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KOL NIDREI SERMON

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Should a rabbi speak about Israel during the High Holy Day season this year – knowing that there is a deep polarization in our Jewish community on this issue? Last week, the New York Times featured an article describing what in my view is a tragic phenomenon on our American Jewish landscape: it has become almost impossible in many Synagogues to have civil conversation about Israel – and no matter what a rabbi may say, he/she is in a classic “catch 22” with both hawks and doves dissatisfied with whatever position the rabbi may stake.

Friends, I consider myself supremely fortunate as your rabbi here at B'nai Israel. I have never – even for a moment – felt muzzled or constrained in voicing my passion for Israel, because I believe deep down that you want and indeed expect me to express my convictions – even if some in our ranks choose to respectfully disagree with my views.

Tonight, as we experience the most sacred moment of our Jewish year, I would like to profile some of my experiences in Israel earlier this summer. The phrase that kept reverberating in my mind over and over again was: “it could be perfect – but it isn’t.”

Beverly and I arrived in Israel on June 26, shortly after the three yeshiva students had been kidnapped. Because we were staying in Israel for a more extended period of time, we rented an apartment in a pleasant Jerusalem neighborhood called Old Katamon. We woke up to the strong Jerusalem summer sun streaming in through our windows. Each weekday morning, I would run down to the corner bakery and bring back some delicious fresh rolls for our breakfast. We then left for our respective destinations: I would head off with my backpack for my studies at the Hartman Institute. Our theme there was: A Time for War and A Time for Peace “– how apt could a topic be – and Beverly would leave for her volunteer work at Lifeline-for-the-Old, where some of Jerusalem’s elderly come each day to create beautiful arts-and-crafts pieces and to enjoy a nurturing and congenial environment.

On my walk from our apartment to the Hartman Institute, I would pass scores of kids waiting at each corner for their day camp busses – chatting excitedly

in Hebrew – some of the boys with kippot – some without – everyone harmonious – a scene as natural and easy-going as could be.

I would think to myself: One of the goals of Zionism was the normalization of the Jewish people in our own country – where we would create our own culture, our own society, where children would grow and thrive and feel pride in their identity . . . and lo and behold, thanks to the efforts and sacrifices of so many, those aspirations have been largely achieved.

It could be perfect – and yet, it isn't.

This summer, we and those Jerusalem children heard the siren alerts over and over again – warning about the missiles being fired from Gaza. We should all thank God and our American government for the technology of the Iron Dome defense system that prevented what would have been widespread, calamitous casualties. In Jerusalem, we and those children had 90 seconds to try and reach the Miklat – the shelter, not always an easy proposition. In our apartment building, there was no Miklat at all. We were instructed that upon hearing the siren, we were to go to the stairwell, descend to a lower floor and simply press ourselves against the wall for maximum safety. Imagine if you were infirm or immobile. In areas closer to Gaza, the safety margin time can be as short as 15 seconds.

It could be perfect – but it isn't.

Michael Oren, who served as Israel's Ambassador to the US from 2009 until 2013 and spoke here at B'nai Israel on Kol Nidrei evening last year recently commented in the magazine Foreign Policy: "In spite of unspeakable pressures, Israeli society has managed to stay democratic, open, creative, self-correcting (frequently to a fault), self-defending, ultra-literate in Hebrew – and Jewish. It is the only place on the planet in the last 2000 years, where Jews can take responsibility for themselves – for their governance, their protection, even for their messes." Michael Oren continues: "Young people, even if they're not religious, get married and have children, giving us the fastest-growing population per capita in the industrial world. There's universal health care, a citizen's army and world-class universities charging less than \$10,000 for a B.A. Since 1989, we've successfully absorbed a million immigrants – the equivalent of about 50 million Americans."

And Michael Oren concludes: "We're surrounded by a sea of supremely armed insanity. There is no solution for the regional madness other than to gird ourselves against it . . .

Americans are tired after two wars, in which the vast majority did not fight. Try dealing with eight or so (wars), every few years, together with thousands

of rockets raining on your cities . . . and an absolutely relentless total threat. Nobody in Israel has not lost loved ones or has not been deeply scarred. We should be amazed that the country exists at all and astonished that our young people still want to serve in the army.

Israel is not about to leave a vacuum in the West Bank to be filled with Hamas or accept a nuclear-enabled Iran just to gain international favor.”

Friends: We all saw the pictures of those miles and miles of tunnels that were dug from Gaza – stretching into Israel – in the hopes of creating havoc – and worse.

But at the same time, I do mourn for all the innocent Gazans – especially the children – who also deserved a summer at the beach and instead suffered grievously.

How can I adequately describe the sense of heartbreak that all Israelis felt when the bodies of the three yeshiva students were discovered -- at the Hartman Institute, most of us were in tears – or the overwhelming outrage when Jewish extremists seemingly burned an Arab teen to death?

I struggle with the moral toll that occupation of the West Bank – now in its 47th year – imposes on Israelis – and how that ongoing political and military reality correlates with Jewish ethics . . .

I worry about the destiny of Israeli Arabs, who are often marginalized and are increasingly restive and edgy. I worry about the growing economic disparities in Israeli society -- the “haves” and the “have-nots” -- and certainly as a Conservative rabbi, I agonize that the struggle for religious pluralism within Israel continues – with many battles still to be fought.

“It could be perfect, but it is not.”

This summer, the venom directed against both Jews and Israel reached unprecedented levels – at least in recent memory – particularly in Europe.

How ironic it is in the context of our Jewish history that Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, has become my new heroine – and perhaps yours, as well.

Addressing a rally at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin on September 14, Angela Merkel noted: “That far more than 100,000 Jews are now living in Germany is something of a miracle. It is a gift and it fills me with deepest gratitude . . .

That people in Germany are threatened and abused because of their Jewish appearance or their support of Israel is an outrageous scandal that we won’t accept. It is our national and civic duty to fight anti-Semitism.”

Yes, to be sure, Israel is sometimes confusing, even maddening – and yet wondrous – a country that sends cell phone messages to Gazans warning them of an impending attack – and brings Gazan children requiring delicate heart surgery to a hospital near Tel Aviv.

Yossi Klein ha-levi, who was one of my teachers this summer at the Hartman Institute, summarized what I believe should be our collective perspective on Israel in a column in the Times of Israel last week.

He writes: “I believe we will persevere. I believe this because Jewish history – events we ourselves have witnessed – insists that despair is always premature.

I resist the fatalism contained in the terrible words: The whole world hates us. Israel may well have more active enemies than any other country, but it also has more active friends – and by no means all of them Jews. The largest pro-Israel demonstration this summer happened not in New York or Toronto but in a city without Jews – Calcutta – where thousands of Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs affirmed Israel’s right to self-defense.

We will persevere because the Jewish fanatics of the far right and the far left – those who have a ready answer to all our dilemmas and who contribute, each in their own way, to Israel’s isolation – are a minority. Most Jews

instinctively know that to be a Jew means to balance paradoxes – security and morality, realism and vision, particularism and universalism, self-defense and self-critique.

This year especially, I will pray that we have the wisdom to hold together as a people, despite the growing pressures on us to fragment and turn against each other. I will pray for the courage to defend the justness of our return home against the big lie that is aimed against us, even as we admit where we have erred.

Most Jews share the same hope – of a strong Israel at peace with its neighbors. We will continue to argue about the best way to achieve that – but as partners, aware that there are no easy answers, that none of us can speak for the totality of Jewish wisdom, that we need each other’s insights to be a whole people, that we cannot thrive without being a whole people.”

And I can only add:

On this Yom Kippur – and in the year ahead – in spite of everything – may our love for Israel – our commitment to Israel – our passion for Israel – never waiver.