

Israel, Gaza, and Why Any of This Matters

This sermon is dedicated to the memory of my childhood USY friend, Marla Bennet, 24 years old, who was one of nine people killed by a Hamas terrorist in the attack at the Frank Sinatra Cafeteria at Hebrew University's Mount Scopus campus on July 31, 2002. May her memory, and her beautiful smile, always live on as a blessing.

How many of you spent hours, and days, and weeks this summer following the war between Israel and Hamas? How many of you found yourselves checking the news online or on social media multiple times a day, to find out what was happening in Israel? How many of you went to Israel this summer, to tour or to visit with family and friends? How many of you are exhausted, frightened, and shocked at the rise of Islamic Fundamentalism in the Middle East and the resurgence of anti-Semitism across Europe? How many of you are just plain worried, exhausted, and feeling helpless with the Middle East?

My friends, these are frightening times. They are times in which collective post-traumatic stress of WWII, which many in my generation have dismissed, is returning; while the hopes that many of us had for a peaceful two-state solution in the Middle East is simultaneously being severely tested. These days, it is simply hard to be an optimist.

This morning I want to talk with you about Israel. My main goal today is not to dwell completely on the politics of the situation, but it's hard to avoid, and

it's part of what made me want to share this message with you- so I will give you a brief synopsis and perspective of my thoughts.

This summer was horrible. I cry for the kidnapped Israeli teenagers- Eyal Yifrach, Gilad Shaar, and Naftali Fraenkel, who were killed by Hamas just months ago. I cry for the Arab teen, Mohammed Abu Khdeir, who was killed by three Israelis in a way that is antithetical to all that Judaism stands for. I cry for the Israeli soldiers that died defending our holy land just as I cry for the innocent Palestinian children who died in vain when their family members used them as pawns and shields supposedly in the name of God, but in reality in a way that makes a mockery of religion in general and Islam in particular. Israel had no choice but to go into Gaza this summer. Hamas is a terrorist organization that is no different than ISIS terrorists operating in Iraq and Syria. There is no question that their main goal is the destruction of the Jewish State and the Jewish people. When an organization digs tunnels in order to carry out attacks on Israeli Jewish communities on Rosh Hashana, the State of Israel has no choice but to protect itself and do so in as moral a way as possible during war. Unless you are in the Israeli military, the truth is that neither you nor I can comment on what that actually looks like. But from what my friends and colleagues in Israel tell me, I trust that Israel did its best in extraordinarily difficult circumstances with a

terrorist enemy who embraces death, has no value for life, and hides behind children in mosques, UN schools, and people's living rooms.

In the year 2014, Israel is living in a paradox. Its successes are astounding, but its challenges are equally so. In so many many ways, Israel is in a terrible and complex position. To be sure, Israel has not been perfect in its short existence- it, like all countries including the United States, has made mistakes. But to lay blame disproportionately on Israel, or to do things like support divestment from Israel is shortsighted, unhelpful, and does not do justice to the complexity of the situation.

Finally, let us not pretend that anti-Israel sentiment on college campuses or throughout Europe are only about the Israeli/Palestinian situation, or working towards a just and peaceful two state solution. As the world has seen this summer- these demonstrations just as often about anti-Semitism. According to the ADL and other organizations tracking these cases around the world, anti-Semitic incidents have occurred in London, Paris, Chile, Argentina, Morocco, the Netherlands, Turkey, and right here in the United States. Swastikas are being painted on synagogues, rabbis are being attacked or killed, Jews are being told to leave, being compared to Nazis, or worse. Many demonstrations against the Israeli action in Gaza this summer

have had little to nothing to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and everything to do with senseless hatred of Jews.

So those are my reflections in brief, and I'd be more than happy to discuss any or all aspects of them with you at another time. But now I want to go in a different direction. I want to move past the high emotions, strong opinions, and hot topic that is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and ask a simple question: **Why does all of this matter in the first place?**

Depending on where you come from and what you have lived through, I imagine that many of you will answer this question differently. Some of you have a deep commitment to, and a strong relationship with, Israel. Some are well-read and have a firm grasp on Israeli history and politics. Some of you were born before Israel came into existence and some of you remember the partition plan of November 1947, or the declaration of Israel's independence in May 1948. Others of you grew up during the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967 or remember the fear and exultation of the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Some of you followed Israel's involvement with Lebanon during the 80's. Others remember the first Intifada, Oslo, the second Intifada, and those dark years of bus and cafe bombings in the early 90's. Some of you are Israeli. Others have family or friends in Israel. Some of you have visited Israel, and have powerful and fond memories of your time there.

But I also know that many in this room have never been to Israel. Many may have little to no understanding of Israeli geography, history, or politics. And many may not even really know if or why it matters.

It is this last group that concerns me the most. I have been disturbed and very preoccupied with Israel lately- especially over the summer. And I have been particularly concerned by the nagging suspicion that many in our community have a waning understanding of what Israel means in the first place, and may not even be able to articulate if asked why they should even care. My generation has no knowledge of life before Israel. And while fifteen years of Birthright trips have contributed tremendously to awareness and education about Israel for the youngest generation of Jewish adults in the United States, there is still so much ignorance when it comes to Israeli politics, history, culture, and society.

So, what does Israel really mean? Why should we care? Why should you care? Why do I care? I can give you a brief answer, in the hopes that it will resonate with some or all of you, or at least help you start thinking about your own answer to this truly essential question.

To be Jewish without an awareness, understanding, or connection to Israel is like being "Jew-*ish*." Israel is a major strand in our Jewish DNA and cannot

be ignored or separated from our Jewish identity. Jews are a religion, a culture, a people, and a nation all wrapped into one. Our Biblical journey throughout the desert led us to the Promised Land. While we live in the Diaspora, have made our homes, our families, our lives, and our roots here, **Israel is still our home.** It is our religious, spiritual, cultural, and historical home.

Most of us probably do feel some sense of connection to or responsibility towards Israel, and in times of crisis, we may rally, gather, share, and discuss, as happened this past summer. But what about during the "calmer" moments? How do we sustain our connection when Israel is not "in crisis?" Do we gather to support Israel then? Do we follow the day-to-day news of Israel at peace, as diligently as we followed the news during wartime? Do we dedicate time to talking about Israeli politics, culture, or history? Do we read books by Israeli authors, listen to Israeli music, or watch Israeli TV shows and films? This year I read two wonderful books about Israel that I highly recommend for an overall understanding of the current state of affairs and how we got to where we are today: *My Promised Land* by Ari Shavit and *Like Dreamers* by Yossi Klein Halevi. If you are interested in either, please let me know and I will remind you of the titles after the holidays.

Unfortunately, my sense is that we have become somewhat apathetic when it comes to Israel as a community, or at least passive. And while our values state that "*we (as a congregation) are inexorably tied to the State of Israel...*" we do a pretty lousy job collectively, on a daily basis, of acting on this commitment. I am not without fault here and take partial responsibility. A small example- I read these deeply insightful books this year, but then did not do anything with the information. I did not share my thoughts with you or encourage us to process these works together. This year must be different. This year we, as a congregation, must take a stance to work harder to bring more Israel awareness, education and advocacy to our community.

This applies to us as individuals as well. Each one of us, to varying degrees, must do more to become informed about our Jewish homeland. How many of us, and how many of our children and grandchildren, know about the history of the State of Israel? How did we get where we are today in terms of the Palestinians, the territories, the settlements, and the peace treaties with some of Israel's neighbors? How many of us have read enough to understand both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and know enough to realize that there are really no simple solutions and no one side is completely blameless? How many of the college students here today feel equipped to answer criticisms leveled at the state of Israel, rampant on

college campuses across the country? How many of us understand why, or how, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and Israel are now aligned against Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas? How many of us know the differences between AIPAC and J Street (or even really know what AIPAC and J Street are)? How many of us can name five different organizations that support Israel, and how many of us give financial support to these organizations? How many of us have a **true** understanding (again, not just based on our favorite news station or media outlet) of the relationship between Israel and the United States?

This is not about feeling guilty or inadequate about our knowledge of, or understanding of, Israel and her past and present. But it is about urging each one of us to do more when it comes **to building and maintaining our commitment to, and our bond with, Israel.**

Israel is strong; but Israel cannot and should not stand alone. This has been a Jewish value since Biblical times. In Deuteronomy chapter 32 we read about the tribes of Reuben and Gad. These two tribes asked Moses to stay behind while the rest of the tribes entered into the Promised Land. Reuben and Gad were happy with the land on their side of the Jordan and did not want to fight on behalf of those Israelites who wished to settle the land. Reminding them that they too were a part of the people Israel, Moses told

them that they could eventually stay behind, but only after they had helped the Israelites enter and settle the land of Canaan. From our very beginnings, this story in the Torah teaches us that we *ALL* have a responsibility towards Israel, and to our fellow Jews living in Israel. We cannot just sit comfortably in our homes and country, bury our heads in our hands, choose ignorance, or avoid the challenging, messy, and incredible miracle that is the modern Jewish state of Israel.

This year, let us pledge, as individuals, and as a community, to do more to understand Israel; to do more to care about Israel; and to do more to support Israel. There is much work to be done in our congregation in this regard. There are programs to be implemented, book clubs to be started, lectures and film series to be scheduled, Israeli food to be enjoyed, scholarships for our youth to be started, and trips to Israel to be planned. If you are interested or available to help us, please reach out to me directly after the holidays.

While most of us are still stressed or scared based on the events that unfolded in Israel this summer, I do want to end with a message of cautious optimism from Israeli author Yossi Klein Halevi. This summer he wrote:

"We try not to ask ourselves too many questions about the future, because it is too terrifying. The only good news from this terrible summer of 2014 is

that we've once again surprised ourselves with our resilience. When Hamas released a video of a song (sung in bad Hebrew) threatening terror attacks, Israelis countered with YouTube clips of young people dancing to the catchy Hamas tune in the streets of Tel Aviv. Other young Israelis went into battle singing the Hasidic song, "The whole world is a narrow bridge and the main thing is not to be afraid." It was a psychological message of its own: We're here to stay. (<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/119244/2014-gaza-conflict-part-hamas-long-effective-war-israel>)

With all of its challenges, Israel is strong and resilient. In times of trouble about Israel, and we must do more to promote Israel, to celebrate Israel, and to strengthen the spirit of Israelis. This is our obligation, and our responsibility. It is also our privilege and great opportunity,

Am Yisrael Chai. The people of Israel lives. As this New Year begins, may our learning increase, our commitment be strengthened, and our resolve be unwavering.

Shanah Tovah.