

Why I Speak So Much About Israel

When I applied for the position of rabbi in a previous congregation, the search committee asked me what subjects I like to discuss in my sermons. I answered, "I like to speak about a wide range of topics, and I try not to address them all in the same sermon."

As is true of any rabbi, if someone were to do a nexus search of the data bank of my sermons, I imagine they would find several key words and themes appear more frequently than others. I try to cover a variety of issues, and give different kinds of messages. To keep from being repetitive, some weeks, I don't give a sermon, preferring to tell a story, or to lead a discussion based on the insights that can be discerned from the parasha. But unquestionably, the subject that I probably speak the most about, especially over the last three years, is Israel. It is close and dear to my heart, and something I feel strongly about.

So this morning I want you to know why I speak so much about Israel. I offer this sermon to give insight and understanding into why I do so.

First and foremost, I speak out on behalf of Israel because I believe in the justness of its cause.

It is the fulfillment of the biblical prophecy and promise. It is the inspiring story of the return of the Jewish people to its ancestral homeland, a dream never lost or forgotten throughout our wanderings. In the millennia that followed the expulsion of the Jews from their land, Israel was always subjected to the control of foreign invaders. The only time the populace living in the land of Israel were sovereign was during the period of Jewish reign.

Numerous expulsions and persecutions have demonstrated how the world feels about having Jews in their midst, and so Israel is the one place in the world where all Jews know they are welcome and have a place. Placards in Europe during the 1940's proclaimed, "All Jews to Palestine"! And yet, a few months ago, the vice president of Brazil said that maybe the world would be better off without Israel.

Israel deserves and needs our support, for there are all too many who are anxious to isolate and condemn her, which is one of the reasons why I am critical of those in Israel and the Jewish community who are so quick to speak out against the Jewish state, or to publicly point out its shortcomings.

I am guided by the teaching of the sage Hillel who taught "*Im ein ani lee, mee lee*, If I am not for myself, who will be for me."

It is unconscionable that over 55 years after it was established, of all the nations founded in the 20th century, Israel is the only one that still must constantly fight to justify its existence. Yet to this day, whenever an Israeli gets up to speak at an international

forum, the United Nations, or any of its committees, delegates from the Arab countries walk out. If Israeli journalists ask a question of an Arab figure, they are ignored, and treated as a non-entity, as if they do not exist. All of this is part of a conscious effort to deny Israel its place among the community of nations.

This past year, the head of the United Nations had the gall to actually ask, is it possible for the entire world to be wrong, and Israel to be right? What a telling and silly question. Just as the minority who said the world was round, when all believed it was flat were right; just as those who said the earth revolved around the sun, and not the other way around, were correct, so, too, are we right to support Israel. Or how about the masses who joined the Third Reich and the Nazi regime when we were in the minority. Maybe according to the Secretary's perverted way of thinking they were right as well.

Ostracized by the international community, Israel is not allowed to sit on the Human Rights Commission. This body delights in passing resolutions affirming the legitimacy of armed struggle against the Jewish state and is currently chaired by Libya. And Kofi Anan wonders if the world must be right since we are in the minority, and the whole world is against us?!

It is not poverty which leads suicide bombers to act. It is fanaticism. The bomber in August who took the lives of religious Jews returning from the Western Wall on bus Number 22 was an imam with two children of his own. The woman who blew herself up in Haifa yesterday and murdered 21 people was a law student. These are not impoverished people acting out of desperation. They are the product of a system which hates Jews and admires and rewards violence and views as heroes those who take innocent lives, for it abhors everything Israel represents.

Novelist Cynthia Ozick writing in the *Wall Street Journal* this summer commented about the depravity and sickness of a society which produces children who are "taught to die and to kill from kindergarten on, via song and slogan in praise of bloodletting..." and of how despicable Hamas leader Abdel Rantisi is, a physician, who is supposed to heal children, but instead recruits them for suicide bombing missions.

An article in last week's *Wall Street Journal* by the former head of the Rumanian intelligence service detailed the role of the Soviet KGB in setting up Arafat and creating his persona. The forces at work against Israel are so much more sinister and complex than any of us can imagine.

With the Moslem and Arab world lined up against Israel, the one thing Israel does not lack is people willing to criticize her. As Jews we have a moral imperative to support the state of Israel and to work for its well-being. We dare not be silent or neutral.

I speak out on behalf of Israel because as the first generation to be born into a post Holocaust world, we have a special obligation to our fellow Jews to defend the Jewish people and its homeland.

Having not yet recovered from the decimation of one third of our people during World War II, we often question if the Jews who were alive during the 1930's and 40's did all they could to save Jews during that horrible era. We dare not take for granted the miracle of the birth and existence of that which Jews prayed for, longed for and dreamed of for more than 2,000 years. It is incumbent upon us to at on behalf of our fellow Jews.

I do not believe we should consider the bellicosity and vicious calls for the destruction of Israel emanating from the Arab world as idle threats, nor should they be treated as mere harmless rhetoric. Consistent with their policies, it reflects their ideology, and true intentions.

Some of us here today may recall that fateful day 30 years ago, when most of us were in shul for Yom Kippur and we first heard the terrifying news that, Israel was under siege, its very existence imperiled and threatened. Once again, the Arab nations surrounding Israel sought to undo the forward march of history by attempting to destroy her, a goal they have never truly renounced or relinquished.

As a result of our history, we must take seriously threats to annihilate the Jewish people and the Jewish state.

I speak about Israel because I believe there is no difference between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism.

Israel constantly being singled out among all the nations of the world is clear evidence of anti-Semitism.

I speak out about Israel in order to condemn the hypocrisy of those morally bankrupt, non-democratic, corrupt, oppressive, repressive despotic dictatorships that actually have the chutzpah to criticize Israel. It is more than just hypocrisy. We know what is behind their actions, and should not be afraid to call it what it is. Motivated by hatred and anti-Semitism, attempting to cloak themselves in the guise of respectability, as if they are only critics of certain policies, or of a country and not Jews, it is bigotry, and we must not allow it to go unchallenged.

How interesting that the world is indifferent to the slaughter of thousands of Kurds, the eradication of tens of thousands of marsh Arabs in Iraq in the 1990's, the brutal occupation of Tibet by China, the killing of Chechens by Russians, the human rights abuses throughout Africa, Asia, and the Arab world, the selling of blacks into slavery by Arabs in Sudan. But if one Israeli soldier at a checkpoint happens to question a seemingly pregnant Palestinian to be sure she is not packing a bomb, it becomes an international incident befitting a Security Council motion and calls for international investigation.

The world seems incapable of being able to distinguish between those who commit terror and the nation that has a legitimate right to defend its citizens; between the nation that has given back land conquered in a war of self-defense, something no other country has ever done, and those who seek to annihilate it. They fail to distinguish between the

side, which consistently takes risks for the possibility of peace and the aggressors who seek her destruction. The world makes no distinction between those who at the risk of their own lives attempt to limit loss of innocent noncombatants, and those who wantonly and indiscriminately dispatch murderers seeking to kill and maim civilians and to inflict as much damage as possible.

Arafat and his cronies have stolen from his own people from the billions given by the European and Arab nations, and no one says a word.

The rule of thumb is occupations, population resettlements, refugee displacements, military action are not a problem, unless they involve Israel.

I speak on behalf of Israel because what you hear in the media is not unbiased.

Israel clearly gets a bum rap in the media. I sometimes wonder if the slanted way things are presented is the result of naiveté or stupidity, and if it is intentional or not.

Shortly after the United States invasion of Iraq, Eason Jordan, the head of CNN revealed a secret he had kept for many years. He was relieved to finally be able to let it be known that the reports they had filed from Iraq during the years of the Saddam Hussein regime were not complete. Concerned about the safety of their sources and their correspondents, he admitted that they had not always told the whole story. Well, friends what makes you think for a moment that it is any different in any other Arab capital? It is a known fact that the Palestinians regularly intimidate and threaten journalists who do not report on them sympathetically or favorably.

I fault the media for not recognizing and adequately reporting on the hatred in the Arab world. The extent of the pervasiveness of the anti-Semitism, the training that goes on there, and the way in which it is a breeding ground for violence is ignored or underplayed. Hezbollah has created a new video game which simulates attacks on Israeli targets as a means of further indoctrinating a sick population. Could anyone picture anything like this emanating from Israel?

So I speak to correct the misinformation you receive and are exposed to by the media, to counter their bias and to supply you with the information missing from their reports.

I speak about Israel because I believe that the fate of Israel and of Jews around the world, and thus, of the Jewish people is one and the same.

It is the Jewish state, the only one in the world. The one place in the world where the Sunday paper comes out on Friday. Even the least observant person in the street will say to his equally secular friend on Friday afternoon, "Shabbat shalom" and hag sameach at the time of a Jewish holiday.

Established as a refuge for Jews from around the world, it is the one country which has rescued Jews in endangered communities and which opens its arms to accept Jews escaping persecution.

Itai Bachur an Israeli writer I met this summer said, "With all the terrible difficulties there are in this country, and there are many, this is the only country where I can live, where I am not an immigrant. Here as a Jew, and a secular, non-practicing one at that, I am home."

When Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon (alav hashalom) went into space, he understood this link which connects Jews around the world, and that he was a representative of all of us. And so, he kept kosher on his mission, and carried with him a torah scroll rescued from the Holocaust.

Intricately bound together, we share a common destiny, a common fate, and a common history.

I speak about Israel because I take pride in her accomplishments.

We have all felt a bit prouder of being Jewish as a result of what Israel has done.

In 1974, Israel did what no other nation of the world would do. It sent a well-trained elite group of commandos to rescue Jews who had been hijacked and were being held at the airport in Entebbe, Uganda. The terrorists were not counting on the fact that the Israelis had plans to the airport, since they had built it. They were not counting on the resolve and determination of the brave forces. But most of all, they did not understand that Israel is a country motivated by the Jewish principle, Kol yisrael areivin zeh b'zeh, all of Israel is responsible for one another. So that when the soldiers arrived they said to the surprised but appreciative hostages, "banu lakahat otchem labayta, we have come to take you home."

But Israel's achievements go beyond what it has achieved on the battlefield. In the field of science and medicine, it is remarkable what this small nation of six million has been able to achieve. It extends health care to all, including Palestinians and Arabs. It has made the desert bloom, while absorbing millions of refugees from around the world and creating a vibrant society and culture.

I am not embarrassed to tell you, I still get chills whenever I see the Magen David emblazoned on the flag of Israel flapping in the air, and the Jewish star proudly gracing the tail of an El Al airplane. (The service on the plane quickly brings me back to reality.)

I admire the ingenuity, resourcefulness and determination of this people. After Israel committed the unforgivable sin of winning the Six Day War, France decided to punish Israel by not delivering a ship it had already paid for. Amazingly, Israel went and stole the ship out of the French harbor and brought it to Israel.

I have witnessed, first hand, on numerous occasions how Jews apathetic to their history, and heritage have been transformed as they suddenly come to take pride and realize the beauty of our religion and how determined, tenacious and resourceful people we are.

I speak about Israel because Jewish values live in Israel.

After the fall of Southeast Asia in the 1970's, when the United States hastily withdrew from the region, refugees from Cambodia packed into small boats and set sail for freedom. Known as "boat people," they were initially turned away by the United States and every other Western nation, except one. Israeli Prime Minister Menahem Begin said at the time, we Jews know what it means to be "boat people", and to be turned away when seeking refuge. With that, tiny Israel, with all its tzoris, became the first country in the world to open its arms to accept the Cambodians.

Begin knew the second half of Hillel's phrase which I quoted at the outset, "*v'im rak lee, az mah anee*, but if I am only for myself, then what am I?" It is this understanding of Jewish values which motivates Israel to share what it has learned in the realm of agricultural technology so generously with African and other third world nations.

Jewish values explains why in the long history of the world, there is only one instance when black people were taken out of Africa, en masse, not as slaves, but to be free. Operation Joshua and Operation Moses, paralleled earlier rescue efforts, such as Operation Magic Carpet which airlifted the Jews of Yemen in 1948. This effort in the 1980's successfully brought thousands of black Ethiopian Jews, to freedom in the land of Israel.

Ani medaber al yisrael kee bezechut kiyuma safat halvrit haya, v'hatarbut haYehudit poracha.

I will translate: I speak about Israel because due to the existence of Israel the Hebrew language lives and Jewish culture thrives.

We surely cannot rely on Americans to perpetuate the Hebrew language. I am certain that the only people here today who understood what I just said in Hebrew understood it because they spent time living or studying in Israel.

I speak about Israel because there is much we can learn from Israelis about the meaning of life.

Despite all the attacks, all the terror, all the loss of life, believe it or not, people still live life. You wouldn't know it from the news reports, but people go out and enjoy themselves going to the mall, beitei café, restaurants, as they defiantly strive to live a normal life. We can learn so much from them.

I admire their refusal to succumb to hatred. The news reported that the brother of the most recent bomber in Haifa, a member of Islamic Jihad had been killed a few months ago by Israeli forces. In the past three years, there have been almost 900 Israelis killed by Palestinian terrorists, and thousands have been wounded. Each of them has relatives, so there is no absence of people who could use the same justification to commit acts of violence. Yet remarkably, they do not. Rather they respond, like Eugene Goldstein who attended his grandson's wedding and was wounded in an attack the next day in July. His son, the father of the groom, was killed. Despite the murder of his son,

he said, "I'm not angry. Anger just kills you and burns you up. I feel sorry for the Arabs and Israelis, but I still have hope."

One of the most difficult things Symcha and I did this summer was to meet the parents of Ezra's commander. Danny Cohen, a precious, beautiful, sensitive 22 year old who exhibited kindness and gentleness to all, including the Arabs he encountered during his patrol, was tragically killed at the Friday night attack in Hebron in November. Symcha, feeling empathy for the pain of a mother, said to me, how can I meet with them.... And yet, we knew we had to. We were moved by their quiet manner. They had no bitterness. Their son Danny was named after his mother's brother, Danny, who also had fallen in defense of the State of Israel in the Yom Kippur War. Without any rancor, they showed us schoolwork and drawings he had made as a child, and told us of the fund they had established in memory of their son to help soldiers who completed their service to get an education.

In light of the sacrifices Israelis are called upon to make for the Jewish state, the least I can do is speak out on her behalf.

And then there is Sherry Mandel, whose son Koby and a friend were viciously butchered and his body dismembered in a cave not far from his home by Arabs. So what does she do? Does she become a suicide bomber and kill others? No. She writes a book called, "The Blessing of a Broken Heart" to deal with her pain and theological struggles. She refuses to let her pain, and the images she sees of her son wherever she goes become all-consuming. So she and her husband established a foundation which runs a camp for Israeli children who are victims of terrorism.

The first words expressed by Hanna Nathanson, a mother who lost a child in the attack on bus No 22 in August was to ask people to do a good deed to bring them closer to God and to speed her family's recovery. Nava Zargari lost her baby Shmuel. Yet she went back to the site of the terror attack and with trembling lips recited a prayer of thanksgiving for the six members of her family who had survived.

Or there is Dov Avital, the new secretary of Kibbutz Metzger where terrorists burst in and in 15 minutes brutally murdered a 34 year old mother along with her two children 5 year old Matan and 4 year old Noam, and who said, while affirming the importance of the IDF tracking down the killers, "Although the thirst for revenge is natural, we need the strength to remember our message, and remain firm believers in our desire to live in peace with our neighbors."

Yes, we have much we can learn from our brothers and sisters, including how to find meaning in life, how to deal with tragedy, how not to become consumed with hatred, and how to understand and appreciate what is truly important.

I speak about Israel because I feel and share the pain it feels whenever a soldier is killed, a father is murdered, a young child is injured.

People like the saintly Dr. Yosef Applebaum, who had done so much to help improve medical care for others, and who simply wanted to share a quiet moment between a father and a daughter before a wedding did not deserve to die. There are so many others as well, almost 900 of them.

But it is not just because I am a Jew that I speak about Israel.

I speak out on behalf of Israel because I care about the fate of freedom and democracy in the world.

Similar to the Jewish experience throughout the millennia what happens to Israel eventually will happen to the rest of the world. When terrorism first reared its ugly head in the 1970's, the world was virtually silent, for after all, the victims were Jews and Israelis. But we see now that allowed to get away with impunity, they have accelerated their attacks. Terrorists have exploded a nightclub in Bali, the most populous Islamic nation in the world, even in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. None of these countries are "guilty" of being too friendly to Israel.

The reality is that, as Daniel Pipes has pointed out, the problem is not really terrorism, but rather Islamic fundamentalism. Terrorism is the weapon they use, but the ideology behind it, whether in the Philippines, Malaysia, or the Middle East is predicated upon the teachings of Sayyid Qutb. In a NY Times Magazine article several months ago, Paul Berman documented that in the 1950's and '60's he wrote about his desire to turn Islam into a political movement based on strict adherence to the Koran and the rejection and destruction of anything western or antithetical to their quest for hegemony and domination of the world.

It is clear that each of us has to choose which side we are on, and where our sympathies in this conflict lie. It is beyond me how any decent, moral person cannot sympathize with the plight of the people of Israel in their efforts to live a normal life and to defend themselves.

I speak about Israel because this is my people.

Yes, Israelis are imperfect, brash and arrogant. Not a perfect people. Far from it. They are not the most patient, and do not have the best manners, but that's the way it is with family. We accept them, with all their faults. Israel remains a democracy in an ongoing armed conflict, struggling for its existence and to defend itself in a sea of dictatorships and fanatics willing to blow themselves up and take with them women and children. Its enemies take pride in killing people sitting down to a peaceful Shabbat dinner, or Passover seder. Is there any question who we should be defending?

Sure, we argue, and have many differences. And that is precisely the point. It need not be perfect to deserve our support and our love, for they are our people, and they are under siege. It is precisely because we see Israel, warts and all, that we feel so passionately.

Finally, I speak about Israel because I love her.

And so I hope you understand, and join with me in supporting Israel. I urge you to support the Federation and its philanthropic work bolstering the social fabric of Israel. Buy Israeli products, and purchase Israel bonds. Attend our Israel oriented speakers and programs. Join our Israel committee. Become activists for Israel.

Having shared our concern for her welfare these past 55 years, and especially these past 36 months, in the face of unrelenting and unprecedented attacks, we want the world to know that we are more determined than ever to remain vigilant in protecting, defending, advocating and supporting Israel. I implore you to take the most important step, short of making aliyah, which is truly the best way to support Israel, and that is to join me in taking the pledge to visit Israel in the coming year.

Do this because this remarkable, tenacious people continue to inspire us by her gallant and noble example. Surrounded by hate, they refuse to succumb to the negative images or to adopt similar attitudes towards her enemies.

They have shown the power of an indelible spirit, which cannot be defeated and have demonstrated that they will not allow adversity or adversaries to overtake them.

I conclude this Yom Kippur message with the prayer I wrote a few months ago for a community gathering.

Ribbono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe,

We ask your protecting care over the land and people of Israel.

Shmor alehea, v' alehem.

Watch over her, and guard them.

Watch over and protect -

The children taking the bus to school,
the women taking their children to a movie,
the grandparents taking grandchildren to a mall for an ice cream,
the fathers on their way to work, and the children who hope they will not
become orphaned,
the elderly school guard who greets the children on their way to the schoolyard,
the young couple sitting at the beit café, dreaming and planning their future
together,
the worshippers pouring their hearts out to you in prayer,
the young soldiers hitchhiking to see their parents on leave, as well as
the soldiers on guard, protecting the borders and at watchposts and checkpoints,
the teenagers simply seeking a carefree evening, going out for a good time at a
disco,
the father sitting in a coffeehouse with his daughter the day before her marriage,
the immigrants who have come in search of a new life filled with hopes and
ambitions

To all these, you owe them and us nothing less than that dear God.

And for our part, may we never to cease to speak out on behalf of Israel.

Amen.

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