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For far too long – and especially in recent months as the Iran nuclear controversy has “played out,” Israel has been a political football – not only in the halls of Capitol Hill – but also among us, the “grass roots” of the Jewish people. It is now the day after: with all due respect, it does not matter anymore how a specific Senator or Representative votes, or how AIPAC or J Street weighs in on details of the Iran treaty. What does matter – and in my view, matters supremely – is whether we can once again have conversations about Israel with civility in our own Jewish community and beyond – and whether we can refocus our mind-set, energies, commitments, and resources to see with fresh vision the extraordinary miracle which is Israel. Anything less than such a dramatic re-positioning will not be enough.

When I was a kid, I vividly remember attending a Festival celebrating the 10th anniversary of Israel’s founding. Of course, it was somewhat idealized:

the brawny pioneers bringing the desert to bloom –
the absorption of impoverished refugees from every corner of the Jewish world – but it was also magical –
and for decades, those kinds of images helped to centralize Israel in our American Jewish consciousness as eminently deserving our passion. We were in partnership –
we and Israel together –
changing Jewish destiny, because there was no other alternative. That sense of idealism, camaraderie and mutuality - - all of us working in common cause - - has largely disappeared in the American Jewish/Israeli dynamic – replaced by cynicism, polarization and name-calling. It has gotten ugly and is a luxury we dare not continue.

The challenges are many: After 48 years of occupation, peace with the Palestinians seems more elusive than ever, despite intense efforts to jump-start negotiations – and Israel’s neighborhood just keeps getting worse:

Hamas in Gaza –
Hezbollah in Lebanon –
Syria in total chaos–
the emergence of the Islamic State – the list goes on and on.

And the issues are not all external geo-politics: There is a growing fanaticism within Israeli society – largely unchecked – that deserves our strongest condemnation: How can we not feel shame and despair when Jewish religious extremists fire-bomb a home in a small Palestinian village – killing and maiming an entire family - - or when a young Jewish woman is stabbed to death by another Jew at a gay-pride march in Jerusalem?

In the aftermath of these two horrors, there was an outpouring of reflection in many sectors of the Israeli public epitomized by the comments of Rabbi Donniel Hartman who said: “Israeli

society is embarrassed because we know this is not who we are, it's not who we want to think we are. (But) the interesting question for all of us is:

Is this going to be a growth moment, or is it going to be (just) another wasted Yom Kippur – Oh we've sinned, and we feel so righteous for saying we've sinned.”

For us, as Conservative Jews, it is particularly troubling that last April, the Mayor of the city of Rehovot cancelled a Bar and Bat ceremony for four children with severe autism. The only reason given: the service was to take place in a Masorti (Conservative) synagogue. Why does a Mayor have such power, and why is religious pluralism in Israel for Jews like us still such an uphill struggle?

And yet, I would submit, what we should be asking ourselves is:

Yes... to be sure, Israel has its share of profound moral injustices and intransigence – but what would it mean to us – American Jews in 2015 – if Israel were not to exist:

What would happen to the age-old dream of Zionism, the ingathering of the exiles, the building of a Jewish national entity?

What would happen to the flourishing of Jewish culture in every possible form - - literature, music, art, dance that Israel nurtures so successfully?

What would happen to the burgeoning of biotech and high-tech, bringing so many life-sustaining advances and improvements to our world?

What would happen to all those whom Israel's “first-responders” save from the snatches of death – whenever there is a disaster “out there” – Nepal, Haiti, Japan?

What would happen to more than half of all the Jews in our world who live in Israel -- who get up in the morning and, for the most part, try to do their best for themselves, their families and their country?

And what would happen to us and our sense of identity and pride – if Israel ceased to exist?

I am not asking you to white-wash or diminish what is wrong with Israel... But I am pleading with you to change the conversation – to “re-engage” with Israel with a renewed sense of passion – focusing not so much on what is wrong but rather what is right – and so much is right and worthy of our admiration and support.

So what should we do?

Please buy Israeli products – they are excellent and easily available.

Please plan a trip to Israel – whether it is your first or tenth.

Please oppose the vicious impact of BDS – boycott, disinvestment and sanctions – being directed towards Israel from many spheres.

Please encourage your children and grandchildren to participate in the wonderful programs available for them in Israel, whether it is a USY Pilgrimage or High School in Israel, a gap-year or Birthright. They will come back inspired by what they have seen and experienced first-hand.

On Thursday evening, October 8 – just a little more than two weeks away – Israel’s Ambassador to the United States, Ron Dermer, will be speaking to our congregation. Please come and affirm our Synagogue’s relationship with Israel by your presence.

Please be a friend of Israel’s –
in what you think –
in what you say –
and in what you do.

As American Jews, Israel must be in our guts and in our souls again – as it once was.

If all we do on this Yom Kippur is to throw up our hands and say “we are tired and have had enough of all of it” –

we have missed the point, the challenge and
most of all, our responsibility.

Perhaps some of you have visited the Clandestine Immigration and Naval Museum in Haifa. It chronicles the story of how Jews escaping from Europe before the official establishment of the State of Israel attempted over and over to run the British blockade and to secure a refuge for themselves. It is a stirring narrative of extraordinary heroism, determination, faith and hope. At the Museum, there is a display of one of those blockade-running vessels, named the Af-Al-Pi-Chen – best translated as: “In spite of everything.”

Af-Al-Pi-Chen – in spite of everything –
ours is a Jewish generation infinitely blessed because of Israel.
Af-Al-Pi-Chen –
let’s push aside our unhappinesses –
our indifference –
our negativity –
and once again reclaim Israel for ourselves with joy and conviction.