandparents; Israel is 50% less important.

That the Holocaust is losing its prominence as an important part of North American Jewish identity may be surprising to older generations, but it is not shocking. As we move further away from the events of World War II, and survivors are no longer alive to personally relate their stories, the Holocaust becomes more of a historical event.

But why Israel? Why are our young people separating Israel from their Jewish Identity?

It's not that they don't think about Israel, or travel to Israel. More from this generation of young people have visited Israel than any other generation in the history of the Jewish State.

And yet 20% say they don't feel connected to Israel at all and 63% said it isn't that important to their Jewish Identity.

There is a profound crisis of Jewish alienation amongst Jewish Young Adults and unless we recognize it we might defeat BDS but we will lose a generation of Jews in the process.

My teacher, Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman, President of Shalom Hartman Institute of Jerusalem observes that, "since its inception, the Zionist movement has been divided between two different ideas and impulses."

The first he calls "Survival Zionism" which was championed by Theodore Hertzl. Hertzl's Zionist dream was predicated on the idea that if Jews are to live — literally

live — it is only possible in the context of a sovereign state, which serves as the homeland of the Jewish people.

This was certainly true at the time of the founding of the state as it rose from the ashes of the Shoah - but our own lived experience as Jews here in Canada has shown Survival Zionism to be past tense. Judaism is thriving in the North American Diaspora.

The second camp of Zionist ideas is “Cultural Zionism”.

Cultural Zionism – espoused by Ahad Ha’am - argues that Israel is necessary, because ONLY in Israel can a renaissance of Jewish ideas, religion, values, language, and culture be attained.

This too is no longer the case – if it ever was.
To most of us here Israel is ***not*** the center or source of our Jewish culture or identity, the synagogue and the North American Jewish community are.

Those two Zionist lenses are out of date and incoherent for our next generation.

While Israel faces an existential threat from Iran and others that wish to destroy it, the Jewish people do not.

Our greatest threat is **internal**, our greatest threat is **apathy**.

There is a story; about an hour or so before the opening session of the First Zionist Congress in Basel, on August 29, 1897, Theodore Herzl asked his aide, David Wolffsohn, to create a banner for the hall's entrance. A stranger to Basel, Wolffsohn had no idea where to go to find such a thing. He ran through the boulevards of the city, scouring the shops, to find a suitable emblem, but found nothing appropriate. Exhausted and frustrated, he entered a small synagogue to rest a moment. And there he saw his emblem. He took a large blue and white tallis, removed the fringes, and with a fountain pen, inscribed a Magen David in the center. Thus, was Israel's flag born. A country whose flag is a tallis, and whose anthem is a prayer of hope, is worthy of our best hopes and highest expectations, it is worthy of our children's **love**.

We taught our children those values, we weaned them on *Tikkun Olam*, Social Justice and the idea that the word Mitzvah meant Good Deed.

We taught them to see the suffering of others and act with compassion, because ‘those people’ were ‘our people’ only a few generations ago.

We taught them that their Judaism demanded they fight for justice, equality and a more peaceful, equitable world.

We taught them their Judaism is inseparable from their Zionism, its literally woven into the very fabric that symbolizes the country. We taught them to care, and we taught them, "if you will it, it is no dream."

We were not wrong to teach those values – because they are Jewish values – but they are struggling to see those values in the Israel they hear about on campus, they read about on Facebook. They are racked with questions.

K'neged arba banim dibra Torah. The Passover Hagaddah speaks of four questioning children, the wise, the wicked, the simple and the one who doesn't even know how to ask. We celebrate them because we know that to question is to be engaged.

How we answer questions is a big responsibility. Answering openly and honestly such as is offered to the "wise" child, encourages more questions, more searching. Defensiveness and belligerence–such as is offered to the "wicked" child, encourages belligerence at best and complete turn-off at worst.

Here's what our children want to know:

- What exactly should Israel be doing now?
- They want to know why the campus is erupting with BDS and Israel Apartheid Week?
- They want to know about Arab refugees and why Israel opposes a right of return?
- What about settlements? If Israel is committed to two states, as it says it is, why the unending declarations from Israel's government about more settlement construction?

And even if they accept that **Palestinian rejection of Israel is at the heart of the problem**, what, they ask, does Israel propose to do about it?

And beyond the Palestinian question – they come back from Birthright and they want to know:

- Why women are arrested at the Kotel for reading Torah – when they read Torah to cheers and celebrations at their Bat Mitzvah?

- They want to know about African asylum seekers in Israel and how the Israeli government's refusal to accept them meshes with what they say at the Passover Seder, that we must never forget that "we were once strangers in the land?"

As they fight BDS, and the Anti-Semitism of student council meetings and Israel Apartheid Week they are also struggling with themselves and these internal conflicts. **And you, their parents, you're struggling too; if not with the questions yourselves then how to answer them.**

We love Israel, **we support Israel**, there is no question for us that Israel's survival is essential, its role in the community of nations is valid and legitimate and at the same time neither Survival Zionism nor Cultural Zionism validate our Jewish identity, and we too, like our next generation, feel at times alienated from an Israel we love and will fight with our last breath to defend.

And therein lies the problem, for our children and for us.

When confronting an outside foe, when fighting BDS on Campus or Anti-Semitism in the streets of Europe or a student council meeting, or even when confronted with the existential threats posed by Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran, the battle lines are clear.

But when the challenge is this gradual, vague drift into apathy and alienation by the very brightest of our next generation, there is no simple or short-term fix.

But there ***is*** something we can do, in fact it's something we must do and we must do it now, before it's too late, BEFORE they go off to university and encounter the whirlwind of attacks and accusations.

No fewer than TWO recent studies show a significant rise in an ongoing commitment to a Jewish life and strong relationship with Israel for those who had been meaningfully engaged as teens prior to university.

Demographer Steven Cohen reports, "The greater the exposure of Jewish teens to positive Jewish experiences before university, the more likely they are to have a strong attachment to Israel and to engage in Jewish activities and communal life in their university years and beyond."

Those findings implore us to intervene early, before they arrive on campus and confront Israel Apartheid Week, or simply walk the other way.

We can fix this. We can rekindle a Zionism that sees that flag and that star as both the symbol of a Jewish state and Jewish values – woven together, inseparable in word and deed.

A Zionism that does not fear the hard moral questions, a Zionism that is not survivalist or cultural, but rather hopeful.

HaTikvah, the hope of 2,000 years.

We all need to grapple with these hard questions and but most particularly our teens need to consider them now, BEFORE they go off to university and are assaulted with them on campus. We cannot wait, we are losing them.

This year we have revamped our High School Program, we have extended it all the way through Grade 12 and it is now focussed on helping our students engage with Israel and their Jewish values. We've built a course of study around answering those difficult questions. And then because it takes more than course titles and a glossy brochure to engage our teens we did something bold. We said we would invest in their Jewish future, because they are our Jewish future.

Last year we piloted a program where every post bar/bat mitzvah student that completed a certain number of hours of Jewish learning would have the opportunity to go on a fully subsidized trip to Poland and Israel called the March of the Living. We sent two Grade 11 students on that transformative two-week trip to fight this apathy towards Israel as modern witnesses to past horrors against the Jewish people and then on to Israel, see its inherent value, in all its messy complexity and inconsistency.

Listen to what one of our students wrote after her experience:

"The horrors I witnessed in Poland are to be contrasted with what I experienced in Israel. While in Israel, I had the unique privilege to witness both Yom HaZikron- Israel's remembrance day for its soldiers and Yom Ha'azmaut- Israel's birthday. On Yom Ha'atzmaut, the entire country is in celebration - the euphoria is palpable. Despite the sadness one is left after being witness, I was left with contagious optimism and hope. Hope for a future without enemies; hope for the Jewish people and the Jewish nation surviving despite all previous oppression. The hope inside of me, is carried by every other practicing, Zionistic, teenage Jew today.

"The entire experience created for me a new sense of being connected to Judaism and Israel, in a way I never thought possible, and in way that my Jewish education through Talmud Torah and King David has not. The trip symbolized for me all adversity, intolerance, and persecution faced by the Jewish people yet at the same time creating a sense of survival and the possibility of a better future, for not just the Jewish people but for all mankind."

Those are the words of a 16 year old, that is a Zionism of Hope not Alienation.

The trip costs $6,000 per student, but as you just heard its impact is priceless. We are the only synagogue in all of British Columbia to send a delegation.

We need to send more; we need to send every student that commits to our course of study and hours of community service. The Jewish Federation has vowed to pay 1/3 of the cost, but I need your help to raise the rest of the funds.

We have 25 students that had a Bar/Bat Mitzvah last year - will you invest a toonie for each of them to insure that by the time they reach grade 11/12 we can provide up to a 100% subsidy for them to have this life changing and Jewish identity affirming experience? If you will, if every family will make a bar mitzvah gift of two

dollars for every child that completes Bar/Bat Mitzvah here at Temple Sholom, the Dayson Foundation has pledged a significant amount to match what we raise for the next three years.

Like Birthright, the March of the Living coupled with our five year High School course in Jewish Identity is the gateway to a connection to Israel and Judaism. But unlike Birthright - the March of the Living coupled with our High School program prepares them for Jewish Life on Campus BEFORE they get there.

The crisis is real, we are losing our children. They are estranged from Judaism and feeling alienated from Israel. The tallit and the star are unravelling before our eyes.

You want to do something. Help stitch them back together.

The midrash teaches that when Moses received the Torah on Mt Sinai God asked him who would guarantee that Judaism would continue from generation to generation?

Here is something you can do, we can all do to make sure the answer remains the same. Invest two dollars for each student that completes a Bar/Bat Mitzvah at Temple, let's create a fund that says to them, if you continue with your Jewish education, if you don't walk away we will not abandon you. We will engage with you, we will answer your questions, we will give you an experience and an education that will change your life and through you guarantee the Jewish future from our generation to the next.

Can you do that? Will you do that?

I guarantee we cannot wait!