

Shabbat Vaetchanan 5779  
August 16, 2019/16 Av 5779

I want to reflect on three moments from my week, each of which reflects my passion as a Zionist and my commitment to the Jewish state.

Earlier this week, I was reviewing and refining the itinerary for our 2020 TBK trip to Israel. As expected, the itinerary includes visits to sites of great historic and religious significance, places of natural beauty, and interactions with both our Reform brothers and sisters and our partner city of Modi'in.

The trip also includes a session on political morality, a reflection on the legacy of the Holocaust, interactions with Arab-Israelis and members of a Jewish-Palestinian dialogue group. We will meet members of the Druze community and have other opportunities to understand the diversity of Israel's population.

All in all, it is an exciting and rich plan, and I look forward to sharing these experiences with many of you. It is an itinerary that shows the beauty and the complexity of life in Israel today.

A second part of my week was working together with the local AIPAC staff on hosting Congressman Morelle. Joe just returned from a trip to Israel, his third, with over 40 fellow members of the House.

It was a full and thoughtful conversation as Joe reflected on his conversations with Prime Minister Netanyahu, Prime Minister Abbas, and a variety of other leaders and engaged citizens. He spent some time talking about the Shabbat dinner he attended, hosted in a family home in Jerusalem.

Joe's presentation also reflected the beauty and complexity of life in Israel. He was somewhat optimistic about the possibility for enduring peace, but was also quite realistic and open about his doubts about whether the current political leaders on either side were capable of truly making progress. The bottom line is that Joe clearly came home inspired and thinking hard about how to preserve and strengthen the special relationship between the United States and Israel.

The complexities weren't limited just to what the Representatives saw in Israel. They came, in part, in the set up of the trip itself. There were separate Democratic and Republican delegations that travelled. They overlapped for 2 days in the middle—and Joe did say that they had very pleasant and positive times together during that period. This was the largest Congressional visit in a long time, however, the reality of our current climate is that this wasn't one single Congressional delegation that had the learning and experience of travelling in Israel: the Democratic House members and the Republican House members were totally separate groups. I don't know how many of the members on either side would have accepted an invitation to travel together, but that wasn't even an option. It was, to me, a reminder of the divided times in which we live, where it is profoundly hard to find opportunities to dialogue with those who have different political perspectives.

The third overlapping piece of this week, also related to Israel, was the announcement by Israel that Representatives Omar and Tlaib would not be allowed to travel into the country this coming week, because of their vocal support of the BDS movement.

This has been brewing for some time. Israel's ambassador, Ron Dermer, who is understood to be close to Netanyahu, had recently offered strong public reassurance that they would be given entry, but clearly things have changed. Even in the last 36 hours, after the announcement, there have been several more maneuvers on both the Israeli and American side.

This decision was distressing to me, because I believe that part of Israel's strength lies in its openness...in its fostering sometimes fierce public debate...in the diversity of its population and its visitors. I vehemently oppose the BDS movement, but I don't believe there was any threat to Israel that was stopped by the ban, and I believe it is insidious to prevent principled people from coming to experience Israel in their own way.

AIPAC's response to the decision was quite good: "We disagree with Reps. Omar and Tlaib's support for...BDS...We also believe every member of Congress should be able to visit and experience our democratic ally Israel firsthand."

A colleague and friend (Rabbi Danny Schiff) who has lived in several countries, including substantial time in Israel, put it this way: "How everybody assumed the story was going to end: "And so the two congresswomen went home and they condemned what they had seen. They tweeted their support for BDS, and denounced Israel for its treatment of the Palestinians." How the story might, just might, have ended: "And so the two congresswomen went home. They did not immediately renounce BDS, but they stated that the reality that they had encountered on the ground is more complex than the view from afar. They had, they said, met some Israeli Jews with whom they wanted to continue a quiet dialogue in order to improve the lot of everybody in the region..."

Had scenario one come about the Jewish people would have been no worse off. Was it not, therefore, worthwhile and wise to take a chance (however remote) that scenario two might come to be? Isn't that what "taking chances for peace" means? And isn't that the true marker of strength?"

In no way do I claim to have expertise or even the greatest insight into Israeli politics...or American politics for that matter. I do, however, hope to be an advocate for civil discourse and persevering in the hard work of creating peace. In order to do so, we must build relationships with those who have different points of view. We must listen, truly listen, to those who have different perspectives. Only when we do so, will we move down the path to a stronger and more peaceful world. And that is, ultimately, my hope on Shabbat...which is why we greet one another with the words *Shabbat Shalom!*