

I would like to share with you the story of Milt Rubinfeld. Rubinfeld was an American Jew born in Peekskill, New York in 1919. He served in the United States Army's Air Force as a pilot, and motivated by Jewish pride and hatred of the Nazis, joined Britain's Royal Air Force before America even entered World War II. When America finally joined the Allies, he returned to fight for the United States. After the war, Rubinfeld could have retired, but chose a different path: he became one of the five founding pilots of the Israeli Air Force in 1948. It is widely believed that Rubinfeld and the four other volunteer pilots changed the course of Israel's War of Independence. The attacking Arab nations were so surprised by the actions of the pilots that they ceased their advance to Tel Aviv, which bought time for the rest of Israel's forces to become better organized.

On one of his missions, on May 30, 1948, Rubinfeld's fighter plane was shot down. He managed to fly into Israeli territory and bailed out at 1200 feet over the Mediterranean Sea, still several miles offshore. His parachute did not fully open, and he suffered three broken ribs, and other injuries, upon impact with the water. Nevertheless, he began to swim to shore. After a few hours of swimming, he gave up when exhaustion set in. Rubinfeld realized that the water was only up to his knees, so he stood up and walked through the water to the beach. Immediately upon standing up, he was fired upon - by Israeli farmers from a coastal settlement.

Why were Israelis firing at him? The fledgling Israeli Air Force was kept a secret so that the Egyptians would not learn of it. However, it was so secretive, with only 5 foreign-born pilots, that most Israelis didn't even know they had an Air Force! The Israeli farmers thought he was an Arab pilot. As the hail of bullets was raining down upon him, he had to figure out some way to communicate with his fellow Jews for whom he was fighting. However, as an acculturated American Jew, he knew no Hebrew and very little Yiddish. In order to convince the Israelis that he was Jewish, he yelled out the only thing he could remember at the moment: "Shabbes, Gefilte Fish! Shabbes, Gefilte Fish!" The firing stopped and he was safely brought to shore.

This story, while mostly true, is partially legendary. In an interview in the 1990s, Rubinfeld said that he did not remember exactly what he was shouting at the Israelis, but that they were indeed shooting at him because they thought he was an enemy pilot. Regardless, Rubinfeld said something to Israelis that convinced them to cease firing. Rubinfeld continued to assist Israel's war effort, and eventually returned to the United States, where he lived the rest of his life until his death in 2004. Incidentally, Milt Rubinfeld is the father of actor Paul Reubens, best known for his television personality Pee Wee Herman. But I digress.

Milt Rubinfeld's story is captivating and begs many questions. What motivated him to fight for the nascent Jewish state? After risking his life to fight the Nazis, why enter dangerous combat again? He was unfamiliar with the land, the language, the culture, and he did not even stay in Israel after the War of Independence. Why was he willing to risk his life in this way?

Rubinfeld's story resonates with a story we find at the end of the book of Numbers in the Torah. At the end of Israel's journey through the wilderness, the Israelites are encamped on the Eastern Side of the Jordan River, making their final plans for their entry into the Promised Land. The tribes of Reuben and Gad told Moses that they wanted to settle on the eastern side of the Jordan. They were interested in herding cattle, and this land was optimal for that purpose.

Imagine Moses' perspective. He will not get to experience the Promised Land, to finish the mission he started. Reuben and Gad, who are allowed to cross the Jordan River and complete the journey that started with the Exodus from Egypt, in essence said to Moses, "no thanks, we're good right here." It seems as if the tribes of Reuben and Gad take it for granted and do not appear interested in the Promised Land. They see opportunities for stability and prosperity, and do not feel called to continue the journey.

Despite what may have been Moses' own personal feelings, he addresses them practically through the lens of national solidarity. Moses says to them, "Will your brothers go to war, while you stay here?" (Numbers 32:6). In this short rhetorical question, Moses calls them to account for even entertaining the notion that the culmination of the journey, and whatever conflicts might arise when the Israelites enter the Promised Land, are not theirs to share. He implicitly castigates the lack of identification with their countrymen, and being interested in material wealth over peoplehood.

The tribes of Reuben and Gad then insist that they will indeed go with their brothers into battle and then return to their preferred side of the Jordan river. As if Moses is not satisfied with this assertion, he

doubles down and says (v. 23) that if they do not come, they will have committed a sin against God, which will always be with them. Moses is requiring solidarity and interdependence. Despite Reuben and Gad's interest in material prosperity outweighing the hardships that might be ahead, they have a religious and moral obligation to stand side-by-side with their brethren in facing an unknown future. Moses' message to Reuben and Gad is one that has rung true through the ages. It resonated with Milt Rubinfeld, as it should resonate with all American Jews today.

The Jewish People have always been divided, whether by geography, application of Jewish practice, political affiliation, and more. But despite these differences, we still affirm our commonalities by calling ourselves "the Jewish People." We may love to argue with each other, but it is because we are a people who argue from a place of familial love. We are all bound together by our story and our common ancestry. The Rabbis taught (Shevuot 39a), "All Israel is responsible for one another." The Hebrew root of the word meaning "responsible" is

ע-ר-ב , which also gives us the word for evening, *erev*, the time when day and night mix together at dusk. In the same way that it seems light and dark are inseparable at this time of day, so too are all Jews inextricably linked by our past and our destiny.

Israeli journalist and author Yossi Klein HaLevi coined the term "American Jewish Privilege." It was his way of describing the American Jewish ability to live our lives without needing to pay attention to Israel or how its existence might affect us. We made it in the *Goldena Medina*, our own Promised Land, and even if our ascendancy coincided with Israel's ascendancy in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we did not see those events as interconnected as they really were. The events of the past few years, especially this past spring and summer, has shown us that hatred of Israel directly affects Jews in America. We can no longer ignore Israel, and we cannot avoid the question of whether or not we are a Zionist.

Since the last Hamas-Israel conflict and its ensuing reaction, we can no longer say, "I believe in Israel, except for..." or "Israel has a right to exist, but I just wish..." This is not a time for "buts" or qualifications. If you believe that the Jewish future must include a Jewish state, then you are a Zionist. Period. Full Stop. Being a Zionist can mean many things, and Zionism has always been more of a conversation than a static platform. However, we must first draw a line in the sand about our commitment to the State of Israel and the Jewish People. Only then can we have the conversation about what Zionism looks like, how Israel can aspire to be the best it can be, and how American Jews can be a part of that vision.

Unfortunately, we are witnessing the mainstreaming of anti-Zionism. This is not the anti-Zionism of yesteryear, like that of Satmar Hasidism who believe that Jews should not have their own state until God brings about the messianic era, or the theoretical conversations about the negatives of a Jewish State that took place before Israel was founded. These new anti-Zionists are people for whom Israel is a stand-in for everything bad about Western Society, including, but not limited to: colonialism, white supremacy, and police brutality. For these anti-Zionists, Israel is uniquely criminal. It seems almost in vogue to be an anti-Zionist, from celebrities, to pop-star politicians, academics, and worst of all, younger generations of American Jews.

These anti-Zionist Jews advocate for boycotts of Israel and protest the US-Israel alliance in order to undermine Israel's economy and its ability to defend itself. They seek to sway public opinion against Israel and diplomatically isolate the Jewish State. In essence, they are taking the position of actively seeking to harm other Jews. While any Jew can hold any opinion that he or she wants, these Jews have advanced the cause of the destruction of Israel, even over Palestinian economic development or political organizing. In the guise of the movement to Free Palestine, Jew-haters in America and around the world have been given carte-blanche to vandalize synagogues, physically attack Jews, and intimidate Jewish students on college campuses.

During the Hamas-Israel conflict, a group of nearly one hundred rabbinical students from all of the liberal Jewish seminaries signed a letter bemoaning the destruction wrought upon the Palestinians in Gaza. It began, "Blood is flowing in the streets of the Holy Land. Fires are burning on the hills of Jerusalem and buildings are smoldering in Gaza. Violence is spilling onto the streets of Lod and Haifa. With each refresh of the news and each rocket that falls, new images of terror sear themselves into our minds. We find ourselves in tears."

The letter was bereft of context and connection to the Jewish State, and it called Israel and American Jewish institutions to task. This letter contained no mention of Hamas, no statement that Israel was under attack, or that it is Hamas' stated goal to destroy Israel. Only once did it mention rockets, as if they could direct themselves to their targets. Palestinians were only acted upon with no agency of their own. Violence "erupted," as if it had no cause, no person or people initiating the violence. There were many responses to this letter from the leaders of these seminaries rightly pointing out the arrogance, one-sidedness, and absence of Ahavat Yisrael, love of the Jewish People and Jewish State. Ultimately, it was an appalling statement from so-called future leaders of the American Jewish community. To me, it was a message that they want no part of Jewish Peoplehood.

We have entered a moment where being a Zionist can get you cancelled. Many young Jews who are proud of Israel are afraid to speak up, lest they get blasted on social media and become social pariahs. During the violence this past spring, Gal Gadot posted a message of solidarity with her fellow Israelis on social media. She received enormous backlash for this. However, she did not back down or apologize, which silenced the haters. We can learn two lessons from this. Number one, you don't mess with Wonder Woman. Number two, people show more respect to those who stick to their convictions, especially when they are in the right. Or, to quote another pop-culture icon, Jean-Luc Picard, Captain of the Starship Enterprise, "If we're going to be damned, let's be damned for what we really are." In this case, Zionists.

While these anti-Zionist voices are the loudest, the silent majority of American Jews and Americans in general overall very much still supports Israel. We must realize that we have been silent for too long. We cannot take Jewish support for Israel for granted anymore. Our task is to reinvigorate and enhance our connection to Israel and our commitment to ensuring a thriving future for our homeland. We who love Israel must be as passionate about our love as the anti-Zionists are about their hate.

The High Holy Day Season is a time for *Heshbon HaNefesh*, an accounting of our souls. It serves the purpose of *Teshuvah* by affording us the opportunity to assess who we want to be. After the events of this year, this should include our relationship and support for Israel. Asserting support is not sufficient. We must re-engage with the core beliefs that underlie our support and reconsider how we demonstrate them. How have the events of the past year deepened your relationship with Israel? What actions can we, as committed Zionists, take to help Israel thrive?

Many of you know my sister-in-law Rachael, and that she made Aliyah about a year ago. During the Hamas-Israel conflict, we were speaking over the phone, and something about our conversation surprised me. She was more concerned about my safety than her own. Something has changed in the Israeli-American Jewish relationship. Despite the neighborhood in which they live, recent events have given cause for greater optimism in Israel, while the rise in Antisemitism in America has called into question our own optimism. My conversation with Rachael was refreshing and left me hopeful, with a strong sense that Israeli Jews and American Jews can support each other and provide what the other might be needing.

It also can deepen our connection. Rachael will be getting married in the coming months. God-willing, I will have nieces or nephews growing up in Israel, beyond my many friends and colleagues who already live there. Beyond my work with AIPAC, I have also been involved in a group called the Zionist Rabbinic Coalition, a group of North American Rabbis who work to promote and advocate for Israel, especially in response to the ambivalence to Israel and anti-Zionism that has emerged from some rabbis in recent years.

Israel has something for everyone, beyond the fact that it is our homeland. It is our duty to find how we connect to the Jewish State and then work to support those institutions and cultural expressions. If your interests lie in politics, get involved in AIPAC, whose mission is to secure a strong US-Israel relationship. If you are interested in the day-to-day lives of Israelis, get involved in the Jewish National Fund, which is working all over Israel to build sustainable communities in underdeveloped areas. If you are interested in the peace process, I encourage you to look into the numerous non-government organizations that work to build relationships between Israelis and Palestinians. Listen to Israeli music, which has become much more Jewish in recent decades. If you are a connoisseur of wine, Israel has an amazing wine scene. The ways to connect are countless.

Another important shift has recently occurred between Israel and American Jews. We are no longer the big brother to Israel. The Jewish State no longer needs our charity, an expression of patronage. We are more like adult siblings, craving each other's love and investment, expressions of mutuality. We are not called to do battle, like the tribes Reuben and Gad, or Milt Rubinfeld, but we are still called to stand in solidarity in times of conflict and to embrace in times of peace.

On April 12, 1958, Mike Wallace, journalist of 60 Minutes fame, interviewed Abba Eban, the great diplomat of the State of Israel. This interview was conducted as Israel approached its 10th anniversary, and yet it still feels relevant, like this conversation could have taken place in recent years, even though it happened before the Six-Day War in 1967, and before the Palestinian National Movement arose in 1964. I highly encourage you to watch the entire hour-long conversation between a journalist at the top of his game and the most eloquent defender of the Jewish State.

After discussing many issues around politics and international relations, Wallace turned towards relations between Israel and Diaspora Jews.

Wallace asked Eban: "Would a Jew, in your estimation...be any the less a Jew if he were opposed to Zionism and to Israel?"

Eban responded: "Well, we are dealing here with subjective terms, "more of a Jew", or "less of a Jew". I think it is for Jews outside of Israel to determine the exact degree and measure of their intimacy with us. We believe that Israel's emergence is the greatest collective event in the history of the Jewish people, and that there is no pride and no dignity for a Jew such as those to be found in giving aid and sustenance to Israel in the great hour of her resurgence."

Wallace, not satisfied with the answer, pressed further on the question. Eban finally responded: "In my own personal interpretation, I would say that a man who opposed the State of Israel and the great movement which brought it about, would be in revolt against the most constructive and creative events in the life of the Jewish people, and it's a fact that the great majority of our kinsmen everywhere, are exalted and uplifted by these events."

Wallace further probed Eban, saying: "But Judaism is a religion, sir."

Eban brilliantly responded: "It is a religion, and it is a peoplehood, and it is a civilization, and it is a faith, and it is a memory; it is a world of thought and of spirit and of action and it cannot be restrictively defined."

Wallace then reiterated: "Therefore, in your estimation again, to be a good Jew one has to be more than just a religious practicing Jew, one has to enter the religion and the peoplehood at one and the same time to be a fulfilled Jew."

Eban concluded: "I believe that religion has been the field in which the genius of our people has been most profoundly stirred. But being Jewish goes beyond this vital domain, and covers a whole complex of spiritual and other emotions, and that to live within the fullness of Jewish history is a deeply satisfying experience."

American Jews should take heed of Eban's statement. Religion certainly has been the area in which we have been most creative, and how we have mostly self-identified. But we are much more than a religion. We are *Am Yisrael*, the People of Israel; the children of Abraham. It is a necessary part of our identity to be connected to our brothers and sisters. On this Day of Atonement, as we recommit to our highest aspirations, to become the individuals we want to be, let us engage in the fullness of our Jewishness, and devote ourselves to Zionism and to the people of whom we are an integral part. Although we may not live in the land that God promised to our ancestors, we can still, like the tribes of Reuben and Gad, and like Milt Rubinfeld, answer the call when it is needed. *Ken Y'hi Ratzon*. May this be God's will.