



A plea to the Jewish diaspora - protecting the land we love!

Being a young progressive Zionist is a strange intersection of identities for myself and many other young Jews across the diaspora. In several non-Jewish progressive spaces, any utterance of the “Z word” is immediately alienating and pigeonholes me as an active contributor to colonisation. In several Zionist spaces, any criticism of Israel makes me a radical progressive who despises the soul of the Jewish People. As a young person, any opinion I hold is considered to be lacking in experience and, therefore, invalid or irrelevant.

What, then, is a young progressive Zionist, like myself, meant to say when the country I love is falling apart? What can I do, as an individual in Australia, in response to such an enormous ongoing threat to Israel’s existence as a democratic State? How can I stay true to my progressive and Zionist values when the fabric of Israel’s liberal and Zionist identity is being challenged in its foundational institutions?

The current Israeli government would like us to believe that judicial independence is a threat to democracy; that the right of return should not be guaranteed to all; that some citizens or residents of Israel and the West Bank are more equal than others; that discourse which promotes settler violence and terrorism has a place in Israeli society; that religion should play more of a role in Israel’s governance while religious freedom should not be guaranteed to all. While we should be celebrating the new delay of the judicial overhaul legislation, we should not be so fooled into thinking that the threats from this extremist government are over.

We must continue to remain careful of those who use Zionism to fuel hate and division and work to reclaim Zionism upon the values on which it was founded. Theodor Herzl imagined a liberal democratic State that sat as equal in the international arena. Chana Szenes imagined a home where Judaism flourished because of its powerful connection to land and commitment to socialist values. Rav Kook imagined a nation free from the corruption that led to the demise of our autonomy in Eretz Yisrael during the Second Temple period. Rachel the Poet imagined a land with gender equality, where all people worked to better the collective. Even Ze’ev Jabotinsky, on whose ideology the Likud party was founded, imagined a place where true democratic values thrived. Our Zionist forefathers and mothers must be churning in their graves at the state of our nation today.

How could we let the movement for the physical, cultural and spiritual liberation of our People stray so far from what it was meant to be? What is our responsibility now, simultaneously allowing us to move forwards while bringing Israel back to its roots?

The Zionist youth have always played an instrumental role in Israel’s development. As *chalutzim* (‘pioneers’), they made enormous sacrifices to leave the comfort of their family homes for a vision of a better future for the Jewish nation. As *habonim* (‘builders’), they built the Jewish State from the ground, creating strong institutions embedded with both Jewish and democratic values. Today, they lead protests in Israel to save the State they worked so hard to create. But, the young Israeli Zionists cannot do it on their own.

Many Zionists today believe that aliyah is a phenomenon of the past, a proud memory of the active role young Jews played in establishing the Jewish State while conveniently forgetting any obligation we might still have towards the State we created. However, the most effective diasporic response to today’s crisis, which has long been brewing through the growing power of the Haredi Rabbinate, expansion of settlement activity in the West Bank, and democratic instability, is another wave of aliyah. With an influx of progressive Jews from across the world while the right of return still protects our freedom to live in Israel, another wave of aliyah could utilise sheer demographic power to ensure that those championing the judicial reforms and other problematic policies do not return to the Knesset. It would allow us to enact change on the ground, creating a larger voice of reason within Israeli society to slow down Israel’s shift to religious and conservative extremism which has plagued the country over the last 50 years.

However, aliyah on its own is not enough. This is why, in my youth movement, Netzer, we speak about *aliyah nimshechet* - continuous aliyah. *Aliyah nimshechet* is not just immigrating to Israel and voting, but becoming an active member of Israeli society in order to make a difference. *Aliyah nimchechet* recognises that only in



Israel do Jews bear the primary responsibility for governing a nation. Unfortunately, this responsibility has been abused by those claiming to act in the name of Judaism. However, this responsibility is also what will let us raise our Jewish voices of dissent. Being in Israel allows our youth movements to gain political capital, the Zionist to protest the Jewish State, and the Jew, as a Jew, to enter politics and lead a nation. Aliyah is undeniably scary, but it may be a necessary sacrifice to save our State, and, in doing so, protect the nation we love.

However, aliyah is not an option for everyone and there are certainly significant ways to impact change from the diaspora. First and foremost, we must be loud. While we may not and should not be entitled to vote in Israel, we can certainly be opinionated on the state of our Jewish homeland. Already, diasporic leadership has expressed outrage at the proposed reforms and grassroots movements across the globe are standing in solidarity with protest movements in Israel. A strong voice from the Jewish diaspora both paints a picture of the effects these reforms will have on Israel-diaspora relations while showing support to our brothers and sisters in Israel and Palestine. Protesting has already effectively delayed some of the reforms, so let's keep our voices raised in order to put an end to them for good!

Second, we should educate ourselves and others on what is going on in Israel. The more we know, the better we can respond.

Third, we should be careful where we send our money. For those who are able, we should strive to support NGOs and grassroots movements who are on the front lines in Israel, such as, through the UIA Progressive Appeal, while ensuring not to give to agencies, political parties and organisations who support the current government.

Finally, we must maintain hope. *Hatikvah* ('the hope') sustained the Jewish people for thousands of years in the *galut* ('exile') and we should not underestimate the power of hope and optimism in ensuring that the Zionist State does not lose sight of the values on which it was founded.

For millennia, we have been guided by the Prophets of Israel to fight for a Jewish State imbued with cultural pluralism, economic equity, environmental consciousness and social justice. Many Jews today are under the illusion that this fight for a Jewish State is over. The difference, however, between 'Zionism before' and 'Zionism today' is that instead of fighting the governments of the world for permission to establish a home for the Jews, we are now fighting our own government for a State that is worthy of being this Jewish home.

As Jews who believe Israel should be championing *tikkun olam* by becoming an *or l'goyim* ('light unto nations'), **we must rejoin the Zionist fight**. And not just a fight for the bare minimum - for a stable democracy - but a fight for the highest moral standards our Judaism lets us imagine. A fight for justice. A fight for human decency from our leadership. A fight for equality between Jews of all affiliations, and between Jews and non-Jews. A fight for democracy. Whether by educating our friends, engaging in political advocacy, donating to Israeli NGOs, or, most significantly, by making aliyah and gaining a vote, the choice for what to do now is ours.

As it says in the Talmud, *Kol Yisrael Arevim Ze Bazei* - 'All Israel is responsible for one another'. Let's embrace this responsibility, and, until the Jewish State becomes the moral beacon it was intended to be, let's keep on fighting!

Nilmad v'Na'aseh - We will learn and we will do!