

Israel: A Non-Political Sermon

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There is a robust discussion taking place in a number of public forums these days about whether or not rabbis should speak about political issues on the pulpit, especially during the High Holidays. Personally, I believe it is a prerogative of a rabbi to be a good citizen by participating in the political process. Even more, it is imperative for a rabbi to share his or her analysis of how he or she applies their interpretation of Judaism to contemporary matters, while stopping short of endorsing a specific candidate or partisan position. So with this by way of introduction, I want to speak to you this evening about a non-political issue --- support for Israel.

Although it may surprise some of you to consider support for Israel to be nonpolitical, I believe that our support for Israel should be viewed the same way we consider our other obligation as members of the Jewish people and our commitments to our fellow Jews. We benefit from Israel being one of the few, if not the only issue that garners broad bi-partisan support and thus is and should always be a non-partisan issue in the United States Congress.

One of our unique hallmarks, admired by others, is that because of our shared history and sense of a common destiny we care about the fate that befalls our fellow Jews, wherever we may be. As I have told colleagues, just as we rabbis are advocates for mitzvot, advocates for keeping kosher, proponents for living a Jewish lifestyle, encourage observance of Shabbat, so too should we be outspoken advocates for Israel. I am disappointed when I hear colleagues tell me that they avoid speaking about this topic because it is too political or too controversial, or because they have members with so many different affiliations or opinions about what Israel's policies should be, or because they themselves are conflicted. I believe that part of our responsibility as rabbis is to be leaders of our community, to help to interpret our tradition and to teach what our responsibilities to our fellow Jews are. We need to inform and educate our members about the centrality of Israel to the Jewish enterprise in the twenty first century and of the very real threats to its well-being and its existence.

We are blessed to live in a time our ancestors dreamed of for centuries. Are we to turn our backs on the miracle that we are privileged to witness: the Jewish people being sovereign in its own land for the first time in 2,000 years? Dare we not do all we can to preserve and strengthen and support for it?

I come to this conclusion for a number of reasons.

In light of the amount of inaccurate and biased reporting about Israel that the public receives, I believe we need to do what we can to set the record straight and to correct distortions and inaccuracies because they lead to pernicious negative perceptions which are harmful. While

Israel is not perfect, and there is much to criticize, we should deal with our concerns as we do with mishpoche, family, with love and not in front of others. For an organization which claims to be pro-Israel to urge the United States not to veto a UN resolution condemning Israel is unconscionable. I am not asking for blind support of all it does or all its policies, but when others gang up and attack its very legitimacy, we should not join the chorus of detractors. The least Israel deserves is fair and honest coverage and reporting.

There is a joke about an Israeli on vacation who visits a zoo in England when he sees a little girl leaning into the lion's cage. Suddenly, the lion grabs her and tries to pull her inside. The Israeli runs to the cage and hits the lion with a powerful punch. Whimpering from the pain the lion lets go of the girl, and the Israeli delivers her to her terrified parents. A journalist who saw what happened says to the Israeli: "Sir, that was the most gallant and brave thing I've ever seen in my whole life. Since I am a reporter I will see to it that this won't go unnoticed. I want to write a story about what just happened for tomorrow's paper. So, tell me a little bit about yourself. Give me some background information: about your family, where are you from, what do you do for a living, what is your political affiliation, and so on."

The Israeli replies, "I am on vacation with my family, from my service as a member of the Israel Defense Forces, and while I don't think it is relevant, since you ask, I usually vote for Likud." The next day, sure enough, the story is on the front page of the London paper with the headline, "RIGHT-WING ISRAELI ASSAULTS AFRICAN IMMIGRANT AND STEALS HIS LUNCH" Unfortunately, the joke is not all that far-fetched.

I would suggest a healthy dose of skepticism when you read or hear about Israel in the media. The constant reference to Israel's Prime Minister as right wing, hard line, and other similar descriptions takes its toll and helps to form a particular perception of him and of Israel's government, which is neither fair nor accurate. As a result of the constant barrage of negative messages, many, including Jews and Israelis adopt a mind-set that views him as intransigent and forget that this government and Prime Minister have demonstrated and expressed unequivocally on numerous occasions their desire to reach an accord with the Palestinians. He is the first Prime Minister to introduce a settlement freeze; has dismantled and taken down most of the roadblocks in Palestinian territory; has repeatedly called for direct unconditional negotiations with the Palestinian Authority; and has publicly endorsed at Bar Ilan University, as well as in front of a joint session of Congress and the United Nations the existence of a Palestinian state. Yet somehow all of this, as well as the very real threats Israel faces and the risks it has taken, is being asked to take, and is willing to take are ignored and Israel is portrayed as the obstinate party.

Typical is the column in yesterday's *New York Times* by Nicholas Kristof who stole a line from his colleague Thomas Friedman and placed exclusive blame on Netanyahu and Israel for its isolation, the problems with Turkey and the breakdown of talks with Palestinians. (I am only surprised he didn't blame Israel for the Yankees collapsing in the playoff series!) He condemns the building of homes in Gilo, which is not East Jerusalem. In terms of proximity and of being integrated into the fabric of the city it is to Jerusalem what Georgetown is to Capitol Hill. His

article, "Is Israel its own Worst Enemy" represents the thinking of those who ignore the history of Palestinian intransigence and terror, of their refusal to compromise, and of the bellicose verbal threats accompanied by the staggering buildup of arsenals of rockets in Gaza and Lebanon. Not mentioned in this one-sided view is the intransigence of the Palestinians, the role of anti Semitic Arab propaganda in making it impossible for any Arab leader to resolve its conflict with Israel, the unrelenting celebration of violence in Palestinian society, the charter of Hamas which calls for the destruction of Israel, or the generous peace offers the Palestinians have spurned on more than one occasion. Unfortunately too often this approach amounts to little more than insistence that Israel should just make more concessions and cede more territory. Conversely requests put forth by Israel to ensure and guarantee its own security are seen as obstructionist, impediments to reaching an agreement and evidence of a lack of interest in negotiating. If anything, with the stakes so high, it shows how serious Israel takes negotiations, treaties and its commitments.

It is easy to recite simple catch phrases often enough that they take on an air of credibility. While terms such as occupier are applied to Israel, no one seems to bring up Turkey's occupation of 1/3 of Cyprus since 1974 when it invaded Cyprus and expelled 40 % of its population. Another harsh critic of Israel, China gets a pass for its occupation of Tibet. Calls for independence, self determination and a homeland of their own by Kurds, Chechnya and Kosovo do not garner the attention given to the Palestinians, who are the only people in history for whom refugee status is passed on to grandchildren. It is estimated that in the 20th century 300 million refugees were created by wars and displacements. Even though some 850,000 of those refugees were of Jews from Arab lands, the only ones who receive so much of the world's attention, including a whole division of the United Nations bureaucracy are the 850,000 Palestinian refugees and their offspring.

As a result of the double standard if you were to land on the planet earth from Mars you would think that the most serious problem in the world is the conflict in the Middle East, that Israel is the primary cause of suffering in the world, and that there are no other internal disputes in the Arab or Moslem world. Syria murders 3,000 of its own people, and hunts down hundreds of Palestinians and still claims to be a defender of Palestinian rights, with Russia and China preventing the UN from taking measures against the regime. Turkey, a contender for the "Nation with the most Chutzpah of the Decade Award" commits atrocities by slaughtering Kurds and parades itself as a paragon of virtue and as saviors of Palestinian honor. Despite their barbarity and repressive atmosphere and oppression of their own people none of these nations is exposed to the kind of malicious attacks, condemnation or boycotts that Israel is subjected to regularly. In the face of such hypocrisy and hostility how can we not speak out on behalf of Israel when it is subjected to hyper-critical treatment?

A Texan, Frenchman and Israeli are on a plane flying over the Pacific Ocean when the engines stop functioning and the plane crashes and lands on a remote Pacific Island where the 3 are captured by a tribe of cannibals and taken to their village. The Chief tells the 3 captives that although they are cannibals, they are civilized and have a custom that before they eat anyone, they grant that person a final wish – no matter what it is. He asks the Texan, "What is your last

wish?" The Texan replies: "I would like a 2 inch thick steak with all the trimmings, cajun fries and a case of beer." The Chief motions to some of his tribesmen who immediately run into the jungle and come back with the steak, the fries and the beer. The Texan eats his meal, and is thrown into a pot.

Next the Frenchman says his last wish, "a case of the most expensive champagne with escargot." The Chief motions to his tribesmen who immediately rush off into the jungle and bring back everything the Frenchman asked for. After he eats and drinks his fill, he is thrown into a pot as well.

Next, the Chief turns to the Israeli and asks, "And what is your wish?" The Israeli looks the Chief squarely in the eyes and replies, "I want you to kick me as hard as you can in the back." The Chief is bewildered and asks the Israeli again, only to receive the same reply. The Chief complies, and kicks him as hard as he can. With that the Israeli pulls out a gun and kills the Chief and all of the other cannibals.

The Texan and the Frenchman look at the Israeli and say: "If you had that gun in your pocket, why didn't you do something sooner?"

The Israeli replies: "Are you kidding? And risk being condemned by the UN for reacting to insufficient provocation!"

Mahmud Abbas stands before the United Nations and among many misrepresentations that are loudly applauded accuses Israel of ethnic cleansing. Abu Mazen made reference to Christian and Moslem connections to the Holy Land, referring to Jesus and Muhammad, while making no mention whatsoever of any Jewish connection to the land. His omission of any Jewish historical connections to the land of Palestine is not unintentional, but meant to signal his perception: that Jews do not have a place there. How does that help prepare his people for peace?

All three of the television stations in Israel broadcast Abu Mazen's speech at the United Nations in its entirety. But when Netanyahu got up to speak, the screens on Palestinian television sets went dark. The Palestinian and Arab people did not hear his conciliatory message of two states for two peoples. Abbas, who is supposed to be the moderate Palestinian leader, refers to Israeli occupation as going on for 63 years, meaning that he takes the uncompromising, overreaching position that all of the land of Israel is Palestinian territory.

When will an Arab leader tell his people, as Israel's leaders have told their people that all will have to make painful concessions and not get all they would like to get. Netanyahu did it again this past spring before the US Congress. Abbas has yet to do so, and yet we are to believe that Israel and its government is the reason there is no peace.

Labels such as apartheid are hurled without regard to reality. What is the reality, and what are the facts? Omar Barghouti, a resident of Ramallah and leading Arab advocate of boycotting Israel is a doctoral student at Tel Aviv University. Israeli Arabs Mira Awad, represented Israel at the 2009 Eurovision Song Contest, as did Rana Raslan in the Miss World contest. Majalli Wahabi has served as Deputy Speaker of the Knesset. Salim Joubran is a Christian Arab Israeli

Supreme Court Justice who presided over the trial of Israel's president Moshe Katzav. In spite of the fact that Palestinians are denied citizenship in just about every Arab country where they reside, that the Palestinian Authority says that any Arab who sells land to a Jew should be put to death, and that Abbas and other members of his coalition have said that no Israeli Jew will be allowed to live on Palestinian land, somehow it is Israel that is falsely branded with the apartheid label while the Arabs are given a pass.

The commentator Mordechai Gifter in Pirke Torah comments on the passage in Deuteronomy that "the Egyptians wronged us and afflicted us, *Veyareu otonanu HaMitzrim*" that the term *otanu* is used rather than *lanu* because before the Egyptians afflicted our ancestors they first mounted a slander campaign against the Israelites to make them appear evil. Once they succeeded in convincing everyone that the Hebrews were evil and not deserving of basic human rights enjoyed by the rest of society it was easy to impose harsh decrees against them. By then the population was conditioned to accept the isolation of the Israelites and acquiesced to their being singled out and mistreated.

In many respects, the same scenario is happening today. Originally referred to as a BDS - boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign, it has now morphed into a full pronged aggressive attack on Israel's very legitimacy and its right to any kind of normalcy. The legitimacy of North Korea, the most oppressive country in the world, with gulags imprisoning millions of people is not questioned. The right of Saudi Arabia, a country which does not allow non-Muslims to be citizens to exist is not challenged. I could go on. The unrelenting efforts fought in every possible venue focusing attention exclusively on the Jewish state and are intended to have the same impact as what the Egyptians did in Biblical times. The campaign to demonize Israel and undermine its right to exist is fought in the United Nations, throughout Europe and in our country as well, on university campuses where pro-Israel speakers are denied free speech, where Israeli academics are not allowed to lecture, and students are subjected to vicious hateful propaganda about Israel, while much more repressive regimes are given a pass. It even takes place in stores and retail outlets, where boycotts are organized and Israeli goods are aggressively pulled off the shelves. A BBC concert of the Israel Philharmonic in London just two weeks ago was disrupted. The first step is to deny Israel the right to normalcy, as a prelude to isolation, in the hope that it will lead to further actions against it.

Israel does not lack those who wish to harm it. Unfortunately there are Jews and Israelis who buy into the negative images, including some who wanted to be a part of the most recent flotilla to Gaza, and worse. Surely the last thing Israel needs is for Jews to join the detractors who will resort to whatever means possible and use whatever forum possible to embarrass and marginalize the Jewish state and its citizens.

In March of this past year two Arab terrorists infiltrated the settlement of Itamar and massacred the Fogel family, killing a father, mother and three children – age 11, 4 and 3 months. They were all stabbed to death except for the three month old baby, whose throat was slit by the ruthless murderers. After the terrorists were caught, members of an Israeli left wing organization called Machson Watch and another group went to the Arab town that the

terrorists who slaughtered the Fogel family came from and visited the families of the terrorists to offer them comfort. These Jewish Israelis gave comfort to the families of the murderers of innocent Jewish people.

It brings to mind the Hebrew poem "Then did Satan say" by Natan Alterman, "...Then did Satan say: How will I conquer this beleaguered one, how will I best him? He possesses courage, ingenuity and tools of war.

And then he said, "I'll neither rob his strength, nor bridle him, nor rein him in, nor plant fear in his heart, nor enervate his mind, But this I'll do: I'll blight his mind, til he forgets his cause is just."

Part of our role and of my responsibility as a rabbi is to remind us and to proclaim for all to hear that our cause is just and that Zionism, the national liberation movement of the Jewish people is just and deserves our support. In light of the ongoing campaign to isolate and delegitimize Israel which is being waged on so many fronts we have an obligation not to be passive and even more, not to contribute to those efforts which single out Israel for harsh criticism. To do so plays into the hands of those who would want nothing more than for the Jewish state to go away.

The thing that I, and I am sure many of you, find especially upsetting and frustrating is that the image perpetrated by Israel's detractors is so contrary to the reality that we know to be true. Unlike most other nations of the world, it has taken in and absorbed refugees, immigrants who came with nothing from Arab lands, Holocaust survivors who brought with them little more than the scars and wounds they bore from the trauma they had just experienced, Russians, Ethiopians, and others and gave them jobs, provided them with homes and an education. And Israel has done this not just for Jews, by the way.

There is a wonderful organization started by a friend of mine, Ami Cohen (*zichorno levracha*) called "Save a Child's Heart." They perform life-saving heart surgery on Arab children from throughout the Middle East. Sadly, when the families return to their homes they often cannot even tell people where they were and who it was that performed and paid for the transportation as well as the operations that saved the lives of their children, for if they say the lives of their children were saved by Israel their lives will be at risk.

And those of us who take the time to go beyond the headlines also know of the lengths taken by Israeli armed forces to save lives, and to minimize casualties of non-combatants, even at the risk of their own lives.

We recall that Israel was among the very first of nations to respond to the tragedy in Haiti. Travelling from half way around the world, they set up a make-shift state of the art fully equipped hospital that CNN described as a Cadillac, or Rolls Royce, especially in comparison to what other countries, including the United States had sent. Colonel Ayal Bor, the IDF doctor who led the extraordinary mission said he received a call in the middle of the night to prepare to leave in an hour and a half. He was not told anything other than that they were going to go

somewhere to save lives. It was not inconsistent with his training because as I heard him say in a lecture, “Ever since I was drafted into the Israeli army, I was trained to save lives, regardless of borders.” This is the ethical underpinning that guides Israel.

We know of and take pride in the many scientific advances, medical research and inventions that have come out of Israel which have improved the lives of so many, including its water purification and ground-breaking desalinization programs, as well as its many contributions which benefit all of humanity. Just this past week, another Israeli scientist received a Nobel Prize. This is the Israel behind the headlines. We must counter the negative images so many have of Israel so that the world will know the true nature of Israel and its people.

When I was in Israel in May with a group of 30 rabbis we visited the Mayor of Sderot who spoke movingly of the plight of the residents of Sderot and what they have to deal with on a regular basis when rockets are launched from Gaza. These attacks are unprovoked. They cause tremendous trauma and hardship. Can you imagine what it is like to be awakened by sirens in the middle of the night knowing you have 30 seconds to get to a safe place? Now imagine what it is like if you are elderly or if you are a child, or if you are a parent of infants. The mayor asks rhetorically, why? “Why are we being attacked? I did not send rockets to kill any children.” He told us that he has asked to meet with his counterpart on the other side, to have children meet each other, and has not gotten a response to any of this. What impressed me most was his lack of malice and any evidence of hostility or animosity towards those who were trying to kill him and innocent civilians in his town. This is the Israel that you and I know and love.

Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza and Lebanon have resulted in those areas being taken over by radical governments, Hamas and Hezbollah, not by parties interested in seeking a conciliatory approach. So on what basis can Israel assume that it should make further withdrawals without ample guarantees of its security.

I still recall Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Ariel Sharon explaining and reassuring the Israeli public that if they turn territory over to Palestinians and then that land is used to launch attacks against Israel, we will have nothing to fear, for the world will take our side, knowing that we are just. They thought the world would understand and support Israel’s need to repel aggression. How typically Israeli it was to be so hopeful. Unfortunately, how naïve their wishful thinking was to think that the world would rally to Israel’s side even though its actions would be so clearly justified.

As the nations surrounding Israel experience upheaval, the cries for Israel to reach a settlement with the Palestinians rise like a crescendo. Logic and past experience would dictate caution. We do not yet know the outcome of the changes in the Arab world, what kinds of governments will be in place or how stable these countries will be. It is not clear if they will respect treaties already signed with Israel, for which Israel conceded territory. It is not certain if they will be able to guarantee any agreements they make, or if they are even interested in making any accommodations for peace – yet there are those who see this as an opportune time to make peace.

But just as applause cannot be made with one hand clapping, it takes two parties to make peace. And the correct question I believe, should be: Does the Palestinian leadership and people truly want peace? Are Arab leaders genuinely interested in ending the conflict? Abbas' speech at the UN as well as his Op Ed piece in The New York Times a few months ago unequivocally states that the reason they seek UN recognition is to be able to pursue their claims against Israel. It seems pretty obvious to me -- that does not sound like a party interested in resolving the conflict, but in prolonging it in other forums. Sometimes they remind me of a reluctant bridegroom, who is afraid of making a lasting commitment, who prefers not to be tied down.

I think we always need to keep in mind and can never forget what Israel faces every day, its surroundings, and the actions of its neighbors. Turkey has sought to become a leader of the Arab and Moslem world by pillorying Israel every chance it can. Hezbollah has become Lebanon's power broker and amassed more than 40,000 missiles and rockets. Egypt, once a friend, is of concern, showing the impact of what happens when Israel is demonized over decades in schools, the media, and the mosques. The Arab Spring has brought to the surface the ugly anti semitic racism the people have been fed for decades. Iran calls for a world without Israel and is pursuing a course to try to make its rhetoric more than just rhetoric. How can pressuring Israel to make more concessions advance the cause of peace?

Those of us who live outside Israel have a choice. We can be supportive, or we can be among those who join the chorus of those who weaken Israel's position in the eyes of the world. We can visit Israel, buy Israeli products, purchase an Israel bond. We can join and support Aipac to express support for the vital U.S.-Israel relationship to elected officials and other organizations that do important work along these lines. We can vacation in friendly countries and avoid unfriendly ones. We can write letters. We can get involved with pro-Israel organizations and help others understand what's going on. Or we can stand on the sidelines and do nothing, or worse.

A short story from the 1890's by Y. L. Peretz tells the story of a poor Jew, Yankele of Chelm, who runs to his rebbe after his teeth have been knocked out for no reason by the town's shabbes goy. The rabbi of Chelm looks at the teeth and questions if they really belong to Yankele. He examines the teeth, and concludes that it is the teeth that are guilty, not the person who hit Yankele in the mouth. A few weeks later Yankele is upset because this time the shabbes goy, the gentile who lights the fire for all the Jews of Chelm on Shabbat has stolen a loaf of bread from him. He grabbed from his hands the bread he was going to bring home from the market to his family. After hearing what happened the rabbi says the reason he was attacked must be because he was walking with the bread exposed. When Yankele says the man is a murderer, the rabbi still refuses to accept that. He says, "Yankele, you are not a murderer. I am not a murderer, so how could he be a murderer?" When Yankele is accosted again and seeks the rabbi's help, the rabbi realizes this is too much and something must be done to solve the problem. He gathers everyone right before Yom Kippur for a meeting in the shul and informs the congregation of the situation as well as of his solution. "I have decided," he says, "Since it is clear that the shabbes goy has a problem with Yankele, that Yankele has to go away and leave

our town immediately. And furthermore, to appease him, and to save the entire community from dire peril, let us also give the shabbes goy a raise... and perhaps he will have compassion on the rest of us.”

And then Peretz concludes, “You’re laughing? Ah, but there’s a little bit of the rabbi of Chelm in each of us.”

The “wise” rabbi who blamed the Jew for his problems reminds me of many in our own community who blame Israel for the problem of how it is treated by others. Like the man in the story, Israel is blamed for its isolation. But unlike Peretz’ amazingly insightful story written over 120 years ago, the only thing that is new is that there is nowhere for Israel to run, nor should it. With our support, standing together, there will be no need to run.

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