

Loving Israel is Not an Option

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Kol Nidre 5778 / September 29, 2017

Fifty years ago I was a 17-year-old rising senior in high school. To be perfectly candid, on the maturity scale I was — shall we say — a work in progress. At that age I was preoccupied with the trials and tribulations of the Detroit Tigers. My spare time was spent in the basement of my home working on my model railroad (otherwise known as *playing with my trains*). Even though I had lived through the Kennedy assassination which had burst my bubble of naïveté as to the *real* nature of the world, even though I had watched with modest interest the unfolding dramas of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war, my world was much more parochial and insular than — in retrospect — I wish it had been.

But 1967 was a watershed year for me. Especially the month of June.

I didn't really know very much about Israel as a teenager. I knew it was a Jewish state, a nation created out of the ashes of the Holocaust. I knew it was over there, in a part of the world that was no more familiar to me than was Southeast Asia. (Indeed, the latter was decidedly more familiar, with images of Vietnam appearing every night on the evening news.) All I really knew about Israel was that it was a self-made nation, a land that was steeped in imagery of copper-skinned Jews riding tractors and wearing canvas hats. I also knew that Israel was surrounded by a host of hostile Arab countries. But that was *there* and this was *here*.

This all changed, however, on the days leading up to, during, and following the Six-Day War.

Most of you know the history of that watershed event in the modern history of the Jewish people. The tensions had been building for weeks. I didn't really understand or appreciate the political nuances between Israel and Egypt (in particular). I simply knew that the situation was fragile. Israel was featured daily on Walter Cronkite's CBS Evening News. Right alongside the daily reports of civil unrest in America's cities, just before or after video footage of a battle with the Vietcong, Israel was increasingly becoming a *feature* story. It was obvious, even to me, that something serious was emerging.

I was learning new geographical names, like the Straits of Tiran. And the Sinai Peninsula. I had heard of Abdul Nasser, but now I was awakening to rhetoric of his wanting to push Jews "into the sea." This I could understand. For the first time in my life, my identity as a Jew was being impacted by events outside the confines of my youth group. I was quickly realizing that what I was watching on television actually had something to do with me.

Then the war started. I clearly recall Israel making it to the lead story at 6:30 every night. Israel's survival was very much at stake. And the tension on my street was palpable. We were mostly Jews, including a Holocaust survivor family living down the block. But across the street we also had a Syrian family from Damascus. One day, around dinnertime, a bunch of the neighbors gathered outside my house in the middle of the street. Israel's fate was still very much in the balance. All of a sudden the Holocaust family and the Syrian family started screaming at each other.

Without any warning, the war in the Middle East had come to Oak Park, Michigan.

It was then that I realized that being a Jew was something which would be an integral part of me for the rest of my life.

A lot of things would happen that year and the next which would have a profound impact on me. Just a few weeks later my city of Detroit would be engulfed in flames. A few months later Martin Luther King would be assassinated. Then Bobby Kennedy. And the Tigers would finally win the World Series. All of these would leave a lasting impression upon me. But מלחמת ששת הימים (as I would come to learn its Israeli identification), the Six-Day War would change the trajectory of my life.

Five years later I would find myself eating *shishlik* on *Rechov Mamilla* as a first-year rabbinic student in Jerusalem. What was once a place “over there” had now become *home*. I had commenced a journey — in classic 60s parlance — of finding myself. It was the beginning of a path which would bring me to you eight years later.

Make no mistake about it: I am here tonight because of those events of fifty years ago. It was then that I realized that the Jewish people was not just something in a religious school textbook. That awareness would inspire me to learn Hebrew, to see other Jews not merely as co-religionists, or as neighbors, but as family. Fifty years ago started my love affair with the people, and the land, and the State of Israel.

I love *Am Yisrael*— the people Israel. I don't say this as a perfunctory statement of ethnic loyalty. I love Jews. I don't always like them. But I feel a bond, a deep sense of familial connection.

Just walk into my office. You will see a World War I Jewish War Veterans poster beckoning us to care for our Jewish brethren who are returning home from the war. Next to it is another poster, this one from the UJA in 1947, reminding us that the dreams and aspirations and struggles of the soon to be created State of Israel “is our fight” too. Just below that poster are framed coins and paper currency which the Nazis minted and printed for the Jews of the Lodz Ghetto to use. Nazi “play” money. No doubt the Nazis intended their actual monetary value to be worthless, yet to me they are priceless.

I don't take you to Amsterdam because of the *rijsttofel* and pancakes. (Not entirely, anyway.) When I walk into Anne Frank's bedroom, when every February I stand in the incredibly cold and damp sanctuary of the *Esnoga* — the Great Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam, I don't do this because it makes for a nice sightseeing trip. I don't go to these lengths because I want to expand your horizons, to offer you a good learning opportunity.

I take you to Amsterdam because it's our home. This is where our people walked. I take you there to understand and appreciate, even more to feel a connection to the members of our people who endured unprecedented pain for no other reason save that they were — like us Jews. To be a Jew means that you are bound to other Jews — both in time and space.

This is why so much of my rabbinate was devoted to rescuing and then caring for the Jews of the Soviet Union. This is why I love to teach Jewish history. This is why I volunteer to care for the historical Jewish cemeteries of Newark. This is why I give of my income every year to the United Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest. Because this is my people. This is what Jews do. *Kol Yisrael areivin zeh l'zeh* — All Jews are bound to each other.

And it was this sense of connection that brought me to Jerusalem in July of 1972.

I love *Eretz Yisrael* — the land of Israel. On my very first night there, after having taken a *sherut* or collective taxi from Lod Airport to the Central Bus Station in Jerusalem, and then

taken the number 15 Egged bus to *Yimka* (the YMCA), got off and walked across the street to the Hebrew Union College where I serendipitously ran into Rabbi Hank Skirball — the only person I knew in the entire State of Israel, on his invitation I spent my first night sleeping on the floor of his office at HUC. Through his office window I would see in realtime what I had only seen in textbooks and newspapers: the illuminated walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. It was the most spiritual sight of my life.

It's hard to explain to someone who has never been there how powerful the land of Israel is. It's not simply the antiquity. I've seen old places before. Ruins are invariably fascinating, even inspiring. But these are *our* ruins. Walking through the Yaffo Gate is a spiritual reality check. This is where David wrote the psalms. Hebron is where Abraham buried Sarah. Modiin is where the Maccabees saved Judaism. These are not just archaeological sites. They're family heirlooms.

The date palms have the aroma of a mystical garden. It is a smell for which we have yearned for over two millennia. Even the dirt feels sacred there. The farms that used to be arid desert, the technology centers which dot the landscape, the tapestry of skin tones and exotic accents show Israel to be what it truly is: a *Holy* land.

None of this is intended to deny or diminish the meaning of this land for its Palestinian inhabitants. Their claims to territorial ownership cannot be easily dismissed. Nor should they. The land of Israel will never know peace until a just and equitable solution is found between Israelis and Palestinians. As Jews we have a moral responsibility to understand and work to resolve Palestinian grievances. But the onus of the conflict lies not just with Israel. The opportunities to share the land are numerous and well documented. Palestinian "rejectionism" of the right of the State of Israel to even exist is the primary cause and perpetuation of the conflict. Of this I have no doubt.

But none of this can nor should detract from the essential nature of this land for the Jewish people. *Eretz Yisrael* — the Land of Israel — is not only our homeland, it is our birthplace. It is the place of which we have dreamed from the very first moment we were driven away. "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem..." sang our mothers and fathers by "the rivers of Babylon." "Next year in Jerusalem" have been the closing words to our Passover seders for more generations than we can count. *Eretz Yisrael* — the Land of Israel — is where Judaism was born. Shabbat. Torah. Holiness. Justice. They were all birthed in that place.

For the Jew — for me — the Land of Israel is not merely holy, it is enchanted.

And I love *Medinat Yisrael* — the State of Israel. This is not always easy for me to say. Because it is comfortable — and lazy — to confuse the *government* of Israel with the State of Israel. But just as my profound upset at the current state of America does not diminish my love for this land and the principles upon which it was founded, so my love and admiration for the State of Israel transcend the deeply disturbing policies and attitudes of the current Israeli administration.

I have never hidden my disdain for the settlements in the disputed territories. I have always believed that they are fundamental impediments to peace. And the currying favor which this Israeli government extends to the *Haredim*, the Ultra-Orthodox, I believe is deeply destructive to the future of Israel as a "Jewish" state. The truth be told, there are so many things currently in Israel which I find concerning, from economic injustice to social and racial pathologies. And

the fact that such warts afflict other nations should not serve as justification for dismissiveness on our part. If Israelis can take its leaders to task, so can we.

Perhaps more than anything else, the reason I love *Medinat Yisrael* — the State of Israel is not that it is a homeland for Jews, but that it is a *Jewish* state. I love Israel because it was founded upon Judaic values. Because it is a modern nation-state that holds itself accountable to the highest principles of Torah. Few things bring me greater pride than to see Israeli courts support the rights of Arabs. To hear stories of Israeli commanders who employ extraordinarily dangerous military tactics — who put their own lives in increased danger — because taking the safe path would violate specific ethical *mitzvot*.

I not merely love the State of Israel, I take deep pride in it. This is a nation which opens its doors to refugees who have nowhere else to go. This is a nation which sends emergency medical aid to places in the world that have never met or even heard of Jews. This is a nation that unflinchingly demands accountability from its military and political leaders. Forget all the stuff about Israel creating cell phones and Waze. This is a nation that pioneers technologies which ultimately benefit the countries trying to destroy it. And it is a true democracy. Israel may be far from perfect, but so much has been made of its failures, we place such high and demanding expectations on it, that all too often — especially in recent years — we easily lose sight of the goodness that is Israel.

It troubles me — deeply — that Israel continuously needs to prove itself to us. It troubles me — deeply — that we American Jews act as if Israel owes us something. As far as I'm concerned, it's the other way around. It is we who should be indebted to Israel.

We cannot overstate the import of the Six-Day War upon American Judaism.

Up to 1967 Israel was for most American Jews — a novelty. Of course Zionism was alive and well here, but the majority of us were not much more than intrigued by Israel. Until 1967. That year was a watershed for Jews world-wide, especially here. After Auschwitz to be a Jew meant to be a *victim*. Even the creation and perseverance of the State of Israel offered little to offset the sense of repressed shame that came after the Holocaust.

But after the Six-Day War the narrative changed dramatically. Israel gave us pride. We started wearing *kippot* in public. We created Judaic studies programs on college campuses. We affirmed Sephardic Hebrew pronunciation, discharging the Ashkenazic Hebrew of Europe to the world of the yeshiva (and Temple Emanu-El in New York City). *The Jews of Silence*, as Elie Wiesel called them, the Jews of the Soviet Union awoke to a Jewishness that had been stolen from them for generations. Suddenly Jewish rituals that had been shelved or forgotten were restored to life. Young Jews started building *sukkot*. We discovered the *tikkun*, the all-night study session of Shavuot. We took the Whole Earth Catalogue and made it Jewish. We created *havurot*. We rewrote our prayerbooks and *haggadot*. Women stood up to take their rightful places at the tables of Jewish leadership.

To be sure, much of these shifts were influenced by the changes already afoot in America. We boomers were challenging the established conventions we had inherited. The impact of the counter-culture, the emergence of feminism, the social justice movements of the civil rights era and the anti-war protests of the sixties cannot be dismissed. They were essential to the changes Judaism would see in the 1970s. But the Six-Day War was the catalyst which brought it all together. Israel was the shot of adrenaline that brought Judaism and Jews back to life.

Simply put, were it not for Israel and its dramatic refusal to be “pushed into the sea” 50 years ago, I have absolutely no doubt that I would not be standing here tonight. There might not even be a Temple Ner Tamid.

I come to you tonight — on this evening of atonement for broken promises — to ask you to take Israel into your hearts.

We shouldn't love Israel only when it's attacked any more than we should turn away from Israel when it angers and even embarrasses us. Does Israel live up to its Judaic ideals? No more than we do. That's why we have Yom Kippur. I don't ask you to accept everything about Israel. I don't ask you to pledge blind loyalty. I don't even ask you to like Israel. But I do ask you to *love* Israel. I ask you to instill in your children and grandchildren a love for the Jewish people. Because we are family. I ask you to seriously consider the notion that *there is a reason we exist as a people*, and that Israel is the place where that sense of purpose was created. I ask you to consider one of the most fundamental truths of Judaism — that Jews and the Land of Israel are inextricably intertwined.

There is so much more we could be doing here at Ner Tamid. We need people to step forward and volunteer to make sure that Israel is part of Ner Tamid's agenda. Call it what you will — a committee, a task force, a *havurah*. I don't care. I'm not talking about putting up symbols of Israeli flags or making gestures of prayers for Israel. I'm not talking about bringing back Israeli dancing or serving falafel at onegs. I'm talking about the stuff that really matters. That makes a difference. We need to organize more trips to Israel. We need to increase our resources so we can help our children visit and study in Israel. We need to be serious players in the struggle for religious pluralism in Israel. We need to make Israel's welfare — both domestically and internationally — a priority for our community.

When I was ordained the title I was granted was not just “Rabbi”. To be precise, in June of 1977 — ten years after the Six-Day War, exactly forty years ago — I was ordained as a רב בישראל; a rabbi in Israel. That does not mean an “Israeli” rabbi. It means a rabbi *within* Israel. Amidst the Jewish people.

We are Israel.

Judaism is not just a religion. We all know this. Nor is it simply a culture. Or an ethnicity. Judaism is a civilization. It is a unique way of understanding and engaging the world. More than a philosophy or a theology, Judaism is a way of living. And its adherents — by birth or through willful choice — are members of a singular if complex people.

Some of us can claim genetic roots going all the way back to Abraham and Sarah. Me? My DNA suggests that three-quarters of me comes from Eastern European Ashkenazic Jews. The other twenty-five percent comes from Protestant immigrants from the British Isles. Some of us have been raised in other traditions yet have elected to embrace *this* people's world-view and the history that goes with it. Some of us are not Jewish but have chosen to live our lives with Jews. To me, these are the true heroes of our people, for — while not of the Jewish faith — you willingly and lovingly stand with your partners in prayer, bringing your daughters and sons to Torah.

As far as I'm concerned, we are all *Yisrael*. We are all — individually and collectively — Israel. Not “part of” Israel. We *are* Israel. And that land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean; that land where Abraham and Sarah first pitched their tents; that land that Moses could only see from afar; that land where David sang his poetry and Jeremiah challenged its inhabitants to

treat others fairly; that land to which Ruth followed her mother-in-law, Naomi; that land our grandparents — both biological and adoptive — dreamed of at the end of every seder; that land is as much as part of us as any place upon which we have ever set foot. It's not merely a part of us. It is us. It carries our name. And we would not be who we are without it.

This is my truth. And it is my responsibility as your rabbi and my joy as a Jew to share it with you tonight, on this my final *Kol Nidre* sermon here. *Kol Nidre*. For all the promises we have failed to fulfill. We don't need forgiveness. We just need to make it right.