

Connecting the Dots: The Basel 125th Conference and the Days of Awe

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As the month of Elul began, I had the privilege of attending the international conference marking the 125th anniversary of the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. What an exciting and moving event. Over a thousand of us came together in the same place and on the same date as that original gathering to celebrate Theodore Herzl's remarkable achievement in assembling 197 delegates with varying Zionist views to discuss the idea of creating a homeland for the Jewish people.

Those of us in Basel last month understood viscerally how important it was to mark this moment communally, to marvel at the miracle of a thriving State of Israel, established a mere 51 years after that first Congress and poised to celebrate its 75th anniversary this May. Conference speakers were brimming with ideas for addressing societal issues, such as economic inequality and a lack of affordable housing in Israel, as well as global challenges such as climate change, all with the aim of maximizing Israel's success and ensuring its sustainability.

At the same time, for all the spirited and fascinating talk, the silence on other vital issues—the needs of the Israeli Arab population, the unresolved status of Palestinians, the lack of religious pluralism—was deafening. It became clear to me that the panel I was asked to participate in—"A Twenty-first Century Zionism for a Twenty-first Century Jewish People"—was one of the few places where those challenges might be addressed. I attempted to do just that.

In Herzl's time, Zionism was synonymous with the creation of a Jewish homeland. But what does Zionism mean now, especially for young American Jews who have only known a strong, flourishing State of Israel?

As I said to a room full of participants attending my panel, I believe a new Zionism for the Jews of today and tomorrow—one devoted to strengthening Israel as a Jewish, democratic State—will only be forged through deep learning, active listening, and engaged dialogue. In this time of reflection before the Days of Awe, there is much we can learn from the Yom Kippur *Vidui*, the confessional we will soon be chanting, about the roadblocks we humans regularly throw in the way of genuinely listening to one another, especially when we disagree.

In thinking about a Zionism for the 21st century, we must recognize that the Zionism many of us grew up with was forged in a very different era from today. My own family's Zionist roots date back well over 100 years to my great-grandfather, Aron Shimon Shpall. Like Eliezer ben Yehudah, he spoke only Hebrew to his children in his eastern European Kremenets home. Forced to leave because of worsening pogroms, the family's circumstances led the Shpalls to the United States and not to the land of Israel, which Aron had dreamed of inhabiting. Yet this did not deter him from his goals, for in his view, Zionism could be achieved not only by settling the land of Israel but also by promoting a rich Jewish national culture throughout the world. Toward that end, the New Orleans Talmud Torah where Aron served as assistant principal provided young Jews with an intensive, six-day-a-week, Hebraic Jewish education.

My family continued his tradition of speaking Hebrew to our children and devoting ourselves to the Zionist dream. As a historian, I also know the many ways that Jews all over the world and in every era consciously have trained their focus on Zion. This longing for Zion—embedded in our liturgy, customs, literature, song, and art—has fortified Jews and bound them to one another.

Yet my vision of Zionism has also evolved, in large measure because I have been privileged to work for over 30 years with smart, talented, Jewishly curious students at JTS. The intellectual, communal, and political context through which they connect with Israel, especially in the last 20 years, differs dramatically from my own. Not only have today's young people grown up with a thriving Israel, but, for many, their world view is shaped by new insights into the historic and contemporary shortcomings of the United States that have touched a lot of us. Their love of Israel is impacted by concerns about equity, racism, and what they perceive as tribalism, and they worry that the State of Israel is falling short of its ideals of being a Jewish, democratic state. Some dismiss these young American Jews as uninformed, naive, or misguided. But if we are committed to the Jewish future and a Jewish State that lives up to our highest ideals as a people, we must engage with those whose love and support impels them to critique. This is especially true for those of us who are educators.

As chancellor of JTS, I lead an institution devoted to serious Jewish learning and open inquiry, to a flourishing Judaism and a Jewish, democratic state. I see JTS's role as fostering an honest appraisal of Zionism's present and future—rooted in history and anchored in love—which can point a way forward for the courageous leaders of today and tomorrow. These conversations must extend beyond the classroom and grow out of relationships with Israelis from across the political spectrum. We write off those who differ from us—in our own families, among our people, and in our country and the world—at our own peril. Rather, we must approach one another with radical empathy, which involves working hard to understand the feelings and views of others. As President Herzog said to us in Basel, “The Jewish People are one big family, and being family means regularly checking in with each other.” Though disagreements will always exist, “we must always insist on open, sincere engagement.”

This is so hard to do, as evidenced by the *Vidui*, which we recite repeatedly on Yom Kippur and which devotes so much attention to the harm we cause consciously and unconsciously through our words: idle chatter, foolish speech, gossip, the way we talk, speaking ill of others, everyday conversation; the confessional also includes the attitudinal failures we exhibit that further impede effective communication: clever cynicism, arrogance, condescension, stubbornness, rash judgment, baseless hatred.

We dwell on these shortcomings because they are ubiquitous in us humans. We fall short daily, if not hourly, in these areas. We inflict pain on those we love, assume we know what is right, and shun those whose words or stances seem beyond the pale. We must resolve to do better. Let's measure our words, approach others with humility, listen more deeply, engage more closely, understand the perspectives of others who differ from us, and work together with them to envision a more perfect future.

Our tradition demands nothing less of us. Though we know we will fall short—and will thus need to recite the confessional again next year and every year after that—we must do our part to move toward achieving these aims, for they are essential to the future of our people and our world.

Tellingly, the Neilah service, including the final prayers of the day, concludes with a yearning for Zion: “Next year in Jerusalem.” In doing so, our tradition is reminding us that our personal reckoning ought not only make us better people in the coming year. We hope that it will also reinforce the connection to Zion that we share and thus deepen our ties to one another as Jews.

Ken yehi ratzon. May it come to pass.



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