

## The Future of Israel: Jewish *and* Democratic?

### *Shabbat Lech-L'cha 5783*

November 3, 2022

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We should be celebrating Israel tonight.

This Shabbat, we read *Parashat Lech-L'cha*. God calls Abraham and Sarah to a land that God will show them,<sup>i</sup> promising, “through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”<sup>ii</sup> Repeatedly, God makes a magnificent promise to our founding matriarch and patriarch, culminating with the covenant which assures them that the land will be the eternal possession of their numerous descendants. What must Abraham and Sarah do? “Walk before me and be blameless,”<sup>iii</sup> God commands them.

Nobody human is perfect, of course. The verb “be” in the phrase “be blameless” is in future tense. God sets a goal to which Abraham and Sarah and their descendants must aspire: To live in accordance with God’s law.

Israel’s Declaration of Independence is also aspirational. It was written at a moment of unprecedented existential threat to the Jewish people, not only to the new state being born. Our people had been slaughtered by the millions in the Holocaust, an open wound when Israel’s independence was declared in 1948. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum reminds us: “At its peak in 1947, the Jewish displaced person population reached approximately 250,000.”<sup>iv</sup> Many of these Jewish refugees were unable or understandably unwilling to return to the nations that had initiated or abetted their destruction. Most famously, the British, rather than permitting Jewish refugees to enter Palestine, as they wished, “established a large displaced persons camp adjacent to the former concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen in Germany.”<sup>v</sup> The United States, Canada, Britain, and other nations permitted only a smattering of Holocaust survivors to immigrate to their lands. The Land of Israel was their only hope, their only refuge, the only place they could determine their own future.

The existential threat to the Jewish people extended to the that land. The Jews in Palestine faced armed opposition to their presence, and the British did not protect them. The United Nations had voted to end the British Mandate in Palestine with a partition, creating side-by-side Jewish and Arab states. The desperate leaders of the land’s Jewish community accepted, even though the territory allotted to Jews did not include Jerusalem or many other places where they had settled over the previous half century-plus. They accepted the partition, and they declared the state, knowing full well that neighboring Arab nations would attack, seeking the

new Jewish state's destruction. Arabs, not Israelis, refused to establish a Palestinian state on the land offered by the United Nations.

Even facing these threats, Israel's political founders aspired to live up to God's promise to Abraham and Sarah and God's requirement that they be a blessing, that they strive for perfection. The Declaration of Independence proclaims: "The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it 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 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." It further declared: "WE APPEAL—in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us for months—to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of **full and equal citizenship** and due representation..."<sup>vi</sup>

Yes, we should be celebrating Israel tonight, three days after citizens of the only democracy in the Middle East went to the polls. In the best of times, Israel is an imperfect democracy, not "blameless" as God commanded our founders. Arab citizens of Israel do enjoy the right to vote on an equal basis with Israeli citizens. However, Jews who live in the occupied West Bank are Israeli citizens with the right to vote, while occupied Arab populations do not. No, Israel is not an apartheid state, but there is not a better word to describe the glaring absence of democracy in the West Bank.

For a little over a year, Israel has been governed by a most unusual coalition. Politicians and political parties from the right, left, and center formed a government with the goal of keeping the indicted former prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, out of power. Government leaders did something politicians usually do not: They sublimated their own goals, even their own power, to achieve the greater goal of safeguarding Israeli democracy. The coalition included an Arab party, which also relinquished its priority of ending the West Bank occupation in return for a seat in the government and an opportunity to improve life for Israel's Arab citizens.

In response, Netanyahu and his ultra-Orthodox and fascist partners appealed to Israelis' basest instincts. They launched a relentless racist attack on the governing coalition on the basis of the inclusion of Arabs in Israel's government. On Tuesday, Election Day, racism ruled the day.

Many may be troubled that Netanyahu, under indictment for political corruption, is returning to power. Worse, Netanyahu can now form a governing coalition composed of his own Likud Party, two ultra-Orthodox parties, and a fascist party known for its incitement against Arabs; gay, lesbian, and transgender Israelis; and left-of-center Israeli politicians. Protecting the rights of minorities is central to any democracy but is now threatened in Israel. The newly elected majority promises to disempower the judicial branch, central to protecting individual rights in any democracy.

Last month, Israel Policy Forum, a center-left American Zionist think tank, issued a statement condemning and urging Israelis to reject “the antidemocratic, extremist views of Itamar Ben Gvir, his Otzma Yehudit party, and the anti-LGBTQ Noam party running with him, and to caution against the danger his inclusion in any Israeli government would portend for the U.S.-Israel relationship.”<sup>vii</sup>

The specifics articulated by Israel Policy Forum are harrowing: “Ben Gvir has been convicted for racist incitement, has glorified and incited terrorism, and openly threatened Prime Minister Yithak Rabin prior to his assassination. His decades-long campaign to treat Arabs as second-class citizens and cement their inferior status flies in the face of Israel’s recent steps toward more fully integrating its Arab citizens into politics and society. His inclusion in an Israeli coalition government, let alone his appointment as a governmental minister, would seriously undermine Israel’s efforts to address discrimination against its own citizens and would be contrary to Zionism’s principles of fundamental justice and equality. In a similar vein, Noam’s virulent homophobic and bigoted platform runs counter to any embrace of basic equality.”<sup>viii</sup>

Now, Itamar Ben Gvir and his party have received enough votes to become the third largest faction in Israel’s parliament. Unless both Netanyahu and a center-right party led by Gideon Sa’ar and Benny Gantz retract campaign promises, Ben Gvir’s party will be in the governing coalition, and Ben Gvir will be a government minister, likely the Public Security Ministry, a terrifying prospect for Israel’s Arab, gay, lesbian, and transgender citizens. Ministries that control religious status and rights are certain to be in the hands of ultra-Orthodox parties, a frightening prospect for Reform and Conservative Jews and non-Orthodox converts in Israel and worldwide.

No, we cannot celebrate Israel tonight, much as we wish we could. We can, however, and we must, recommit ourselves to the Jewish State and particularly to our Israeli family, friends and partners who are dismayed and likely to be harmed by these election results.

I plan to return to Israel in February, together with hundreds of Reform rabbis, for the annual convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. We convene in Israel every seven years, and this just happens to be the year. There could be no more important time for us to be there.

Reform rabbis will go to Israel in great numbers in February—to indicate our enduring commitment to a Jewish and democratic Israel, the nation-state of the Jewish people and of all its citizens, respecting the rights of every citizen, regardless of religion or ethnicity. We will go to Israel to stand with our too-often-beleaguered Israeli Reform and Conservative rabbinic colleagues and the communities they lead and serve. We will go to Israel to affirm our solidarity with institutions of Israel’s civil society, including LGBTQ organizations, that work every day for peace, justice, equality, and the rule of law. We will go to Israel to engage in dialogue with Israel’s elected leaders and to speak truth to power.

We will go to Israel to call on the Jewish State to keep faith with the covenant of Abraham and Sarah. Like our first matriarch and patriarch and like the founders of the State of Israel, let the Israeli people of today and their leaders aspire to a future when, once again, all the peoples of the earth may be blessed through the goodness of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 12:1.

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 12:3.

<sup>iii</sup> Genesis 17:1.

<sup>iv</sup> [Postwar Refugee Crisis and the Establishment of the State of Israel | Holocaust Encyclopedia \(ushmm.org\)](https://www.ushmm.org/education/teaching-tools/lesson-plans/postwar-refugee-crisis-and-the-establishment-of-the-state-of-israel).

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Declaration of Independence, Provisional Government of Israel, Iyar 5, 5708 (May 14, 1948). Emphasis mine.

<sup>vii</sup> [Reject Itamar Ben Gvir – Israel Policy Forum](https://www.policyforum.org/reject-itamar-ben-gvir/).

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.