

## **Rabbi Cooper's Sermon: "On Being A Friend to Israel"**

Dear Friends,

At Shabbat services last week, in honor of Yom Ha'atzmaut, I spoke about Israel. Specifically I posed to myself the question: What does it mean to be a friend to Israel. Following services a number of people asked for copies of the sermon. That sermon is attached here, with my best belated-wishes of Chag Yom Ha'atzmaut Sameach / Happy 66th Birthday to Israel.

### **Parashat Emor – Yom Ha'atzmaut 5774**

#### **"On Being A Friend to Israel"**

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This week we celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut, the 66<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel. In honor of this day of celebration, I want to use these few minutes to speak of my connection to Israel. At a time in which support of Israel is so passionately and heatedly debated, specifically regarding who is and who is not a friend, I thought it might be a worthwhile exercise for me to try to articulate some of my views on this topic. In analyzing my connections with and support of Israel, from 1948 to this day, the context in which Israel has functioned on a daily basis must be considered first.

It is important to note that, despite only 66 years of statehood, Israel never had an easy opportunity to create a firm and strong foundation on which to build the state. From the outset, from day one, Israel has absorbed, and continues to absorb, millions of Jews from every place on earth. Israel continues to be the place that Jews want to go, not only for a visit but to escape persecution and anti-Semitism. Israel has understood from day one that its role would be, first and foremost, to care for and protect her own. Israel cares for her own because no one else will care for Jews other than Jews. There is no place in the world, other than Israel, where Jews can be assured that they will be welcomed, safe and secure. This reality is part of Israel's context.

It is also important to note that during these last 66 years, Israel has been at war, nearly non-stop, with her neighbors. Israel, as we say, is a great place located in a bad neighborhood. The five countries surrounding Israel, in addition to Gaza and the area often referred to as the West Bank, have waged numerous wars against her, vowing to destroy the State and drive the Jews into the sea. Those wars, in 1948, '56, '67, '73, '82, '86, the intifadas, the War in Gaza and the ongoing and relentless shelling of civilian areas from Gaza, continues, unabated, on nearly a daily basis. And all of this has come at a steep price. Israel has no choice but to fight in order to defend itself, to fight simply to exist. And, since 1948, she has lost 23,169 of her people, killed defending the State of Israel.

Israel continues not only to be embattled and attacked, by her geographic neighbors, but she is routinely denounced by nearly every country in the world in the forum provided by the UN. The UN has created the “special resolutions of the Security Council” which are used exclusively for the purpose of condemning Israel. There has never been a resolution of the Security Council of the UN that does not include a condemnation of Israel. Suffice to say, the vast majority of countries in this world believe that the world would be a better place without Israel. And so, the celebration of Israel’s birth is accompanied by a sense of weariness and wariness that comes from living in a world that is openly and unabashedly hostile to her existence.

These facts and many more must compel any fair-minded observer or analyst to consider Israel’s embattled nature and the incredible stress which has been woven into the fabric of life in Israel from the beginning. However, before assessing Israel’s virtues or deficits this context must be considered. And so, when one celebrates Yom Ha’atzmaut, in addition to the great sense of joy, there must be, as well, a sense of trepidation and vigilance tempering our joy. In such a world, a world in which Israel has so few friends, it is important to know who your friends are. It is important to know what it means to be a friend to Israel. Here, therefore, are four of my criteria regarding what it means to be a friend of Israel.

1. **To begin with, friends must use words of friendship, not hatred, in their speech.** Jews view words not simply as ephemeral syllables spoken or written which disappear after they have been articulated. In Hebrew, words are things, literally. The Hebrew word for “word” is *davar*/thing. And the power of words, to the People of the Book, to a people whose sacred obligations require us to speak carefully, is considerable. Friends of Israel, supporters of Israel, need not agree with everything Israel does, just as one friend may find fault with decisions made by his/her friend. But, in disagreeing, in criticizing, even in rebuking a friend, one must choose words carefully.

According to the Rambam in **Sefer Ha-Mitzvot** (#205), not only may we criticize and rebuke a friend, but we are required rebuke our friends, if we see them doing something ill-advised or dangerous. Indeed, according to Maimonides, “it is every person’s duty to criticize or rebuke” their neighbor if they see them going on the wrong path. To say, therefore, that criticism of Israel is a sign that one does not support Israel is not only silly, it is dangerous. If you believe your friend is headed in the wrong direction and you don’t criticize them, you have transgressed!

But, this command to rebuke, “*hochiach tochiach*,” comes with its own guidelines. Rebuke and criticism must be made in a loving way, in a way that preserves the dignity of your friend, in a way that is intended not to hurt but to steer the other back to a better path. When one rebukes or criticizes Israel using words like “Nazi” or “Apartheid,” one speaks not out of love or care, but out of ignorance, willful blindness and/or unvarnished hostility. I am glad that Secretary of State Kerry

immediately retracted his use of “Apartheid” recently in connection to Israel and the failed peace negotiations. Regardless of the stated intent of one who claims to be a friend and insists that these comparisons are appropriate, these are words used to inflict pain, to degrade and denigrate the State of Israel. These are not words which can be spoken by a friend.

**2. To criticize only Israel is not “tough love.” It is disingenuous to claim that you care about Israel so much that you save your indignation and criticism only for her. A friend of Israel must not judge and criticize Israel, without judging or criticizing other nations as well.** Israel is not perfect. It is not possible to look at Israel seriously without recognizing a myriad of problems, some of which Israel has created for herself. No one in Israel today, for example, believes that the situation of the Palestinians living under Israeli military control is ideal. Reasonable people can disagree regarding the solution to this problem, but each of us should see the moral danger and inequity that this situation causes. But what a friend cannot do is to criticize Israel alone. Any concept of fairness requires that some of the blame be placed squarely on the Palestinians for their refusal to negotiate any compromise, for their refusal to renounce violence or to recognize Israel’s right to exist. We can judge Israel harshly because we expect more from our country, more from our people, whose mandate is to be a light among the nations. We must require more from ourselves, but must hold others accountable as well. A friend does not criticize only Israel.

**3. A friend of Israel cannot be a friend if they combine their voices of criticism of Israel with voices of avowed enemies of Israel.** In this week’s *parasha*, *Emor*, there is a rather obscure and puzzling incident about a blasphemer who blasphemes in the camp of Israel. Our commentaries there suggest various explanations for what specifically happened (Lev., 24:10 ff, p. 732). We don’t know specifically what the blasphemer in the Torah said, but we do know that highly incendiary opinions were voiced before the community of Israel. We know that, in the end, the blasphemer was taken into custody and brought to Moses and that the punishment for blaspheming was death. But, before he is executed, however, it was required that the blasphemer be physically removed from the camp. It was the community of Israel which determined that the words spoken by the blasphemer were blasphemous. It was the community which placed the speaker outside the tent.

To me, a friend of Israel cannot function within the camp of Israel and speak words that inflame, anger, and cause outrage to the larger Jewish Community. As a result, the debate today in the pro-Israel community relates to the degree of divergence and outrage caused by certain groups claiming their right to be included in the communal tent. And so, the question of old remains: who is in the camp/tent and who is not? And, as in times of old, the answer is given by the community.

It is the responsibility of the community to preserve a degree of unity and purpose within the tent. As a result, a voice which attacks, words which polarize rather than unify, opinions that incite rather than searching for consensus, may and should be relegated to a place outside of the tent. At the

same time, however, the community must be cautious. Not every voice of dissent can be seen as blasphemous or considered illegitimate. This is tricky because there is no objective standard against which acceptability is measured. One person's blasphemy may be another person's truth. And so, those in the tent must constantly evaluate and re-evaluate the boundaries and limits of legitimate communal discourse and criticism.

**At the same time, it behooves those expelled to do some of their own soul searching.** If their statements and positions are, in fact, so controversial and offensive that the majority of those in the tent refuse to grant them entrance, perhaps they should re-think their views, their words and their critique of Israel, if, indeed, it is their desire to sit at the table with the rest.

There are limits. I believe that some views are so objectionable that we should not be required to consider them. Those who hold those views do not belong in the tent. Those who advocate for policies which are designed and intended to hurt Israel cannot be welcomed in the tent. And I will go one step further. For me, **those who criticize Israel and who find common cause with others who, without hesitation or regret, denounce Israel and support positions aimed at hurting Israel, intimidating Jews or being complicit with violence against us, must re-evaluate which tent they really want most to enter.** Indeed, if one is welcome in the tents of our detractors and enemies, is it any wonder why they might be denied entrance into the tent of Israel supporters?

4. **The last point I would make this morning is an emotional one. Being a friend of Israel goes beyond the bounds of logic. In our friendship with Israel, in my love for Israel, there is something deeply profound and spiritual.** For me, Israel is so deeply engrained in my being that, admittedly, it is not possible for me to claim total objectivity. I feel, on a regular basis, the pain which is part of being a friend of Israel. But when I am not in Israel, an event which occurs here can, without warning, transport me to Israel: a song, an image, something as small as the prick of a pin can carry my thoughts to Israel. As the psalmist put it: *Im Eshkachech Yerushalayim,– If I forget Thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand lose its cunning.* For me, this verse is constantly on my mind.

The author, Jonathan Safran Foer, expressed this sentiment more eloquently than I in his novel Everything is Illuminated (p. 198):

*Jews have six senses: touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing...memory. While Gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pin prick back to other pin pricks – when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was still in it, when his grandfather's finger fell asleep while stroking his great grandfather's damp forehead, when Abraham tested the knife point to be sure*

*that Isaac would feel no pain – that the Jew is able to know why it hurts. When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: What does it remember like?*

Certainly, I do not see Israel as being right all of the time. But for me, Israel does receive the benefit of the doubt. For me, the context of the State of Israel, its constant need to defend herself, the multiple threats and challenge she faces must be kept in mind always. For me, the internal issues that challenge the moral and ethical underpinning of Israel's own stated goals cannot be overlooked even as we support Israel. For me, to identify Israel's shortcomings is most legitimate and credible when we commit simultaneously to work, to help repair that which is broken. For if one sees only that which is broken, and does not engage in the work of *tikkun*, one can easily forget why fixing it is so important

For me, a friend of Israel feels:

Gratitude in the fact that Israel exist,

Pride in all that she has accomplished,

Concern for the challenges she faces,

Awareness of the never-ending threat which Israel faces.

And a friend of Israel feels Israel's pain, like the sting of a bee, like the pin's prick,  
each time she is maligned or attacked unfairly.

To be a friend means never to lose hope: the hope for a better life, for an end to war and the hope that the time will come soon and all who live there shall live in peace.