

*i-Engage – Kol Nidre 5773*  
Rabbi Michael Safra

My father loves this story from Israel's early days:

Things were going badly. The economy was in a tail spin with inflation rapidly rising, immigrants flooding in from all over and enemies threatening from all sides. It was problems, problems, problems, with no solutions in sight. So the Knesset held a special session where they talked and argued and debated for hours with no progress. Finally, one member stood up and says "Quiet everyone. I've got it, the solution to all our problems. We'll declare war on the United States."

Everyone started shouting at once. "You're nuts! That's crazy!" But the minister says, "Hear me out! We declare war. We lose. The United States does what she always does when she defeats a country. She rebuilds everything; our highways, airports, shipping ports, schools, hospitals, factories, loans us money and sends us food aid. Our problems would be over." Another minister responded, "Sure. That sounds like a plan if we lose. But what happens if we win?"

With all the goings-on in Washington during the past couple weeks, maybe that wasn't much of a joke. Many of us are fearful about an impending crisis over Iran. But tonight I want to talk about a different crisis. And that is the crisis within the American Jewish community, particularly among the non-Orthodox, that when it comes to Israel, lots of people don't seem to care all that much.

The challenge is not new. In 2002, the pollster Frank Luntz organized focus groups of American Jewish college students, and he found that at least the students he interviewed didn't think much about Israel one way or another. "Six times," he reported, "We have brought Jewish youth together as a group to talk about their Jewishness and connection to Israel. Six times the topic of Israel did not come up until it was prompted. Six times these Jewish youth used the word 'they' rather than ['we'] to describe the situation."<sup>1</sup>

A year later, the sociologist Steven M. Cohen had a similar experience with day school parents. When asked general questions about what they like or don't like about their Judaism, "None of the participants ... so much as mentioned Israel during ... conversations [that] lasted half an hour."<sup>2</sup>

Embarrassingly, I had a similar experience in a seminar during rabbinical school. (The seminar happened to be taking place in Jerusalem, but that part doesn't matter). We were talking about what makes for Jewish identity and how to best serve Jews and help them discover what they're looking for. We talked about God and prayer and Tikkun Olam and Torah study. And after about 30 minutes, the seminar leader pointed out that we hadn't mentioned Israel once. We got defensive, of course; after all we were spending the year studying in Israel. But it made us think.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Beinart, *New York Review of Books*, 5/12/10.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Wald and Bryan Williams, "American Jews and Israel", 2006.

Part of the “problem” is that in spite of the Iranian threat, Israel is far more secure now than at any time in history. And with the miracle of Israel’s success, there is no denying that the relationship of American Jews to Israel is changing. For too long, the response has been to complain, to malign the next generation, to question their loyalty and hope that things might change. But that is a fool’s errand. What we need is a new conversation about Israel, to offer new avenues for deeper engagement.

The president of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, Rabbi Donniel Hartman, puts it this way. He says that for most of history the Jewish community has viewed Israel in light of two categories: There is גלות, exile; and גאולה, redemption.

For generations there was no question that *galut* was inhospitable to the Jew. Jewish history is filled with evidence that the Jew is the consummate outsider. And the Holocaust proved without a doubt that the future of the Jewish people is untenable without a Jewish state. In the years following the establishment of the State of Israel, Jews fled from Yemen and Morocco and Iraq and Syria and so many other lands to find refuge in Israel. And I remember the airlifts from Ethiopia and the settlement of more than a million Jews from the Former Soviet Union – proof positive of Israel’s ability to bring people from *galut*, from dispersion, to *g’ulah*, to redemption.

Modern history has played out the promise of Zionism as a redemptive force. My mother speaks often about her sense of euphoria, living in Jerusalem on June 6, 1967 when the city was reunited. Many of you remember well July 4, 1976, when Israeli commandos raided the airport in Entebbe to free Jewish airline passengers who were being held hostage by terrorists. Israel is a redemptive force.

The problem, though, is that the paradigm doesn’t work as well anymore.

The concept of *galut*, exile doesn’t mesh with the reality that Jews in America and other places are quite comfortable and our Judaism is quite vibrant. Most of us don’t accept the premise that Judaism outside of Israel is doomed.

And the lens of גאולה, redemption, leads to the view that Israel is always right; or, paradoxically, to disillusionment because Israel is supposed to be perfect and we know it is not.

Hartman proposes a paradigm shift. Instead of *galut* and *g’ulah*, we need a paradigm of *engagement* in the process of בנין ארץ ישראל, of building up the Land of Israel. We need a discussion – and the *i-Engage* series we are going to offer beginning in January is going to provide that forum – We need a discussion that celebrates Israel and explores the moral and religious underpinnings of Zionism and evaluates areas where Israel embodies those values along with areas where there is still work to be done in the process of building our nation.

Consider some headlines from the past year. There are the crises:

- In August, terrorists attacked an Egyptian Army checkpoint in Sinai and stormed the border fence with the intention of capturing Israeli soldiers or civilians. Israeli airstrikes killed most of the attackers as they fled. And there was a similar attempted attack from just last Friday. These events remind us of the looming threat to Israeli security.
- As do the recent reports of the approaching red-line with Iran's nuclear ambitions. The proxy war is ongoing, as we saw in the attack on Jewish tourists in Bulgaria in July. I have no doubt that there are people in this room who have made their choices for president based on the issue. Our concern for the safety and security of Israel is paramount, although we also know there is room for debate – in America as in Israel – about how to most effectively counter the threat .

Other headlines point to Israel as a redemptive force:

- In July, Speaker of Knesset Reuven Rivlin met with the president of the German Bundestag Norbert Lammert to denounce the controversial ruling by a district judge that circumcision was “a serious and illegal intervention in the bodily integrity of the child.” The meeting highlighted Israel's unique role in protecting Jewish interests throughout the world.
- A couple of weeks ago, Noam Gershoni defeated American David Wagner in tennis to win Israel's seventh medal of the London Paralympic games. Over the years Israel has won over 330 medals at the Paralympics. For those who view Israel only in terms of crisis, this is hardly news, but many of us take almost redemptive pride in the fact that Gershoni is one of us.

But then there are the troubling headlines:

- Last month, on Rosh Hodesh Elul, 4 women were taken into custody for the crime of wearing a *talit* at the Kotel. In May, Sephardi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar called non-Orthodox rabbis “the uprooters and destroyers of Judaism” while expressing displeasure at a plan to pay *some* non-Orthodox rabbinic salaries from the budget of the Ministry of Culture and Sport (not the Religious Ministry). In January in our sister city in Bet Shemesh, an 8-year old modern Orthodox girl on her way to school was harassed by an ultra-Orthodox mob who objected to what they said was immodest dress.
- No less alarming, in August a mob of Jewish teenagers attacked and beat an Arab teenager almost to death in downtown Jerusalem. Hundreds of people watched the attack and did nothing to help.

Through the prism of *galut* and *g'ulah*, we dare not hold Israelis to a higher moral standard than that of our enemy. But through the prism of engagement, we have to ask if there is something

wrong with our society that could allow such hatred to manifest itself. We have to ask serious questions about the viability of a Jewish state that doesn't represent Jews like us.

Whether we like it or not, for a significant number of Jews, the model of *galut* and *g'ulah* no longer works. The relationship based solely on crises – setting aside troubling stories in order not to air dirty laundry or to focus only on issues that unite us – no longer works. We need engagement not based on politics or fear, but engagement based on the fact that I am Jewish and this is my homeland and my dream and I have a role and a responsibility in building it.

I cannot accept a nuclear Iran that threatens the survival of my country, and I also cannot accept an ultra-Orthodox rabbinate that considers me the enemy. Because I love Israel and I care about Israel's future, I will get involved and I will do my part.

There are concrete things we can do.

Start by getting involved at B'nai Israel. A couple of weeks ago we welcomed Daniel Levy who is filling a new position of congregational Shaliach. Daniel comes to us from Jerusalem and he is working in a variety of settings with children and adults not just to "teach Israel", but to help us "live Israel" and engage in a very personal way.

If you haven't done so already, sign up to receive the periodic B'nai Israel Alerts. Join us for a conversation or a celebration; and when we announce another trip, sign up to visit Israel as well. And register for parts or all of the new *i-Engage* series. You won't be disappointed.

If you've never contributed to Masorti, the Conservative movement in Israel, we need your help. There were collection boxes for Masorti in the halls when you walked in to the synagogue this evening, and you can learn more at [www.masorti.org](http://www.masorti.org). In spite of the roadblocks set by the ultra-Orthodox establishment, the Masorti movement is making inroads. There are more than 60 Masorti congregations. And talented Masorti rabbis are reaching hundreds of thousands of Israelis who don't go to synagogue – through the Tali school system, outreach to Russian and Ethiopian Israelis, conversion classes and alternative wedding ceremonies. The fact that so many Israelis are ready to jump through hoops – getting civil marriages in Cyprus in order to have their Jewish weddings performed by Masorti rabbis – is testament to these rabbis' remarkable talents and the need for our brand of Judaism in Israel.

Israel's religious landscape is not going to change by itself. Masorti is on the front lines of the struggle for religious pluralism. They need our help; and they need our Federation to invest community dollars in that fight as well. You can make your gift to Masorti more personal if you contribute \$120 and designate it as membership dues in our sister congregation, Yaar Ramot in Jerusalem.

A donation to Masorti doesn't just *support* Israel. It helps to *build* Israel and it becomes an invitation to engage.

Tonight I also want to make a special plea to purchase an Israel Bond. There is no easier, more tangible way to take part in the *mitzvah* of **building** the land.

When I was in Israel in February I visited a desalination plant in Ashkelon. It was the largest such plant in the world until Israel built a bigger one in Hadera. It is huge, and it desalinates over 300 million gallons of sea-water a year. Israel Bonds had a role, as it did in building the new airport, expanding the train system, building roads, and more. Writing a check to the State of Israel to build our homeland, to own a little piece of the Jewish state, is an emotional experience.

Right now Israel borrows a lot of money through other markets. But in the event of crisis – say with Iran – banks will stop lending and interest rates will rise; and the government will count on its database of Israel Bonds purchasers to make up for the shortfall. In our precarious environment, it helps to know who is really committed to the Jewish state and its future.

If you have purchased Israel Bonds in the past, I hope you will join me in making a pledge to purchase more tonight.

And if you have never purchased a bond, I want you to see how easy it is. Look at the card. Consider at least the \$100 Mazal Tov bond for yourself or as a gift. The rates are good and the investment is safe.

Thanks to the generosity and vision of Wendi and Danny Abramowitz, we are continuing our program where *b'nai mitzvah* students who purchase a \$250 Israeli bond will receive another \$250 bond from the congregation – that's more than a 100% return on the investment! You can know that if we're giving away free money, we must really believe in the value of Israel Bonds and the need to have more people connecting to Israel in this way.

B'nai Israel continues to lead all area synagogues in both the number of purchasers and the total amount of bonds purchased. And I know that with your support we can retain our title.

There are lots of other things we can do. Join Rabbi Schnitzer and me at the Aipac Policy conference in March to support and preserve Aipac's effort to preserve America's ironclad relationship to Israel and to ensure that that it remains bi-partisan. Both American parties affirm their commitment to Israel and we want to keep it that way.

The 16th century scholar and mystic Maharal of Prague suggests that the purpose of fasting on Yom Kippur is to allow us to focus on the essence of our selves. When we deprive our bodies of ordinary nourishment, our souls – our innermost selves – become free. And deep within our Jewish

souls is an eternal concern, an unbreakable connection to Israel. In the words of the Psalmist, “אם אישכחך ירושלים תשכח ימיני, If I forget you O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget her cunning.”

As we afflict our bodies to nourish our souls on this holy night, let us re-engage with that innermost identity. Let us find strength in our love of Zion. Let us pledge to do our part to continue the process of building the land and shaping its society. Let us pray for a future when the yet incomplete dream of 2000 years to be a free people, a secure people, a pluralistic people, a redeemed people in a redeemed land will become reality.

גמר חתימה טובה, May we be sealed for good in the book of life. Amen.