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The Character of Israel

A sermon delivered by

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L'shana Tova

Thank you

So what did you do for your summer vacation? I always spent the last week or two of summer break imagining how I would answer that question on the first day of school.

Thinking it through allowed me to look back, consider what I had experienced, and at least attempt to make some meaning out of it all.

Truth is, I still ask myself that question all the time—what did I do in the fall, in the winter? For a vacation? For Passover, for summer vacation, for the past week? Frankly, all of those questions make these days of awe just a bit easier.

This year, though, was different. Melissa and the kids and I spent the whole summer—two months—living as ordinary Jews in the land of Israel. We rented a small apartment, shopped at local markets and shops, read the local paper, and savored every minute of it.

As American Jews living in Jerusalem, we were blessed to discover fascinating bits of the character of Israel.

We saw its beauty and strengths, its questions and faults. We saw its hopes and fears, its successes and failures, its dreams and its difficult realities.

We discovered that the character of Israel is rich and varied, that it reflects the challenges each of us faces individually. It represents the highest ideals of Judaism, and exhibits some of the worst attributes humanity.

In so many ways, Israel, like each of us, is fallible. Israel, like each of us, has made mistakes and continues to make mistakes. And like each of us here today, Israel returns again and again to the well of hope so deeply entrenched in our tradition.

As a nation, Israel struggles to find its own place while both respecting others and reacting to threats. Israelis are accustomed to sacrifice, willing to give everything they hold dear. And they are constantly searching for holiness, in themselves, in others too.

The character of Israel is complex and complicated. The shadow of the Shoah still lingers, the path to peace lays soaked with the blood of too many. And yet Israelis continue to live and grow and work for a brighter tomorrow. Somehow, Israelis have figured out how to be both pragmatists and dreamers at the same time.

So easily, conversations about Israel turn to the usual dichotomies—hawk vs. dove, left vs. right, religious vs. secular. We Americans allow ourselves to enter into those debates, and we develop strong views, and often, strong contempt for those who have opposing views. Instead of seeing Israel as a reflection of Judaism itself, we concentrate on Israel's highest achievements or most despicable flaws. But in doing that we miss something much greater.

I believe that the mere existence of the State of Israel represents an unparalleled miracle for Jews worldwide.

I believe that a modern Jewish state, no matter how flawed it may be, shows the ultimate power of hope, the ultimate resiliency of Jews and Judaism, and offers a beacon of light to all the world.

We are living in a time when our own Jewish beliefs are the heart of a society in a sovereign nation. To live in Israel is to live on a Jewish clock and calendar!

Nothing can equal the experience of being a Jew on Shabbat in Jerusalem—the streets empty, people heading to synagogue or to Sabbath meals, the sounds of singing and playing in the air. Israel, even with her warts, proclaims, *lamrot hakol*, in spite of it all, we still believe in a better tomorrow.

Time and again this past summer, I watched four traits shine through among regular Israelis which illustrate the marvel of this modern miracle.

I saw an almost genetic willingness to dream, an iron-clad will, an acceptance of confrontation when necessary, and above all, a willingness to transform. Each of those values have roots in Jewish tradition, and each have served the State of Israel well, whether in times of triumph or times of despair.

Even more, as we better understand and embrace those four traits, we can better help Israel achieve what it most desires—long and lasting peace, safety and security for Jews living in our ancient homeland.

At the crest of Har Herzl, Israel's version of Arlington National Cemetery sits the grave of Theodor Herzl, the dreamer who inspired the development of the state. Herzl himself visited the land once, but did not live long enough to see the establishment of the state. Herzl did live through some of the challenges facing European Jewry, and he allowed himself to dream.

On the side of his tombstone are inscribed the words which still animate the Jewish State: *Im Tirtzu Ain Zo Agadah*—If you will it, it is no dream. And if you walk from Herzl's grave back to

the main entrance to the cemetery you will encounter a relatively new small museum dedicated to Herzl himself.

That little museum tells the story of the transformation of a secular European into a dreamer and believer in a new Jewish future. The museum tracks the life and intellectual journey of the man, the growth of the Zionist dream, and ultimately, the establishment of the State.

Herzl's dream was no different than the dreams of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. Each dreamed of a better way of life, a new kind of blessing in the Promised Land. And each pursued that dream—providing a model for centuries of Jews who had nothing more than dreams. It was Theodor Herzl who finally moved Jews toward the fulfillment of those dreams. And it was David Ben Gurion who built that dream and made it a reality.

Herzl's dream was clearly the motivation used by David Ben Gurion as he set about to build the new Jewish nation. Famously Ben Gurion once noted that to be a pragmatist in Israel, one must believe in miracles. And in fact, given the rough neighborhood in which Israel resides, dreaming has been and continues to be a hallmark of the Israeli people.

Talk to the average person on the street, the cab driver, the shop keeper and you will hear a longing for peaceful co-existence. Listen and you will see that overwhelmingly Israelis believe that just as they deserve a state and international recognition, so too do the Arabs who call that land home deserve a state of their own. They may disagree on the parameters of that Palestinian State, but even today, most of the Israelis I encountered believed that a two state solution offers the best chance for peace.

Even more, the Palestinians I encountered shared the same dream. They too see two states living side by side in peace and respect. They too see two peoples who call the same land home, two peoples living next to each other, each recognizing the history of the other and the hopes for a brighter future for the other. Yes, among the commoners, the dream is shared. And dreams are a big part of life in that part of the world.

Those dreams, never far from the surface, seemed to me to be partly fueled by the sheer power of will. In Israelis, the will to survive and thrive can be seen and felt from the moment one exits the airplane, and for Palestinians, that same level of will power can be easily felt.

To enter into either Jerusalem or Tel Aviv today is to be overwhelmed by the advancement of science, technology, and society. Coming into Tel Aviv one sees the skyscrapers of a major city, hears the sounds of multiple languages. And as one enters Jerusalem the light rail zooming by, the bridges being built for the new speed train, and the ancient old city glistening in the sunlight show how a people moves forward.

And if one travels to Nazareth, an Arab city, one can see the same progress, the same building boom. All over Israel, all over the Palestinian territories, one can feel the will to not just survive but thrive. Yes willpower is alive and well in modern Israel.

In Jerusalem, tucked across the street from the cinematheque and the Mount Zion hotel sits the Menachem Begin Center. The center includes classrooms, a museum, and the papers of one

of Israel's most significant leaders. He was not always easy as a partner—he had an ironclad set of principles and rarely if ever violated them. His stubbornness was legendary.

Begin was willing to commit acts of terror as a young man for those principles, and as an older man, he would not waver even as he sought to be the Prime Minister. Yet, once in office, he was the leader who reached out to Egypt, who along with Sadat and Carter, found a way for Israel to be recognized by an Arab nation, for Israel to reach a peace accord with an Arab nation, for Israel to enjoy a peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship with an Arab nation.

Agree with him or not on any particular issue, and lord knows plenty of us disagreed with Begin often, Menachem Begin was defiantly steadfast in his belief in the future of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel.

Again and again this past summer we met Israelis of all viewpoints who shared this strong sense of will power. Every Israeli we met displayed a commitment to country like nothing we had ever encountered here, and again and again we were inspired.

That will power comes from Abraham, who so believed in his journey that he was willing to do the unthinkable. It comes from Moses who was willing to confront the Pharaoh and demand freedom. It comes from David, who believed that even though he was small, he was mighty.

To encounter the will power so dominant in Israel today, one needs only speak with almost any Israeli at any time. Israelis are blessed with a force of nature, a belief in themselves that can only be experienced to be understood.

Whether talking politics or the relative quality of a hat in at a stall in the shuk, Israelis exhibit a willingness to engage and a belief in their opinions like no place else on earth. One can have a discussion or even an argument with an Israeli, but as I discovered more than once, one cannot easily win that argument or discussion!

Along with that will comes something harder to comprehend—Israelis are not afraid of confrontation. Whether that encounter comes in a heated conversation in a taxi or between soldiers on a border, Israelis are willing to engage and make their views known. No one is shy—no one holds back.

Partly a result of living with hostile neighbors, partly a result of the role of Jews in history, deeply embedded in the character of Israel is a willingness to confront, to make views known and felt. Sometimes this feels pushy, sometimes it is inspiring—but it is always present.

Moses displays this chutzpah in argument after argument with God. Moses, a mere mortal, pushes the Almighty, arguing his case, believing in his position. Israelis have inherited this gene from Moses, and they display it proudly.

We encountered the challenge of confrontation on a windy hilltop in the Golan one evening. We were standing with cousins of Melissa's at a monument to a tank battle from the Yom Kippur War in 1973. We had spent a good part of the day in the hills, looking out both at Israel and at Syria. We spoke with UN peacekeepers stationed on the boarder and with Israeli soldiers patrolling the area.

And then at dusk, we passed by a scorched field—later explained as burned by an errant Syrian mortar—and looked out toward Syria. Yishai, Melissa's 24 year old cousin heard the first boom. He looked out, and showed us what was happening. We were watching the Syrian Civil War. With our own eyes. He showed us the tracer fire—told us to count to ten—and then boom! The bombs exploded. Back and forth, again and again. We stood, the five of us, Yishai, his parents, and my father—all of us dumbfounded.

Yishai explained that the fighting intensifies at night and that what we were watching would continue for hours. Our children were at first wildly entertained. Then we explained that each boom probably meant that someone, some mother's child, was being killed. We were totally safe—and yet we were watching a war no more than five miles away.

I asked Yishai if he thought Israel should engage in the battle, and his answer was one I would hear over and over—better to let them kill each other than to aim at us. And while I understood the practicality of the answer, I remain bothered by it. Israel—a nation willing to confront—choosing to stay on the sidelines. And yet, Israelis more than most, know the price of war. They know the cost of confrontation. Over time Israel has learned that confrontation only works if it includes a willingness to transform—and in this idea, we saw another major character trait of Israel.

The Israel of today is not the Israel of yesterday. The speed with which change comes to the land of Israel boggles the mind. I first visited Israel as a teenager in the late 80s. Many times this past summer as I watched my children explore the land I flashed back to my earliest experiences in Israel. And the two versions of Israel could not be more different. So much has changed, even as the character has stayed the same. Israel does not sit still. And neither do Israelis.

For most of the first fifty years of statehood, Israel was an agrarian country, led by the Kibbutz movement. Israelis worked the land, growing crops, building an old-new nation. But the last two decades have seen a wild transformation. Today technology has replaced the kibbutz movement as the leading force in both the Israeli economy and Israeli society.

Little silicon valleys exist in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Herzlyia, Haifa, and many more places. One cannot travel more than five feet without seeing someone on a cell phone, a tablet, or a computer. In the bible we read that the old shall dream dreams and the youth shall see visions. Earlier generations dreamed of a prosperous modern society in Israel, and today's youth are living that image.

The transformation of Israel can be viewed in the life of Yitzhak Rabin, the great Israeli Prime Minister assassinated more than twenty years ago. Trained as a soldier, Rabin spent the majority of his life focused on war and fighting. But once in the Prime Minister's seat, Rabin the military man became Rabin the peacemaker.

He reached out, recognized the right of Palestinians to be free in their own state, and began to work on a peace treaty. His work was cut short by the assassin's bullet, but his transformation stands as a towering model today. If even the most hardened of soldiers can see that peace and coexistence is the answer, then surely many others can do the same.

That willingness to change, to grow, learn, re-evaluate and re-imagine remains a shining attribute of Israeli character. Israelis want desperately to live in peace with their neighbors. They are willing to work to make that peace real and lasting. And I believe the majority of Palestinians share those views. I heard laments from both sides this summer that the political leadership did not reflect the will of the people on either side. Yet neither side has yet had the will to make this happen at the ballot box.

Israel's embrace of transformation comes from an idea rooted in Torah. From Jacob's wrestling onward, we Jews have recognized the power of human growth. We know that to remain static is to move backwards, or even worse, to cease living. Israel knows, as we do, that one of the secrets to Jewish survival has always been our willingness to adapt to whatever circumstances we face. The character of Israel is in fact the character of the Jew.

This afternoon we will read the *Eleh Ezkerah* service—a section which reminds us of remarkable Jews who gave everything to make the world better. Their stories are our stories. Their stories are Israeli stories. The ten we will remember embraced the character traits that make Israel the marvel that it is. I pray that they, and Israel itself, will inspire each of us for good in the coming year. Amen.