

## UnXeptable Australia Saving Israeli Democracy Speech

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### Why are we here today?

What began as small grassroots initiative by Israelis living in San Francisco, California, has now evolved into a global movement in over 30 cities around the world from San Francisco, New York, Vancouver, Madrid, London, Sofia, Oslo, and, now, Melbourne. UnXeptable- Saving Israeli Democracy - is an outcry from the Jewish world in solidarity with our Israeli family conveying our outrage at the reforms proposed by the newly elected Israeli government, threatening our core Jewish and democratic values upon which our Jewish homeland was built.

I've asked myself why I have never taken to the streets over various decisions made by previous Israeli governments. I promise there was much I struggled with and vehemently disagreed with. But this is different.

Jews around the world find ourselves in a challenging situation. Israel, the homeland for the Jewish people, developed to be an *or l'goyim*- a light unto the nations - a role model to build a country founded on our Jewish values of equality, compassion, empathy, and justice, is now threatening to make decisions which undermine those core foundations.

Theodor Hertzl, the father of Zionism, said:

"We need a land upon which the [all] Jews will be recognized as a human being, wishing to work and live in freedom." (Hertzl, T. (1898) *The Return to the Homeland will Commence Soon*).

Ahad Ha'Am, the father of Cultural Zionism said: we need Israel to be our 'national spiritual centre', a 'safe retreat' not for Jews, but for Judaism..." (Ginsberg, A. (1981) *An Open Letter to My Brethren in the Spirit*).

Benjamin Netanyahu in 1993 said in a speech: "The rebirth of Israel ... is the incomparable quest of a people seeking, at the end of an unending march, to assume its rightful place among the nations". With such legislation, which nations do you seek a place with?"

So, I ask:

- Is the current Israeli government creating a "land upon which the Jew will be recognized as a human being, wishing to work and live in freedom"?
- Is the current Israeli government creating "a safe space" for all expressions of Judaism?

- Is the current Netanyahu government creating legislation aligning us with governments with democratic values and setting Israel up “to assume its rightful place among the nations”?

But, who am I to speak up? I live in Australia, not in Israel. Some say that those of us – both Israelis and non-Israelis – who have chosen to live outside of Israel have no right to speak out against the Israeli government.

I say, why, then, can we, as Jewish Australians, speak out against injustices in any other country around the world without being accused of betrayal or of threatening that country’s right to exist?

Surely, fighting for a Jewish homeland to uphold our values is not just permissible, but obligatory. Former Defence Minister, Benny Gantz is encouraging protests as “a **civil duty**”.

Some say, that as a religious leader, I should not be political.

I say, how do we distinguish between politics and Jewish values? Although different prioritisation of values inform party policies, surely transgressing our Jewish values transcends party lines.

Supreme Court President Esther Hayut said the current judicial reforms would “‘crush’ the judicial system and deal a ‘fatal blow’ to democracy”. She stated that the role of the Court is to protect human rights in Israeli society, “to ensure that the rule of the majority does not turn into the *tyranny* of the majority.”

Should we sit *shtoom* when human rights are being threatened? Afterall, our Torah teaches us: “All human beings are created “בְּצֶלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים”, *in the image of G-d* (Gen. 1:26), and yet, all human beings will not be treated equally with these current reforms. Upon becoming Prime Minister, Menachem Begin, Bibi’s role model, said: “We do not wish to evict, nor shall we evict, any resident from his land. And they must live together in peace, mutual respect, equal rights, in freedom with socio-economic progress.” A free and independent judiciary is the only way to ensure this. Is that what this government proposing to do?

Hillel said:

— דַּעְלָהּ סְגִי לַחֲבֵרָה לֹא תַעֲבִיד  
זו היא כל התורה כולה, ואידך פירושה הוא

*What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Torah. All the rest is commentary...*

(Shabbat 31a)

Surely, our right to offer support or to protest a governmental policy is a basic democratic obligation. Just because our preferred party is not elected does not mean we give up on our country. *Kal v'chomer* – all the more so – do we fight for the rights,

values, and decisions we think are best for our country, recognising that not everyone agrees with us. **Silencing the dissent is silencing democracy.**

Just take one look at the Talmud. Since when did Jews ever agree? Although the majority voice may win, the minority voices are always recognised, sometimes even swaying the ultimate decision. So, speaking up and speaking out is not only about politics, but is, and has always been, the Jewish way.

Finally, some say, this is the end of democracy. Former Supreme Court President, Aharon Barak, went as far as to say that these "...reforms were 'a string of poison pills' that would mark 'the beginning of the end of' Jewish sovereignty".

In the educational website "Israel Unpacked", Avi Posen cautions us against "doomsday thinking" - that this will be the end of Israel, that this will be the last generation living in sovereignty on our Jewish homeland. When there is a crisis in Israel, people panic. But Israel has survived and will continue to survive.

Posen argues that the issue is not about being pro-Israel or anti-Israel. Rather, the biggest threat to Israel is indifference. Protesting is a sign of a healthy democracy. It shows we care enough to be here and make our voices heard.

The question is not about being pro or anti Israel, but about being a Zionist. To be a Zionist, Posen says, is "to get up and do something, to be developers of our Jewish story, to be agents in our history, and determine our future."

Surely, our Jewish values of *tochecha* (rebuke) and *teshuvah* (repentance) remind us that we have an obligation to call out behaviour and decisions we feel are threatening to the greater good and enable those (including governments) to learn from their mistakes and make better choices. How do we know what are the "better choices"? That is why democracies have a system of checks and balances within governments (which the current Israeli government is trying to remove, which would leave our beautiful Jewish homeland more vulnerable to corruption).

So, regardless of our political orientation, these issues in Israel affect us all and transcend the politics, touching the core of the Jewish nation.

Personally, I have agreed and disagreed with various Israeli governments. I have felt proud and ashamed. But never have I felt that Israel is in danger of losing sight of our core values. And never has my commitment to our Jewish homeland waived.

So, why am I here today? Because I love Israel. Because I am not indifferent. Because I am educating myself and cannot remain silent in the face of injustice. צְדָקָה תִּרְדָּף. Justice, justice shall you pursue (Deut. 16:20).

So, I stand here calling for justice – for a justice system with checks and balances, for legislation that protects the rights of all its citizens (regardless of gender, sexual orientation, race, religious affiliation or expression), for a justice system that upholds the rulings that many have spent decades to change such as maintaining an egalitarian section at the Kotel for all genders to pray together side by side, for all genders to ride on public transportation without segregation, for the LGBTQIA+ community to be recognised as equals in their loving relationships, for Progressive/Reform and Masorti conversions to be recognised in all Jewish rites, including the Law of Return, for settlements in the West Bank to stop, for the death penalty to NOT be Israel’s new normal.

“Israeli author **David Grossman** told a crowd at the recent Tel Aviv rally. ‘Now is the moment to stand up and cry out: This land is in our souls. What happens in it today, will determine what it will be and who we and our children will become.’”

So, I am here standing up and crying out. Are you?

I am here in solidarity with family and friends in Israel. Are you?

I am here because I care and love Israel. Do you?

I am here because I want an Israel I am proud of, with its flaws and imperfections, with its accomplishments and contributions, with governments I agree and disagree with, but with the faith that our Jewish democratic values upon which our Jewish homeland was built will continue to prevail.

I am here because I am a Jew and Israel is the homeland of my soul.

אם תרצו, אין זו אגדה

“If you will it, it will be no legend.” - Hertzl

**I will it, do you?**

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