Vayikra 5774

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This week I attended the AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington DC along 14,000 other pro-Israel activists, including 2300 high school and college students. This was not my first policy conference, and each time I walk away informed and inspired. Informed: I learned about some of the incredible technologies coming from Israel that are making the world a better place: from technology that can attach to glasses and can read to the blind in any location, to software that can detect leaks in municipal water system with the potential to save billions of gallons of drinking water per year.

Inspired: I saw the great diversity that exists within the pro Israel community in general, and in AIPAC in particular. Liberals and conservatives, Republican and Democratic Congressional leaders sharing a stage, John Kerry and John McCain (shared a stage, but not at the same time), Rabbis from across the denominations, all sharing the stage at AIPAC- highlighting both the interests and values that Israel and America share and emphasizing the importance of the US – Israel relationship. This image of the diversity of the pro-Israel movement in Israel was especially felt for me during two presentations. One: Union President Olga Miranda, a Latino woman who admitted on stage that her trip to Israel showed her how she was wrong to side with the Palestinians because they are the presumed “underdogs.” Second: Pastor Chris Harris of Bright Star Church of God, on the South Side of Chicago. He told us about his trip to Israel and how wanted to apply the model fo dealing with trauma that he saw in Sderot to his community in Bronzeville section of Chicago. Of course it was a great idea for Pastor Harris to bring along his church choir to lead a spirited rendition of the gospel hymn walk with me to finish out his presentation- a crowd favorite.

Many of these presentations are available online at aipac’s website. I encourage you to attend next year’s policy conference- and you can register next week for a steep discount- fully refundable until next January.

 As Jews we are used to standing alone for our causes- against much of the rest of the world. We are described as the nation that dwells alone. And in some ways- that is by design and can’t really change. However On Display at the AIPAC Policy Conference was tangible evidence that when it comes to Israel, we are not alone in our concern for Israel and support for strong US support of the only democracy in the Middle East.

Israel is in the midst of renewed peace negotiations with the Palestinians, which are being overseen and facilitated by Secretary of State John Kerry. While Majority Leader Eric Cantor bragged about being to Israel 13 times, Kerry mentioned that he has been to Israel/ Middle East that many times just in the past 6 months. Many of us are pessimistic about the prospects for peace at this time. In my opinion peace is a gradual process, as one speaker at AIPAC put it, “Is today better in Israel than yesterday?” we can never give up on the prospect of peace- unless we have another viable option , and the best way to keep moving forward is to continue discussing the issues.

Although all the old, tangible issues remain unresolved, suddenly a conceptual one has become the major stumbling point. Prime Minister Netanyahu has called upon Mahmud Abbas to recognize Israel as the nation state of the Jewish People. This idea was also mentioned by Secretary of State Kerry as a requirement for a final agreement. And yet the Palestinians are adamantly opposed to such an assertion. You might wonder as I have: who cares what the Palestinians officially recognize or not? If they sign a peace deal, and keep to its agreed points, then does it really matter what they believe or don’t believe?

The answer is that it matters – for two important reasons. First, without acknowledgement of Israel a s Jewish State, Palestinian leaders are still leaving the door open for the possibility of repatriating the 5 million Palestinians refugees not into the new Palestinian state, but to their old homes in Israel proper, which would be the end of the idea of a Jewish State. Second and more importantly, only an acknowledgement of Israel as a jewish state recognizes a Jewish claim to this land that predates 1948, predates the holocaust, predates modern Zionism. Without recognition of a Biblical connection between the Jews and Israel, the claim still exists that Israelis are colonialists that came from Europe or parts of the Middle East threw out the indigenous people and occupied their land. Recognition of Israel as a Jewish state admits that the Jews are a unique people, not just religion. We may have been exiled from our land for 2000 years, but that does not make us interlopers. We are indigenous to the land, we did not colonialize- we returned to that which was ours since ancient times.

 This is something that many Americans believe- whether they be Bible readers, Evangelicals or astute students of history. But this is a narrative that the Palestinians have yet to admit. They deny Jewish historical ties to Israel- deny the existence of a Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

Recognition of Israel as Jewish state is important for a number of reasons, but most importantly because words matter. Words shape attitudes which in turn shape actions. In this morning’s Parsha we are introduced to korbanot. One of the sin offerings is brought when a person breaks his/ her word. The Torah says, “Oh nefesh Ki Tishavah L’vateh bisefatayim l’harah oh l’heitiv.” A person can cause good or bad- merely through the utterances of the lips.

 Words matter. Calling Israel the nation state of the Jewish People- matters.Admitting to the jewish history of Israel- matters. Condemning terrorists in public and private- matters. These and many other ways Palestinian leadership is deficient.

But it’s also about our words. Educating people about the Jewish connection to Israel- matters. Correcting misconceptions about Israel- matters. Delegitimizing those that delegitimize Israel and speaking out againbst BDS- boycott divestment and sanctions against Israel – matters.

Talking about the miracle of Israel in its first 65 years and the ways that it contributes to the world- matters.

As we learn Sefer Vayikra and the details of Jewish life in Israel many years ago, let us recommit ourselves to making our words matter and to ensurin a glorious and peaceful **future** for Jewish life in Israel.