

## Standing with Israel ... in the Tragic Gap

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The question came up a few weeks before we were to depart for our congregational trip to Israel this summer. He had already signed up, but he was concerned. "What kind of a trip is this going to be?" he asked. "Is it going to be political? Are you going to be espousing a party line? Am I going to feel comfortable on this trip?"

The short answer was: "It's not that kind of trip." But more important than the question was the fact that he even had to ask. Israel is often viewed through the lens of politics – do I agree with the decisions of the Israeli government? Is one party in the US more supportive of Israel than the other? These are legitimate questions, but the answers are divisive. For many, the very topic of Israel has become divisive. My message tonight, in case you want to take a break and come back when I'm finished, is that our relationship as Jews to our homeland transcends politics. We have to go back to basics, to reaffirm what it means to have a homeland and to understand the miracles of *this* place, barely older than my father and yet more successful than he or I could ever dream to be.

Of course, miracles are in the eye of the beholder. I'm thinking about a little girl who came home from Hebrew School all excited. Her father asked why, and she explained that she had learned about how the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea to safety. "Can you believe that God split the sea in half so that all those freed slaves could walk through ... and then caused the sea to close on top of the Egyptians so that they all drowned?" The girl's father was very upset. "Come on," he said. "You don't really believe that that happened. I can't believe they are teaching you that garbage. The water was only like 10 inches deep; it was no miracle for the people to walk through it."

The girl listened; but she became even more excited than before. Her father didn't understand, so she explained. "Wow! That's even more amazing. How could God drown all those Egyptians and their horses in only 10 inches of water!"

Our first stop off the plane was in Old Jaffa, a city we will read about tomorrow at Minha. Jaffa is the port where Jonah boarded a ship 2,500 years ago, when he didn't want to preach to the Ninevites. Standing near the ancient port, we gazed north at the tall hotels and office buildings on Tel Aviv's coast. 109 years ago, Israel's largest city was but a sand dune. 66 people gathered and drew lots to determine where they might build – a historical fact that prompted Tel Aviv's first mayor, Meir Dizengoff, to quip: "If you want to be mayor, build your own town."

That is the miracle of Israel. Old meets new. A landless, persecuted people meets up with its historical destiny to make the desert bloom. An ancient people returns to its land to build a vibrant, modern, bustling, democratic state. But this is not a travelogue.

This was a tough summer for Israel – not just the burning kites and flirting with war. It's been tough because of the signs of division among the Jewish people.

- In May, President Trump moved the American Embassy to Jerusalem, an achievement 50 years in the making. But it was not simple. The news reports in this country and in Israel were delivered in “split-screen” with a celebration in Jerusalem on the right, and skirmishes in Gaza on the left. And we interpreted those screens in different ways. I'm not choosing sides; just pointing to the division.
- In July, the Knesset passed a law to allow single women to receive state-funded fertility treatment, a benefit that was previously available only to married couples; but the law excluded single men and gay and lesbian couples from this right. Tens of thousands protested in Tel Aviv.
- Thousands also protested the new Basic Law defining Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. There can be no debate about the substance, which was clearly spelled out in Israel's Declaration of Independence. But some saw in the way the law was written the potential for discrimination against Israel's non-Jewish minority.
- In July, my Rabbinical Assembly colleague, Rabbi Dov Haiyun, was taken to the police station in Haifa and questioned about a wedding he performed, which the Rabbinates had refused. Was it a coincidence that Rabbi Haiyun was scheduled to give a talk at the President's residence on the same morning he was taken in? We've seen the effort to delegitimize non-Orthodox Judaism before.

Some people read these kinds of stories and decide “*Dayenu*, I've had enough.” Others hear *Dayenu* and say: “I can't believe a Jew would say *that* about Israel. We shouldn't air our dirty laundry in public.”

While we were in Israel, five women staged a walkout from their Birthright trip, claiming Birthright was not being fair in limiting the itinerary to Jewish sites in Israel-proper. My mother had a favorite joke when I was growing up: What is the definition of a Jewish moral dilemma? Free ham. But what are we to say now, when even a free trip to Israel is considered a moral dilemma for some. The growing generational divide on is troubling.

Ronald Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress and a longtime supporter of Benjamin Netanyahu, wrote about it in the *New York Times*. He asserted that “Jewish millennials are raising doubts” and “the commitment to Israel and Jewish institutions is not unconditional.” Referencing the difficult events of the summer, Lauder concluded, “This is not who we are, and this is not who we wish to be. This is not the face we want to show our children, grandchildren, and the family of nations.”

Talk about airing dirty laundry! The very appearance of the article underscores a reality. Some lovers of Israel are caught in the middle. The author Parker Palmer calls it the “tragic gap” between reality and what we *know* to be possible. And there are pitfalls on either side.

On one side, there is the danger of what Palmer calls “corrosive cynicism” – we don’t have peace partners; most Israelis are not interested in non-Orthodox Judaism; the Middle East is a dangerous neighborhood. This is the side of the status quo, which silences its critics out of fear.

And on the other side, there is the danger of “irrelevant idealism,” which is to be so bent on doing something impossible, that we either become irrelevant or irredeemably disenchanted. I wish the Israeli army could lay down its arms. I wish the Rabbinate could be dismantled. I am frustrated with the world as it is, and until that changes, I am going to walk away. That position is just as tragic as the status quo.

We must learn to stand in the gap. Israel is not perfect; the world is not perfect; but divisions are worse. Standing in the “tragic gap,” let’s remind ourselves of the values about which we can all agree:

- **The idea of the Jewish state is legitimate and just.** Israel is the realization of a 2,000 year-old hope to be a free people in our own land.
- **The achievements of the past 121 years since the First Zionist Congress, and the last 70 years of Israeli independence are miraculous.** Hi-tech, biotechnology, medical advances, startup nation, universal health care, an army that protects Jews in Israel and around the world.
- **Peace is our goal.** There are obstacles that make peace unattainable in the short term. But the present is not our final destination.

Life is lived on the way.

The entire arc of Torah points to the Promised Land. That’s the focus of God’s promise to Abraham, the purpose of the Exodus, and the goal of the wilderness travels. Rashi suggests that even Creation began with the Land of Israel in mind. Why did the Torah, a book of law, begin with Breishit, with Creation, instead of the first commandment? So that nobody could claim that the Land of Israel did not belong to the Jewish people. God created the world, God assigned nations to their lands, and God assigned the Land of Israel to the Jewish people.

Israel is the goal of Torah. And yet Torah ends before the people make it. A beautiful Midrash has Moses pleading with God: “If I don’t enter the land,” Moses says, “My entire life will have been a failure.” God responds to Moses: “You are not a failure, but such is My decree.” Success is not perfection. Success is attained along the way, in the “tragic gap,” with a goal in mind even if it will not be fully attained.

That’s going to be my message in November, when I will be traveling to Israel on a partnership mission, led by Rabbi Michael Siegel of Anshe Emet and Pastor Chris Harris of Birth Star Church of God in Chicago. I’m traveling with two African American pastors from Montgomery County, as part of a 26-person national delegation.

Some in the African American community see the suffering of the Palestinians and the strength of the Israeli Army, and that's all they see. My message to them: We can't pretend that the present is perfect; and we can't deny the beauty, legitimacy, and miracle of Modern Israel. The issues are not simple, and so we stand in the Gap between reality and what we know is possible. And we stand there with Israel.

It has long been our tradition, as we stand together with Jews throughout the world in prayer tonight, to affirm our connection to the Jewish homeland. We do so this year with the excitement of having just welcomed a new Shlichah, an Israeli Emissary, onto our staff. Tamar Sommer, whose parents made *Aliyah* to Israel from Australia and South Africa, grew up in the Jerusalem suburb of Ramot. She was a member of our sister congregation in Jerusalem, and she understands the struggle for religious pluralism in Israel. She is incredibly eager to share her Israel with us; and we are grateful to the Jewish Federation for making this personal connection possible.

I want also to turn our attention to the envelopes at each seat, sent from Israel Bonds, and to invite you to join me in standing with Israel in that tangible way. Israel Bonds is an investment in Israel's future. It is not political; it isn't policy. The purpose of Israel Bonds is to *build* the land, *binyan eretz yisrael*. Israel Bonds helps to bridge the gap between what is and what is possible.

For many years, ours has been the leading congregation in Washington, both in total dollars invested through Israel Bonds and in the number of purchasers, which should make this easy. You know why it is important:

- Israel Bonds is a tangible connection. You write the check to Israel; Israel sends you a check when the Bond matures.
- Israel Bonds are safe. For almost 70 years, the State of Israel has never missed a payment on an Israel Bond. And the rates are competitive.
- Israel Bonds is solidarity. In addition to raising capital, Bonds tells Israel who its friends are. Israel's economy is booming now, but there could come a time, perhaps a conflict, when capital markets might dry up. In tense times, Israel needs to know who she can count on. Our goal is to increase the number of purchasers. If you've never purchased an Israel Bond, this is your year to be counted. Look at the pledge card. You can see that there are many options.
- And B'nai Israel will help. Thanks to Wendi and Danny Abramowitz, we are continuing our program for B'nai Mitzvah students. If they purchase a \$250 Israel Bond, the synagogue will buy them another \$250 Bond. That's *free money*, and it's worth it for us because Israel is that important.

Ours is not the first generation to question Israel. A hundred and fifty years ago, when Zionism was a secular enterprise, led by visionaries who sought to create "new Jews" who were strong and pioneering but not religiously observant, the ultra-Orthodox were suspicious. Their revered sage, the

Hatam Sofer, had decreed "*He-hadash asur min haTorah*, Anything new is forbidden by Torah." Religious and secular were divided over Israel.

But there were religious Zionist leaders too, most notably Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. He knew Zionism wasn't perfect. But he also knew what could be. He preached that religious Jews should not be afraid of everything new. "*Ha-yashan yit-hadash v'he-hadash yit-kadesh*, what is old can be renewed, and what is new can be sanctified."

Rav Kook's words speak just as loudly today, as we stand in the Tragic Gap between what is and what could be. Reasonable people disagree about all kinds of things, but we know why Israel matters. We need Israel, and we know that Israel needs us. Together we can renew the vision of living as a free people in our own land. Strengthened by the call of our prophet: "*Sha-alu sh'lom Yerushalayim*, Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. May all who love you be at peace." Amen