

Why We Need the Jewish State: Building Our Connections with Israel

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I want to invite you to take a few deep breaths and clear your head.

Now I want to ask you to tell me the first thing that comes to your mind when I say the word: Israel....

I imagine that as you will sit for a while a number of images/memories/experiences will come to mind.

For me I first think of my dream-like vision of Israel was the land my mother loved and taught us to love, the land where trees bloomed in the desert, the land of orange groves and Jewish people singing and dancing in the streets. The land of miracles! When I was in middle school, my parents took us on a trip to Israel. We were not a family of great means, but my mom wanted to go to Israel and she wanted us to see Israel through her loving eyes. I remember how they talked about saving their money for years to take us on that trip. And when we traveled to Israel, I was mystified by the land, the Hebrew signs and Hebrew language, the modern city and the ancient ruins, the soldiers with rifles touring Yad VaShem alongside us, and the beautiful collection of art and culture in the Israel museum. This was the land of hope, the land where anything was possible, the land where the Jewish people created their own destiny.

Then, there is the Israel of today. The reality of Israel. This is the land of Israel surrounded by enemies. This is the place where I learned to be fearful and always on guard as I walked through the street or rode on a bus. The land of terrorist attacks, bus bombings, suicide bombings, and rocket attacks. This is the land of tension and conflict, the land of settlements and the land of roadblocks, the land that is cut in pieces by walls and fences and still there is no peace.

This is the land in which I do not feel comfortable walking down the street, not because of security, but because of my personal expression of Judaism—wearing a kippah and tallit while walking through the streets of Jerusalem is not a pleasant experience for a woman. This is the Jewish state in which I am not recognized as a rabbi—nor are my male colleagues for that matter, in which Conservative marriages and conversions are not recognized and Conservative synagogues and communities are discriminated against & cut off from state funding, because they do not meet the extreme criteria of the Chief Rabbinate.

We each may have our own problems with the Jewish state, our own critiques of our national homeland. And the question is, how do we stay connected to Israel when the state's policies continue to alienate us? Why do we need to? Why is it so important for there to be a Jewish state?

This is the time of year when we are evaluating how we have lived our lives, whether we have accomplished what we wanted to accomplish, how we see ourselves and how others view us....and this is the time when we realize our shortcomings, we face our failures, we accept our mistakes, ask forgiveness and resolve to change our ways in the new year...

This morning I want to make a confession and ask for your forgiveness and your own *heshbon hanefesh* in this area. I have always seen myself as a supporter of Israel and this talk is certainly from the perspective of someone who loves the State of Israel and struggles with the State of Israel, critiques the state of Israel—in domestic as well as international matters. Throughout my life and career, short as it is, I have tried to promote Israel's interests and encourage American Jews to forge a meaningful connection with the land and the people of Israel. My husband still suffers the trauma from my trip to Israel during the Second Intifada when I was 7 ½ months pregnant with Simon. No one was traveling to Israel. Jerusalem was a ghost town, and I felt I could not promote travel to Israel, unless I walked the talk....and so I went with a Conservative Rabbinical mission in October of 2002. And, as much as I love and support Israel, I have never given a High Holy Day sermon about Israel. I often avoid sermons that are solely focused on Israel, although I have given a few...but I confess that I do not preach or write about Israel as much as I would like for a number of reasons.

First, I avoid political discussions as much as possible. I do not see myself as a politician or a political expert. I see my role as more prophetic, seeking to point out areas of injustice and the need to get involved and work for change...I am loath to place myself in the middle of a political debate and most often, that is right where the state of Israel is...

Second, I don't see myself as a middle-east expert, I am not an expert in middle-east history or policy and I no there are many experts within this congregation who can teach better than I. Actually, Nomi Colton-Max, an expert in Middle East policy, will be speaking on the Second Day of Sukkot about the threat of Iran and the current political landscape in the Middle East.

And last, I also know that there are a number of people within the congregation who struggle with Israel as I do, and some who reject Israel's importance in our world or in our lives because of their disenchantment, disappointment or outrage at the government's policies toward Palestinians over the past thirty years. I, too, have my critiques of Israel and find it a very difficult tightrope to walk of criticizing Israel and affirming my dedication to Israel....or at least I have until recently.

It is clear that the existential condition in which Israel finds itself today is deteriorating. Israel's existence is being threatened from the outside and from the inside. If we care about Israel at all, if we believe that a Jewish state is necessary in this world, if we see the state of Israel living out a reality that is in conflict with what we believe to be core concepts of the Jewish people, then we have to start doing more. I have to start doing more. It's time to talk politics and policies, dreams and visions.

We need to talk to each other more about Israel. We need to slow down and listen to each other. We need to allow criticism and challenges of Israel to be voiced so that we can have a full and honest conversation. And we do all this because we love Israel. Because we need Israel.....and because, if we don't do it soon, the Israel that the founding mothers and fathers of the Zionist state envisioned will never become a reality.

The problem is not just that we may be feeling alienated, distanced, sometimes even repulsed by Israeli policies....but Israelis themselves are feeling alienated from the Jewish state...Israelis are losing hope in the future of the state and questioning whether it is still worth fighting for...

Rabbi Danny Gordis, in his book “Saving Israel: How the Jewish People Can Win a War That May Never End”, has greatly influenced my thoughts today and inspires me whenever I read his columns and blogs online to do my part to save Israel. Gordis talks about the problems in Israel plaguing the heart of Israel and the lives of Israelis:

“Life in Israel,” he writes, “is going to continue to exact a high price from Israelis, in no small measure because the conflicts with Israel's enemies appear to be unsolvable for the present. For a long time, Israelis understood that they had no choice but to pay that price. But that is true no longer. Increasingly Israelis are asking, both for themselves and for the sons and daughters whom they will one day drive to the induction base to be drafted by the army, 'Why pay this price if I can't say what it is that I'm being asked to defend?'”

Israelis are suffering a loss of will and a loss of tenacity in defending the Jewish state. The hope that once defined the land of Israel has been replaced by despair, by the loss of faith in the possibility of peace, by the fear for the survival of the people and its land in light of the nuclear threat from Iran. The relentlessness of war and conflict have undermined Israel's faith in the possibility of a future. With the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit from the land of Israel and his unending captivity, Israelis feel a sense of powerlessness over their own destiny that seems to be the direct contrast to the reason for a Jewish state. This is not to mention the profound impact the domestic scandals and corruption as well as the increasing fanaticism of Israel's religious coalition and the ever-strengthening stronghold it holds on Israeli society.

Hope has been lost and must be renewed for the Jewish people to survive, says Gordis, and for the Jewish state to continue. Why must we continue to hold out hope that a Jewish state in that region will be able to survive and thrive? Why must we preserve the Jewish state? There are three reasons that I can give you this morning:

- Survival #1: Israel must remain the refuge for world Jewry, the safe haven for the Jewish people when they are oppressed and can no longer live in other lands. Israel is the place where Jews can live. This is the view of Israel from its founding in the shadow of the Holocaust.

- Survival #2: A second reason based on survival is given by Rabbi Gordis. He makes the claim that without the Jewish state of Israel world Jewry will disappear:
 “The loss of a second round of six million Jews would undoubtedly set American Jews back significantly. The loss of inspiration that Israel’s regeneration provides, the sense of guilt that would inevitably accompany Israel’s demise, and the impact of a second loss of millions of Jews in the space of a century would almost certainly prove overwhelming and insurmountable... The loss of the Israel and American Jewish communities would thus spell the end for Jewish life as we know it, not only in Israel and North America, but across the globe.”
- 3. In my opinion, the most important issue for Israel’s survival is not middle eastern policy and politics; the most important issue for the Jewish state’s survival is what it means to be a Jewish state. Here, again, Gordis raises the challenge:
 “...facing its enemies is not the primary battle that Israel must wage. Rather, Israeli have to decide if they believe in the Jewish state deeply enough to undertake the difficult and painful challenges that another century of thriving will require... Israelis need to wrestle with the question of how the Jewish state should be Jewish... they must learn to admit what they do not like about their own country, without giving up on Zionism altogether.”(p.218)

I reject the calls for Israel's continued existence based on the case of survival. I think Gordis is overstating it and that world Jewry is stronger than that...but, more importantly, if Israel is to flourish and grow as a nation, it must be seen as more than a place of safety and refuge for Jewish bodies! Israel is the cultural and spiritual center of the Jewish people! It is not just a place to live!

Israel is the home of Jewish tradition, the land of Jewish history, the source of the Jewish narrative. Israel is today undergoing a cultural Golden Age. In literature, the arts, and film, Israel is creating and receiving international recognition. In the realm of science, everyday Israeli doctors and scientists are making new discoveries about the mysteries of the human body and discovering cures to disease and inspiring treatments. Israel is the international center for Jewish diversity and expression and without it, we will lose the Jewish state.

Why do the Jewish people need a state? What is the state supposed to do to transform the Jewish people? First, Gordis reminds us, the state of Israel represented new hope for the Jewish people. Because the state of Israel existed, the people of Israel lived. *Am Yisrael Chai!* “Israel has represented for Jews the triumph of life over death, of hope over despair, of the possibility of a future when a decimated past seemed to cloud every view”(p.16) The Jewish state puts the Jewish people on the stage of Jewish history as actors and gives them the power to determine their own destiny. The Jewish state of Israel gives the Jews a sense of peoplehood and purpose. It gives a context for Jewish expression like no other place in the world!

“For the Jewish state to survive, Israelis need to recover a sense of purpose. They need to be able to articulate why the calls for their destruction are unfair, what Jewish statehood

has done for the Jews, and why the Jews, like other national groups, have a right to the national self-expression that can come only with sovereignty.” I encourage you to take up this question over your *yomtov* tables this year. I encourage you to speak with your children and grandchildren about these questions, so that we can influence the next generation, a generation that is largely out of touch with the profound history of the state of Israel, the promise of the state of Israel, the hope that the state of Israel represents.

When they think of Israel, the first thing that comes to them is “war” or “injustice” or “oppression” or “terror”. A recent study asked American Jews whether the destruction of Israel would be a personal tragedy for them. The destruction...Among Jewish Americans sixty-five years of age and older, more than 80% said that Israel's destruction would, indeed, be a personal tragedy for them. But amazingly, among those aged thirty-five and younger, a full 50% said that it would not. (p.11)

And what of young Israelis...Imagine that you are a typical young Jewish couple and you want to be married in a Jewish ceremony. If you live in America you have many choices, many places in which you can get married, many different rabbis or cantors who can perform your ceremony. In Israel, although there are different streams, or movements, of Judaism like in the states, there is only one version of Judaism recognized by the state. For that young couple, there are no alternatives in Israel—there is only a wedding performed under the aegis of the *Rabbanut*, the Chief Rabbinate—and then, it is a *civil marriage* for them, although the justice of the peace is wearing a hat and has a beard, to the couple he is just a functionary of the state and is not speaking religiously or spiritually to them [thank you to Rabbi Gordon Tucker who crystallized this idea for me.]...This is just one small but significant area in which the reality of the Jewish state is destroying the hope for the future of the Jewish state.

Israel is being threatened from within as much as it is being threatened by its external enemies. And Jews who are committed to Israel's future, who are standing up and publicly criticizing Israel and offering alternative visions, they are not Israel's enemies...The external enemies are quite clear, the most threatening right now being Iran.

A nuclear armed Iran poses a threat to Israel, the Middle East and really to the world. Iran's support for terrorism, its commitment to Israel's destruction, and its determination to produce nuclear weapons represents the most pressing issue of our time. Iran has repeatedly demonstrated its refusal to accept norms of democracy and civility. Last month, President Ahmadinejad appointed an internationally-wanted terrorist, the mastermind of the murderous attack on the Jewish Center in Buenos Aires in 1994, as his defense minister. Israel needs American and international support in moving toward a permanent, sustainable peace and Israel needs American and international partnership in the quest to stop Iran from achieving the capacity to live out what its president has defined as its mission—to destroy Israel.

What can we do?

March for Iran – September 24th

Contact our congressional representatives and senators

Go to www.ujcnj.org for more information

What I would also challenge you to consider is that Israel is being threatened from the inside as well as outside. If we do not fight within Israel to preserve and create religious freedom, pluralism and equality, the future of the Jewish state is in as much danger as it is from nuclear attack.

If you have always supported Israel and defended Israel in the press, fought for Israel's recognition internationally and always been involved in the political dimension of the conflict, we thank you and please continue to do your good work! But also, do not forget about the quality of life within Israel and the need for it to improve so that the citizens of Israel will feel a part of the Jewish state, have hope in its ability to provide them with a safe and vibrant future and be willing to defend it.

And if you have always stood in judgment of Israel, at arms-length, or felt that you just didn't understand the complexity of Israel and the Middle East, we can not afford to have you on the sidelines any longer! We need you to make a connection. We need you to share your views within our Congregation, to speak out, to get involved, to travel to Israel, to read the newspaper on line....whatever you can do to build a connection.

I would like to travel to Israel with you. In the past I have planned a trip, but then cancelled the plans because of the economy. But, I don't think we can wait any longer. There is no better time than the present! And if you are interested in helping me plan a trip, please let me know. We need to travel to Israel to see the promise and the challenges of the land and the state. We need to visit our sister cities of Ofakim/Merkavim and see all the important work our Federation is doing. We need to visit our Conservative congregations in Israel and give our brothers and sisters support and *hizzuk*. We need to meet with Arabs and settlers and seek a better understanding and connection with the land, the people and the Jewish state.

The third vision of Israel that I have in my mind and heart is the Israel of the future. This is the Israel that remains in our prayers. It is both a place of ingathering for Jews from around the world and a place of spiritual life for all Jews, a place of security for all residents, a place of religious freedom for all its citizens. It is a place of peace. May this Israel come to be in our life-times. May we continue to pray for it, connect with it, work for it...do all we can, to preserve the Jewish state of Israel.