



High Holidays Sermon Prompts for 5780

As Jewish clergy, we often feel called to speak about Israel on the High Holidays—and as progressives, we often find ourselves not quite knowing what to say. We may feel a little stuck. We offer these prompts and stories in the hope of helping you get un-stuck. Join your colleagues and **pledge** to give a progressive Israel sermon.

Sermon prompts:

- How do we stay engaged with Israel, when it feels like nothing ever changes?
How do we conjure hope when the situation seems hopeless? How can we see Israel in a new light?
- Gershom Gorenberg, the Israeli journalist, wrote in *The Unmaking of Israel*, “A country ... can be best understood by its contradictions.” Which of Israel’s contradictions are most intriguing/infuriating/present for you at this moment?
- One of the most common mistakes we humans make is to think we are better people than the people in our lives who love us but make us nuts. How does that dynamic play out in your relationship to Israel?

FOR INSPIRATION:

Rep. John Lewis (D-GA) tweeted (July 16, 2019):
“Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Do not become bitter or hostile. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble. We will find a way to make a way out of no way.”

Rabbi Amy Eilberg teaches in *From Enemy to Friend: Jewish Wisdom and the Pursuit of Peace* that the experience of authentic human connection can help us move past traumatic historical memory.

Here are four stories to move us out of the realm of ideas and remind us that, when we talk about Israel, we’re talking about people.

1. PLANTING AND REPLANTING TREES FOR JUSTICE

In honor of Tu BiShvat, rabbinical and cantorial students studying in Israel for the year went with T’ruah to plant 50 olive trees in A-Rakeez, a tiny village in the South Hebron Hills. Within days, half of the trees were uprooted by settlers. The students went back to replant the trees that had been uprooted, this time attaching to each tree a laminated tag that contained Maimonides’ injunction that it is forbidden to uproot fruit trees—in Hebrew, English, and Arabic. The students also discussed the spiritual and activist significance of going back in the face of the unknown. If the settlers uprooted the trees again, would their replanting have made a difference? This is our rising generation of religious leaders: rabbis and cantors who have been to the West Bank, have met with Palestinian and Israeli activists, and can teach their communities about what it will take to build a joint future.

Read more in the [Philadelphia Jewish Exponent](#) and [The Baltimore Sun](#).



2. SEEING THE OCCUPATION AND ISRAEL

Before J Street U's "Let Our People Know" trip, most of the 28 American Jewish college students who participated were familiar with facts and figures about Israel and the conflict, but many felt utterly unprepared to bear witness firsthand to the hardships faced by both Palestinians and Israelis on a daily basis. The trip was structured both to provide a nuanced understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the occupation, and to help participants examine their own Jewish identities and connection to Israel. It included visits to the West Bank village of Susya, where residents bear the full brunt of the occupation, and to the moshav of Netiv HaAsara, on the border of Gaza, where residents have dealt with Hamas rocket fire since 2001. After the trip, the students expressed feeling more connected to Israel, Palestine, and the people who live there than ever before. While they heard many different perspectives, most agreed on one thing: Major change is possible. The trip participants are starting conversations within their Jewish communities, and organizing, leading, and educating on their college campuses.

Read more in [The Forward](#) and [The New York Times](#).



3. ZAZIM: GET-OUT-THE-VOTE IN THE NEGEV

On the eve of Israel's elections in 2015, Prime Minister Netanyahu sent a video to his supporters warning that left wing NGOs were "busing Arabs to the polls in droves." This was a baseless fear tactic. But the fact is, some Palestinian citizens of Israel, particularly Bedouin in the south, couldn't even get to the polls. So, during the April 2019 election, Zazim, Israel's version of MoveOn.org incubated by the New Israel Fund, decided to turn Netanyahu's racist invective on its head. In a crowdfunding campaign, more than 1,400 Israelis collectively donated tens of thousands of shekels to help Zazim bring Israel's Bedouin citizens to the polls. The organization hired fifty minibuses that then shuttled Arab citizens to the polls. Netanyahu's Likud party tried to shut down the initiative through legal harassment, but democracy and equality won in the courts. In this upcoming election, Zazim is training election monitors who will help prevent Likud voter suppression tactics.

Read more in [Haaretz](#) and [+972 Mag](#).

4. ADALAH HELPS TO DESEGREGATE AFULA PARK

Earlier this year, the mayor of Israel's northern city of Afula imposed restrictions on the city's main park, allowing in only residents of Afula, who are overwhelmingly Jewish. Sowing fear and division is a popular political strategy, but it doesn't always win. Nareman Shehadeh-Zoabi, an attorney at Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, brought her child to the park from the neighboring city of Nazareth and was turned away. But Adalah and Shehadeh-Zoabi submitted a petition to the Nazareth Administrative Court. Not long after her humiliating experience of being shut out, and with the support of Israel's attorney general, the court ordered the city of Afula to reopen its central municipal park to all Israeli citizens.

Read more in [Reuters](#) and [The Jerusalem Post](#).

The Progressive Israel Network is a coalition of 10 leading organizations representing Americans committed to pursuing democracy and equality in Israel and to peace between Israelis and Palestinians. The coalition speaks with a unified voice in support of democracy and equal rights, religious freedom and pluralism, and a two-state solution.