

## We Are Israel – Kol Nidre 5775

Rabbi Michael Safra

Deborah Lipstadt, the acclaimed professor at Emory University began a recent [op-ed article in the New York Times](#) with the proverbial Jewish telegram: “Start worrying. Details to follow.” It was a sobering piece, especially coming from a person who in many ways represents the essence of Jewish power. She became a Jewish hero when she successfully defended the libel case brought against her in a British court by the Holocaust denier David Irving.

Lipstadt pointed to the summer protestors in Berlin chanting “Jews, Jews, cowardly swine”; ones in Frankfurt chanting, “Hammas, Hammas; Jews to the gas”; Parisian Jews trapped in a synagogue by pro-Palestinian rioters; signs posted in Rome urging a boycott of Jewish-owned businesses, the Sainbury’s grocery store in London where a manager pulled kosher products off the shelves to try to calm protestors outside. Even before the Gaza War, there were four people killed in March 2012 at a Jewish day school in France, and a warning from Israeli officials in December of that year that Jews visiting synagogues in Denmark should be careful not to put on their *kippot* until they were safely inside the building.

The [July cover for Newsweek](#) featured a young woman with a suitcase under the headline, “Exodus: Why Europe's Jews Are Fleeing Once Again.” Our vulnerabilities are real.

My colleague in Israel, Rabbi Elisha Wolfin, spoke to a solidarity mission over the summer: “We built a wall,” he said, “And then we weren't safe. And then we built an Iron dome, only to discover that they were digging tunnels”. Surely technology will invent new defenses to give us the illusion of safety, but this war brought out a latent anxiety ... that even in our own homeland we are vulnerable.

Soon we will recite “Ki Hine Kachomer”, with its stark portrayal of our existential vulnerability:

As clay in the hand of the potter, who thickens or thins it at will

As stone in the hand of the mason who preserves or breaks it at will

As glass in the hand of the blower, who shapes or melts it at will

“So are we in Your hand, O God.”

We are dependent on Your mercy, Your love, Your powers as a savior and healer; there are threats and dangers beyond our control.

I have to admit that this is not a sermon I feel completely comfortable delivering. I don’t want to sound powerless, because we are not. I don’t want to scare anyone. And I assume that not everyone will agree with everything I say.

I don't think Jews should be scared to visit or live in Israel. Even when we made the emotional decision this summer to postpone our congregational trip, I never felt that I or anyone would actually be in danger. My mother was already in Israel, as she and my father had been planning to meet our group; her daily reports from Jerusalem indicated that life went on as normal in spite of the rockets. Other trips, including 8 USY groups, were steadfast in their resolve to remain in Israel. It's not that we made a wrong decision – it was a terrible summer and the MOOD in Israel was not right for the type of experience we wanted to create. But I am not *used* to feeling vulnerable. My generation, born after the Six Day War, let alone the Holocaust, is not *used* to feeling threatened.

Hamas is not the Nazis. But the vulnerabilities are real. And Hamas, Hezbollah, ISIS, Iran ... Some of our enemies are convinced that they can scare us or divide us such that we will not maintain our resolve or our love or our support for Israel as the going gets tough.

I am reminded of a man named Shmulik who was walking around Jerusalem, and the hills must have gotten to him because he had a heart attack. As the medics tried to revive him, his soul went to heaven. He arrived to find a truly remarkable place – a beautiful five star hotel, several swimming pools, an all-you-can-eat buffet with every kosher food imaginable. Just as he began to relax and enjoy himself, though, the medics succeeded in restoring his heart beat and his soul returned to earth.

Shmulik woke up and announced to all who could hear, "I am no longer afraid to die. I have seen heaven and it is a wonderful place. I want to live a long life with family and friends, but I know I have nothing to fear.

Well, unfortunately, it was only about a month later when he suffered another heart attack, and this time the medics were not so lucky. Shmulik's soul went back to heaven, but this time it was totally different. No hotel. No pools. No buffet. And Shmulik was upset, so he demanded to speak with management. When God suddenly appeared, Shmulik let Her have it. "Last time I was here, everything was great! I was looking forward to the five star hotel, the pools, the buffet. This time, *efes, nada*, nothing!" God tried to comfort him. "I'm sorry you're so disappointed," She said. "The thing is that last time you were here as a tourist, and this time you're here to stay."

The path to peace is difficult. Israel today is not the fulfillment of the messianic dream. But we are here to stay. Even with our vulnerabilities; it is impossible to discount the huge effect the State of Israel in our lives and in our history. 2014 is not 1881; there are no pogroms marching against our communities. 2014 is not 1933; Hamas is not a world power and anti-Semitism is not tolerated as it once was. 2014 is not 1967; Israel is not facing extinction.

We've heard plenty about the troubling statistics in our community. But there are other numbers worth noting. 94% of Jews are proud to be Jewish. 75% claim a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people. In a recent study, Americans were asked to rate their feelings towards various religious groups, and Judaism came out on top, above Catholics and Evangelical Protestants. These

statistics were unthinkable in 1945; they are made possible by the existence and success of modern Israel.

“The odds that [a country of] immigrants,” to quote Ambassador Michael Oren, “would forge a national identity capable of producing a vibrant literature, pace-setting arts, and six of the world’s leading universities approximated zero.”<sup>1</sup> Herzl would have never imagined the revival of the Hebrew language, and today it is more widely spoken than Danish or Finnish, and will soon surpass Swedish. Life expectancy in Israel significantly exceeds America’s and that of most European countries. When tragedy strikes anywhere in the world, Israelis are there to help – in Haiti, the Philippines, even during the wildfires in Washington State, which came in the middle of Israel’s war with Gaza. Israel’s population growth rate is the fastest in the modernized world, with the birth rate for *secular* Israelis surpassing three children. The vulnerabilities are real, but what better affirmation could there be that Israelis believe in their future.

We should be proud. The obvious response to the dangers that lurk is to double down on our commitment to build, sustain, protect, and improve the world’s only Jewish state, our spiritual homeland. We have to affirm peace. We have to affirm life. We have to affirm that every people deserves a land and we are committed to sustaining our homeland for Jews.

There is a scene in *Superman 2*, where General Zod has a bit of a revelation while he and his villainous comrades are fighting Superman: “This ‘super-man,’” he says “is nothing of the kind. I’ve discovered his weakness. ... He cares. He actually cares for these earth people.” The villains think they can wear Superman down by threatening the innocent people around him, but they soon find that Superman is only strengthened, and he fights back hard.

We must stand against terrorism everywhere and every time. For too long, Palestinians have been trapped in a cycle of violence. Billions of dollars were spent, hundreds of thousands of tons of cement were used not to build playgrounds and schools and the hallmarks of a vibrant society, but to build tunnels and hide bullets and bombs. I want the Palestinians to have a homeland. I want them to live in peace in their own state. But the Hamas leader Ismail Haniyah let them all down when he explained his strategy: “We are a people that yearns for death, just as our enemies yearn for life.” And he supported his words with the rockets stored in UN schools and fired from civilian structures and into civilian areas.

We cannot let that strategy work.

We must stand with Israel because we stand for life – for Palestinians and for Jews. Every Palestinian victim matters; we are not so heartless not to shed tears at the loss of innocent life or condemn Jewish vigilante justice when it occurs. Every Israeli victim matters. Israel needs and wants peace because every victim matters.

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<sup>1</sup> Wall Street Journal, “In Defense of Zionism”, *Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 2014.

I want to challenge you tonight to travel to Israel – if not with Sharon and me in July, then on another trip. If you have never been to Israel, find a way; the experience is as powerful as a lifetime of Kol Nidre services and fasts. There is a reason they call it a Birthright. And this year Birthright changed its rules, so if you go on a teen tour in high school, you can still go on the free trip in college. Teens don't have to choose between USY/BBYO or Birthright; you can do both. And the synagogue has scholarship money that we want to give away. We want to see you there.

I am proud every year at Kol Nidre to include an appeal for Israel Bonds, and I want you to take a moment to look at the cards that have been passed out, because it's not just the money. A bond is a connection.

Every purchaser is a statement of solidarity: We stand with Israel and we believe in her future.

Every bond purchase is an affirmation of the ongoing success of Israel. Israel leads the world in water management, having just signed a new agreement to bring its technology to drought-stricken California. BusinessInsider.com reports that "US companies and investors are falling over themselves to get a piece of Israel's start-up action." And when Israel's Chief Scientist promotes challenge grants to foster innovation, he uses borrowed money. 26% of which comes from Israel Bonds. There are advantages for Israel. When the going gets tough, Israel knows it can count on US.

Every bond underscores the point that WE ARE ISRAEL.

When American Jews purchased the first bonds in the 1950s, they didn't really think they would ever get their money back. But Israel never missed a payment and today Israel Bonds are A+ rated. Israel bonds are smart.

We have set a goal this year to increase the number of purchasers from our congregation by 10%. It doesn't matter which tab you fold down. If you have never purchased an Israel Bond, or if it has been years since you've purchased, I hope you will make a commitment tonight because your pledge is a vote for Israel. Rabbi Schnitzer and Beverly are going to be honored by Israel Bonds in January at the Prime Minister's Dinner in Florida, in large part because of you. B'nai Israel is always at the forefront of our community in terms of our commitment to Israel and Israel Bonds, and we can do even better with your help. Honor Rabbi Schnitzer. Honor B'nai Israel. Honor life and values. And help us reach our goal.

A Midrash<sup>2</sup> records a strange occurrence in the court of King Solomon, featuring a two-headed man. He had six brothers, each of whom had one head, and they wanted to divide their father's estate into seven equal parts. The two-headed man claimed that it should be divided into eight parts and he should receive a double portion. The brothers sought counsel from King Solomon.

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<sup>2</sup> Beit Hamidrash, Jelinek, vol. 4, pp. 151-152; cited in Tos. Menachot 37a, s.v. 'או קוים גלי.

A test was devised. Solomon poured boiling water over one of the heads, but both heads screamed. Solomon determined that since both heads felt pain equally, they were actually only one. They could not be separated.

And so it is with the Jewish people.

Two great communities prosper in Israel and America, but they share but one body. We share in the successes of over 66 years of miraculous achievement, and we share the pain when the going gets tough. We are inseparable.

On this holiest night of the year, we contemplate our vulnerabilities as individuals and as a people. But we need not worry because we are not alone. Let us thank God for all the miracles of Jewish history and the State of Israel in particular. Let us pledge to do what we can for the sake of our entire body, for the sake of Israel and the totality of the Jewish people.

In conclusion, let us join together in a prayer for Israel and peace, which is found on the back of the pledge cards:

Shabbat shalom and G'mar Hatimah Tovah. May we be inscribed and sealed for good in the Book of Life.