

YOM KIPPUR MORNING 2014

Some of you undoubtedly saw the Jon Stewart episode this summer when he attempted to speak about Israel. Each time he pronounced the word, "Israel," he was attacked from all sides. He was surrounded by people yelling: "Fascist!" "Racist!" "Zionist Pig!" "Self-hating Jew!" Jon Stewart couldn't get more than one word out before everyone jumped on him. It felt to me like he was describing the American rabbinate of this past summer. Rabbis have been worried about what to say about Israel this High Holy Day season.

My good friend and colleague, Rabbi Rick Block, current president of the CCAR, the professional organization of Reform Rabbis, in his convention address this year, urged his rabbinic colleagues to refrain from criticizing Israel from the pulpit. His sermon was reprinted in a number of online and print settings. And yet, when I was in Israel this summer, my colleague, a leading Israeli Reform Rabbi, Uri Regev, meeting with us in Jaffa, said the exact opposite. He stated that it was our duty to speak about Israel in both supportive and critical ways.

A few weeks ago, Peter Beinert wrote in Haaretz that rabbis should not talk about Israel at all during these High Holy Days, but only teach text. Beinert wrote that rabbis are only "Grade B" pundits. He made me think about the color of pots and kettles. Perhaps he was grading on a curve. More significantly, the New York Times included an article last week relating that rabbis are fearful of speaking freely about their true feelings concerning Israel.

When I was a student at Hebrew Union College in the late '70's, none of us anticipated that the great polarizing topic of the future would be Israel, of all things. Many rabbis today are wondering if it might not be safer to avoid the Israel discussion entirely. I cannot imagine that. I am reminded of what occurred after 9/11. On that Rosh Hashanah immediately following the destruction of the Twin Towers and the attack on the Pentagon, there were some rabbis who chose not to change the sermons they had planned to deliver for the New Year. Those who did not speak about 9/11 let their congregants down. I could not imagine ignoring 9/11 that first year.

A rabbi cannot abandon the hot topics. I can assure Peter Beinert that I am not, in any way, aspiring to be an Op-Ed columnist for the New York Times. I am not Tom Friedman or Roger Cohen, nor am I attempting to be Leon Wieseltier of the New Republic or JJ Goldberg of The Forward. I am not Michael Oren or Martin Indyk. You can get that punditry elsewhere. I am not attempting to offer political analysis, but I do hope that I can contextualize some of what you read and hear. Most importantly, I will attempt to deal with some of the spiritual and personal issues that inform my thoughts about Israel.

Having said all that, I am fully aware that, for some of you, Israel may have dropped off your radar screen. It might be irrelevant to your everyday thinking. What happens there may have little, if any impact, on your daily life. For others of you, you may have raised your hands in despair of any positive change in Israel and the broader Middle East. Some of you may be turning away or turned off.

But I am not there. I am not ready to abandon the importance of Israel—Jewishly, religiously, in terms of identity, sense of family, Jewish thought. That is why I went to Israel this summer, on very short notice, and not for pleasure or tourism. I really did not know until two days before I left that the trip was going to take place. When I did know, I wrote a note to all of you letting you know of my plans. I received a great many e-mail responses. Many of you wrote to tell me to be safe, but many others wrote to say “thank you.” You encouraged me to go and learn first hand and then return and share my insights. That was at the heart of my own motivation for the trip. I was hoping to be able to cut through the information overload about the Gaza Operation that was inundating my intellectual “in box.”

I, like many of you, had been reading everything I could about what was occurring in Israel and Gaza. I was overwhelmed with e-mails and caught up in an endless stream of Facebook postings. It felt like every writer and analyst was trying to tell me what to think. I needed to see for myself. I needed to have conversations with political and military leaders, civil rights activists, soldiers and reservists, philosophers, friends, people I met in the street. I accomplished a lot of that in four short days.

When I returned, I shared my insights and reactions with you in direct e-mails, Facebook postings, the newsletter, and various blogs that picked up my posts. Without completely repeating myself, here is some of what I learned: The situation is complicated. Whether speaking about Gaza in particular or Israel in general, the Palestinians, or the greater Middle East, things are ambiguous, nuanced, and gray.

Let me offer a few words about the Gaza Operation—though this is not the exclusive focus of this sermon. There are few absolutes, but this I know. Hamas is a violent, terrorist organization that oppresses its own people. Hamas is dedicated to the destruction of Israel. To them, the occupation they oppose is not the post-1967 occupation, but the post-1948. They will use any means to attempt to destroy the Jewish State.

On the other hand, while Israel may well have been fully justified in hitting back with its full military power, the destruction was enormous, and it resulted in the tragic loss of innocent life. We cannot turn our eyes away from the heartbreaking deaths of children. Military and political leaders surely know that, in a setting such as Gaza, it is impossible to control the devastating collateral damage to humans.

Far more importantly, many of the people with whom we met in Israel told us that military tactics, no matter how effective, could not solve the problem. This war was all about tactics, but there seemed to be little concern for long-term strategy or

vision. Tunnels and rockets are tactics. The Iron Dome and aerial bombardments are tactics. Ultimately, the military solution to Gaza is no solution. The solution must be political, economic, and societal.

The current Gaza operation is over, but the Left and Right share the sense that the Operation solved nothing. The Right wanted the IDF to go deep into Gaza, take over, and completely destroy Hamas. Thankfully the IDF rejected that idea. As an aside, it is telling that, in Israel, the military—the IDF—is often far more liberal than some of the political leadership. The military strategists knew that any attempt to re-occupy Gaza would be suicidal, impossible, and destined to fail.

The Left hoped that once the Gaza Operation ended there would be a Marshall Plan to restore Gaza and create economic opportunity for its residents. There appeared to be the prospect of a broad coalition with the Palestinian Authority, along with Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and other “moderate” Arab states. People hoped that there could be a new Gaza, freed from the strangulation of both the Israeli blockade and the despotic regime of Hamas, offering hope to the Palestinian people of Gaza and eventually leading to a Palestinian State based on the Geneva agreements and the Arab League proposals.

As of right now, there is no indication of a direction or vision based on either side’s perspective. Israel remains caught between a schizophrenic self-image of total vulnerability and total invincibility—vulnerable to terrorists tunneling beneath its kindergartens, but invincible in its military might, whether in offensive power or the Iron Dome defense. Once again, however, the current Israeli political leadership remains caught in the status quo. Gaza is still Gaza. The West Bank is still the West Bank occupied by Israel. Even with the possibility of broad support from other Arab states, there seems to be no vision for a just peace that would end the occupation and insure Israel’s security. The disastrous occupation and settlement expansion continue to eat away at the moral fabric of Israel.

I have just shared with you a brief political overview of what I learned from my recent trip to Israel. But that is not what really matters

My primary concern is not about the military security of Israel or the potential coalitions of Israel and the Arab states. I am most worried about *the soul of Israel*. I do not mean to be overly melodramatic, but this is the concern I heard in the deeper conversations I had when I was in Israel this summer. Israel’s moral and spiritual future was the topic of so many of my encounters with close friends as well as conversations with some of Israel’s leading thinkers. The impact of the Gaza Operation has added to those fundamental concerns that many of the intellectual elite express.

The Hamas tunnels were frightening discoveries for Israelis, particularly those living in communities and kibbutzim near the border. But, for many Israelis, Gaza exposed metaphoric tunnels just beneath the surface of Israeli culture and society.

Israel, as we have known it, may be facing societal trip wires and land minds far more dangerous than those placed by Hamas or Islamic Jihad.

I am certainly not alone in recognizing that there are serious cracks and fissures in Israeli society. This is not an issue of peace agreements between Israel and the PA, nor of defending itself from rockets or missiles, or even from a nuclear Iran. These concerns go far beyond JStreet or AIPAC. There is, for many, the fear that the Zionist dream and experiment will not survive as they were envisioned

This past year many of you read the book, My Promised Land, by Ari Shavit. We studied it seriously in classes and discussions at Sukkat Shalom. A number of us had the opportunity to hear Ari Shavit speak. I do not think it was a perfect book, but it was challenging and, in many ways, troubling. To summarize for those of you who have not read the book, Shavit's history of Israel might prove the "Law of Unintended Consequences". He criticizes his great grandfather, Herbert Bentwich, an important 19th Century Zionist, for being blind to the realities of the indigenous people around him in the Land of Palestine. From the beginning, seeds were sown for many of the problems tearing Israeli society apart.

But the issues are not merely Arab-Jewish or Israeli-Palestinian. Shavit and many others are most concerned with the internal strife within Jewish Israel itself. Israel today is a society of different tribes often in great tension with each other. For many of us, our impression of Israel dates back to the early 1960's, even before the Six Day War. Our image of Israel was formed by Leon Uris' book, Exodus and by its hero, Ari Ben Canaan. This was the story of Israel based on the ideals of Labor Zionism. We were inspired by the stories of the kibbutzim and political leaders such as David Ben Gurion, Moshe Dayan, Golda Meir, and Yigal Alon. Their successors were Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres.

Today there is different political leadership in Israel. Today's Likud Party leaders are the heirs of Vladimir Jabotinsky and the Revisionist Movement. Its leaders have been Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, Ariel Sharon, and now Benjamin Netanyahu. This party is committed to the permanent expansion of Israeli territory and opposed to the establishment of a Palestinian state. Today, Likud is joined in coalition with the Russian Immigrant party of Avigdor Lieberman and Naftali Bennett's, The Jewish Home. These parties are often racist and undemocratic.

Israel is also divided by the increasing demographic power of the Ultra Orthodox. There remains tension and resentment among the Sephardic underclass, represented by Shas.

I often joke that there is already a two state solution: Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. But the reality is that there are deep divisions between the secular Israelis living along the coast and the Ultra Orthodox of Jerusalem and Ultra Nationalist Settlers of the West Bank. The weeks leading up to the Gaza Operation also saw the deeply troubling rise

of racists and other anti-democratic forces, rioting and marauding through the streets. Amos Oz has labeled these groups: “Jewish Neo-Nazis.”

I agree with Ari Shavit when he wrote: Either Israel will end the occupation, or the occupation will end Israel, but the reality today is that the occupation may not be the key geo-political issue confronting Israel anymore. It may be too late to change those “facts on the ground.”

I have always believed that Israel had three options but would need to choose two of the three. It could be a Jewish state, a democratic state, or a state encompassing a greater Israel, meaning Biblical Israel, or at least the West Bank. It can have two of the three, but not all three. For many of us, the “two” choice was Jewish and democratic, but for significant forces in Israel, their two choices would be Jewish and Greater Israel. They would be willing to give up on the democratic state. I have always rejected the Greater Israel and Jewish choice, for the only way to achieve a Jewish and democratic state is to establish two states between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea—the Jewish State of Israel and the Arab State of Palestine.

But it appears to many that the landscape is changing. A growing number believe that the two state solution is really not viable anymore. Many say that the two state solution is dead. In the end, there will be only one State. As they say in Israel: the toothpaste is out of the tube or the egg cannot be unscrambled. Continued settlement expansion and building in the West Bank preclude the possibility of a viable independent Palestinian State. The taking of Arab homes in East Jerusalem and the settling of Jews in neighborhoods that were always seen as authentically Arab enclaves add to the feeling that the opportunity for a two state solution is either past or quickly nearing its end.

Let me be clear, I am not in favor of the one state or a bi-national state, but people are beginning to ask, with great seriousness, if the two state solution dies, then what? If there will be one state, what, then, what will be its nature? Will it be democratic, giving full civil rights to all its inhabitants? Or will some inhabitants (a potential Jewish minority) have full rights—voting, representation, etc.—while others (the majority non-Jewish population) lack those same rights? It needs to be said that in Israel proper, the Arab minority has full political rights. Things may be imperfect. Arab citizens suffer from serious discrimination and inequality, but they have full civil rights. Israel “proper” is a Jewish state but grants full rights to its Arab minority.

But if Israel eventually includes the territory of the West Bank, demographics dictate that Jews will no longer be the majority. With full and equal rights for Palestinian Arabs, the Jewish character of the state will be lost. I have long predicted that a Third Intifada would be a voting rights campaign for the Palestinians. Some on the Left or the Right may welcome a single state, but this would clearly not be a fulfillment of the Zionist dream.

Increasingly, more and more people are discussing the inevitability of a single state. If that will be the case, then the conversations change, and the key issue becomes whether such a state will be a constitutional democracy with equal rights for all—majority and minority, with the minority protected from the dictatorship of a majority. This may, in fact, be the debate for the future. Will Israel remain a progressive, egalitarian society based on its Declaration of Independence?

Contemporary forces and trends are endangering that democratic, egalitarian, society. The population and power of the ultra Orthodox are steadily increasing. They are anti-modern, anti-egalitarian, and opposed to basic secular education. A very troubling statistic is that approximately one million Israelis have left Israel. This group is made up of mostly educated, secular, and progressive Israelis. A rising conservative element within Israel is made up of those whose national backgrounds were never formed in the worlds of democracy or human rights.

All of these trends are worrisome. Will Israel truly remain the only democracy in the Middle East where there is freedom of expression, dissent, and religion?

I am beginning to believe that the battle is no longer about peace agreements and external military threats. The battle for the future of Israel will be a fight for Israel's soul and identity. And in that struggle, I firmly believe that our involvement matters. Our engagement and commitment are needed. As I said earlier, I do not think this is an AIPAC or JStreet fight. Instead, I am looking to the New Israel Fund and various social justice initiatives of the Federation and Jewish Agency. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), Association of Reform Zionists in America (ARZA), and the Israel Religious Action Center are all engaged in these issues. We have congregants actively involved in Arab-Jewish initiatives in the Northern Galilee, Akko, and Jaffa.

I truly believe that what happens in Israel remains important to us. For me, Israel has always represented an ideal. It is more than a homeland for the Jewish people. It is a place where Jewish thought and ideas are generated. Israel has allowed for a creative flowering, not just of the desert, but of Jewish ideals and values. We in North America must still talk about what happens in Israel. We need to discuss, debate, and argue—with civility and respect. During this year, we will have many such opportunities. Among our many guest speakers at Sukkat Shalom will be JJ Goldberg of The Forward, Gary Rosenblatt of The Jewish Week, Gershom Baskin, the leading expert on Hamas and Gaza, and Gidi Grinstein of the Re'ut Institute. That covers just this fall. Undoubtedly there will be many more guests throughout the year.

This is not the time to wash our hands of Israel. You may not agree with its policies or direction, but this is not a time to merely criticize and condemn without working for change. As I wrote this summer:

The Zionist dream was for a democratic Jewish state where the eternal values of prophetic Judaism could be lived out in the real world, not just in the minds of theologians and philosophers. Ultimately, the real existential threat to Israel is internal. It is quite miraculous that Israel has thrived for sixty-six years in spite of continuing war, absorbing millions of immigrants and living with deep religious and tribal divisions. But it has. The question now is what is the vision for the future? I continue to return to Israel. I always find it inspiring and energizing, while, at the same time, it remains demanding and often infuriating. To me, Israel matters. I always try to remember that Israel was created and built by idealists, dreamers, and visionaries. Let us hope and pray that it can be led once more by those ideals of equality, opportunity, and peace.

That remains my hope for this New Year. There will be many forces at play in the Middle East. There will be great dangers and we hope new opportunities. I pray that in this New Year, those opportunities for greater understanding, equality, human rights, and peace will win out over the forces of tribalism, ultra nationalism, hatred and despair.