I begin with a story about a rabbi giving a sermon that was proving to be a rather long one. A synagogue visitor in the back row leaned closer to the white-haired man seated just ahead of him. “How long has he been preaching?” he whispered. The elderly man hesitated. “About 25 or 30 years, I think.” “Then I’ll stay,” said the guest. “He must be about through.”

I have been standing before this congregation for 25 years. I think by now, you know what I usually talk about during the holidays.

This morning, I’d like to begin talking about Israel and end up teaching what to me is a vital lesson about being a member of Beth Or. It may, take me awhile, but I hope to deliver a message that will bring meaning.

This past summer, as some of you may know, 32 members of our community joined Laurie and me in Israel for a two-week pilgrimage. I have to tell you, it was one of the most memorable trips of my life. Of course, we saw all the sites, had services at the Western Wall, visited the North, hiked through the oasis of Ein Gedi and visited the holy cities of Tzfat, Tiberias and Jerusalem, but what made this trip so memorable, was our timing. You see, we left just as Israel’s
conflict with Gaza was ramping up. We left just after the tragic kidnapping and murder of the three yeshiva students, but before Hamas had fired their missiles at Israel. Once we arrived the missiles started flying. Most were either intercepted by Israel’s missile defense system, Iron Dome or fell in open spaces.

But on one particular night in Jerusalem as we were walking back from the Sound and Light show in David’s citadel the missile alert sirens went off. At first, I wasn’t sure what I was hearing. I thought, perhaps there was a fire somewhere close. But upon seeing people running in the streets and Laurie saying “we better run,” I knew that we were under attack. I’ve lived in Jerusalem for a year, having visited her hundreds of times, but I never had to run for my life on her streets, yelling at our members to follow me.

We had just passed the King David Hotel and had a five-minute run to our hotel and their bomb shelter in the basement. Only afterwards, did I realize that we were too far away from our shelter to have made it in time. I can’t really say that I was scared, because I didn’t have time to think. I just reacted and hoped that our fellow members would do likewise.

Upon entering our hotel, the Inbal bellmen and hotel staff were ushering everyone down three levels into the bomb shelter. I found in our shelter, what Aaron Panken, the dean of HUC found in his shelter only a few blocks away. He wrote, “In the shelter, the most remarkable equality reigns. Babies, young children, teens, soldiers, the elderly are all there — the entire cycle of life walks down those
stairs to seek safety, with all its glories and challenges blatantly displayed. Those bedecked in yarmulkes or dressed in the black suits and hats of the haredi Orthodox stand alongside those who live Reform, Conservative, secular or more postmodern lives, along with Israeli Arabs, Druze, Christians and others.

Some pray, others recite Psalms, some chat, but most sit quietly and wait for the “all clear.” For a few minutes, the divergent, contradictory and competitive streams of life in Israel all converge, and human safety becomes the sole communal objective.”

My daughter, Ricca spent the summer in Tel Aviv. She texted us that her first time in the shelter was nerve wracking. “I did not sign up for this,” she said. “I want to go home.” By the second night and the third siren, she texted us, “I’m getting used to this…Not so bad.” By the third day and her fifth alert, she had become an Israeli and was complaining about the inconvenience of it all.

Our members had a few tearful moments, but I’m glad we were there even for the war. They will have memories that will last a lifetime. They experienced a shared vulnerability that few know but that united them with their homeland. They were constantly reminded of their inescapable link to state, people and collective fate. Life was tense, but oddly very normal and predictable. One night, we were to hear from an AIPAC speaker at 7pm, but the sirens went off at 6:30. I knew that our speaker would never make it. He would be in his bomb shelter with his family.
But there he was, right on time in the hotel lobby. And with all their palpable nervousness and a few tears, our Beth Or pilgrims were there as well. Then with hope for quiet, we emerged again into the Jerusalem night to have dinner as a group at a new restaurant in the refurbished Jerusalem train station.

After leaving Israel, Laurie and I travelled to Istanbul for three days. In the best of times, during the Ottoman Empire, there were approximately 250,000 Jews living in Turkey. There were hundreds of synagogues and cultural institutions. Now, the Jewish community is under siege, fearing for their safety. We were told, in no uncertain terms when leaving Israel, never to tell the Turks that we were Jewish or that we had come from Israel. We felt comforted that our flight from Tel Aviv was full of Jews, many orthodox, believing that many Israeli’s were coming to Turkey as tourists. We were reassured on the plane that we wouldn’t be alone. But we were the only two people on the Boeing 767 to enter Istanbul. The rest of the passengers made a left and went to their connecting flights, while we were the only ones to go through passport control and enter Turkey. OY

On our second day in Istanbul we visited the Neve Shalom synagogue just down the road from the highest point in Istanbul, the Galata tower. The tower used to be the center of the Jewish community. As we approached the tower, we witnessed a sizable pro-Hamas march through the streets of the declining Jewish community. Our Jewish guide, who we hired to take us to the synagogue, told us to ignore them and just look away. As the angry crowd past us, we turned down an
alleyway and made our way to the synagogue. Neve Shalom was built and rebuilt many times. The newest structure was constructed in 1952. Frankly, it was not nearly as impressive as some of the shuls here in Philly. But what was remarkable was its history and its current configuration. You see this shul was attacked twice in recent history. On September 6, 1986, Palestinian terrorists aligned with Abu Nidal opened fire during a Shabbat service, which resulted in the death of 22 people. Bullet holes are still visible in a few inconspicuous places. Then, on November 16, 2003, the Synagogue was hit by one of four car bomb attacks carried out in Istanbul that day. The explosions devastated the synagogue and killed twenty-seven people, and injured more than 300 others. Entering the shul, today, is like entering a bomb shelter. The front of the building has steel plated outer doors and an inner blast door that is designed to protect the worshippers from another car bomb. The outside protective doors are decorative, but make no mistake; their purpose is to shelter the community. To expedite our visit, we entered through a side door. Laurie and I walked into a sealed room that closed us off from the outside but didn’t allow us to enter the synagogue. An armed guard took our passports to check our identity with their security service. We waited in the secure room for several minutes. Then we put our items on an x-ray machine, walked through a metal detector and reclaimed our items, except our passports, which we were told that they would hold in case we were killed in the synagogue and they needed to identify us.
Here’s what struck Laurie and me. We never felt safer and freer to be who we really are than in that shul. For the brief hour, in which we toured the synagogue, inspected the torah scrolls, saw the bullet holes in the banister leading up to the bima; we were able to be ourselves. You see, outside on the beautiful, historic, culturally rich streets of Istanbul we were enjoying the culture, architecture, food and nightlife, but we were living a lie. I told people, including the hotel personnel and our guides that I was a high school teacher. At our meals, the waiters tried to engage us, but we anxiously deflected all personal questions. Only inside the shul, sheltered and secured did we feel comfortable and emotionally free. We smiled at the Shamash, perused the prayer books and had our pictures taken on the bima. We were home.

With our visit over, we left the shelter of the synagogue and returned to the beauty, wonder, tension and duplicity of modern day Istanbul.

Upon our return to the States, on my first Shabbat back, I read the torah portion from Numbers, chapter 35. It speaks about the Ir Miklat, or the six cities of refuge. These cities, spread all over Israel and beyond, were places to which an unintentional manslayer could flee and find shelter in the event of an accidental death. The relatives of the person whom he killed would have no access to him to exact vengeance. He would be safe in the city of shelter. From this idea, the church developed the idea of making a cathedral a “sanctuary,” a place where the police could gain no access.
According to the Sefer Hachinuch, a medieval commentary, the City of Shelter had three purposes. The first was repentance. The person who committed manslaughter could realize and regret his deed. Living in the city of refuge was a respite, a protective haven where the perpetrator lived cut off from his family and friends. It provided an opportunity for spiritual growth and teshuvah. The second was physical safety. In a world of “an eye for an eye,” the city of refuge removes the manslayer from society so that the victim’s family will not be able to exact retribution. Law enforcement today utilizes this idea by offering a protective custody system or the witness protection program. The third reason was emotional. The relatives of the victim didn’t have to see the perpetrator every day and be constantly reminded of their pain. The Ir miklat protected the family member of the victim by not forcing the bereaved to see their loved one’s killer every day on the street.

In short, the Ir Miklat, the city of Refuge was a spiritual, physical and psychological retreat.

Once the Jews were exiled from Israel in 135 CE, the six cities lost their status as refuges. The word Miklat, or shelter fell out of use. But when the state of Israel was created and Hebrew was resurrected, the word took on a whole new meaning. The father of Modern Hebrew, Eliezer Ben Yehuda, was brilliant in fashioning words to express modern phenomenon. As there was no Biblical word for telephone, and Hebrew was not a spoken language, Ben Yehuda needed to
create a modern word for it. Ben Yehuda created one…. TELEPHONE. And how about Television? …Easy …TELEVISIA. My favorite is Bottle. In Hebrew it’s called “Bakbuk,” for that is the sound it makes when milk is poured out.

So what name do you think ben Yehuda came up with for a bomb shelter? Ben Yehuda named these shelters “Ir Miklat,” after the cities of refuge. Thousands of shelters, or Miklatim, in rural kibbutzim and modern cities, in shopping malls and hospitals offer shelter to Israelis. Most Israelis don’t make the connection between their miklat and the Biblical Ir Miklat. But it’s significant.

Having been in the shelters of Israel, having explored the shelter of Istanbul’s synagogue, I have come to believe that we are still in need of cities of refuge. We need to find shelter from the storms of life and the growing hatred that surrounds us as Jews and lovers of Israel.

Beth Or is our miklat. Our shul is our spiritual shelter where we can pray, grow, learn, and repent. This is our place for reflection, safety, restoration and where we can be who we are. Here I can wear my cipah without worry. Here I can speak of my support for Israel without being concerned that someone might over hear. Here I can be who I am. Beth Or is our refuge, a haven for our souls.

You know that we always have members joining and leaving. It is the rhythm of synagogue life. A few years ago, a few close friends left Beth Or for various reasons. It happens. We all know it. It saddens me, but there is often nothing we can do to stop it. But over the summer, a wonderful thing happened.
A half dozen members came back. Why, I asked. They answered, because they needed to be with their community following the war in Israel, the anti-Semitism seen all over the world, and the discomfort of seeing their fellow Jews suffer because of their identity. They came back because they needed to be with their community in a safe place.

In short, they needed their Miklat. Here we can stand together and be who we are. Here we can worry together. Pray together. Be together and find refuge from the storms outside.

What we have in this building and at this time, should never be taken for granted. It is something special. Beth Or shelters us and is as a guard on the watchtower, protecting our heritage, our culture and our values. Beth Or, our Miklat, is where we share a common heritage, talk of our joys and our struggles, dance under the chuppah and mourn our loved ones. This is our sacred place. Here we remember the victims of the Holocaust and celebrate Israel’s independence. Here we wave the Lulav and pass around the matza at a community Seder. Beth Or, our miklat is where we teach our children and give them a love for their identity and their heritage. We, and other shuls like us, are the only ones created to do so in our community. We shelter what is precious and true in our culture and guarantee our continuity.

Israel not only has many miklatim…. It is a miklat. Despite it all and the insecurity of sometimes living there. It is still our haven. Do you know that six
thousand, roughly one percent of French Jews have made aliyah to Israel in the last several months? Violent, anti-Semitic protests are all across France, not just in Paris. One young Beth Or family, was horrified and their young 9 year old daughter traumatized when they heard during their French vacation, “Death to the Jews” rising up from the street below their hotel window. When I arrived in Ben Gurion airport I noticed a man from the aliyah department of the government, standing by passport control ready to welcome new immigrants to Israel, even when the state was under siege. France may be lovely. The Champs Elysees is romantic and the food is fabulous, but more and more Jews don’t feel safe there anymore. They want to be with their people.

One of my favorite stories is of David Ben Gurion welcoming the Jewish-American Pulizter Prize winning author, Herman Wouk to Israel. Ben Gurion said to Wouk, “Why don’t you come to my home for Shabbat in Sde Boker, (which is a five hour drive into the desert from Jerusalem, where he was staying). Wouk asked, “How will I get there. It’s 1948 and I have no secure transportation during the war.” Ben Gurion responded, “I’ll send a car for you.” The next day an armored personnel carrier full of soldiers, a jeep with a mounted machine gun and an armored plated chauffeured car showed up to take Wouk to Sde Boker. When Shabbat was over, and Wouk turned to leave, Ben Gurion said with a smile, “You know, you really should make aliyah and live here in Israel, for only here can you be free.” Wouk was astonished. “How can you say that? You sent an armored
convoy to escort me here.” Ben Gurion retorted, “I didn’t say ‘safe.’ I said ‘free.’”

It may not always be safe, but at least you can be free.

Despite it all, French Jews are freer in Israel. Only we can understand why they would prefer the shelter of Israel to the splendor of France.

To make my last point, about psychological freedom, I want to tell you a story about Shawn Carmelli. Do any of you know who he was? His story starts in South Padre, Texas. It’s a village located somewhere on the Rio Grande. I have never been there, but my guess is that South Padre Island probably does not have a very big Jewish community, nor do they have many synagogues there.

And yet, there was a boy named Shawn Carmelli who grew up there and when he turned 21, he made aliyah to Israel. The first thing he did upon arriving was to join the Israeli army. He asked if he could join the crack division of the Israeli army - the Golani Brigade. He served for one year and this summer, Shawn Carmelli died in the war in Gaza.

When he died, the family, figuring that no one would come to his funeral, because he was a lone soldier, put the word out that he was killed on Facebook. They said that they felt alone. They knew no one in Israel. They didn’t even know their son’s friends. They posted on Facebook of his death and his funeral. They expected a few people to attend.

The next day, TWENTY THOUSAND PEOPLE SHOWED UP FOR THE SERVICE! The people of Israel built up a shelter of love for the Carmellis.
People with kipot on their heads came, and people without kipot came. People from the far left came, and people from the far right came, and people from every single group in between came too. The President of the State of Israel came, and the American Ambassador to Israel came. The Israeli army chief of staff came, and many, many other people who were not celebrities came too. They came to give honor to this boy from South Padre Island, Texas, who had died in defense of Israel. They came to show their love for his parents who mourned so deeply.

When we are exposed to the harshness of life, we can find a Miklat, we can worship in a Miklat, we can build a miklat, we can be a miklat.

Close to four thousand years ago, our people knew that we would need shelter. They knew that we would need a place to repent, feel safe and find reconciliation. They build six cities all across Israel to which people could flee. Those refuges no longer exist, but today we know otherwise. We are in our shelter and it’s called Beth Or. What would Jewish life be like without Beth Or or Neve Shalom? We need our communities. Thank God you are here to keep them strong. Israel is still our haven, our Miklat. It may not always be safe, but at least we are free. As evil surrounds us, the people of Israel welcome us into their shelter and we can be secure. Finally, we can and must be a shelter to one another. We need to embrace each other with our words, our arms and our very presence. Let love be our shelter from life’s storms.

My friends, we need our havens. We need our refuge. Let it be built with
our love, with the cementing bonds of fellowship that link us together in fate and faith.