

Our Votes Count...in Israel

Shabbat Bo 5780

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Tonight, we read God's promise: The Children of Israel will live in the land promised to their ancestors.

The centuries of Egyptian bondage might have been the first time that our ancestors prayed for return to the Land of Israel, but it was far from the last. In Babylon, the exiles "laid down and wept for Zion."ⁱ After the destruction of the Second Temple, from the year 70 until the modern State of Israel was established in 1948, our people prayed for return to the native land of our Jewish people and our Jewish faith.

Admirers worldwide were deeply impressed by the accomplishments of the early Zionists, who "drained the swamps and made the desert bloom." Israel's pioneering spirit continues today.

In November, 2016, during our first congregational visit to Israel, we enjoyed Shabbat with Congregation Bavat Ayin in the city of Rosh HaAyin. There, at least metaphorically, we saw swamps drained and a desert in bloom.

We worshiped with that spirited community. We witnessed the blessing of young people who had grown up in the congregation; and, having recently graduated high school, were about to begin their service in the Israel Defense Forces.

We also met two young women, apparently a couple, who grew up in Rosh HaAyin but had never previously visited this synagogue. A few days earlier, the women survived a dangerous encounter on Israel's highways. Their parents encouraged them to go to synagogue to recite *Gomel*, the prayer of gratitude for having escaped peril. The parents, who are Orthodox, knew that their daughter and her partner wouldn't feel comfortable or be well received in their own synagogue. Bavat Ayin, and Rabbi Ayala Shashoua-Miron were there for them—with loving, open arms, and with blessing.

In the Jewish State, the Judaism known to most people is a "swamp" of cruel intolerance and exclusion. This week, you might have seen the video: A woman had to run away from authorities because she dared to bring a Torah scroll to Jerusalem's Western Wall. The Ultra-Orthodox rabbinate, which controls marriage and divorce for all Israeli Jews, countenances only weddings performed in accordance with its rules and by its rabbis. A man of priestly descent—that is, a

kohen—cannot be married to a divorcee or widow in Israel. The child of a Jewish father, whose mother’s identity is unclear or not Jewish, but who has been Jewish all their life, cannot be married in Israel. A person who became Jewish by conversion under the supervision of Reform or Conservative rabbis cannot be married in Israel. Needless to say, a Jewish same-sex couple cannot be legally married in Israel.

And don’t even get me started on divorce for Jews in Israel. That women aren’t treated equally is a gross understatement.

Reform rabbis like Rabbi Miron, and their Conservative and Reconstructionist colleagues, are teaching Israelis about another kind of Judaism. Much like that young couple who came to Bavat Ayin for blessing, Israelis are increasingly learning that Judaism can be embracing of a wide variety of Jewish and personal identities and expressions, upholding Jewish values such as “Love your neighbor as yourself;”ⁱⁱ and “You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And Israelis are responding. “According to a survey [published in *The Times of Israel*], 57 percent of Israeli Jews polled indicated that Reform and Conservative Jews should be able to offer their own religious life-cycle services in Israel. A full half of respondents supported the government funding to these denominations, ‘according to their share of the population.’”^{iv} “The...Jewish People Policy Institute, a Jerusalem-based independent policy think tank, found that 800,000 Israeli Jews—or 13 percent of the country’s Jewish population—self-identify as Reform or Conservative, a marked increase from numbers charted in previous studies.”^v

On the evening that our group was at Bavat Ayin, though, we could not help but notice that the congregation’s worship space is unappealing, a rented room in a community center. They do not have their own building.

In Israel, land for synagogues is provided by municipalities, and money to build them is allocated by the Jewish Agency from funds donated through Jewish Federations, mostly in North America. For twelve years, each time Rosh HaAyin has built a new neighborhood, Bavat Ayin has petitioned for land. Each time, every parcel for a new synagogue has gone to an Orthodox congregation—often to a congregation that, unlike Bavat Ayin, doesn’t yet exist. Now, the City of Rosh HaAyin is building another new neighborhood, with about a dozen spaces designated for synagogues. The City Council designated all of them for the Orthodox. With the help of the Israel Religious

Action Center, Bavat Ayin sued. Months ago, the court—the judge is Orthodox, by the way—ordered the city to provide a space, but the congregation is still waiting. We remain optimistic. The story has been similar across Israel.

With its own building, Bavat Ayin will be able make the desert bloom. Already attracting hundreds of local residents to holiday programs that offer a liberal Jewish perspective, the building will make a strong, aesthetically pleasing statement to Rosh HaAyin that Judaism can be loving and welcoming, not exclusionary and angry.

We can help.

Five years ago, Reform Jews across North America voted for our Reform Zionist delegation to the World Zionist Congress in large numbers. Together with our partners in the Conservative Movement and a smaller, progressive group called *Hatikvah*, we garnered more than half of U.S. votes. The result is that Reform institutions in Israel now receive over \$4 million in Jewish Agency funding. Moreover, Reform leaders have a seat at the table when discussing expansion of settlements in the Occupied Territories. And we have an important forum in which to voice our concerns about women's rights, marriage and divorce equality, and racism.

World Zionist Congress elections come every five years. Beginning on January 21, many of us have already cast our votes for the ARZA slate. Voting continues until Purim. “Vote Reform!” Justice Annabelle Tuck is our captain to corral our members to vote in large numbers, which is why you have the opportunity to vote on Friday nights and Sunday mornings with help here at Temple. You can also do it on your own at home. The information you need is in your hands.

The stakes are monumental. Others have seen our success, and ultra-Orthodox communities can more easily motivate their members to vote. The futures of Bavat Ayin and other congregations like it are on the line.

I have a personal stake, with three nieces who grew up in Israel since their family made *aliyah* when they were 3, 5, and 7. All veterans of the Israeli military, each was married to an Israeli Jewish man, also a veteran, in weddings officiated by Conservative rabbis, which is to say that their Israeli marriage ceremonies weren't legally recognized in Israel. I had the honor of

officiating when two of those couples were married here on our *bimah*. Their marriages are now legally valid in Israel, absurdly thanks Arkansas marriage licenses.

I'm now a great uncle to five little Israeli children. With your help, Ron, Noah, James, Asa, and Dylan will grow up in a Jewish State where Judaism flourishes in all of its diverse expressions; where people of all genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations enjoy equal rights; and where they may, if they choose, be legally married, in Israel, by the officiant of their choice.

Then, will the swamps be drained and the desert bloom.

Amen.

ⁱ Psalms 137:1.

ⁱⁱ Leviticus 19:18.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 22:20, *inter alia*.

^{iv} Sam Sokol, "Poll: Israelis increasingly support non-Orthodox Jewry," *The Times of Israel*, December 24, 2018.

^v Hannah Dreyfus, "Liberal Branches on the Rise in Israel," *The New York Jewish Week*, October 16, 2018.