

KOL NIDREI - 11 OCTOBER 2016
ISRAEL

For months, I have been pondering what it is that I could say this evening that would inspire or re-inspire you to be a Zionist. It used to be axiomatic that most American Jews had a visceral affinity – even a love – for the State of Israel ... a setting where Jews were creating a homeland out of the swamps and desert – where a surge of determination was changing the trajectory of Jewish history – and where we –albeit from afar – could view these achievements with profound admiration. Now, sixty-eight years after Israel's founding – and almost 50 years after the Six Day War which dramatically altered Israel's geography and politics, we must address a new reality. Yes, Israelis continue to reside in the brutal neighborhood of the Middle East – surrounded by Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the horrific murderous turmoil of Syria and the ever-present unrelenting hostility of Iran – but in 2016 – in contrast to 1948 or 1967 or 1973, I am not really worried – as many of us once were – that Israel will be destroyed. I certainly do not want to minimize the impact the lone terrorists who continue to wreak bloodshed in Israel whenever they can – but, big picture, Israel as a state – as a society – is secure. The challenge, though, which is all of ours is not so much about ensuring Israel's physical survival but ensuring its character, its values, goals, aspirations – its ability to be both Jewish and democratic. Our challenge is to re-define Zionism for our era, so that more Jews can once again embrace that vision.

To me, the essence of Zionism has always been in lifting the Jewish people higher: though the re-claiming of a homeland – through the reestablishment of the Hebrew language – through the flowering of Jewish culture – through the ingathering of Jewish exiles and refugees and through a profound partnership with Jews like us – Jews from all over the world who share – at some deep level – in the furtherance of that enterprise.

As we are all aware, Shimon Peres, the last of Israel's founding giants, died at age 93 just before Rosh Hashanah. A cartoon in the Haaretz newspaper depicted Mr. Peres arriving in heaven and being received by his mentor, David Ben Gurion, as well by Yitzhak Rabin and Golda Meir. Ben Gurion turns to Peres with the words: “We have been waiting a long time . . . we thought you weren't coming.”

It is certainly the end of an era, but it must not be the end of the dream that dominated Peres' later years: He had been a leader, an activist and a witness to every significant chapter of Israel's journey. But rather than dwelling inwardly in the past, he was always looking ahead – to science and technology and the role that they could serve in shaping Israel's future. Above all, though, Peres maintained his conviction that in spite of obstacles in abundance, the Palestinian conflict can only be resolved by negotiating a two-state solution, and that anything less would be a violation and a travesty of the Zionism in which he believed so fiercely.

In his memoir, Shimon Peres wrote: “My life's work is not yet done. The final crowning chapters of my biography are still being written. They deal with the subject closest to my heart – peace.”

Israelis are remarkable . . . The “Start-Up Nation” has pioneered break-throughs that are transformative in many realms.

And here is how Israelis have responded to grief and pain: The Benji Hillman Foundation, started by Benji Hillman's parents after he was killed in the Second Lebanon War, assists Israel's lone soldiers – young men and women who have left their families and country-of-origin to serve in the IDF – Israel's Defense Forces.

A project called “Nirim in the neighborhoods” seeks to rehabilitate juvenile delinquents through wilderness therapy. The program was founded by a group of Israeli naval commanders to commemorate one of their comrades, Nir Krichman, who was killed in the West Bank in 2002. Even now, commandos from that unit regularly accompany the teenage participants on the tough wilderness treks – an essential component of the therapy – with Nirim asserting that 95% of its 300 graduates have turned their lives around ... only in Israel.

But then there is the other side. It is despicable that 9 months after a Knesset agreement was finally brokered allowing egalitarian prayer at the Kotel – the Western Wall – our most sacred Jewish site – the ultra-Orthodox are now threatening to quit the government if that agreement is upheld. 68 years in, religious pluralism as we understand that concept here in America – equal rights for all Jews – is still held hostage in Israel by those whose *raison d'être* in large measure is the rejection of tolerance and inclusion.

It is regrettable that more settlements continue to be built on the West Bank – that process creating unnecessary alienation with our American government and, perhaps even more seriously, with large segments of our American Jewish community, including many of our millennials who cannot understand or sympathize with zealotry that places the occupation of land above all other considerations.

It is unfortunate that Israeli Arabs – citizens of the state and 20% of Israel’s population – languish all-too often in substandard marginalized communities – with poorer educational and vocational opportunities than their Jewish counterparts. It is a problem which will not just disappear.

So, friends, our Zionist work is not yet done – far from it. I am therefore pleading with you – not to turn your backs on Israel because you are exasperated with a particular policy or decision – but rather to re-affirm the spirit of Zionism – that “lifting up” of Israel – that persistent prodding of and partnership with Israel, so that its full potential as a light to ourselves and to our world may yet emerge. Every country is always a work-in-progress, and it would be naïve to think that at age 68 – all of Israel’s tasks have been accomplished. Now more than ever, the two largest and most important Jewish communities in our world today – Israel and the United States – need each other – and the strength, creativity and energy that each can give the other.

As far back as I can remember, I have been proud to say that I am a Zionist . . . As your rabbi for many years, I have tried to the very best of my ability to communicate that Zionist message as consistently and persuasively as possible and to frame our Synagogue as “Israel-centric” – a passion which I hope that I have ignited in you . . .

Let me say it openly: It is not always easy being a Zionist in 2016 . . . but in the hierarchy of our Jewish privileges and responsibilities, it is right up there at the top.

I close with the words of Isaiah that have always stirred my heart:

“For Zion’s sake, I will not be silent –
And for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be still.” (*Isaiah 62:1*)