

Israel: Dream and Reality
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B'nai Shalom of Olney
Kol Nidre 5768

There is a joke told about an Israeli bus driver and a pious rabbi who die on the same day. They are brought before the heavenly tribunal, and the bus driver is immediately admitted to heaven. The rabbi, however, is told to wait; his case needs to be examined more carefully.

The rabbi is outraged. "I know for a fact that that bus driver was a totally irreligious Jew, while I gave a shiur, a lesson in Talmud every day."

"Ah yes, that is all very true," the heavenly angel tells him. "Except when you taught Talmud, you caused many people to fall asleep. When that driver drove his bus, everybody prayed." ☺

If you've been to Israel and ridden on an Egged bus before, hopefully you can appreciate this classic humor. The trend of aggressive Israeli driving in buses and cars is more than just the butt of jokes, however. It is a part of Israel's reality, attributed by some to the stress that Israelis feel on a daily basis. In Israel's 60th year of life, the *halutzim*'s, or Israeli pioneers', pre-state aspirations of an idyllic kibbutz-centered agrarian communal lifestyle may seem more like ancient history than a time from this past century. But Israel's existence and complex reality, with its combination of virtues, shortcomings and challenges, is still unequivocally the

fulfillment of a two-thousand year old national aspiration. For where else can Jewish people be, as the powerful words of the Hatikvah remind us, Am Hofshi B'Artzeinu, Eretz Tziyon V'Yirushalayim a free people in our OWN land. And not just any land—but the land of Zion and the holy city of Jerusalem, a place which has been the homing beacon to Jewish hearts since our earliest days as a people dispersed among the nations.

But the signal of that homing beacon has waned disturbingly in recent years. Many people are making a compelling argument that the connection between American Jewry and Israel is as tenuous as it has ever been. We have fewer and fewer American Jews who were alive to witness the birth of Israel through the U.N. Partition Plan in November of 1947 and Israel's Declaration of Independence in May of 1948, followed by Israel's miraculous survival in the subsequent War of Independence. Many of us, and I am included in this group, had not even been born or were too young to remember at the time of the Six Day War in 1967 when Israel reunified Jerusalem. And what a sight it must have been—imagine heavily armed soldiers weeping openly and kissing the Kotel Ha-Ma'aravi, the Western Retaining Wall of the Ancient Temple, knowing that the area, the holiest place in our tradition, was under Jewish control for the first time in 2000 years. And can we even imagine what it would be like if many of us in the room tonight reflecting

on how we can live better lives were called away immediately to fight for the very life of our country, as in the Yom Kippur War of 1973?

Our awareness of Israel has become less personal, and more and more become an awareness shaped by the media's unbalanced and incomplete depiction. And why should this surprise us? Because despite the wonderful success in the last ten to fifteen years of Taglit/Birthright Israel in getting young Jews to Israel for the first time (nearly 145,000 18-26 year old Jews from 52 countries to date), it seems that there are more and more American Jews who have never been to Israel even once in their lifetimes. If we haven't been there, haven't walked the land of 3000 years of our people's history, if we haven't seen with our own eyes what is really going on, then it is difficult to know any better. Whereas it was once a foregone conclusion that American Jews would defend Israel against the media amongst our friends, at college campuses, and in the workplace, now it is no longer something we can take for granted. The general press routinely gives the impression that both Israel and the Palestinians are equally culpable in the complex conflict between them. We must not give in for a second to the fallacy that there is moral equivalence in the violence on both sides. How is it morally equivalent when Israel empties family and friends from the home of known terrorists before demolishing the house, and conducts house-to-house searches for terrorists rather than bomb the homes in order to limit civilian casualties, while the Palestinians

create a Mickey-Mouse look alike named Farfur to brainwash their children through television that violence and martyrdom is ideal, if it eliminates the Zionist oppressors? I will say unambiguously that Israel is not perfect by any means, but it is a country that is grounded in Jewish values and in a culture devoted to life. I am still amazed by the 2004 story when Israel opted to trade 400 militant prisoners to Hizbullah for one Israeli businessman suspected of criminal activity, and three bodies of Israeli soldiers—but what amazed me even more was the conversation I had with a non-Jewish friend who thought that somehow this trade illustrated Israel's perception that the lives of the militants were worthless! On the contrary, I explained, it shows just how much Israel values life, and even how much Israel cares about the Jewish values of *Pidyon Shevuyim*, the redemption of captives, and *K'vod Ha-Met*, the ability to bury its dead, a fact which its enemies have constantly exploited. Make no mistake—though Israel is a democracy, it is still the Jewish state through and through.

Additionally, while we need not approve of everything Israel does, nor need we give Israel a free pass for mistakes that the Israeli Army or Israeli politicians have made, we must remember that Israel is trying to achieve peace and security for its citizens. We are not there in the midst of it, like the residents of Sderot, a southern Israeli town about a kilometer from the Gaza Strip that has been subjected to relentless Qassam rocket attacks from Gaza, including a barrage of more than

100 rockets falling over the course of several days in May. What would that be like? After the horrific events of 9/11/2001, most people thought the world would understand what Israel has been going through for years, that the world would now sympathize with and support Israel as she sought to defend herself from terrorists willing to give their own lives to take the lives of their enemies. Maybe for a little while there was a little more sympathy, but in the eyes of the world it does not seem to have been a lasting transformation. The world is as critical of Israel as it ever was—and we, as American Jews, must again stand up and be counted amongst her vocal and loyal supporters.

How can we support Israel more actively? In keeping with my High Holiday theme of lists, here are five simple and concrete ways each of us can increase our connection and commitment to Israel this year:

#5) Invest in Israeli Bonds

I hope that last week when Elaine asked you to support Israel Bonds, that you did it, and if you haven't, that you will still consider it. We in the synagogue office would be happy to send you your pledge card, or you can contact our local Israel Bonds office and make your investment directly. You can do what Jen and I did—and buy bonds for your children, or you can buy for your grandchildren, and

turn it into an educational experience as well, as we try to teach the next generations about how important it is to support, and invest in, Israel.

#4) Be aware.

Read the Jewish press or get involved in watchdog groups to get a balanced picture and be willing to speak up in the name of Israel. There are many sources available to us that help us better understand the situation in Israel. We can read sources like the Washington Jewish Week, the Jerusalem Report, the Jerusalem Post or Haaretz online, or get involved with groups like CAMERA, Jewish Media Watch, or Honest Reporting.com, to name just a few good resources. Familiarizing ourselves with these, and the many other resources that are out there, empower us to dispute and respond to objectionable characterizations of Israel and its supporters, like the characterizations made by former President Carter and Professors Mearsheimer and Walt.

#3) Give to the Jewish Federation

Among the many worthwhile endeavors of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, and its parent organization, the United Jewish Communities, is the provision of millions of dollars of support for Israel on an ongoing basis, as well as crisis support in times of particular need. Last year's Israel Emergency Campaign

is a great example in that it raised \$360 million, primarily to assist Israelis living in the north during the Lebanon War, but also to assist the residents of Sderot and the surrounding area as it deals with the rocket attacks I mentioned earlier. When we make a donation to Federation, we are making a difference in these efforts.

#2) Join MERCAZ USA

For those who are not aware, MERCAZ USA is the American Zionist Organization of the Conservative Movement. MERCAZ is the ONLY Zionist organization in America concerned with the future of Conservative/Masorti Judaism in Israel.

MERCAZ works towards many important goals, including:

Ensuring religious pluralism in Israel and full recognition of our rabbis, synagogues, mohalim, institutions and programs.

Encouraging electoral reform so that extremist minority parties will no longer wield undue power.

Determining an equitable distribution of World Zionist Organization/Jewish Agency funding for the Conservative/Masorti Movement, around the world.

Promoting civil rights including Conservative/Masorti representation on religious councils and full equality for women.

Supporting Aliyah and Hebrew language studies.

Opposing any change in 'Who is a Jew' and 'Law of Return'.

To quote the MERCAZ website: “If you are a Conservative Jew, you can no longer ignore the critical need for religious pluralism in Israel and our Movement's approach to religious Zionism. Thousands of new olim (immigrants) as well as veteran Israelis, deserve to be exposed to a meaningful, traditional, non-coercive approach to Jewish life style as an alternative to the extremism and fanaticism which have caused so many Israelis to consider themselves "secular" Jews. Israel needs Conservative/Masorti Judaism to enhance the quality of Jewish life in our homeland”. My friends, the ability and effectiveness in meeting these goals is directly correlated to the number of MERCAZ members and proportional representation at the Zionist Congress. Want to find out more about MERCAZ? Talk to Stephen Steckler, who is a past president of BSO and Vice-President on MERCAZ’ board. After break fast tomorrow night, why not go to www.mercazusa.org, take a couple of minutes, and become a MERCAZ member—dues are only \$12 for a student, \$36 for an individual, and \$54 for a family. And don’t forget to join us on November 9th and 10th when Rabbi Paul Arberman, a Masorti Rabbi from Modiin, Israel, will join us to speak about all of these issues, courtesy of MERCAZ.

#1) GO TO ISRAEL AND BRING OR SEND YOUR CHILDREN THERE

For years, fear kept us away from Israel. Europeans and Christian groups visited Israel, but American Jews stayed away. Teen programs dropped off for a while,

but thankfully the number of teens and young adults visiting Israel is strong once again. There are all kinds of worthwhile touring and study programs for young adults including USY Pilgrimage, Ramah Seminar, Taglit/Birthright Israel, NATIV, USY's first year of college in Israel program, USY HIGH or HSI, the Conservative Yeshiva in Israel. But visiting Israel is NOT something that is reserved for teens and young adults. Whether you have never been there before, been there ten times, or haven't been in twenty years, it's time to go. People are flocking to Israel in record numbers this year for Israel's 60th, and you and your family can be among them. Join me and your fellow BSO congregants this summer on BSO's Inaugural Israel Adventure from August 3-15. See the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit, and visit the Dead Sea, Masada, and the Kotel. Interested in the amazing blend of old and new that is Israel? Enjoy a camel trek through the Judean Desert and a biblical dinner in Abraham's tent, and when you get back to Jerusalem, if you haven't had enough to eat, go get a kosher Voper Kaful, double whopper, at Burger King. Pick up some delicious, melt-in-your mouth rugelach at Marzipan in Machane Yehuda, Jerusalem's outdoor market, and save them for dessert when you get back from davening at one of Jerusalem's many distinct synagogues on Shabbat. You don't have to be Madonna to experience the mystical city of Tzefat, nor an archaeologist to qualify you to dig for a day at Beit Guvrin. Spend some time at Kibbutz Lavi, ascend the strategic Golan Heights via jeep and

look down upon the Galilee, and glide down the Jordan river in a kayak. I could go on and on, but the full itinerary is available in your Program Guide and in a flyer outside the sanctuary. We already have twenty participants signed up for this exciting trip and I have no doubt that the rest of the spots will start filling up quickly, so sign up soon to guarantee your space. But most importantly, even if you can't make it to Israel this summer, make plans to go soon, so that when you say L'Shana Ha'Ba-ah BiYirushalayim at the end of the Pesach Seder, you will truly mean it. There is simply no place in the world like Israel.

To recap—my five suggestions to increase our connection and commitment to Israel this year are: **Invest in Israel bonds, be aware, give to Federation, join MERCAZ USA, and, most importantly, GO TO ISRAEL and get your children there too.** May this year 5768 be a year of peace in Israel and a wonderful 60th birthday celebration, and may her call once again be a strong and steady homing beacon for our hearts, and the hearts of Jewish communities everywhere.