

Ein Li Eretz Aheret, I Have No Other Homeland

Kol Nidre 5776

Rabbi Michael Safra

People ask what was my favorite part of our congregational trip to Israel this summer – I mean, aside from the friendships, the spectacular tour guide, or when my daughter complained that for the rest of her life she would never have another experience to match this one. The best part for me was getting off the bus and watching the cameras click. Logic dictates that you can only experience Israel once for the first time, so it was a thrill for me to share other people's first time experience. Or when we looked down over the Galilee from the Golan Heights; it is remarkably easy to see the border between Israel and Lebanon: You see that desert to the right? That's Lebanon; and all those green fields to the left? That's Israel. Or emerging from the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial and wiping away teary eyes to see the panoramic hills of Jerusalem. Or the progressive dinner and dessert at a Masorti congregation in Jerusalem and in their members' homes. My favorite parts of the trip were the ones that underscore what Israel means to me: A beautiful land of old and new, the only majority Jewish country in the world, a place that – even after years away – always feels like home.

The Israeli folk singer Ehud Manor put it best: *"Ein li eretz acheret, I don't have another land; kan hu beiti, Here is my home."*

You have to be in Israel to experience that because that's not the Israel that we get here. Here, Israel is most often reduced to politics – either the "if it bleeds it leads" politics of the conflict or the "which side are you on?" politics of divisiveness and division. Last September, in the aftermath of the Gaza War a survey found that a majority of rabbis are afraid to speak their minds when it comes to Israel. And that was in the aftermath of a war that all but unified the Jewish world. I actually got that advice once from a rabbi who was supposed to be a mentor: Don't talk about Israel because it can be divisive.

It's the old story about the rabbi who was asked by the president of the congregation not to talk too much about rituals like Shabbat or Kashrut that might make the less-observant uncomfortable, not about controversial issues of social justice, and certainly not about politics. When the rabbi asked what he *should* talk about, the president suggested, "You know; just talk about Judaism."

It got even worse with the controversy over the Iran deal. It is a fairly incontrovertible fact that the deal has its problems. Even supporters acknowledge the \$150 billion that Iran may choose to funnel to terrorist groups, the last minute lifting of the ballistic missile ban, the unceasing rhetoric from Iran's leaders, the open pathway to a bomb in about 10-15 years, the troubling side deals. And those problems don't even consider the possibility – or even the likelihood – that Iran will cheat. There is probably also some truth to the claim by supporters that maintaining the status quo was not an option because the other nations were eager to end the sanctions for their own gain; this may have been the

best deal they could get. As Robert Satloff of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy put it: It is neither un-American to oppose the deal nor traitorous to the Jewish people to support it. There are legitimate arguments on both sides, and honest debate is supposed to be a hallmark of vibrant democracy.

But the debate was taken over by extremists and party loyalists. Some challenged the president's intelligence, questioned his support for Israel, and even used Holocaust language to underscore their opposition. And on the other side, opponents of the deal were labeled warmongers and accused of holding dual loyalty, which is a particularly vile accusation. I received almost daily emails from both sides, each claiming that they spoke for the majority of American Jews and the majority of Americans. Political operatives tried to take advantage of the situation. I, personally, am grateful that this damaging episode is now behind us. Now is the time to rise above the politics and to reaffirm our fundamental love for our homeland.

Lots of people asked me about the mood in Israel and were surprised to hear that it was pretty upbeat. True, ISIS is now operating in Syria within a few miles of the border; Lebanon has been all but taken over by Hezbollah – that's true; there is instability in Jordan and Egypt; the Palestinian issue is not resolved – it's true. Israelis were pretty unified in their opposition to the Iran deal and they knew the likelihood was low that it would be defeated; and yet the overall mood was positive. It is not because Israelis are so resilient and courageous, although they are. The mood was positive because Israelis don't live the life of the political football. Israel is a real live society, which means that politics, crises, and whatever else you read about in the newspaper represent only a small slice of reality.

I once read a sermon about the twelve scouts that Moses sent to reconnoiter the land before they were to conquer it. Ten of the scouts came with an evil report, while only Caleb and Joshua maintained their faith that, with God's help, they would conquer and settle the land. The sermon hinged on two Hebrew words that are used to describe what they were doing: *la-tur* and *l'ragel*. *Latur* is like the English "to tour." How does a tourist view a space? She superficially looks for all the best things, the cool trends, the hot spots; she avoids the bad neighborhoods and goes around with a predisposition to love. *L'ragel*, on the other hand, means to "spy". A spy looks for the weaknesses, the areas that can be exploited for his own gain. Too often, discussion of Israel is presented as a debate between the tourists and the spies. It is BDS vs. "Israel: Right or wrong," Joshua and Caleb vs. the other Ten Spies, when the reality is that neither spies nor tourists can claim a grasp on reality. Reality includes the good, the bad, and lots of fuzziness in-between.

Think about it this way. When we talk about the basic tenets of Judaism, we talk about God, Torah, and Israel. There is one God, whom we are supposed to bless God for the bad and the good. It would be foolish to suggest that all Jews agree on how to understand the one God; we accept that God is complicated. There is one Torah, which our tradition says every one of us was present to receive. But we say *Shivim panim la-torah*, there are seventy faces, an infinite number of interpretations of Torah. We accept that there are Orthodox and Conservative and Reform and Reconstructionist and Renewal and other ways of living Torah, and we would never suggest that a person who doesn't keep kosher or Shabbat or any other commandment is not really a Jew.

And yet when it comes to Israel, some people find it perfectly reasonable to begin a sentence with: “How can any Jew or supporter of Israel possibly believe...” or: “How can I possibly support Israel when I disagree with its government’s policies?” We are entitled to differing beliefs about Israel and its politics; but we have to keep in mind that there is only one Israel we can call our own. To quote David Ben Gurion, “This country made us a people, and our people made us a country.” *Ein li erez aheret*, I don’t have another homeland. And so I share in the responsibility to add my voice and my talents and my love to the miraculous story of Israel.

I personally support, and I have preached about the importance of Masorti, the Conservative movement in Israel, because it advocates a pluralistic approach to Jewish living that invites more Israelis to participate in a way that works for them.

I personally support, and I encourage others to support our Jewish Federation, which is a central address to support a range of causes in Israel and throughout the world. I know that some members of our congregation are participating in Federation’s upcoming mission to Israel this fall, which is offering various track to ensure that participants can see Israel “their way”, and also get off the path of the tourists to see how life is *lived*. If it has been a long time or you have never been to Israel, this is the time to plan a trip because the only way to rise above the Israel of the debates is to *be there* to experience the living, breathing, real life thing.

I am a member of AIPAC and I will be attending Policy Conference in March because AIPAC includes everyone. Israel is a bi-partisan issue for a government that has precious few bi-partisan issues, and that’s because of AIPAC. Now more than ever – precisely because of the troubling debate – it is imperative that we work to keep the American-Israel relationship something that both parties can enthusiastically support.

And I am an enthusiastic supporter and purchaser of Israel Bonds. Every year on Kol Nidre we make an appeal on behalf of Israel Bonds, and I find it fairly easy to make the case. I ask you to take a look the pledge card that was placed at your seat.

Israel Bonds is not *tzedakkah*. *Tzedakkah* is when you give your money away to help a needy person or institution. A bond is an investment in the only sovereign Jewish state in the world. Since its launching in 1951, Bonds has secured worldwide sales approaching \$40 billion, facilitating the rapid development of Israel’s economy, and building a global partnership with Israel. We know how Israel’s pioneers drained the swamps and made the desert bloom, and we take pride in Israel’s hi-tech. Just one remarkable statistic: Israel is the world’s leader in water reclamation. More than 80% of household waste water in Israel is recycled, amounting to 400 million cubic meters a year, which is four times higher than second place Spain. That remarkable infrastructure achievement is made possible in part through Israel Bonds.

It is not just the money. Our push this year is not necessarily for an increase in dollars, but for an increase in the number of *purchasers* of Bonds. Currently, Israel Bonds are held by more than 300,000 people. This wide dispersion of a portion of Israel’s sovereign debt helps the state to earn high credit ratings, which gets Israel lower interest rates on the world market. Politicians see the number of

purchasers and use it to gauge support for the Jewish state from the Jewish community, which the statistics suggest is waning.

If you have never purchased an Israel Bond or if it has been a long time, I hope that this will be the year that you will join me and the many other regular purchasers in folding down a tab to support Israel. It is easier than ever with online purchasing and instruments designed for gifts giving – the e-mitzvah bond starts at only \$36 and the Mazal Tov bond starts at \$100. For our b’nai mitzvah students, we are continuing the popular matching program for those who invest at the \$250 level. There is no easier or better way to rise above the Israel of politics and to express unified love and support for our unique Jewish state. If you are worried that your children or grandchildren are not connecting to Israel, why not buy them a bond, so they can own a little piece in their own right? For those who remember the certificates and waiting in line at the bank to redeem the bonds, those don’t exist anymore. Your book entry bonds are automatically paid in full and on time at the maturity date.

We can pray for peace and security in Israel. We can advocate for Israel in its PR battle. We can debate and question and learn and visit and love Israel. And tonight we can help build Israel because Israel is ours and we have no other.

I ask you to flip your tabs and to turn the cards in to the ushers as we hear the words of Ehud manor:

Ein li eretz aheret

I have no other country

Even if my land is burning

Just a word of Hebrew pierces my veins, penetrates my soul.

With a body that hurts

With a heart that is hungry

Here is my home, *Kan hu beiti*.

We pray for a year of peace and security for ourselves, for the state of Israel, and for the entire world. Amen.