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A prayer for Israel

O Holy One of Blessing
We come before You to ask for Your blessings.

Long ago,
You changed the name of your servant Jacob
to Israel, "God-wrestler."
And God-wrestlers we became,
the name of a people and a land
that You promised would flow with milk and honey.
A land that included many peoples
between the sea on the west and the river on the east
among and alongside whom we could thrive.

Thousands of years later, on part of that same land,
we created a state to which we gave the same name, Israel,
with a dream that it would be a light to the nations,
a place of holiness and sanctuary,
a place of safety for the Jewish people
and a place of protection and dignity for all who called it home,
a place where we could flourish and grow into a new future
replacing the nightmares of centuries past
with *Ha-Tikvah*, the hope, carried for thousands of years.

We come before You on this Rosh Hashanah as the people Israel,
Still wrestling with who we are and what we should be.
And this year when we look toward *Tzion*,
toward the land of Israel You led us to,
and toward the State of Israel we created,
When we think of the dream and the promise that were ours,
Our hearts are broken and our eyes are filled with tears.

We hear the anguished cries of the hostages still held in Gaza,
their bodies broken, starved and tortured,
but their spirits somehow clinging to life,
along with the hostages who did not survive
but whose spirits still suffer
as their bodies lie far from their families and their land,
and we suffer along with them.

We hear the mourning keen of the bereaved families of Israel,
the parents and siblings of those murdered on October 7
and of the hundreds of soldiers killed in battle since then,
and our hearts ache along with them.

We hear the horrible silence

of the thousands upon thousands of innocents in Gaza
who have died in the past year,
the stunned speechlessness of their families,
the sharp cries of the injured and the orphaned,
the supplications of the hungry and the homeless,
and our tears flow along with them.

We hear the hundreds of thousands of Israeli voices of protest,
filling the streets and demanding the end of the war
and the release of the hostages,
calling for diplomacy and negotiation
to bring the nightmare to a close,
and our own voices cry out along with them.

Alongside and below and surrounding these voices of the present,
we hear the rush of the voices of the past.

The voices of Zionist leaders like Herzl, advocating for a Jewish state
who said, "Whatever we attempt there to accomplish for our own welfare
will react with beneficent force for the good of humanity."[1]

The voices of medieval sages and poets like Yehuda ha-Levi, dreaming of Zion
who said, "My heart is in the east,
even though I am in the uttermost west."[2]

The voices of ancient rabbis and teachers like Tanchuma,
who said, "As the navel is the center of a human being,
the Land of Israel is the center of the world."[3]

The voices of Biblical prophets and seers like Isaiah,
who said, "[God] will gather the dispersed of Judah
from the four corners of the earth."[4]

The voice of Moses in Egypt transmitting Your word
who said, "'I will bring you into the land
which I promised to give
to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.'"[5]

Your voice, God, at the beginning of the Jewish people
who said, "Go forth from your native land

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[1] Theodor Herzl, "A Jewish State," translated by Sylvie d'Avigdor and Jacob De Haas.
https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_Jewish_State_(1917_translation)/Conclusion
[2] Yehuda HaLevi, *"Libi ba-Mizrah,"* translations vary.
https://poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/2014/08/yehuda-halevi-my-heart-is-in-east-from.html
[3] Tanchuma Kedoshim 10 (Buber 78).
[4] Isaiah 11:12.
[5] Exodus 6:8.

and from your father's house
to the land that I will show you."[6]

These voices ground us,
these voices inspire us,
these voices challenge us.

And so we turn to You, O God, at this time of turning,
with prayers, desperate prayers on our lips.

Help us open our souls
to the wrestling we must still do
as we consider how to live and to act as the people Israel,
the God-wrestling people,
alongside all the other peoples You created in your wisdom
to live with us in this world.

Help us open our hearts
to the suffering, the heartache, the tears, and the voices
that rise up to us and into us from all sides and all peoples
that live in the land between the sea and the river.

And help us open our ears
to the promise and the ideals and the dreams of millennia
that propelled us to create the State of Israel,
letting them inspire us anew
to commit to all the best that this State can be,
showing us the way
toward change, growth, and goodness
for all of its inhabitants.

O God, save us from despair.
Fill us once again with *Ha-Tikvah*,
with hope for the future.

Open the hearts of leaders on all sides
to compassion and care for their own people
and for other peoples,
knowing we are all inextricably and forever intertwined.
Let them hear good advice and counsel
leading them away from hate and disaster
and toward a new beginning.
Show them and us the way to a future
that will build on our brightest dreams and our deepest hopes
for what the State of Israel can be,

[6] Genesis 12:1.

a model of human redemption.

O Holy One,
may you bless the State of Israel and all of its citizens,
the land between the sea and the river and all who dwell there,
and the people Israel and all who journey alongside us,
with strength and inspiration,
with insight and lovingkindness,
with justice and mercy,
and with Your most precious gift,
the gift of peace.

And let us say: Amen