

Renewing, Reconnecting & Rededicating Ourselves To Our Second Home

Every week I send out a Monday Morning Message (which I hope many of you receive), and every week I hear from a handful of you in response.

There are very few exceptions to this pattern. One exception happened when I sent out my message on Yom Ha'aztmaut, Israel's independence day. Now, I may be overanalyzing things, but I am not surprised that I didn't hear anything from anyone. Because the truth is, I think many people aren't exactly sure what to say about Israel these days.

These are extremely difficult times for Israel. Things are changing rapidly, and they don't seem to be changing for the good. Israel's decades old stable relationship with Egypt is in question as thousands demand the ousting of the Israeli ambassador to Israel, and hundreds stormed the embassy just a few weeks ago. Relations with Turkey, once considered to be solid and productive are now very tenuous as Prime Minister Erdogan continues to attack the current government, and has made overtures to both Iran and Hamas. Two weeks ago, I participated in a conference call with American Rabbis and lay leaders and Israeli Ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren. I learned that Iran's nuclear advances are progressing and intelligence believes that it would only take them 62 days to make a nuclear weapon this year, and if they continue making progress by next year it is believed that it will take them only 16 days. Iran continues to call for Israel's destruction

and has supplied Hezbollah in Lebanon with 50,000 rockets over the past year that could hit every city in Israel from Metullah to Eilat. Hamas, a terrorist organization whose charter calls for the destruction of Israel is in control of Gaza and there has been much discussion over this past year of a reconciliation between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. And despite calls from Prime Minister Netanyahu, in Arabic and Hebrew, to meet Prime Minister Abbas without pre-conditions on any issue at any time in any place, the UN is currently discussing a Palestinian bid for statehood. (Are you tired yet?)

But it gets worse. Because if all of this was not bad enough, I am not sure that we, as American Jews, are really sure what to make of all of this. I am not sure that we know how to talk about this anymore, and I am not sure that the younger generations, know why they should care in the first place. And that is really scary.

This is not going to be a political sermon. I am not going to try and comment on things on which I am well educated, but not an expert. Things in Middle Eastern politics change so quickly that I know even as I am writing this my introductory words will have to be adjusted. Instead, this morning I want to focus on why we, as American Jews *need to care*; and how we, as American

Jews, might learn to be more engaged, in a healthy and productive way, when it comes to the topic of Israel.

First, let's talk about why we need to care. There is no Judaism without Israel. All one needs to do is look at the Torah to see that the entire enterprise was about getting to the Promised Land. Thousands of years later we are privileged to live in unprecedented freedom in America and many of us would not consider living elsewhere, but Israel is still our people's homeland. Our historical memories tend to be short. It was only sixty years ago that the Jewish world was coming out of the worst disaster in our history. And out of the ashes of the Holocaust came the miracle of the State of Israel- a homeland where Jews of all backgrounds could come to live without fear of persecution. Have things changed in the past sixty years? Absolutely. But, the idea that Israel is a state that will guarantee the safety of all Jews is a value that we should not forget so quickly.

We also need to care because Israel is a relatively new, national Jewish project that is trying to accomplish something. As Rabbi Daniel Gordis writes, in his book Saving Israel:

In the decades that have passed since the Shoah, many Jews have grown uncertain about the need for Jewish sovereignty. To them, Israel is the story not of recovery and healing, but of roadblocks and occupation. For them, Israel is a source not of pride, but more often of shame.

The most urgent task facing the Jewish people at the beginning of the twenty-first century is countering this trend. For this to happen, Jews need to speak about the purpose of the Jewish state, about what sovereignty enables Jews to do and to become. Without the sense that the Jewish people is actually trying to accomplish something in Israel, there is no way to see the Jewish state as anything other than a problem....

The purpose of the Jewish state is to transform the Jews.

Let's not forget that Israel is to a certain extent still a great experiment that asks the question: "What can a Jewish Sovereign nation contribute to the world?" Have there been mistakes along the way. Yes. Does Israel have a long way to go to be "perfect?" Of course. Are there major economic problems in Israel and daily arguments about basic religious rights and freedoms? Yes. But at its core, Israel is a Jewish State that has the potential to contribute a great deal of value to the world. Indeed it already has (a topic to which I will return in a moment). But this experiment is still new, and it is at risk. As Gordis wrote in his Yom Ha'atzmaut op-ed piece this year:

OUR CELEBRATION of Israel's independence – an extraordinary accomplishment by any measure – takes place this year under the cloud of an awareness that the Jewish state's future is tenuous and fragile.

Consider this: There is no other country about which the following two predictions can be made with equal plausibility.

The first prediction: In 50 years, Israel will be a thriving democracy, at the cutting edge of technology, medicine and education, a First World country in every way.

The second prediction: In 50 years, Israel will not exist.

Gordis goes on to share the amazing accomplishments of Israel and his hope that Israel will have a thriving future. His article, as well as his book "Saving Israel," serve as a wake-up call that the modern day experiment of the State of Israel is something that we, as Jews, must care about because the purpose of Israel is to transform the Jews and bring a healthy, productive, and meaningful Jewish voice onto the world stage. Judaism was never meant to exist only in a synagogue setting or in our private homes. Judaism has something to say about all aspects of life and has the potential to bring wisdom to the global stage. Israel is our chance to ensure that a Jewish voice, alongside other voices of course, is used as *a light unto the nations* (Isaiah 49:6). As American Jews, we have an opportunity to be a part of this incredible conversation about what Israel should say on behalf of our people. While we may not have as much of a voice as our brothers and sisters who actually live in Israel, as members of the Jewish people our voice still matters and it should be heard. But first, we have to have the will and desire to speak up. Again, to quote Gordis:

Herzl was right: what matters most is will. What matters is that the Zionist discourse- a conversation about why the Jews need a state, what kind of state they need, and how they are going to build and sustain it- be rekindled.... For thousands of years, Jews have thrived

on intense debate, on the cultivation of ideas, on disagreements that, though painful, have led to greatness. They must do so again.

Now is the time to reinvent Zionism, to re-create the conversation about why the Jews need a state and to ask what they are willing to do to preserve it. Nothing more ambitious is possible. And nothing less ambitious will suffice. (Gordis, Saving Israel 217-218)

In addition to our recognition that Israel is a great experiment that is our responsibility by virtue of our birthright, we also need to remember that, despite all of its challenges, Israel has done much to make the Jewish people proud. Allow me to share just a few examples:

- Israel has produced more scientific papers, more patents and nobel prizes than any nation per capita in the world
- Unlike many countries in the Middle East, women play a major role in Israeli Society. From Golda Meir, to women on the Supreme Court, to Tzipi Livni- Israel is a state where women's voices are heard.
- Israeli doctors, scientists, and researches have produced countless medical advances and Israel is often first on the scene to volunteer its services internationally after a terror attack or natural disaster strikes.
- An Israeli company, VocalTec communications of Herzeliya developed the first practical Internet phone software
- The original intel processor for the IBM pc of the 80's was developed by Intel's Israel division and the online phenomenon of chatting over the internet was developed in Israel.
- In recent years Israel has been a leader in solar power generation, seawater desalination and is continually working to decrease its dependence on gasoline. Just one example is the amazing project called "A Better Place," started by CEO Shai Agassi that is working to build an infrastructure to enable the mass adoption of electric vehicles.
- And if all that were not enough, Israel has brought Israeli wine making to a new level as Ambassador Oren reminded us when he noted that

Israel is now exporting wine to France!

**Source: RA phone call with Ambassador Oren, www.aipac.org

It is actually quite remarkable. Israel is only sixty three years young, and look what she has managed to accomplish. As members of the Jewish people we should be filled with pride at Israel's accomplishments even if we are concerned about Israel's shortcomings and challenges.

If the first question was why we should care about Israel, the second question is how we can become more engaged in a healthy and productive way when it comes to Israel. In his article in honor of Israel's Independence Day this year, Chancellor Arnie Eisen of the Jewish Theological Seminary wrote the following words:

Israel is the single greatest project the Jewish people has going right now and, in the last two millennia, the most important arena that has ever been available to put our Jewish values to the test and our Jewish teachings into practice. We need it. And it needs us....Jews everywhere have the obligation to do our best to guard the chances for success and bring hatikvah, the hope of covenant, to fulfillment...

How can we do that? I want to propose three steps toward the renewed consensus among Jews in North America that I believe are essential both to Israel and to us.

First, let's do a better job of learning about and talking with Israelis.

Second, let's do a better job, as North American Jews, of talking with one another about Israel...

Third, let's make sure that our future lay and professional leaders have every chance to know the wonderful, bewildering, changing-by-the-day reality of Israel — and so come to love it, each in his or her own way.

Let's take Eisen's points in order:

1. Talking to Israeli's: There is no shortage of Israeli's in our community. When was the last time that we sat down to talk with these members of our community about Israel? When was the last time that we asked about their childhoods, about their army service, or about Israeli society today from their perspective? And what about our friends or family members that are living in Israel? When was the last time that we called them to check in and see how things were going? In addition to talking with Israelis, I would add that all of us must continually educate ourselves about what is going on in Israel today. If you only get your news about Israel from American media sources, you are doing yourself a disservice. Check out the Jerusalem Post, Haaretz, or Ynet news.com to get the Israeli perspective on Israel. The internet makes access to these first-hand accounts and perspectives more accessible than ever.

2. Talking to one another: Civil discourse in our country has continued to deteriorate to a point where it is embarrassing, and the topic of

Israel is no exception. Looking at our own community, members of the Jewish community need to stop feeling like any one of us has a lock on loving Israel the most, or has the absolutely correct perspective on the political situation in Israel. Republican or Democrat, J-Street supporter or AIPAC supporter, we need to stop assuming the worst about one another when it comes to Israel and start living the Jewish value of *dan l'chaf zechut*, giving one another the benefit of the doubt. People can have strong disagreements about Israel, but the disagreements should be respectful, open, and without judgment. Rabbis are no exception to this rule. Right now there is a discussion happening in mainstream Jewish seminaries across our country, sparked off by Rabbi Gordis, about the views of young rabbis and rabbinical students as compared to their older colleagues when it comes to Israel which has led to the first ever study led by Dr. Steven Cohen of "the Israel-related views of JTS-ordained rabbis and students." The results, by the way, just came out last week and showed that despite different political beliefs when it comes to Israel, young rabbis and rabbinical students are no less passionate about Israel than their older counterparts. And yet Rabbis too can get caught up in the moment and forget that our dialogue must also be respectful, particularly when we disagree. The bottom line is that as Jews we are taught that our words matter. When our speech becomes hateful, and

our disagreements become vitriolic, our tradition teaches that destruction looms right around the corner. After all, according to the rabbis of the Talmud it was hateful speech that led to the destruction of the Second Temple.

3. Investing in getting our lay and professional leadership to

Israel: Here I want to expand on Eisen's point. Getting our leadership to Israel is critical, but the truth is, we should work to get as many American Jews to Israel as possible. If you are one of the 2/3 of Jews that have not been to Israel, you owe it to yourself to visit. If you have been to Israel and it has been a long time, you owe it to yourself to go back. You will be amazed at Israel's progress. And if you have been recently, you can never visit home too often.

Many of you may have heard that we are planning a Congregational trip to Israel this summer.

The following is a preliminary itinerary, but allow me to paint you a picture of some of the elements of the trip we hope to create. Imagine spending the day walking through the old city of Jerusalem in the footsteps of our ancestors, visiting the Western Wall and exploring the Southern Wall excavations that have taken place over the past decade. After leaving this awesome ancient attraction, picture us spending Shabbat in Jerusalem—a

city where everything stops when the sun sets on Friday. Shabbat morning will offer a chance to pray at some of the many unique synagogues around the city, followed by an afternoon Shabbat stroll around the beautiful neighborhoods of Jerusalem. With every step we will simultaneously connect to our history and experience today's vibrancy, with the glowing Jerusalem stone surrounding us.

From Jerusalem we will journey to the mountain fortress of Masada with a stop along the way at the Dead Sea. If you have never floated on water, or taken a mud bath, now is your chance! From there we will travel to the beautiful Ein Gedi nature reserve, taking a small "tiyul" (hike) in the spot where King David and Saul themselves walked. Then you'll have a chance to experience something you definitely won't find in New Jersey: riding a camel!

Our week will then continue with a visit to the spectacularly renovated Yad Vashem Holocaust museum, learning and remembering those we lost in the Shoah. This will be followed by a visit to Beit Guvrin where we will have an opportunity to participate in an authentic archeological dig. You never know what relic of our ancestors we might dig up!

The next day we'll focus on the foundations of the modern state of Israel.

After a visit to Independence Hall, the site where David Ben Gurion declared the existence of the State, we will have time for shopping and exploring the vibrant and modern city that never sleeps: Tel Aviv.

Next, we will travel to the Golan Heights and take another "tiyul" around a beautiful Nature Reserve. We will even make some time for Kayaking down parts of the Jordan River. From there we will tour the excavated city of Tzipori, the home of Rabbi Yehudah Hanassi (the compiler of the Mishnah), where we'll explore beautiful ancient Mosaics from the Mishnaic time period. And then we will continue on in the footsteps of our mystics and sages with a visit to the mystical city of Tzfat, the city where the words of Lecha Dodi were composed. The synagogues and works of art that are created in this city are not to be missed.

As our week comes to a close we'll return to Tel Aviv to learn more about Israeli Palestinian hopes for co-existence, and conclude our trip by celebrating Shabbat with a Masorti (Conservative) congregation in Tel Aviv . After a relaxing and spiritual Shabbat we will bid farewell to the holy land as we prepare to return home.

I can speak about Israel for hours, but in reality, it is hard to fully understand what I am talking about unless you experience Israel. I promise you that you will return from this trip a changed person. Spending a week connecting to our collective past, visiting with our brothers and sisters in Israel, and traveling with our Torat El community, is an opportunity not to be missed. I hope you will join us for our first information session on Monday, October 10th. Please take one of the flyers in the lobby if you are interested.

On the conference call with Ambassador Oren, he reminded us that now, more than ever, Israel needs us. Israel has had challenging times before, but has been able to overcome these challenges because it has known that the Diaspora Jewish community, very much including the American Jewish community has been there for Israel. Israel needs us and we certainly need Israel. Rabbi Avraham Yizhak Kook, the first chief Rabbi of Israel taught that Teshuvah, the major theme of these High Holidays is not just about a return to God, or to one another, or to our best selves, but it is also a return home- to the land of Eretz Yisrael. (Elkins, Yom Kippur Readings, 311). Although Israel faces real challenges and dangers both from within and outside of its borders, we pray that this year be one of peace and prosperity for Israel. We pray that the spirit, courage, and determination of Israel's citizens will help them through difficult times. May this be the year that

those who have forgotten why Israel is important, and who are unsure of how to engage with Israel in the twenty first century, find a way to return home. In the words of the Haftarah that we read this morning:

וַיִּשְׂתַּקְוָה לְאַחֲרֵיתֶךָ נְאֻם־ה' וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלָם:

There is hope for your future, declares Adonai. Your children shall return to their country (Jeremiah 31:17). For all of this, and so much more, I have hope.

Please join me in the singing of Hatikvah