

Sermon for Yom Kippur - Jewish American Nationalism  
October 8-9, 2019 – 10 Tishri, 5780  
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton  
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Growing up in Waterloo, Iowa in the early 1980s, Nikole Hannah-Jones remembered something extraordinary in their front yard. The blue paint on their two-story house was always chipping; various parts of the house existed in a perpetual state of disrepair, but at the edge of the lawn, high on an aluminum pole, soared an American flag, which her father Milton would replace as soon as it showed the slightest tatter.

Milton was born in the mid 1940s into a family of sharecroppers on a white plantation in Greenwood, Mississippi. Life was extraordinarily difficult and dangerous for black folk in Mississippi. Milton's mother could not vote, use the public library, or find work other than toiling in cotton fields or cleaning white people's houses. So with three small children, she packed up her few belongings and joined the flood of black Southerners fleeing north. Arriving in Waterloo, how shattered she was to learn that Jim Crow did not end at the Mason-Dixon line.

In 1962, Milton joined the US Army, hoping to escape the poverty of his youth and to find a pathway to opportunity. Instead, he was passed over for promotions, discharged under murky circumstances, and then labored in a series of service jobs for the rest of his life. Like everyone in his family, he believed in hard work, but no matter how hard he worked, he never got ahead.

"How could this black man," wrote his daughter Nikole, "having seen firsthand the way his country abused black Americans, how it refused to treat us as full citizens, proudly fly its banner?"<sup>1</sup> But in spite of all he experienced, his love for America and his patriotism never waned.

I love America. I always have. My father worked for the Federal Government for nearly his entire career. He could trace part of his family's roots to New York City before the Civil War. My mother's parents immigrated to Canada from a small village in southern Poland in 1929, and eventually my mother came to the United States in 1963. Growing up in Washington, DC, national news was local news, and politics was frequently the subject of our dinner table conversations. We used to give my mother grief for kvetching about American politics – you're not a citizen so what's it to you? In 1988, when I was 19, I was so proud to accompany my mother to her citizenship exam and to see her join the ranks of proud American citizens.

This past summer, watching the US Women's soccer team dominate the World Cup, I rooted for them with utter abandon to win. I'm sure the women from the Netherlands are very nice, other than that one player who kept fouling everyone, but I'm an American – I root for America.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Idea of America," by Nikole Hannah-Jones in *The New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 2019, p. 16.

I guess I am in many ways - a nationalist. Nationalism is a powerful force in bringing people together, celebrating the common heritage, culture, and values of a particular people, and ensuring that the citizens of that nation come together to protect each other from threats, and support and uplift each other to achieve some measure of self-actualization – to become all that we can be.

I think about all that America has contributed to the world – in technology and industry, in science and medicine, in music and the arts, and I feel tremendous pride. When I see photographs from fifty years ago, when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin planted an American flag on the surface of the moon, my heart swells with pride with what we as Americans have accomplished.

It's the same feeling I have as a Jew when I think about the State of Israel. As a Jew I feel a kinship with the State of Israel, even though I do not make my home there. I remember as a kid seeing an El Al 747 and feeling an overwhelming sense of pride: "Hey that's our 747!" I hear Hebrew spoken in the grocery store and I want to stop and say, "Hey, we're family!"

Nationalism has gotten a bad rap recently. It carries a connotation of chauvinism and separatism. Some describe nationalism as a regressive force that, "appeals to our tribal instincts, to passion and to prejudice..."<sup>2</sup> We hear the term nationalism and think of white nationalism, right-wing extremism and the drift to fascism. But identification and pride for one's own nation and support for its interests does not have to imply a belief that one's country is superior to all others, or that other countries are to be distrusted as rivals.

To understand what it means to be a patriot – to love your country and to love your people - we need to go back to the beginning – to think about what it really means to be a nation at all.

The Torah teaches us that at the beginning, God created one human being and set him in the Garden of Eden. But God soon realized it was not good for a human being to be alone, and so God took one of Adam's ribs and fashioned it into a woman to be his partner.

In thinking about the creation of Adam's partner, why did God choose the rib? The rib cage is what protects our hearts. In order to love someone, you have to be willing to open that cage and expose your heart. So a fitting helper – an עֶזֶר כַּנְגִדוֹ – *Ezer K'Negdo* – is someone who agrees to be your rib – who will look after you and care for you, who will ensure your safety and will protect your heart.

Thus the building block of nations is the family. The Torah commands that I honor and respect my parents by caring for their needs and showing deference to their wisdom. I must care for my spouse and see that our household is safe and secure. I must care for my children, provide for their needs, and raise them in mind, body, and spirit. It is ultimately to them that I owe my loyalty.

Every year, I gather the students of our tenth grade class in my living room for our first confirmation class of the year. I bring them to my home because I want them to know how much I care for them. I want them to feel like family.

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<sup>2</sup> Yael Tamir, *Why Nationalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019, p. 26.

But I am not paying for them to go to college. I am not providing for their health insurance. And I am not taking them on vacation. As much as I love them, and I really do love them, I prefer my children and my family. At my son's graduation, I cheered for MY kid. When my daughter moved into college, I unpacked HER dorm room. At my daughter's recital, I videoed HER dance on my IPAD.

And just as I prefer my family to yours, I prefer my people to other people. It's not that I bear any animus or hatred for other peoples – some of my best friends are .... But I am a member of this congregation, and I prefer it to other synagogues. I hope you do too. I am a Jew, and I support Jewish causes because they are my people. I am an American, and I root for America. I don't prefer my people because Jews or Americans are intrinsically superior to other people, but because I believe so deeply in what we are supposed to be about.

At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the German philosopher Martin Buber taught that it is not enough for us simply to live our lives in pursuit of our physical needs. Each of us needs a mission, a “destiny and calling,” a higher and holier purpose that gives meaning to our existence.

The same is true, Buber taught, for a nation. The land of Zion, he taught, was not simply a piece of property promised to the Jewish people. “It was,” he writes, “always at the same time a challenge to make of it what God intended to have made of it,” a Holy Land.<sup>3</sup>

God formed the Jewish people into a nation – not simply for the sake of creating yet another nation, but for a much deeper purpose. God formed us as a nation to become, as Isaiah taught, a Light to the Nations – to teach the world a different kind of moral code, where human life is understood to be of infinite value; where wisdom and understanding are of primary concern; where compassion and justice are our obligation to pursue; where the poor and the vulnerable are to be raised up and protected; where freedom is to be championed and love to be extended not simply to self, but to neighbor, and stranger; where we strive to render each and every moment as sacred.

It is this sacred mission that has held our people together throughout our agonizing journey through history. Through exile, subjugation, massacres, inquisition, dispersion, pogroms, and Holocaust – it is the sense of sacred mission that makes our nation worthy of our loyalty and fidelity.

Our national identity, as Jews and as Americans, comes from the stories we tell that form our collective consciousness and memory. Former member of Knesset and scholar Yuli Tamir wrote: “National consciousness and collective memory form a cognitive map that helps us define who we are, where we are, and where we are heading. Without it we are lost.”<sup>4</sup>

As Milan Kundera wrote: “Remembering our past, carrying it with us always, may be the necessary requirement for maintaining, as they say, the wholeness of the self ...

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<sup>3</sup> “Nationalism as a Spiritual Sensibility: The Philosophical Suppositions of Buber's Hebrew Humanism” by Paul Mendes-Flohr in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 69, No. 2, April 1989, p. 167.

<sup>4</sup> *Op cit.* Tamir, p. 67

memories have to be watered like potted flowers, and the watering calls for regular contact with the witnesses of the past...”<sup>5</sup>

Nations form rituals to water our memories and remind us of who we are and to what we belong as a people. As Jews we gather around our Seder tables each year to tell the story of our people – and we retell it in a uniquely Jewish way - with familiar words in our holy language, in poetry and in song, and in the fashion of our unique culinary culture. But we do not simply tell the story – we tell what that story means. We tell a story of liberation because freedom is essential. We remove wine from our cups for each of the plagues visited on the Egyptians to remind us that we must care even for the suffering of our enemies. We open the door for Elijah to remind us that work still needs to be done to work for the redemption of the world. And we proudly say, “it is because of what God did for me when I went forth out of Egypt.” In telling and retelling the story of my people, I make that story my own.

This happens in the State of Israel today. Every year, the entire nation observes Yom HaShoah – Holocaust Remembrance Day – and even though more than half of Israelis come from lands that did not suffer Nazi genocide, still they embrace the Holocaust as part of their national narrative. An Iraqi, Persian, or Ethiopian Jew may not have lost family to the concentration camps, but they still recognize that tragedy as part their own national collective memory.

I love America not for her spacious skies or amber waves of grain or her purple mountain majesties, but because of its story, a story that has captured the imagination of the world since her founding. The story of America is a story of a nation that champions freedom over tyranny, where those fleeing religious and ethnic persecution could find the freedom to practice their faith and express themselves in safety, a land of opportunity where hard work and ingenuity could lead to prosperity, and where real justice and the rule of law were sacrosanct.

The story of America is one of extraordinary ingenuity and industry, the nation that pioneered the assembly line, that invented the airplane, that cured polio, that landed a man on the moon, that invented the personal computer and the cellular telephone, that gave us Disney and Pixar and Rhapsody in Blue.

But the story of America is also a much darker tale, a story of subjugation and slavery, a history of xenophobia and bigotry, a saga of misogyny and homophobia. The story of America is built on the backs of millions of slaves, is the story of Jim Crow, redlining, lynchings, and signs reading “no Blacks, Jews, or Dogs Allowed.” The story of America is also one of new immigrants, women and children trapped in sweatshops, internment camps and McCarthyism.

But what I love the most about America is that her story is also the story of those who fought to help America atone for her sins, who as Americans, fought and died to make America the best version of herself. America is not just the story of George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, Abigail Adams and Julia C. Addington. It is the story of Harriet Tubman and WEB Dubois, of Susan B. Anthony and Alice Paul, of Cesar Chavez and Daniel Inouye, of Harvey Milk and Billie Jean King. It is not just the story of slavery and

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<sup>5</sup> Op. Cit. Tamir, pp. 66-67.

racism, but the story of those who fought for abolition and Civil Rights. It is not just the story of sexist oppression, but the story of those who fought for women's liberation and equality. It is not just the story of abusive labor practices and homophobia, but the story of those who fought for the rights of workers and the right for gay men and women to live their lives openly and with dignity.

Why did Milton Hannah fly a pristine American flag in his front yard? Because he knew that his people's contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were indelible, that the story of the United States could only be told with his story.

On Yom Kippur, we use this day to think about how each of us can change, to become the best version of whatever we can be. And on Yom Kippur, we think about our nation, and how we, as citizens, can work to help her become the best version of whatever she can be. Not just wealthy, and powerful, and strong, but compassionate, just, and a force for good in the world.

I want to challenge us to become Jewish American nationalists – professing the moral and spiritual truths of Jewish text and tradition while weaving our unique heritage and culture into the larger fabric of American nationhood.

If we are true Jewish American nationalists, then we will not rest until the dream articulated more than fifty years ago by Martin Luther King is realized, a dream rooted in the American dream, a dream that one day this nation will rise up, and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

If we are true Jewish American nationalists, then we will work to ensure that the American dream is open to all, from the poorest neighborhoods of south Chicago or South Central Los Angeles, to the poorest cities in Arkoma, Oklahoma or Weston, West Virginia.

If we are true Jewish American nationalists, then we will celebrate the fact that every American is a "real" American, no matter where they live, what profession or trade they practice, no matter their economic stature or level of education, no matter their political affiliation, the religious faith they profess, their gender or the hue of their skin.

If we are true Jewish American nationalists then we will ensure that the rights and dignity of indigenous people, minorities, immigrants and foreigners will always be respected and defended.

If we are true Jewish American nationalists, then our primary care and concern for America and Americans will not be grounded in a false sense of superiority but in a belief that other peoples and nations have the same right (and duty) to pursue their [own] goals as do we."<sup>6</sup>

If we are true Jewish American nationalists then we will not turn our backs on the rest of the world, but rise once more to be the ones leading humanity to a future that is more compassionate, more just, more free, and more holy than what we know today.

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<sup>6</sup> Op Cit. Tamir, pp. 178-181.

If we are true Jewish American nationalists, true American patriots and true to our values as Jews, then we will be the rib for each other – protecting the heart of every Jew, of every American, and build together a nation whose story we help to author, that we are proud call our own, and for which proudly raise, on a shiny aluminum pole, the flag of these United States of America.