

## More than Facts, Kol Nidre 5772

Rabbi Michael Safra

Yosef Burg, a cofounder of the National Religious Party who served in the Knesset for the first 40-plus year's of Israel's existence, was once asked, given his involvement in Israeli politics, if he considered himself an optimist or a pessimist. He answered in typical Israeli fashion: "I'm an optimist, of course. I am quite confident that today will be much better than tomorrow." It reminds me of the famous – if fictional – Jewish telegram, which reads: "Start worrying. Details to follow."

Certainly when it comes to the State of Israel, the reasons for worrying are many:

- The instability and lawlessness in Egypt and at Israel's southern border,
- The downgrading of diplomatic relations with Turkey,
- The application for statehood by the Palestinians at the UN, which threatens Israel with isolation, more anti-Israel resolutions, and even indictments in international courts.

You know the news, so I don't need to enumerate all the threats facing Israel as this new year begins.

But the challenge that bothers me the most is the "young people". Anti-Israel sentiment rages on. I am constantly told that the children we send off to college are completely unprepared to defend Israel. They don't know the facts well enough to respond to anti-Israel propaganda on campus. We need to help them present "the truth" about Israel. I am told that if we just taught them more facts, they would advocate more on Israel's behalf.

But I disagree. Facts are not enough. The weak response of Jewish college students in defense of Israel is, at its root, not a "facts problem." Our kids know that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East; they know that Israeli researchers are responsible for a host of advances in hi-tech and biotech and medicine; they even know that Israelis want to create peace with a viable partner.

The real problem is not the facts; it is the emotions. The real problem is that our children don't grasp the emotional connection that our people have had to the land of Israel for more than 3000 years. The real problem is that our children don't share the visceral reaction that many of us feel every time we hear the name Israel or see an article about Israel in the newspaper. The real problem is that our children – and possibly we ourselves – do not fully comprehend just how much of the modern American Jewish experience is predicated on the existence of the State of Israel and the reestablishment of Jewish culture and civilization that the state has made possible.

I don't believe that the 45% of American Jews who say Israel is more of their parents' issue than their own say so because they disagree with Israeli policies. The students I teach are much more likely to say that they just don't understand why Israel is a big deal; they don't understand why we care what happens in Israel because they see their destiny in the United States; they see our preoccupation with Israel as excessive.

Our educational challenge is not as much to explain Israel's policies or challenges or accomplishments of the last week or the last year or the last 64 years as it is to instill an emotional connection to a land we have called home for more than 3,000 years.

A story. Years ago I was staffing a USY convention in New Jersey, where we brought someone from Jews for Judaism to teach the kids how to respond to Christian missionaries on the college campus. The man begins by pretending to be a messianic Jew and telling the kids how his life has become more fulfilled since he accepted Jesus. And then he starts quoting Isaiah chapter 53, about the suffering servant: "אִכֵּן חָלֵינוּ הוּא נִשָּׂא, It was our sickness that he was bearing, our suffering that he endured ... he was wounded because of our sins and ... by his bruises we were healed." "They don't teach this chapter in Hebrew school," he says, "Because it is talking about Jesus. And you know what? Out of all those *haftarot*, there is no *haftarah* that comes from this chapter either. Why haven't you learned this text before?" he asks. "It must be that your Rabbis hide it from you because they know what it's really about!"

By this point the kids are REALLY getting riled up. "It must be that you are mis-translating the Hebrew!" You're reading the text out of context!" "How dare this person come into our synagogue and talk like that!"

Eventually the speaker reveals his true identity and explains that the suffering servant need not refer to a specific historical figure. But my question is, why do these kids get so riled up about the interpretation of Isaiah, while they appear far less invested in a conversation about Israel? Believe me, they do not know more facts about Isaiah than they do about David Ben Gurion or Binyamin Netanyahu. But they have an emotional attachment to their Judaism; and too often they lack that spiritual connection to Israel.

Think for a moment about your own connection to Israel. Why is Israel important to you? Or when did you first become aware of the need for a modern Jewish state?

Some of you remember the apathy of the world during the Holocaust, when there was no place for Jews to go. That's an emotional connection.

Some of you remember the euphoria of the Six Day War, when Israel's existential reality changed so rapidly and the city of Jerusalem was reunited. You may or may not know about the Battle of Latrun or Tel Facher or Abu Ageila because, at its core, this is an emotional connection, not an intellectual one.

I remember my first visit to Israel as a child. I was packing and wondering if there would be dusty paths instead of sidewalks; and then to fly up to the Tel Aviv skyline with its tall, modern buildings, to touchdown and walk down to the tarmac. My mother told me to kiss the ground, so I did. I was 11 years old, but I cried. It was emotional. The medieval poet Yehuda Halevi commented on that custom, "Jerusalem will surely be rebuilt when the children of Israel love her so much that they love her stones and her dust." Israel is the seat of the Jewish heart.

Yehudah Halevi is also the author of one of my favorite medieval poems, "*Libi B'Mizrach, My Heart Is in the East*":

לְבִי בְּמִזְרָח נֶאֱנָן כִּי בְּסוּף מִעֲרָב

My Heart is in the East, and I am at the edge of the West.  
How can I taste what I eat, how can I enjoy it?  
How can I fulfill my vows and pledges  
While Zion is in the domain of Edom, and I am in the bonds of Arabia?  
It would be easy for me to leave behind all the good things of Spain; just as  
It would be glorious to see the dust of the ruined Shrine of Jerusalem.

Yehuda Halevi lived in Spain in the Golden Age and he lived a pretty comfortable life, not all that dissimilar to ours. He was educated in traditional Jewish scholarship, but also Arabic literature and Greek sciences and philosophy. He was a respected physician and comfortable in the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. He wrote Hebrew poetry; but he also wrote in Arabic. In his later years, Yehudah Halevi decided to immigrate to Israel. But he wasn't running away from persecution. On the contrary, he gave up a privileged life to move to a desolate place to pursue a spiritual and emotional dream. It is that spiritual and emotional connection that we have to foster for ourselves and our children.

Our connection to Israel did not begin when Jews became victims of terrorist bombings. It didn't begin with the Holocaust or the pogroms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Our connection goes back to Abraham and a promise. It continued when our people journeyed through the wilderness on their way to a promise. The promise is the oft-repeated phrase: "והיה כי תבוא אל הארץ, It will be, when you arrive in the promised land." There you will set up a system of law and justice, an equitable society that will become a light unto the nations. Through 2000 years of exile, our people longed for a return to that land.

When we pray, we face Jerusalem. Our liturgy references Israel hundreds of times each day. We conclude a wedding with the breaking of a glass. As the Psalmist wrote, "אם אשכחך ירושלים תשכח, אם לא אעלה את ירושלים על ראש שמחתי, If I forget you, O Jerusalem, May my right hand forget her cunning; may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you; אם לא אעלה את ירושלים על ראש שמחתי, If I do not elevate Jerusalem above my chiefest joy." These traditions did not begin in 1948. Torah, God, and Israel are an inseparable triad – the essence of Judaism.

I understand that the modern politics are complicated; I recognize that we do not use the Bible to draw the modern boundaries. But our deep connection to the land is not so complicated at all; it is who we are. And we have to teach our children about that religious connection to the land.

Let me share some of the things I think we need to do.

We need to learn Hebrew. Perhaps the greatest miracle of modern Israel is the rebirth of Hebrew as a spoken language. A little more than 100 years ago, it was inconceivable to Theodor Herzl that someone would be able to order a train ticket in Hebrew, much less write a novel or lecture about biochemistry. Hayim Nahman Bialik once remarked: "Reading a poem in translation is like kissing a woman through a veil." Hebrew is the language of the Jewish experience. It is the language of the Bible, the Mishnah, and the siddur. In the modern day, more articles and books on Judaica are written in Hebrew than in all other languages combined.

The challenge of Hebrew is significant, especially given the reality of limited instruction time in the congregational school setting. But we need to help people connect to Israel, and Hebrew is key. Our students in day schools should appreciate the great gift they are receiving to learn Hebrew. We need to encourage more of our college students to study Hebrew when it is offered; and I think we need to talk seriously about getting Hebrew offered as a language option in our public schools. Modern Hebrew is no less a living language than Italian, Russian, or Arabic – all of which are offered in our county system.

Of course, like Yehuda Halevi, we need to go to Israel. I am excited that there will soon be an announcement about a synagogue trip this summer. Nobody ever returns from Israel with a mediocre feeling about the trip. It is always an amazing experience, usually led by “the best tourguide in Israel.” I remember the first time I saw a garbage man wearing a kippah and it hit me that Israel is the only place in the world where the MAJORITY CULTURE is Jewish. Our kids need to experience that. And while the Birthright program is wonderful, I think we can do more. We can send our kids to Israel on a peer trip in high school, before they get to campus. Let the trip during college be a return trip – to study in one of Israel’s universities and to experience what it’s like to really live there. That’s one key way to instill the feeling of Israel as a homeland.

And we can do more to deepen our connections with Israelis here as well. I’ve said it many times, but it happens to be true. Americans and Israelis see Judaism in different ways. For American Jews, Judaism is primarily a religion, while Israelis tend to see Judaism as a nationality. We can learn from Israelis, and we also have what to teach them. I love when secular Israelis visit our synagogue on Shabbat – and they see all the people and the activities and the way we make Jewish ritual come alive. They take that experience home with them.

We can support our brand of Judaism in Israel by contributing to Masorti or joining Mercaz. Let me just give a quick plug for Mercaz, which is our party to the World Zionist Organization. The WZO allocates money raised by the Jewish Agency from our Federations and it is done based on proportional representation. In the last round, Mercaz secured \$2 million in funding for the Masorti Movement, based on 10,000 membership units in Mercaz. Now - there are 200,000 members of Conservative synagogues in this country, so imagine if we were all members of Mercaz. It’s \$36. You see how a small contribution can make a huge difference.

And we need to buy Israel Bonds. David Ben Gurion once said, “Lending money is an old Jewish business. But it is only now that Jews have had the privilege of lending money to a sovereign Jewish state.” An Israel Bond is not charity and it’s not a political statement. It is an investment in the future of Israel. The government uses the money to build infrastructure: airports, bridges, railroads, desalinization plants. 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.

And, there are other reasons to purchase bonds. As Israel’s economy has improved, the Ministry of Finance has actually lowered the amount of money it needs to raise from Bonds. But they

have called for an increase in the number of purchasers. If things go badly or if companies or governments consider divesting from Israel, 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 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 the \$100 Mazal Tov bond for yourself or as a gift. The rates are still good, especially considering the state of interest rates today.

Thanks to the generosity and vision of Wendi and Danny Abramowitz, we are starting a new program this year for b'nai mitzvah students. Any bar or bat mitzvah who purchases a \$250 Israeli bond will receive another \$250 bond from the congregation – that's more than a 100% return on the investment! This is the strongest statement we can make that we believe in Israel Bonds and we want to see more people – especially more young people – connect to Israel in this way.

For several years now, B'nai Israel has led all area synagogues in both the number of purchasers and the total amount of bonds purchased. And I know we can retain our title with your support.

Modern Israel is nothing less than a miracle. The revival of the Hebrew language, the establishment of a democracy built on the values of justice and equality as preached by our prophets, a vibrant economy, the fulfillment of an ancient promise to live as a free people in our own land. These are the facts that matter most for our connection and the connection of future generations to our homeland.

On this holiest of nights, I pray for our State, for those who live there and for all who love her. May this coming year bring peace to us, Israel, and to the world. May this be the year that each of us resolves to elevate Israel, its achievements, and its challenges to the forefront of our Jewish spiritual consciousness, and to invest in the promise of our destiny as the Jewish people.

G'mar Chatima Tovah, May we be inscribed for good in the Book of Life.