

## The Importance of Israel

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Last summer the national body of the Presbyterian Church at its biennial convention passed several resolutions of concern to Jews which have had an adverse impact on our relationship. One endorsed the outreach work of a “Jews for Jesus” evangelical church, masquerading in Philadelphia as a synagogue under the name of Avodat Yisrael. Another resolution condemned Israel for building a security fence to prevent terrorist infiltrations – I guess the Presbyterians are upset that Israel is taking any action to protect the lives of its citizens. The most controversial of the three resolutions was the one calling for divestiture in companies which do business in Israel and which could be seen as promoting Israel’s policies and occupation of Palestinians and their land.

Not wanting to take this without fighting back, Comedian Jake Novak came up with some novel ways Jews can retaliate against Presbyterian divestment in Israel. Here are five of the ones I thought were the best on his list of ten.

1. Begin a counter boycott of Hellmann’s Mayonaise and Wonder Bread.
2. Replace muzak – elevator music played in Jewish doctor’s offices with klezmer cd’s.
3. Wear white shoes after labor day.
4. Secretly replace all references to John Calvin in Presbyterian doctrine with “Calvin Klein.”
5. Let them do their own taxes!

The Presbyterians are not the only ones to act in a way which is insensitive to Israel’s position. Other church groups are beginning to follow the Presbyterian lead. Europe is awash in antipathy towards Israel. A recent poll in Germany revealed that over 50 % of the participants equated Israel’s policies towards Palestinians with Nazi treatment of Jews, and 68% of those surveyed believe that Israel is waging a war of extermination against the Palestinian people. Bombarded with negative images in the media, even some Jews and Israelis waver in their support.

In August, a retired Israeli general on his way to England to raise funds for a center for autistic children was warned not to get off the plane at London’s Heathrow Airport. British agents were waiting to issue a warrant for his arrest for the crime of home demolition, since he had issued the order as a means of deterring Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin, responsible for the deaths of hundreds of innocent Israelis and for the dispatching of hundreds of suicide homicide bombers into Israeli population centers. (This from England, shoot to kill the guy on the subway who looks like a suspect since he is dark-skinned, even though he is really just an innocent Brazilian. The hypocrisy is appalling. Can you imagine the international outcry if Israeli forces would have “accidentally” shot and killed an innocent foreigner.)

Yet equally upsetting is that the documents and material for the indictment were supplied by an Israeli organization known as “Yesh Gevul”, which means “there is a limit”, to which Dry Bones cartoonist Yaakov Kirschen pointed out in one of his cartoons, apparently there is no limit to the chutzpah of the organization known as Yesh Gevul, “there is a limit”.

Unfortunately, all too often, Jews and even Israelis are guilty of accepting and internalizing the propaganda disseminated by the other side. A petition to boycott Israeli professors in England was sponsored by several Israelis. Similar anti-Israeli campaigns on American campuses, including Rutgers University a few years ago, were led by Jewish academics. Israeli plays, movies and media frequently portray Israel as the aggressor. The effort of some to sympathize with the enemy, often plays into the hands of a sophisticated well-financed effort aimed at undermining support and sympathy for the Jewish state. Too many Israelis and Jews accept the superficial notion that views Palestinians as victims and the powerful Israelis as the aggressors, an attitude that is not only not true, but does not do justice to the complexity or historical antecedents of the quagmire.

The criticisms are too simplistically framed and leveled in a vacuum, as if Israel were living in some idyllic pristine environment. In the last five years, over 1,000 Israelis have been killed and tens of thousands have been injured in ways that will alter their lives forever, the result of over 26,000 Palestinian attacks during that period of time.

The resolutions and actions of the Presbyterians, the Europeans, and others is upsetting because they do not contribute to peace for it only raises Palestinian expectations that they will succeed in achieving their ultimate goal. Make no mistake about it, that goal remains the destruction of Israel as a Jewish state, even among moderates – the only difference is over timing and tactics.

The problem with the Presbyterian one-sided critical approach towards Israel is that it overlooks the malicious murderous acts of Palestinians terrorists and the society and infrastructure that supports them.

This approach is unfair because it overlooks the countless sacrifices and numerous tangible concessions Israel has already made for peace, receiving little in return other than empty unfulfilled promises.

Not only does this approach not take into account the steps Israel has taken for peace, but it expects that all the risks should be born by one side. Israel is expected to give up something tangible, land, for something intangible, such as a cessation of violence, which is then not enforced. Once the territory is given up, it is gone. Yet the other side maintains a state of hostility, ignoring the violent and implacable nature of Israel’s enemies.

This approach is also disturbing because it singles out Israel for criticism, while allowing the true instigators of international atrocities to get off scott-free and ignoring the plight of millions of refugees made homeless by other international conflicts.

This approach demands no accountability by the Palestinians for their actions, but instead makes excuses for their non-compliance to signed agreements. It does not require any accounting of the billions of dollars in aid they have received and continue to regularly receive from the international community.

The Presbyterian position overlooks the insecurity and isolation felt by Israel being surrounded by 21 nations who still seek her destruction, most of whom do not recognize her, whose diplomats leave the room when an Israeli enters, who finance and support the campaign of terror and who boycott companies doing business in Israel.

The world is obsessed with Israel. Although it takes up .16% of the land mass of the entire Middle East, and constitutes .09% of the world's population, and despite the killing of a million people in Rwanda, the displacement of 2 million in Sudan, and other world crimes and crises, 56% of all United Nations resolutions passed since its founding sixty years ago have been to condemn Israel. I have often thought that the world needs to find a good psychotherapist to help it get over its Israel complex.

Rather than condemn Israel for its actions against Palestinians or in defense of its own people, it should be praised for its amazing restraint in the face of unprecedented, unrelenting vicious attacks by an enemy who makes no distinction between civilian and military targets. Its use of limited retaliatory raids or targeted killings has thwarted the leadership of the terrorist organizations without decimating the general population, and this should be lauded by the world. That is the resolution that should be passed and the story that should be written and needs to be told.

When I was in Israel this summer, a commando from an elite unit told me that when he and his men went to arrest a Hamas terrorist the man was surrounded by children, whom he kept close to him, on a leash, like dogs, without any regard for their safety or well-being, precisely because he knew that this would prevent the Israelis from harming him. By the way, they got him anyway, and did it without hurting the kids.

In response to the resolutions of the Presbyterians against Israel, Jewish groups around the country have been quietly involved in dialogues and meetings to help foster better understanding and to hopefully overturn these offensive resolutions at their next conclave. I should hasten to inform you that I have met many Presbyterians appalled and embarrassed by the actions of their national body and who are anxious to rescind the resolutions.

Part of the problem is that people are under the false impression that the whole conflict began recently. Some think that our connection began in the late 1800's, when according to this scenario, the Jews came in and evicted the Palestinians from their country, which is why it is called "occupied" today. It is important to set the record straight.

At one such meeting I was asked to give the keynote address and to help explain why Israel is important to the Jewish people, from a theological as well as a historical perspective. In light of the need for all of us to be educated so that we can better defend and advocate for Israel I want to share some of what I said at that conference with you this morning.

Jewish history begins with Abraham. It begins when Abraham first heard the call of God to leave the land of Mesopotamia to journey to the Land that God will lead him to, to Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel.

And so as Jews, our association with the land of Israel goes back to our very birth and beginnings. Perhaps this is why the 19<sup>th</sup> century rabbi, Rabbi Nahman of Brazlav said, “Wherever I am going, I am always going to Israel.” Such is the nature of the tie that binds us to the land.

In truth, that connection even predates Abraham, the first Jew, and goes back to the very origins of the universe. The great Biblical commentator, Rashi, commented on the opening passage of the Torah, “*Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim*, In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth...” His classical commentary teaches: God opened His Holy Torah with an account of the Creation of the world, precisely so that should there ever come a time when the people of the world will accuse Israel of being robbers, Israel will be able to reply: As stated in the Bible, all the world belongs to the Holy One, and it is He who decided to give this land to the people of Israel.”

The covenant which God made, first with Abraham, and later with Moses is predicated upon a relationship which is eternal and irrevocable – a promise that we will accept the mitzvoth and not worship other Gods. In return for this, God gives to Abraham, and to his offspring, the Land of Israel for eternity. That’s the deal.

For Jews, therefore, the link to the land of Israel is as ancient as Israel itself, dating back to our very inception and introduction to the world.

When Moses led the Jews out of slavery, there was only one destination imaginable for the liberated slaves. He brought them back to their homeland, to the land of Israel. And there in the land of Israel over the next several hundred years, the tribes of Israel, as well as the kings, the priests and the prophets lived and prospered.

When the First Temple was destroyed in 587 BCE, the people who were exiled to the land of Babylonia longed to return to the place where they had first come to experience and encounter the Divine. They longed to return to the Temple where they worshipped God, which was situated upon a hill, which they referred to as Zion. Consequently, Zionism, the desire to return and to live in the land of Israel as a sovereign people has its first expression in Biblical times.

Our sages in the time of the Talmud taught that there was a special merit to living in the land of Israel. They noted that many of the mitzvoth are dependent upon our living there

as a sovereign nation. Deuteronomy 11:12 is but one example of the high regard for the land:

“It is a land which the Lord your God looks after, on which the Lord your God always keeps His eyes, from year’s beginning to end.”

This passage is preceded by a verse which states that whereas in Egypt, water came up from the ground or the overflowing river, in Israel, water derives from rain, which comes from the heavens above. This is interpreted as a sign of Divine Providence and God’s ongoing relationship and love for both the people and the land of Israel.

So what I want to convey to you, is first and foremost the understanding that Israel for us Jews represents Divine Promise and Intention. For us, the three pillars of faith are: God, Torah and Israel. While Israel refers here to the people of Israel, the relationship between the three is manifest in the Torah by God’s gift of the Land of Israel to the People of Israel.

Yet our connection is predicated upon more than just the Bible and theology. In addition to the theological aspect, there is an historical connection.

Even when others abandoned it and left the land barren and desolate, Jews still inhabited the land, as evidenced by the remnants of synagogues and Jewish communities dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and other centuries. It is where the midrash was composed and where the kabbalists dreamed. Even when Jews have been dispersed and exiled throughout the world, regardless of where we have lived, we never abdicated the concept of the centrality of Israel.

As a result,

When we pray, wherever we are in the world, we face towards Jerusalem.

In those prayers, we ask, three times a day, to be gathered from the four corners of the earth to the land of Israel.

Jews living in Elephantine, Egypt in the first century, one of the earliest of Diaspora communities understood the importance of the connection, for there are records of them sending contributions to help support the Temple and the people living in Israel.

Yehuda HaLevi, the medieval Jewish philosopher and poet, expressed the feelings of many when he wrote, “I may be in the West, but my heart is in the East.”

I could continue with countless other citations, but let these few examples suffice to convey the depth and the breadth, as well as the longevity and extent of this love affair between the Jewish people and the land of Israel.

One of the things that is somewhat unique about the Jewish experience and which is an aspect of this relationship to the land of Israel is that we are not just a religion, or a faith group. Obviously, we are that. But Jews also perceive ourselves to be an eternal people, with a shared destiny, a common heritage, and a distinct vision. One of my favorite

teachings from the midrash likens the Jewish people to a lamb, for whenever any one part of that lamb feels pain, the whole lamb feels it as well.

When Zionism was first conceived, as a political movement, therefore, it did not spring out of nowhere, but in the context of 2,000 years of longing to return. Yes, it was the product of the nationalist movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a phenomenon which gave birth to many other nations which hitherto had not existed. Yes, it was a response to centuries of anti-Semitism, to the attempts throughout the millennia to isolate Jews, to persecute, murder, and annihilate Jews. Hitler's Final Solution was a solution to the 19<sup>th</sup> century problem known as the "Jewish Question." In the 1800's with the emergence of nationalism, people asked – Where do the Jews fit in? Are they part of the nation or not? Hitler had one answer to this question. The Zionists, led by Theodore Herzl offered a different response. Zionism did not then, nor does it now, deny other peoples their right to a national homeland. It merely advocated that the Jewish people were equally entitled to fulfill its national aspirations to live in its historic homeland and to have the chance to shape our own destiny.

Throughout the millennia Jews were denied equal rights and citizenship wherever they lived. They were expelled from countries they thought were their home, places where they had roots, and had lived for hundreds of years, and where they had contributed to the society. They were persecuted, tortured, and subjected to pogroms and violence. The world's record of hostility and inhospitality towards the Jews surely would be justification enough for the existence of a Jewish homeland.

An important role played by the State of Israel since its inception has been to fulfill its mandate to serve as a haven for persecuted Jews and Jewish communities around the world. For the first time in 2,000 years, Jews have a sense of security knowing that there is a nation whose doors will always be open to accept those individuals subjected to discrimination, rejection, harassment and oppression just because they were Jews. Never too distant from our consciousness is the recognition that we live in a post-Holocaust world. The memory of that act, when 1/3 of our people were taken from us, a short time ago, causes us to be especially vigilant on behalf of the welfare of our fellow Jews and sensitive to calls to isolate or destroy any part of our people.

Israel rose out of the ashes of World War II, yet its history is so much older than its modern existence. It is both one of the youngest nations in the world, while also being one of the most ancient.

Finally, Israel today is a source of great pride for Jews around the world. We are proud to see what Israel has been able to accomplish despite being surrounded by 21 hostile nations committed to its destruction. We are proud, not just of what it has achieved in the scientific, medical, high tech and cultural realms, despite the efforts to isolate her from the international community and the boycotts waged against it, but also of what it has done to revitalize Jewish culture.

The fact that Hebrew is a living language, that there is a nation in the world where the Sunday paper comes out on Fridays, where people wish each other a Shabbat shalom, rather than “have a nice weekend,” where Jewish culture is alive and vibrant – this is a source of great pride to Jews the world over. And the fact that Israel has remained so moral a nation, that its people sing of peace and that their children are not taught to hate, that it fights its wars with a commitment to morality, restraint, decency, and consideration for the rights of its enemies, that it has made more sacrifices in the hope for peace than any other victorious nation in history – This is all also a source of tremendous pride.

That with some minor modifications, was the speech I gave to the group of Presbyterian ministers here in Washington this past February in an attempt to elucidate the importance of the eternal connection between the people of Israel and the land of Israel.

A lot has happened since, including Israel’s evacuation of the Gaza Strip. Unprecedented in world history, a nation victorious in a defensive war used its military to forcibly remove its own citizens from their dwellings and handed territory over to an unrepentant enemy.

What was the Palestinian response to Israel’s disengagement? Hamas reiterated that its goal remained the liberation of all of Palestine. The Palestinian Authority did nothing to refute or repudiate these remarks, for moderate Palestinians do not reject the ultimate goal of dismantling of the Jewish state, but differ in that they see the process as taking two steps.

Imagine, if only the heart-wrenching decision to uproot its citizens would have been met by a public expression by the Palestinian leadership to their people that the individuals and families vacating Gaza had made a significant sacrifice and that the personal anguish should be recognized. If only the Palestinian leadership would have used this as an opportunity to prepare its people to live in peace with Israel and for the inevitable reality that one day they, too, will have to give up some of their demands and unrealistic expectations.

Instead, they celebrated and called it a victory for terrorism, and demanded further Israeli withdrawals. Gaza first was the battle cry, without realizing “Gaza first” could also be viewed as a first test of their ability to govern.

They have failed the first step. The buildings which once housed synagogues were all destroyed, torched, and desecrated. Technically speaking, these of course, were no longer synagogues. But for the Palestinians who set out to rampage them, it didn’t matter. Rejecting the suggestion that the buildings be turned into community centers, or places to distribute economic humanitarian aid, their hatred of Jews and the Jewish religion was so strong they lashed out and destroyed anything that symbolized Judaism. Can you picture a scene like that taking place in Israel? The contrast could not be greater. Derogatory comments about Moslems are not tolerated, and quickly condemned by all sides of the political spectrum.

American Jewish philanthropists raised \$14 million in a span of two days so that the greenhouses developed by the Gaza settlers could be turned over to the Palestinians. The means of providing jobs for thousands of Palestinians, of exporting flowers and produce to Europe, all developed by the Israeli settlers were given to them. Yet once again, the facilities were vandalized and destroyed. Why do the critics of Israel not see that the will to destroy is greater than the desire to constructively build a society and provide for their people.

I cannot help but contrast this with the response of Israel.

After the scenes of destruction, which barely appeared in our news here, Israel's former chief rabbi, Yisrael Lau warned against harming holy sites of other religions reminding people, "It is not our way."

Our way is different. I will never forget the extraordinary display of unity we witnessed during those days in August when Israeli soldiers uprooted their own people. Everyone had expressed apprehension and fear over what would happen and the civil war that they expected to break out between Jews. But those who made those predictions do not know our people. I was amazed by the scenes and my faith in being a Jew renewed. Soldiers embraced and sang and cried along with the people they had come to evict. Even though they were sometimes subjected to hostility they did not lash out. On more than one occasion when a settler angrily confronted and castigated a soldier for what he was doing, the soldier lovingly put his arm around the person who had just shouted at him and offered a bottle of water to the settler he had come to remove.

We often lament how fragmented and divided we are. But the evacuation was an amazing display of the unity and civility of our people, of which we should be immensely proud.

The Road Map for Peace requires that the Palestinian Authority dismantle and disarm the terrorist organizations and to stop teaching and promulgating hatred and vicious Nazi-like anti-Semitic images and portrayals of Jews in their schools, textbooks, official media, public proclamations and mosques.

If only the Presbyterians and others would pass resolutions calling upon the Palestinians to turn away from acts of belligerency and hostility.

As the recipients of billions of dollars of international aid, and with the aid of oil-rich Arab nations, the Palestinian government has sufficient resources and ample means to improve and ameliorate the lives of their people. Yet they choose not to, preferring instead to let their people languish in poverty and to foment hatred. The time has come for the Palestinians to dismantle some of the refugee camps where they have kept their people as pawns for the last 57 years and where hatred and fanaticism are bred. Imagine the impact if the international community would demand that these camps be dismantled and replaced with adequate housing.



As the recipients of billions of dollars of international aid, and with the aid of oil-rich fellow Arab nations, the Palestinians have the resources to improve and ameliorate the lives of their own people. The question is whether or not they have the will.

I wish there was some way I could convey to our Presbyterian and European friends that the problem really is not Israel or land, or settlements, but the fundamental desire on the part of Palestinians, as evidenced by deed, action and ideology to destroy the Jewish state. I include ideology because recent statements make it clear that whereas Israelis are all too ready to understand the Palestinian narrative, there is no acceptance by Palestinians that we have any historic connection to the land. Top officials, educated people deny that the Holocaust ever occurred as well as that we ever had a historic presence in the land of Israel. Until that perception changes, there is little hope for reconciliation or true peace.

But having said all this, let me share with you a small ray of hope. In an unprecedented speech before a small group of 60 – 70 rabbis a few weeks ago, His Majesty King Abdullah II captured the hearts of all of in attendance. He described the common threads of our two religions and people, while not denying the Jewish people's narrative. He laid out a vision for peace that did not entail the dismantling of Israel. He said we need to unite and focus our attention on combating the major threat to peace in the region -- Islamic extremism. This courageous and honest approach is the path to peace, understanding and reconciliation.

We can only hope that if we remain vigilant, steadfast and knowledgeable, others will share this vision. Israel will ultimately prevail and it will continue to inspire and uplift us for all eternity. May the vision of the prophet come to pass: The lion and the lamb shall lie together, and peace shall prevail in the land.

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