

Israel Is Not Optional
Rabbi John Franken
Yom Kippur Morning 5779

© 2018 by John A. Franken. Not for publication without written permission of the author.

Dear Friends:

45 years ago this morning on the Hebrew calendar, Jews around the world woke up to frightening and alarming news. Overnight the Jewish state had been suddenly and deliberately attacked by the united Arab states of Syria and Egypt. Even worse, its celebrated defense force was suffering fearsome casualties and, in some places, was in full retreat. The ensuing days would see the state, made up largely of survivors and refugees, thrown into existential danger as its adversaries came frightfully close to destroying it and inflicting, potentially, a second holocaust. Israel, whose cardinal defensive strategy had been to engage the enemy on its own territory, would require not only a massive airlift to survive, but the better part of a month to beat back the fierce invaders and restore the *status quo ante*.

When it was all over, the young Jewish state, then numbering barely more than three million citizens, was financially broke, its economy badly shaken; diplomatically isolated, its self-confidence and international standing diminished; and politically adrift, its leadership discredited. The Prime Ministership of Golda Meir came to an ignominious end and David Elazar, the distinguished Army Chief of Staff who some had thought a worthy successor, collapsed from a heart attack and died. It was a terrible and fearsome time - one that would soon be exacerbated by the OPEC oil embargo and the Arab states' success at pressuring the United Nations General Assembly to declare that Zionism is racism, a morally obnoxious charge that would take the U.N. sixteen years to retract.

Yet for all of the fear, all of the sorrow, all of the isolation, all of the hand-wringing, and all of the grief and mourning, Israel and the Jewish people as a whole were united to a degree that we haven't seen since. "Am Yisrael Chai," the people Israel live, became at once a declaration, a prayer, and a vow. All at once it seemed that the song would unleash tears of defiance, hope, relief and joy. For some years afterward, the United Jewish Appeal would disseminate posters throughout North America declaring "We are one."

For a good while, we believed it. The Jewish people was united, bound together by the trauma of the Shoah, our concern for Israel's survival, and our struggle to free Soviet Jewry from suffocating grip of Soviet communism.

But something happened along the way. A series of phenomena—among them the "Who is a Jew?" controversy in Israel, the decline of antisemitism and ethnicity here in the U.S., the unshackling of the two million Jews behind the Iron Curtain, and the change of Israel's status from David to Goliath —tore at the fabric of Jewish unity.

More and more, our people began to dis-integrate, seeing ourselves less as American Jews than as Jewish Americans or, more to the point, as Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, secular, or something else.

But there's one particular aspect of this rending that I want to speak with you about this morning. And that is the recent phenomenon of tearing away from the State of Israel itself. The state that was such a source of pride and unity in 1967 and 1973 has, at least for some in recent years, become a source of discord or, I shudder to say it, shame. Witness how a group of college students recently repudiated the Birthright Israel program which since its inception has brought more than half a million young Jewish adults there to introduce them to the place and deepen their emotional attachment to its land, people and culture. Witness how a public intellectual like Professor Hasia Diner has repudiated Zionism. Witness how in our own Judea community Israel has become, well, a flashpoint.

Now, I know the arguments: that the occupation of another people is immoral and cruel; that it is untenable and a threat to Israel's long-term security and democratic character; that the taking of Palestinian land and the building of settlements on it is illegal and wrong; that the suffering experienced by Palestinians is deep, for which Israel bears a share of responsibility.

And I don't disagree with any of those propositions.

For I believe in Isaiah's vision of Israel being a light unto the nations.

I believe in Israel's Declaration of Independence, which promises a society "based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel [and to] ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex."

I believe in a Judaism that values life over land, that exalts justice, that extols peace, and that teaches "What is hateful to you, do not do to others."

And I believe in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a magnificent but oft-ignored achievement that came into existence after the Holocaust devoured a third of world Jewry.

I understand, too, why so many of us liberal Jews are angry at a system that has granted a religious monopoly to the ultra-Orthodox. Because I am angry too.

I am angry that our rabbis and cantors are not authorized to perform state-sanctioned weddings and funerals there. I'm angry that the Orthodox establishment blackmails restaurants into closing on Shabbat and sets up bus lines that relegate woman to the rear. I'm angry at a Religious Affairs Ministry that refuses to build Reform and Conservative synagogues and pay their rabbis a salary. I'm angry at a government that can bring a satellite into orbit but can't find a way to bring half a million Russian Israelis into the Jewish people. I am angry at the police for failing to defend men and women who go the Kotel to pray, only to find themselves frisked for hidden Torahs, spat on, targeted with

excrement, drowned out with catcalls, and roughed up by haredi mafiosi. And I'm angry at Prime Minister Netanyahu for breaking the agreement to create an egalitarian prayer space at the Southern Wall even after being ordered to do so by his own Supreme Court. Because, as Kol Nidrei last night reminded us, it isn't kosher to break one's vow.

So I get it.

There are scores, if not thousands of actions over there, that turn us off and even repel us. It's true especially now, with Israel being controlled by its most right-wing government ever - a government that has all but officially renounced the commitment to a two-state solution made by Prime Minister Rabin 25 years ago last Thursday; a government that has doubled down on settlement construction and displacement of Palestinians from territory in the West Bank known as Area C; a government that recently arrested a Conservative rabbi for the "crime" of performing a wedding; a government that just this summer passed the so called Nation-State law; and a government which has begun to detain and even deport visitors whose views differ from its own. As Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the president of the Union for Reform Judaism, said, this development amounts to a posting a "giant sign by the door of the Jewish state [stating]: 'Don't come unless you agree with everything we're doing here.'"¹

I understand all that.

But here's the thing: *Ahavat Zion* - love of Zion - and *Ahavat Yisrael* - love for our brothers and sisters everywhere - is not optional. It is a mitzvah.

Rabbi Eugene Borowitz z"l, one of the most important Jewish thinkers of the modern era, taught me that a mitzvah is an obligation generated by a relationship. And relationship is why we celebrate marriages and lament breakups. That's why we expect parents to nurture their children and children to honor their parents. And that's why we Jews accept the proposition, "*Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh L'zeh.*" All of Israel is responsible for one another."

Perhaps unique among the world's peoples, the obligations to which we Jews are subject arise out of both our religion and our peoplehood. No matter whether we are Ashkenazic or Sephardic, Mizrachi, or something else, Jews by birth or Jews by choice, all of us trace our lineage to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. All of us are bearers of a common legacy and stewards of a sacred destiny. All of us stood at Sinai and entered into a covenant with the Eternal and with each other. That is, whether metaphorically or literally, how a Jew chooses to see his or her place in the world.

As we will recall in the Torah reading to be read on this very day, Moses declared to all of Israel:

You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God—you tribal heads, you elders, and you officials, all the men of Israel, you children, you women, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer—to

¹ "New Israel Law Bars Foreign Critics from Entering the Country" in *The New York Times*, March 7, 2017.

enter into the covenant of the Eternal your God . . . in order to establish you this day as God's people and in order to be your God, as promised you and as sworn to your fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I make this covenant . . . not with you alone, but with those who are standing here with us this day before the Eternal our God and with those who are not here this day.²

And so we in this room - who were not there that day - we who didn't stand at Sinai because we wouldn't be born for another 150 generations - we are parties to that covenant too. That is why to this day we publicly welcome Jewish babies into the covenant in front of a holy ark. That's why we rejoice as a community when, at age 13, b'nai mitzvah reach young adulthood and declare that, along with all the privileges and blessings of being a Jew, they also accept a certain obligation generated by a relationship.

When we liberal Jews get into trouble, it's sometimes because we act like the person who drills a hole under his seat on a lifeboat, claiming that what he does with their seat is their business alone. In a covenantal community everyone, for the sake of themselves and of the collective, guards the boat's hull and keeps it in good repair. Because only a boat that is seaworthy can sustain and transport its passengers to magical places they never even dreamed of going. The seaworthiness of the boat depends on everyone.

In the same way we are required to do *shmirat haguf* - to care for our individual bodies - so are we expected to care for the collective body of the Jewish people. And if a part of our body should get ill, or infected, we don't ignore it. We don't distance ourselves from it. We certainly don't amputate it. We treat it.

As the late, great former President and Prime Minister Shimon Peres used to say, Israel belongs to all of us, and so Israel is too important to be left alone to the Israelis alone.

So, my friends, what I'm really saying you this day is this: Israel needs us. It needs us to engage with her because each of us has a stake in her.

I therefore am asking two things of you. First, to love (or, if you prefer, engage with) Israel. Love her by praying for her well-being and the well-being of her inhabitants. Love her by visiting her, by seeing the wonderful sites and history there, by experiencing the incredible diversity and vitality of Israeli life, and by encountering the so many amazing people there who want what you and I want. And love her from afar too, by feeding upon her innovative cuisine and by embracing her art and music and literature and dance and the magnificent modern Hebrew language.

The second thing I am asking you to do is this: help Israel. Help her by doing the next best thing to voting: write checks. Support the organizations that fight for the values we all share: values of religious pluralism, of equality, of justice for foreign workers and refugees, of a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians on the West Bank; of an end to settlement construction, confiscation of Palestinian land, and the malicious destruction of Palestinian property. You can even support them from just one tax-deductible web portal:

² Deut. 29:9-14.

Israelgives.org, Rabbis for Human Rights, the New Israel Fund, J Street, Americans for Peace Now, the Israel Religious Action Center - these and so many others merit our support. If you are an Israeli citizen, vote. And If you are an American citizen, vote. Because whoever governs has the power to do great good or great harm. Loving Israel means helping her work on all of her problems.

The Book of Deuteronomy, which we will soon hear from, instructs us: “Do what is right and good in the sight of God, that it may go well with you, and that you will come and inherit the good land that God swore to your ancestors.”³ (2x)

What is interesting about this is that the Jewish people’s possession of, and dwelling in, the land is contingent - contingent on doing right and good. If we fail to do right and good, we lose our birthright. We forfeit our blessing.

Moreover, says the Medieval commentator Rashi, doing what is right and good means not only following commandments like “Love your neighbor as yourself,” and treating justly the widow, orphan and foreigner, but compromising.⁴

Now I know I’m not alone. Rabbi Friedman, JRC’s original Rabbi John, has done as much as perhaps any rabbi in the country to fight for an Israel that is pluralistic, just, and at peace with its Palestinian neighbors.

For my part, I’ve made engagement with Israel part of the fabric of my life. I’ve lived there twice, visit often, and one day *b’ezrat Hashem* will make aliyah. I spend part of my every day reading the Israeli press and listening to Israeli radio. I support organizations like Rabbis for Human Rights, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, the Israel Religious Action Center, J Street, and the New Israel Fund. I’ve visited Arab and Bedouin villages marked for destruction. I’ve protested home demolitions in Jerusalem. And four summers ago, in downtown Jerusalem I confronted a large gathering of young Israelis who, angry at the murder of three Jewish youth, called out for revenge and chanted an anti-Arab slogan that was as hate-filled anything I have heard broadcast out of Charlottesville. And, I must admit, it was rather frightening, and the police escorted me away for my own safety.

But here’s the thing. I do those things because Israel is worth it. Because Israel remains to my mind the greatest miracle of our time and one of the biggest thrills of being a Jew.

Last week I shared with you a letter from a college student reminding her parents about the importance of keeping perspective. So let us look at things in perspective for a moment. In the 121 years since the first World Zionist Congress convened in Basel, Switzerland, the almost impossible-seeming idea of a Jewish state has become a phenomenal success. Today, for the first time in twenty centuries, not one Jewish community in the entire world lives in existential peril. Today, as the recent film “Operation Finale” shows, Jewish blood can no longer be spilled with impunity. Today there is a

³ Deut. 6:18.

⁴ I learned this from Rabbi Aaron Panken z”l.

flourishing Hebrew culture, of art, music, and literature. Today, fully half the Jewish people lives the dream articulated in *HaTikvah*, of being a “free in our land - the land of Zion and Jerusalem.”

Has Israel become a light unto the nations? No. Not yet, anyway. But in twice the timespan, has the United States?

Even so, *af al pi zeh*, you stand here this day. I stand her this day. All Israel stands here this day, in covenant with the Eternal and each other.

Let us therefore choose life and good, so that we, and our children, and all of our nine million Israeli brothers and sisters, three-quarters of them Jewish, shall live in justice and peace, and flourish in the land.