

Rosh Hashanah 5778
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Israel

Our Legacy and Our Future

L'shana Tova!

Eddie Jacobson could have been your classmate or neighbor. He was a regular guy in every sense, but he more than almost anyone else, deserves honor for helping America and American Jews build a connection with the land of Israel.

Jacobson is one of my personal heroes. He was the subject of my Rabbinic Thesis, and with some good luck and a little time, will be the subject of my first book. Jacobson was born to an ordinary Jewish family in New York City in the 1890s. Living in relative poverty, he had no idea in his formative years that he would someday be viewed as a hero by me or anyone else.

When he was a young child, his parents decided to move from New York to the middle of the country. They settled in Leavenworth, Kansas—not quite the same environment as the Lower East Side. Officially they moved because one of their sons had asthma and needed more fresh air. But family lore had it that one of Eddie's older brothers had fallen in with the wrong crowd and the family needed to make a change.

Eddie went to school in Leavenworth, a town known more for its federal prison than anything else. His family was poor, and Eddie dropped out in 9th grade to go to work to help support the family. He moved to the big city—Kansas City—which was an hour or so away, and took a job as a stock boy in a clothing store. In those years, 1912, 1913, 1914, Kansas City was a boom town, with lots of activity and lots of new jobs and new people arriving.

Eddie made his way, and along the way became friends with others who like himself were just starting out. One such friend was a man named Harry, who had a similar entry-level job at a bank. Harry would go around from shop to shop collecting deposits, and in time he and Eddie became friends. They would see each other at the barber or around town, and though not close, were always friendly.

Just about one hundred years ago the United States entered the Great War, World War I. Young men lined up to serve, and both Eddie and Harry enlisted in the US Army. They both became soldiers in Company D of the Missouri National Guard, and in time the whole company was mustered into the United States Army.

Company D was sent to Camp Sill in Oklahoma, and the unit elected Eddie's friend Harry as its captain. One of the jobs of the captain was to get a canteen up and running. So Captain Harry Truman turned to his friend Eddie Jacobson, since he knew that Eddie had worked in retail.

In no time the canteen was a thriving operation, with Truman and Jacobson running a brisk business.

Company D was sent to France to fight, and luckily endured fairly light casualties. On the ship home the two decided to go into business together. A Jew from small town Kansas and a Baptist from small town Missouri cemented a friendship, and in 1947 and 1948, Jacobson was the one person who could get then President Harry Truman to support the cause for Jewish Statehood.

On May 14, 1948 the State of Israel was declared, and just 11 minutes later the United States, by way of statement from President Truman, recognized the new nation. The Jewish community was elated, worried about war, and intrigued by Jacobson.

Eddie Jacobson, it turns out, was an active Reform Jew. He was a regular most Friday nights with Rabbi Samuel Mayerberg at the Temple in Kansas City. But Mayerberg, a great Rabbi, was not the most vocal Zionist. He was not opposed to the Jewish state, but was also not preaching about it with any regularity.

Jews wondered how Jacobson had been moved to act—a question Jacobson himself never fully answered. Many factors probably contributed to Jacobson's actions, but reciting the prayers each Shabbat surely had some effect.

We Jews have always prayed for Israel. We recognize time and again our connections to the land of our matriarchs and patriarchs. Our synagogue buildings face Jerusalem, and Israel is common thread throughout our prayers.

In fact, more than ever, our connection to Israel deserves attention, thought, and action. In so many ways, Israel has emerged over the last number of years as the beating heart of the Jewish world, supplanting New York City as the center of it all. Going forward Israel's role will only increase. On this Rosh Hashanah, our relationship with Israel deserves more study and appreciation, and our commitments to the land of Israel merit new consideration and emphasis.

We Reform Jews arrive at this moment in time with both a colorful past and a deep commitment to the future of the Jewish state. When early Zionists were making waves in 19th century Europe, most Reform Jews turned the other way. Our Reform ancestors believed that the Promised Land was not the ancient land of Israel but rather the inviting shores of North America. It took almost 100 years for the Reform Movement to fully embrace the idea of a Jewish state.

Even with that time of disconnection in our history, we Jews—all of us, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and everyone else—are heirs to a connection to the land of Israel spanning centuries and millennia. Torah tells of the first Jew, Abraham, and his journey from the Fertile Crescent to Eretz Yisrael.

From that time until today, we Jews have treasured a special connection to the land, working, building, praying, defending, honoring that sacred soil. From that first journey until today Jews and the land of Israel share an entwined, braided history, like the Shabbat Challah bringing sustenance and beauty, like the Havdalah candle bringing light and joy even in darkness.

On this Rosh Hashanah we mark a number of significant anniversaries in the modern story of our people's connection to the land.

120 years ago last month the first Zionist Congress was convened by Theodore Herzl in Basel, Switzerland. At that gathering, the 208 delegates present adopted a formal platform advocating the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz Yisrael. More, they adopted Hatikvah as a national anthem, and for the first time a group of Jews openly and securely advocated for the Jewish cause.

The cause for Jewish statehood grew slowly, but 20 years later, in November of 1917, Lord Balfour of Great Britain wrote that the King's government "looked with favor on the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." In just two decades the leading superpower of the day endorsed Jewish statehood. The 100th anniversary of that declaration reminds us of the importance of reaching out to those in power, of raising our voices and advocating for our own interests.

Next spring we will mark the 70th anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel, celebrating seven decades of a Jewish state. And just this past June we observed the 50th anniversary of the Six Day War and the reunification of Jerusalem. The audacious proposal of Zionist dreamers has become our reality; its triumphs and tragedies are now ours.

Israel's existence remains more tenuous than most any other nation on earth. No other country faces existential threats from its neighbors with depressing regularity as Israel does. No other country has sacrificed as much as Israel, and no other country has accomplished so much with so little as tiny Israel has done.

Yet even with all of these challenges, Israel's history contains too many moments of missing the mark, of failing to do what is right, of not living up to its best self. At the time of the victory in 1967, American Jews woke to a new reality—a strong, tough but small bunch of Jews defeating much larger forces.

Since then, Israel's government has produced a record of both successes and failures. Successes in opening religious and historical sights to all, successes in business and technology and agriculture and peacemaking and education. And failures in equality, religious freedom, peacemaking, arguably even human rights.

While peace and relative prosperity have grown as a result of better relations with Jordan and Egypt, the divide between Arab and Jew in parts of Israel seems wider than ever. Jews and Arabs regularly interact—working together, enjoying pita and humus together. But the leaders of both groups seem to listen more to their extremes than to the vast majority of their people.

On one side, too many settlements have been built, too many restrictions have been placed on daily living and movement. And on the other side too much violence has been accepted and encouraged, too many cash rewards have been given to the families of terrorists, too many children have been taught to hate.

Within Israel itself, the divide between minority Ultra-Orthodox and the rest of the nation grows ever wider. When Ben Gurion made a deal with Orthodox leaders to give them power in

exchange for support of the new nation, he never could have imagined the difficulties which would emerge.

You and I as Reform Jews are second class citizens when it comes to religion in Israel. Just the other day in an address at the United Nations, Israel's prime minister recognized he could not solve the problem. Or rather, in a moment of uncharacteristic clarity admitted that he would not solve it.

If Benjamin Netanyahu wanted equality as much as he wanted his own personal power he could reign in the rabbanut. He could cut the ultraorthodox out of his coalition. He could return to the deal he made to open a section of the Western Wall to egalitarian prayer. Alas, the prime minister lacks the fortitude, courage, or heart to do what is right. So we progressive Jews who love Israel remain in limbo—we love the land and the people, feel deeply connected to it all. And at the same time we are equally distanced from the current leadership of the country, frustrated by broken promises and excluded far more than we are included.

It is no wonder younger generations of American Jews continue to feel less and less connected to the Israel. How can we support such a confusing mix? It is simply easier to pull back and disengage. Yet that answer is precisely the opposite of what is needed today. Our Israel, the land that is welcoming to all Jews and a shining example of equality and human rights needs us more than ever. Now is the time to learn more, do more, be more in support of our Jewish state.

The first step in the path is re-engagement. Now is the time to read more and discuss more. Come to our Israel classes on Wednesday mornings. Make reading Ha'aretz or the Jerusalem Post or both a part of your daily online news reading. Explore new books on Israel in our library. Come listen to scholars who will be speaking about different aspects of Israeli life at our Temple in the coming year.

When you read about organizations supporting BDS—boycotting, divesting and sanctioning Israel, look at the speakers and their statements and decide if they are anti-Israeli policy, anti-Israeli, or anti-Semitic. Sadly, most seem to be more of the third category and less of the first two.

When you hear about organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace, listen closely. Only one of those three words in their name is honest. They definitely have a voice. Peaceful? Hardly. Jewish? Not the way you or I would define it. They sound as if they want peace for all, but their rhetoric regularly moves from anti-Israel to anti-Semitic as they regularly question the legitimacy of Israel.

And pay attention to what is happening and being said on college campuses. Criticizing policies is good and healthy, both Jewish and American in nature. But what is happening is far more nefarious. Charlottesville showed us how much anti-Semitism lurks beneath the surface. Often in America today it hides as anti-Israel. Now is the time to pay attention, to read more, to learn more, to do more.

Israel needs our support now more than ever. Even with its challenges, Israel remains our heritage, our homeland, our promised land. Israel needs us to speak up, both with our voices and our wallets.

When you entered the sanctuary this morning you received an envelope. Go ahead and open it now. You will find information about Israel Bonds. When we purchase Israel bonds we make an investment in the state itself, an investment which is not political. Israel bonds help strengthen the economy of Israel, providing a healthy return for us as American investors. Whether we purchase a small bond as a gift or a larger bond as an investment, Israel bonds provide a way for us to show support of the cause of the Jewish state, to vote with our own dollars.

So take a moment now to read the card, flip the appropriate tab, and put it back in the envelope. On your way out of services you will see big boxes in which to place the envelopes. A representative of Israel Bonds will be in touch with you to discuss next steps. Our investments can help build a stronger and better Israel.

Another way to make our voices heard will come when we give our annual gifts to the Jewish Federation. We have the opportunity to direct our gifts to particular causes. I urge you to direct some of your gift to progressive causes in Israel. Even more, consider giving to the Reform movement in Israel as it works to create a more equal and accepting Israel.

And if you want to do even more, then join us in the Syracuse Community Trip to Israel next year. Just after the High Holidays in 2018, the four pulpit rabbis in Syracuse will co-lead an incredible journey to Israel. Together we will learn history, wrestle with the present, and pray for the future.

We will spend time in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and visit the Galilee as well. We will share the beauty of Israel while also learning about its challenges. We will meet with thinkers and leaders in Israel, and yes, we will have an Egalitarian prayer service at the Western Wall.

The trip will celebrate the 100th anniversary of our local federation, and even more, it will celebrate the new era of cooperation and collaboration in our Syracuse Jewish community. Rabbis Shore, Drazen, Pepperstone and I are eager to travel together, to share our Israel with each other and with you. Join us, and together we will paint Israel orange!

Israel needs to hear from us. Israel needs to learn from our community. Our example of unity under the banner of pluralism here in Syracuse can inspire others. We can raise our voices and encourage others. Syracuse really can teach the world. But to do so we need participation from all of us.

A New Year arrives filled with hope and opportunity. We enter into 5778 carrying the lessons of generations before us. HaYom Harat Olam. Today is the beginning of the world. We emerge from this day empowered as creators. As we build our lives in this New Year, let Israel be a priority. Study more, learn more, experience more, do more. And together let us move from strength to strength.