

MK Rabbi Gilad Kariv maiden speech at the Knesset, May 5, 2021

Speaker of the Knesset, my dear friends in the Labor faction: Omer, Emily, Efrat, Ram and Ibtisam; my inspirational - and dare I say faithful - friend MK Meirav Michaeli; and all members of the Knesset

Before I begin, I must pay my respects to the memory of all who have perished in the great tragedy in Meron last week, and I pray for the speedy recovery of those who were injured in the terrorist attack in the Shomron.

With great excitement, I stand here before you today, and I am reminded of the first verses of Parashat Netzavim in Deuteronomy:

“You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your G-d [...] and I make this covenant [...] not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our G-d and with those who are not with us here

I have immense gratitude first and foremost for those who are here with us today – my parents Avital and Shlomo, my partner Noa, my three children Amalia, Avigail and Amos, my sister Lihi and her son Amitai, my aunt Yali and my in-laws Tzvika and Dalia. As Rabbi Akiva said of his love Rachel – all that is mine is theirs. I am also grateful for those who are not here with us today, in particular my four grandparents, who I was blessed by their good influence for many years

Many happy hours of my childhood were spent visiting my grandparents in Tel Aviv. Their homes were both Israeli, Zionist and very secular, bursting with love for the land of Israel. One of the homes belonged to Savta Elka and Saba Shimon – who was injured during his military service in the Hagana in Kibbutz Ramat Hakovesh and years later joined the Lechi. The second home belonged to Savta Chana - who had left her Haredi family at age 16 without severing their loving relationship – and Saba Emanuel, who had made aliya as a child in 1921, with his widowed mother and young siblings. When he was 33, he was called upon by Ben Gurion to help establish the IDF's engineering corps, on the eve of the Independence War. Later, he worked as the CEO of the Dead Sea factories, in the days before our precious natural resources had been carelessly privatized

It was near this home that I discovered the neighborhood synagogue, as a strictly secular young child who was always attracted to Jewish tradition, prayer and literature. This moderate religious-Zionist synagogue was my home throughout my youth. These were years filled with studying, scouting, political activism and friendship.

Later on, as I neared the end of high-school, I embarked upon yet another spiritual journey from the Orthodox synagogue of my youth to the Reform community in Tel Aviv, and the many endeavors of the Reform movement in Israel and all over the Jewish world.

Throughout this journey I was well aware that Jewish tradition and culture are a central part of my identity, alongside the belief in equality between men and women, and the recognition that dignity for humankind, love of the stranger and the pursuit of justice and peace are values inseparable from my Judaism. Even then I was adamant that in 4000 years of Jewish thought, one can find both inspiring human sensitivity as well as fundamentalism, outbursts of creativity alongside deep conservatism. The question that always guided me was not “What is Judaism?”, but rather “Which interpretation of Judaism will I choose?”.

In the Beit Daniel community in Tel Aviv I met many committed partners who shared with me a longing for an Israeli egalitarian Judaism. This is the community where I met my life partner – Noa; the community where I became a rabbi; where both my daughters read the Torah at their Bat-Mitzva; and where they continue to lead prayer to this day.

It is in this community, during the Shavuot holiday of 1996, that Lea Rabin carried a Torah scroll dedicated to her late husband Yitzchak Rabin of blessed memory. In this community, I was honored to read the Torah with special needs youth. In this community hangs to this day a rainbow tapestry in honor of Shira Banki of blessed memory, who was taken from us in the Jerusalem Pride Parade by those who had violently distorted the Torah of Israel.

I share this story with you today not only as a personal biography. I want to suggest that there are a growing number of Israelis who seek to deepen their knowledge of Judaism and make it a meaningful part of their lives, without giving up on liberal values. These Jews are standing up for their right to navigate both Western democratic liberal culture as well as the richly diverse world of Jewish thought.

For these people, there is no contradiction between these two worlds. There is a third path, through which we can together balance both our private and communal spiritual lives; accept social and political responsibility as well as tikkun olam; and combine creative religious innovation with a deep respect for our intergenerational roots. There is no contradiction between Zionism, Jewish solidarity, and a universal, humanitarian worldview.

The growth of the Jewish pluralist renewal movement, which I have had the honor to be among its leaders over the last two decades, is the explicit expression of this important process. This movement has raised several important ideological flags – tolerance, equality and most importantly, the recognition that there is more than one way to be a Jew. This movement is not just directed externally, but internally as well. It is a broad and diverse Israeli movement that includes a wide range of communities: orthodox, conservative, Reform and secular, as well as *batei-midrash* of all types, educational institutions, pre-army seminars and youth movements, adult communities and educators, cultural institutions and civil society organizations; and most importantly, we are a diverse community with many different lifestyles but we are all Israeli - secular, traditional and religious as one.

As is the way of any young ideological movement, the Jewish renewal movement is finding its path step by step, navigating many obstacles. The biggest obstacle, not surprisingly, is the monopoly over Israeli Judaism that has been given to one particular denomination and institution, in a gross breach of the core values of the Israeli Declaration of Independence. This grim reality of monopoly, coercion and discrimination in the name of religion, continuously violates the basic rights of millions of Israeli citizens: women, hundreds of thousands of immigrants and their children, members of the LGBTQ community, liberal citizens as well as Jewish renewal communities, Israeli citizens of other religious affiliations and many others. This violation in turn severely undermines Israel's commitment to democratic values, equality and freedom of religion and belief.

No less important, are the severe consequences these policies have for Israel's basic identity as a homeland for the Jewish nation, and for the relationship millions of Israelis have with their own Jewish culture. These policies deepen feelings of alienation and anger, and cause a

very broad part of the public to view the state religious establishments as a source of corruption and power struggles rather than as an inspiration and moral, social and unifying power.

I believe these harsh words tell the story of the upsetting processes Israeli society is experiencing, but they are also true of Israel's relationship with world Jewry. In the last few years, the Israeli government has explicitly turned its back on millions of diaspora Jews, because of their communal and religious identity, and often because of their political views—as if the Zionist tent has enough room only for those who support the current incumbent government. Mending Israel's relationship with the liberal Jews of the world on the basis of mutual respect and recognition are worthy Israeli and Zionist goals. I am happy to be standing here today and to speak the voice of my brothers and sisters in the Diaspora, whose love of Israel is genuine but sadly, they rightly feel all too often that this love is one-sided.

The distortion I'm talking about in the relationship between religion and state, which I worked on as a civil activist, does not only entail the freedom of religion and the freedom from religion of the citizens of Israel - which they are supposed to be granted naturally. It also relates to the complicated relationship between the Jewish state and the Jews of the diaspora. Regarding this relationship, in the eighth decade of the country's existence, Israel is standing at a profound crossroad.

In the lively political and civil debate that the Israeli society holds on its path and values, there are great forces who search to take advantage of the Jewish tradition and the Zionist vision in order to justify nationalism and racism. Others do so in order to deny the legitimization of their political opponent's opinion, to denounce any appeals against the government's actions, whether by individuals or organizations, and constantly measure the absolute loyalty of citizens. They do so while totally ignoring the ancient holy prophets of Israel, whose vision was mentioned in the Declaration of Independence. They were the first to stand bravely opposite the king and ruling authority.

The leaders of these maneuvers do not hesitate to quote any slogan, reference or Zionist saying. But truth be told, more often than not, their rhetoric is merely pseudo-Zionist. This rhetoric seeks to reestablish the public and political discourse of a pre-sovereign era.

According to these forces, we are not dealing with leading a mature country, but rather with the continuation of the pre-mandate Jewish struggle against forces of darkness from within and without. This tactic does not derive from any sentimental feelings. It is entirely a dry political calculation to attempt to excuse Israel and Israeli society from the burden of challenges that are upon its shoulders, as a country that is modern, civilized and advanced, that seeks at once to be both a national home for the Jewish people and all of its inhabitants, and a democratic state of all its citizens regardless of religion, ethnic origin, language and gender.

Amongst these challenges - is the promise of equality and opportunity to each and every citizen; the protection of human rights; the reduction of economic inequalities; the reparation of the relationship between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority and encouraging coexistence; the prioritizing of the public interest over individual preferences; the promotion of social mobility and equal access to resources; the cultivation of a pluralist and tolerant society; the deep concern for the environment; and of course the striving for a political agreements and peace - not only with the Gulf state, but more importantly with those with whom we share the promised land.

As the continuation of the Israeli Labor movement, these challenges of creating a just, tolerant and peaceful society are exactly the weight we are willing to carry. For us these are not only political assignments, but also a deep expression of the way we understand the essence of our Jewish and democratic state and the great challenges of the Jews in Israel.

The way we see it, if there is someone who forgot how to be Jewish, then he or she are turning their back to these challenges, or even worse - sees them as an expression of national weakness, or of distancing from the Zionist vision whilst blurring the lines of Jewish identity. From this Israeli, Zionist and Jewish position, derives our decisive refusal to give any institution or religious denomination ownership and exclusive monopoly on Judaism and Zionism.

Naturally, this refusal incites a strong argument, which echoes in this political house at all times. As always, achieving compromises and approval are worthy and important goals. But the basic condition of these goals is that around the negotiation table no-one will shout and demand: "It's all mine", whilst the other side is constantly forced into a defensive mode. The

two sides must hold the prayer shawl and be willing to share it. Only in this kind of discussion, we can build bridges wide enough that will allow more than one to cross them at once.

Speaker of the Knesset, my friends,

In the last 20 years as a Reform Rabbi in Israel I was able to accompany thousands of individuals, couples and families in moments of sorrow, but mostly in moments of joy and new beginnings. The happiest of these moments were the thousands of weddings I ordained from all the spectrum of the Israeli society. Couples who could not get married through the Orthodox institutions, and many more who consciously chose a Jewish egalitarian Chuppa. Couples born in Israel raised by Olim; couples in which one partner was Jewish by birth, and the other - by choice. Couples of a bride and groom, and also couples of two grooms or two brides.

At the end of the seven blessings, after we bless the couples with “love, comradeship, in peace and in deep friendship”, and after we ask that only voices of happiness and joy will be heard in the “cities of Judaea and outskirts of Jerusalem”, I would always read a song of prayer by Lea Goldberg, that is included in many new Hebrew and Israeli prayer books for the Reform Jewish communities in Israel, alongside the traditional prayers.

“Oh lord my God please teach me how to bless and pray

The truth of falling leaves. And fruits of summers day

The freedom that it brings - to see to feel to breath

To know, to yearn, and even fail.

Teach my lips a song that tells us how to praise

The morning and the nights the secrets of your ways

Guide my mind to find the truth, see through the haze

'cause I don't want no ordinary days”

With the beginning of a new officiation that I hope will be the beginning of a long term and that makes a positive difference, I pray that I will continue carrying blessings every day and a song of grace for the great privilege of being a public servant in this institution - alongside both partners and challenging rivals, and that this mission will never become habit for me.

Blessed are you God, who created me in your image.

Blessed are you God, who created me free.

Blessed are you God, who created me Israel.