

Shana Tova Congregation Or Ami,
Saying that it's great to be back and see you all, is an understatement.

One of the most principal prayers and pinnacle of the Rosh Hashanah service is the Unetaneh Tokef prayer. In this prayer, we conclude that the way we establish for ourselves a good, sweet, and happy new year is through three things: Teshuvah - the return to the essential, real self as a Jew, Tfillah - individual judgement of oneself, and Tzedakah - justice and notion of giving back. The prayer reads, "ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה" "מעבירין את רע הגזרה". Through Teshuvah, Tfillah, and Tzedakah, we will destroy evil decree and have a meaningful, positive, fruitful, and happy new year. Rosh Hashanah is a time of self reflection, and this year, I reflect on the past two years I have spent in Israel.

My wonderful grandparents, Fred and Elena Pelsinger, joined Congregation Beth Am in 1977. They raised their three beautiful daughters, Mindy, Shara, and Janna into the merge with Or Chadash. My loving parents, Eric and Shara Hymowitz, then raised me, my sister, Jady, and my brother, Reece, instilling our Jewish values and traditions here at Congregation Or Ami. As a minority in the Katy, Texas bubble, my Judaism and Zionism became my most valuable asset, for it grounded me and made me feel at home. I used this inspiration and value, secured by my community to dive deeper into my Jewish and Zionist identity.

Making the decision to expand my boundaries, I spent the next 9 months on Young Judaea Year Course's gap year in Israel. I lived in Tel Aviv for 4 months, tasting independence and volunteering, while the second 4 months were spent in Jerusalem, learning about Zionism and studying Judaism with our programs Rabbi. Throughout the year, we visited many sites, and explored many cities, but however wonderful, it was the individual conversations that I had with my Israeli, American, and English peers that made all the difference. To understand their perspectives, learning who they are. Words can't explain the raw impact made from just me and another individual discussing what it was like to be a Jew in our respective countries.

פקל קפה in the negev, hikes in the Golan, Kotel meditations, Shabbos challahs, late night conversation, and independent studies revealed my true Jewish identity. One that connects through tradition and culture. One that connects through history. I became acutely aware of the inseparable nature of Jews, Judaism, and the land of Israel. I would be a part of our practice and our history as a nation. But how?

I thought and struggled with the impact and role of being a Jew in the diaspora, and a Jew in Israel. What could I give? What responsibilities did I have to the Jewish homeland and its people while living as an American? To advocate for Israel, face and combat anti-semitism and anti-zionism, contribute צדקה and תיקון עולם. And to be a Jew in Israel? Or should I say עולה חדשה? חיילת בודה? To remind Israelis to be proud,

inspire them with Zionism from abroad, serve and protect, contribute to the nation I call home.

I can still pinpoint the one moment where everything began to make sense. At the halfway mark of our year, we spent a shabbos at Kibbutz Ketura, established in 1973 by a passionate group of Year Coursers. We spent one evening in the desert and read a letter sent home by one of the teens, Don Tucker, justifying his Aliyah and commitment to Israel. "I cannot be happy in a society that does not need me. I have no purpose in America. Whatever I do is depriving someone else from doing the same, and whatever I don't do will surely be done by someone else. Israel does need me, the desert needs me, the Army, the government and the people need me to help this country exist." As harsh as these words may have sounded, this was the first time I felt that someone understood me. From that moment, we were encouraged to step out into the desert, and find a place to think as the sun was setting. There I sat, and there I cried. מי אני, who am I? I knew in my heart and in my soul, that it was impossible to leave this place.

With plans to study at Tulane University, I looked towards an Israeli alternative. This past year at Reichman University, in Herzliya, I learned a lot. Of course academically (don't worry pops), but about my life in Israel. That my role and understanding of this country has and will forever evolve. A tourist, a gap year participant, a student, a soldier, a member of society.

And what kind of life do I dream to live? One that challenges me. I want to learn and be challenged. As an עולה חדשה, life will always be challenging, but I will continuously learn about myself, my Jewish identity, the people of Israel, and the land beneath us. I dream to be a part of something bigger than myself, and Don Tucker took the words from my mouth, "I have a dream, a dream that I can build something positive, create a new society for myself, help build and protect the country that I love, search for a new and better type of life and search for answers to my thousands of questions in a new environment."

I will build something positive, for I became the best version of myself as a Jew and a human being, here in Israel. I have opened my eyes to the basic privilege that I have, that makes all the difference. To freely separate challah on shabbat, to touch the western wall, to return to the Holy Land, and to have a country to protect. Our people have been tested throughout history, but we always persevere. It is this very reason, that we owe it to ourselves as Jews, and the ones before us to reach our full potential, follow our dreams, and build something positive, whatever that may be. We all want to find meaning and purpose in our life. You should not be afraid to recognize that. You deserve to feel needed, to find your purpose.

On this Rosh Hashanah, I encourage each individual to reflect upon the notions of Teshuvah, Tfillah, and Tzedakah. Teshuvah; the idea of returning, the idea of finding your place, Tfillah; to judge oneself, to ask the question, "what is my purpose as a

Jew?", and finally Tzedakah; to go and do the thing that brings justice. Here I stand, telling all of you, my own personal Teshuvah, finding my place, Tfillah, discovering my purpose, and Tzedakah, doing my thing. Each of you will have your own different questions, with their different answers, but if you form that, it won't just be that this coming year will be one that is happy and healthy, but will be most meaningful.

As I left to begin my journey in Israel, I received a blessing from the congregation. I stand with my Or Ami family once again, entering the next and most meaningful chapter of my life.

With the love and support of my family and friends, I decided to make Aliyah and draft into the Israeli Defense Forces. May 26th, 2021, I became an Israeli citizen, and December 29th, 2021 I will become a lone soldier.