

Manifesto of a Progressive Zionist **Rabbi Max Miller | Temple Emanu-El Atlanta**

I was 8 years old and a bright new 3rd-grade student at Colony Meadows Elementary School in Sugarland, Texas, a suburb of Houston. I was starting to get into sports, and having moved from Richmond, Virginia where there were no major college or professional teams, I was eager to be a part of this new athletic landscape. I remember my first day at school. At lunch I sat down to talk with my new friends and classmates. When they discovered I was born outside of the Great State of Texas, they had to know what box to put me in. The very first question I got was a test of allegiances, a litmus test that would determine my tribe for the rest of my life in Texas. I was asked, “are you an Aggie or a Longhorn?”

At that point in my life, I don’t think I knew the difference between a first down and a touchdown, and I certainly didn’t know what an Aggie or a Longhorn was. For those still at a loss like I was, the Longhorn is the symbol of the University of Texas in Austin, and the Aggie is the symbol of Texas A&M University in College Station. All I could tell is that one was good and the other was bad. That was it in Texas; you could either be the Mordechai hero from the University of Texas, a Longhorn, or you could be the Haman, the wicked villain from Texas A&M University, the Aggies. The only thing I learned during that first day of school was that I wanted to be a Longhorn—however one did that I wasn’t sure. Since that day, I haven’t encountered a decision so clear. A decision so easy to determine right from wrong.

A few weeks ago, about 23 years after the lunch table at Colony Meadows Elementary School, I was eating Ben and Jerry’s ice cream, well really it was the dairy free version because I have an Ashkenazi stomach, so it was technically “frozen iced dessert.” I digress—I never imagined eating Ben and Jerry’s would be a moment between choosing good versus bad. On one side there are Zionists throwing out their Chunky Monkey, against those in opposition, the anti-Semites who seek the destruction of the State of Israel—and to eat all of my dairy-free salted caramel swirl. There I stood, between it all, holding a spoon and a pint full of Chocolate Fudge Brownie.

I’ve started calling this “Ice Cream Zionism.” Suddenly, when Ben and Jerry’s, maker of Charoet flavored ice cream, pulled their stock of ice cream and production facility out of the West Bank, Zionists across the globe opened their freezers and the streets and sewers were flooded with soupy Cherry Garcia. For Ben and Jerry’s and Unilever, their parent company, this was probably not a good business move. Many Palestinians and Israelis lost their jobs because of change, and Ben and Jerry’s will make less money for leaving the market. The move certainly made a statement and drew attention to the intractable and ever deepening conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. But today, the beginning of September, we’ve largely moved on. Ben and Jerry’s is mostly out of the news. And the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict hasn’t changed. Eat the ice cream or don’t eat the ice cream, this will not end the military occupation of the West Bank territories, nor bring about a Two-State Solution any faster. If anything, this move has shown us what we’ve always known, the most effective way to change public policy is at the ballot box and by lobbying for policy change.

And yet, where we stand on the issue of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream, our stance is seen as a statement of our Zionism. But at its core, Zionism is the belief that Jews have the right to safety,

security, and self-determination in our ancestral homeland—a Jewish State. We ought to measure our response to news concerning Israel and the Palestinians based on this core definition. However, we are not just Zionists. Zionism has been and will always be a hyphenated term. In our case, at Temple Emanu-El, we are Progressive Zionists. Progressive in this case is in the Jewish context, not in the American political context. The word “Progressive” here means loving the Jewish State whether or not we love the Israeli government at any given time. Progressive means advocating for an Israel that reflects our Reform Jewish values.

Today in Israel, our Reform movement advocates for progressive values on a daily basis, through the Israel Religious Action Center, not some American organization imposing our culture onto Israel, but as Israeli Reform Jews who care about equality in public spaces, advancing freedom of and from religion, ensuring state recognition and equal status for Reform and Conservative rabbis, synagogues, and institutions, strengthening Israel’s democracy, advancing racial equality and combatting hate, protecting the rights of converts and immigrants to become Israeli citizens and enjoy equal rights. This is Progressive Zionism as it blooms from within Israel. This is the next generation of Reform Judaism in Israel. This is what it means to be a Progressive Zionist. Love the Israeli government don’t love the Israeli government, but always love the one and only Jewish State.

A couple of months ago we lost a giant of our movement, in Hebrew we call him a part of g’dolei hador—the greats of our generation. Rabbi Dick Hirsch—alav hashalom—was instrumental in the movement of Progressive Zionism. Whether we know it or not, Temple Emanu-El is the embodiment of his vision. Rabbi Hirsch would always remind those he taught of the importance of that phrase in Deuteronomy, “Justice, justice you shall pursue,” tzedek, tzedek tirdof (Deut 16:20). We at Temple Emanu-El live by these words. Our social justice committee is compelled by the urgency of this phrase to lead us to take the world from where it is to where it needs to be. But Rabbi Hirsch would remind us that “tzedek tzedek tirdof” isn’t the whole verse! The pursuit of justice isn’t enough, it isn’t where the idea ends. The verse continues, “v’yarashta et-haaretz asher Adonai Elohecha notein Lach,” so that you may live and inherit the Land that Adonai your God has given you!” tzedek tzedek tirdof v’yarashta et-haaretz asher Adonai Elohecha notein Lach. Justice, justice you must pursue so that you may inherit the Land that Adonai your God has given you. Our pursuit of justice is inseparable from our pursuit of Zionism, of attaining and remaining in our Land.

Rabbi Hirsch believed that the way for the Jewish people to best pursue tzedek is through tzion—justice through Zion. Our Zionism is directly connected to justice. As a nation among the nations, our prophets implore us to be a guiding light of righteousness to the world. This is the purpose of having a Jewish State. When we live out our Jewish values as a state, we perform tikkun olam, repairing the world. We bring tzedek, justice.

Being a Progressive Zionist today takes courage and determination. Courage, because Zionism is not necessarily in vogue in American liberal circles, and the progressive values of our Movement are not necessarily accepted by those who sit to the right. However, the dilemma of a progressive Zionist is not a recent phenomenon. Eighty years ago, when Rabbi Hirsch was then just a boy living in Cleveland, his rabbi was a man named Abba Hillel Silver. Rabbi Silver was nationally and internationally known as one of the foremost Zionists, and at home, in Cleveland, he was the

rabbi of a non-Zionist congregation, the norm in classical Reform circles in that time. Rabbi Silver's shul was devoted to the words of the prophets—statements like, “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God,” or, “The fast that I, Adonai, desire is to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and shelter those who live without,” but they were ambivalent on the question of Zionism.

Being a Progressive Zionist like Rabbi Silver in his day, the 1940's, meant being a vocal critic of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, an icon and the recipient of near-universal adoration from the American Jewish community. While Rabbi Silver held passionate progressive beliefs, he sharply criticized the Roosevelt Administration for diminishing the threat Hitler posed to the Jewish community of Europe. Later, Rabbi Hirsch described Rabbi Silver as having intellectual integrity and as someone who never shied away from voicing dissent.¹ We ought to take a page from Rabbi Silver's book, that being a progressive, a conservative, a Zionist, a Patriot, these are not acts of blind faith. We do not have to accept the entire platform of beliefs that seemingly all others espouse. Another great Jewish teacher, Rav Steven Spielberg, taught us this lesson when Jedi Master Obi-Wan K'nobi told Anakin Skywalker that only the Dark Side deals in absolutes. Being a Progressive Zionist, and for that matter being a Jew, is a rejection of absolutism and an embrace of wrestling within the gray areas of life.

Today witness Progressive Zionism in the dozens of Reform synagogues holding Rosh HaShanah services for thousands of Israelis this week. These services are being led by more than 100+ native born Israeli Reform Rabbis. And these rabbis are influencing graduating Israeli high school seniors to participate in a gap year program run by Israel's Reform Movement. These young men and women are learning to become leaders in the Israeli Defense Forces guided by the values of our Movement. Progressive Zionism is a part of every layer of Israeli society.

At Temple Emanu-El, we act on these values when we gather as a community in this space to celebrate Jewish holidays, when we choose to live according to the Jewish calendar and connect our holy days, to tikkun olam, and to our relationship with Israel— to pursue tzedek through tzion, justice through Zion. Our teens act on these values when they travel with their rabbis on the teen leadership trip to D.C. as we lobby our elected officials for a country that is consistent with our Reform Jewish values. And our adults act on these values when we travel to back to capital hill for the AIPAC Policy Conference to lobby for a strong, bi-partisan American-Israeli relationship.

This is all a very rosy picture I'm painting, but where Progressive Zionism leaves ideological conversations and meets the real world is when a beloved ice cream company, a Jewish founded company no less, who pursues justice by donating to social justice causes, makes a business decision that does not necessarily align with our Zionism. We are also challenged when, at the Kotel, ultra-Orthodox Jews throw hot coffee, raw eggs, and water bottles filled with urine at Jewish women trying to pray aloud with a Torah scroll. Being a progressive Zionist means pursuing justice through Zion: speaking up to an Israeli government who turns a blind eye and gives a cold shoulder when fellow Jews demean one another; as well as standing up for Israel against a boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement which targets the very idea of a Jewish state existing anywhere let alone in tzion, in Zion, in our Land.

¹ Hirsch, Richard, For the Sake of Zion p.3

I am under no pretense that any of this is simple. Standing with Israelis, even Haredim, when Israel is under figurative and literal fire—and also opposing toe-to-toe those same Haredim when they denounce our practice of Judaism as a desecration of God’s name requires an Olympic level of gymnastics in our minds. Being against Settlements as a barrier to a two state solution, but conflicted when a beloved ice cream brand pulls out of an area unilaterally. A Progressive Zionist must wrestle with the shades of grey in life. It means pursuing tzedek through tzion, justice through Zion, and by loving the Jewish State whether or not we love the current Israeli government.

Unfortunately, that support for Zionism and the State of Israel are trending in the wrong direction, diminishing as each generation since 1948 passes. For those who remember 1967 and 1973, you remember a time when Israel’s safety and security was hanging by a thread. You witnessed the military miracle of a small nation of refugees, immigrants, and Holocaust survivors, having no standing army, defending their families from certain annihilation against the elite, British trained Egyptian and Syrian standing armies. And they did so—twice. Zionism amongst you and your peers is overwhelmingly positive. However, since 1973, not every operation, battle, conflict, or war has been so clear and felt like 1948, 1967 or 1973. Subsequent generations have held a mixture of pride and pain when the topic of Israel or Zionism arises. Israel is indeed a miracle, but as a State like all others around the world, it is subject to the same if not higher standards than the rest of the world. Since 1973, every subsequent generation has seen Israel’s success, blunders, and tragedies. When there were SCUD missiles falling on Tel Aviv during Desert Storm, we circled the wagons to defend our own, and when the atrocity of Sabra and Shatila occurred in Lebanon, our heads bowed in shame. And my generation knows all too well the terror instilled in every bus and taxi rider on the streets of Israel during the second Intifada.

Being a Progressive Zionist should not mean being a blank check Zionist, offering blind support for the State of Israel; rather, we ought to have clear eyes about Israel’s successes and achievements and its imperfections and shortcomings. Anything less than an authentic look would be disingenuous, and pushes away those who might otherwise rally to our support.

If only the questions of Zionism were as clear as being an Aggie or a Longhorn, a Bulldog or a Yellow Jacket, picking chunky monkey or mint chocolate chip cookie dough. Living in the gray is not easy, only you can decide whether you’ll stock your freezer with Ben and Jerry’s Cookies and cream cheesecake core or Haagen Daaz double chocolate chip. Only you can decide if Ben and Jerry’s is the line you draw in the sand of your Zionism. That is what these High Holy Days demand of us: namely, to take a good look at how our actions line up with our beliefs, how well we are living up to our highest ideals, and where we might have fallen short in the year that has passed. These ten days are intended as the time to wrap up a year that was and to prepare for a year to be. The pen is in our hands to write our story that goes in the Book of Lives Well Lived. May that story be written with ahavat Yisrael, a love of the People Israel, the Land of Israel, and the State of Israel.

Am Yisrael Chai
Shana Tovah

And Gut Yontif