

## Israel Today

Rosh Hashanah Eve 5775

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The Medieval Jewish poet, Judah Halevi wrote, “My heart is in the east; and I, I am in the west.” Halevi meant that he lived in Spain, but his heart was in Israel. This summer, Halevi’s words expressed how many of us were feeling. Our bodies were here in America, a land we love; while our hearts and minds were constantly drawn to our people in Israel, under attack.

First we were horrified, by the brutal murder of three innocent Israeli teens, kidnapped at a bus stop, and then by the barbarous revenge killing of a Palestinian youth by Jewish thugs. When Hamas attacked, we were tormented by images of our Israeli brothers and sisters, constantly descending to bomb shelters, right in the heart of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. We were grief-stricken by the tragic loss of life among innocent Palestinians, deployed as human shields by their Hamas overlords. We were terrified by the Hamas tunnels, intended to transport murderers directly into Israeli schools and playgrounds. We were outraged by news reports sympathetic with terrorist aggressors.

This summer, the bright light of Zionism seemed to burn in American Jewish hearts. And yet, all too quickly, that light can fade these days. Already, Israel has begun to fall off too many of our Jewish radar screens.

How can we rekindle the flame? It cannot be too late. Though Israel is thriving, the Jewish State yet needs our support, as recent events make all too clear. In return, our Jewish identity is strengthened by the inspiration of Israel.

Perhaps we reinvigorate our love for Israel by returning to the beginning.

Some here yet recall a November night in 1947. Emerging from the Depression and from the national sacrifice that brought victory in World War II, American Jews were becoming aware of the horrific tragedy that had befallen our people. Six million, six million, dead at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators. And what of the survivors? They had lost their families; their homes were occupied by the neighbors who had turned them over to the Nazis. Homeless, the remnant of European Jewry plagued the conscience of the world.

On that November night, American Jews were riveted to their radios. The General Assembly was casting ballots on the partition of Palestine, the plan to create two nations, one Jewish, the other Arab, side by side on land that both

called home. At home, American Jews kept score, as the announcer called the names of the world's nations, one by one.

As if the very lives of European Jewish refugees were not sufficient, tens of thousands of Jews had relocated to Palestine in the previous half century. They had settled the ancestral home of our Jewish people, the land where Jews all over the world find our roots. They had given new life to the Hebrew language. After millennia when our people had been forbidden to own or work the land, these Zionists had drained swamps and made the desert bloom. They had established the modern world's first-ever new Jewish city, Tel Aviv. Out of necessity, they built a Jewish army, recalling that 1800 years earlier, we had taken up arms to defend ourselves against the Romans.

And so it was, on that November night in 1947, that our people listened and waited. The totals were announced: Partition was approved. The Jewish State would be born, with the world's blessing. The Jewish people greeted the announcement with dancing in the street.

In the years that followed, American Jews continued to watch, and often to worry. Israel is surrounded by hostile neighbors, attacking in large numbers in 1948, massing on Israel's borders again in 1967. Would the Jewish State be called out of existence?

The answer was miraculous. In six days, only six days, the Israelis routed the combined armies of the Arab world. Israel would not merely survive, as its army vanquished the enemy that had sought destruction, uniting Jerusalem under the banner of the Star of David.

The American Jewish community swelled with pride. So much would change, not only in Israel, but here, for American Jews. An age-old stereotype would collapse almost immediately. The image of the physically weak, defeated Jew had symbolized our position in the world from Medieval Europe to Philip Roth novels. That picture was replaced by the victorious Israeli soldier. Our American neighbors began to look at us with unexpected admiration. The battle had not been fought by American Jews, but we were beneficiaries. Israel filled us with glory. The impact is hard to overstate.

Then, just six years later, in 1973, as we filled our synagogues on Yom Kippur, we learned that the holiest day on the Jewish calendar had been

desecrated by an invading army, again bent on Israel's destruction. Ultimately, the Israeli army prevailed, but only after a real scare and terrible loss of life.

Now as never before the American Jewish community would mobilize. In the 1970s, American Jews accepted a new *mitzvah*: Thou Shalt Support Israel and advocate for the Jewish State.

Synagogues and Jewish Federations sponsored missions to Israel. Jews of every age and of the full diversity of Jewish life were inspired as they took in the sights of Jerusalem, prayed at the Western Wall, climbed Masada, and met a long-lost Israeli relative. Jewish Federation campaigns grew, with Israel as the inspiration that also built local Jewish institutions.

Slowly, though, and imperceptibly at first, the last thirty years have lowered Israel's appeal among American Jews. We continued to witness inspiring moments, but so many of our interactions with Israel have become more complicated. We began to criticize Israel, and not without reason. Israel's military venture into Lebanon was a moral disaster as well as a military failure. Palestinian citizens of Israel still do not enjoy benefits equal to their Jewish neighbors. And our fellow Reform Jews lack full religious liberty in the Jewish State, of all places.

Israel is now often seen more as Goliath than David. We are understandably concerned about the welfare of the Palestinian people, as are most Israelis. At the same time, we are bewildered and divided about whether and how that problem can be solved. Peace negotiations and the future of Israel and the Palestinians are important issues. However, those matters can distract us from our greater obligation. A timeless bond links us to our Jewish people, here in America, in Israel, and across the globe. We cannot regard Israel as any other nation, but rather as our own second home.

We need Israel, uniting us as one people with one homeland, inspiring us wherever we have wandered, even in this land of our blessing.

We need Israel, our living laboratory of Judaism, where even Israelis who call themselves "secular" study Torah and Talmud, keeping our sacred heritage alive and teaching Jews everywhere.

We need Israel, as a beacon of democracy where democracy is not easy, as men and women struggle with how to preserve freedom and dignity in an often hostile world.

We need to be engaged with Israel, for the good of our Judaism, for the depth of our faith, for the inspiration of our community.

Israel offers much fire to rekindle the flame.

Perhaps you will be surprised that Mississippi is a place where our faith in Israel is deepened each summer. Our Henry S. Jacobs Camp brings a score of Israeli staff to Utica each summer. These young men and women have recently completed their compulsory military service. They are mature and purpose-driven, though most have yet to enter college. Every camper feels Israel's touch, and our youngest adults of the Camp staff make even deeper connections. A few years ago, one counselor told me, "Now, I have at least five friends in Israel who have invited me to crash in their apartments. I'm going to Israel this fall!"

That counselor was on the mark. Nothing cements a person's relationship with Israel like traveling there. Thanks to the generosity of our Jewish Federation and our own Grundfest Fund, we send teenagers to Israel each summer, most of them inspired by Israelis at Jacobs Camp. Lucy Goldman braved the war in Israel this summer, as did young adults from our congregation who participated in Birthright Israel this summer, Jonathon King and Lindsey Shindler, and perhaps there were others.

A few years ago, I was privileged to travel to Israel with the Mayor of San Antonio, Julian Castro, now U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. That trip was for economic development. I called it a tour of *Start-Up Nation*, the book that describes Israel as home to more start-up businesses *per capita* than any country on Earth. I was inspired anew. The spirit of the early Zionists lives in the Israelis of today.

Northern Israel, once a swamp, drained by the early Zionist settlers for agriculture, is now home to Iscar, Warren Buffet's first acquisition outside the United States. I met Stef Wertheimer, the grizzled veteran who founded the company, described in *Start-Up Nation*. Wertheimer has a vision of planting more industrial parks like the home of Iscar, where Jews and Arabs work side by side in a meritocracy, with mutual respect and productivity that benefit the nation and a broad array of its citizens. Stef Wertheimer, a Zionist since the days before 1948, is still busy draining the swamp.

A generation ago, Israelis built the National Water Carrier, to bring water from the Sea of Galilee to the cities in the center of the country and all the way to

agriculture in the Negev. Now, though, the Jordan River has slowed to a trickle, and the Galilee is at dangerously low levels. I visited a desalination plant on the Mediterranean coast at Hadera. Soon, Israel will meet its entire fresh water need through desalination. Israeli ingenuity continues to make the desert bloom.

The current American political season seems like it will never end, especially in Arkansas. But it will. When it does, I hope we will bring our state's new leaders together to consider an Arkansas economic development mission to Israel, building bridges between Arkansas and Israel at the highest levels.

Natan Sharansky, once a courageous Soviet Jewish refusenik, now a leading Israeli, is deeply concerned about the distance that has grown between us and our brothers and sisters in Israel. Sharansky urges us to renew our bonds, saying: "I know from the story of Soviet Jewry how the connection to Israel, the discovery that we are part of the great story of our people, inspires and gives you the will to fight." Sharansky continues, asking that we build what he calls "solidarity, commitment, or connection among Jews." Note that Sharansky says "or." Not all of us can or will support Israel in the same way. But we must all love Israel. We can all be Jews who care deeply about our Jewish State.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let us heed the shofar's clarion call: 5775 must be a new year in our relationship with Israel. No more may we avert our eyes when the missiles stop flying. No more may we permit troubling articles and less-than-inspiring realities to diminish our support for our people in Israel. No more may our commitments and our donations slide. No more may Israel fall to the bottom of our Jewish priorities.

For me, supporting Israel means visiting regularly, speaking Hebrew, supporting the Jewish Federation, AIPAC, and the New Israel Fund, as well as our Reform Movement institutions in Israel and ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America. Many of you also support some or all of those endeavors; others will align themselves with causes as far-flung as J-Street and the Z.O.A. All of these represent meaningful engagement with Israel and our Jewish people, so all will be for blessing.

This year, plan a trip to Israel, as Toni and I have for December. Everyone deserves to see the new ways that Israelis are making the desert bloom, draining proverbial swamps, and building a dynamic future for the Jewish State and the

world. I also hope to begin planning for a congregational trip to Israel – if not this year, then next.

This year, vote in the World Zionist Congress elections. Yes, all Jews do have a vote that really matters in Israel. You can start by completing the card you were given tonight. If you'll bring it back here, we will mail them in bulk from the Temple. Our Reform Movement in Israel needs us.

This year, consider sending your own child or grandchild to Henry S. Jacobs Camp, or donating to our scholarship funds so that we can send even more than the 18 Temple youngsters who went to Utica last summer, touching scores of Israelis personally and culminating in travel to Israel after Confirmation.

This year, read *My Promised Land*, by Ari Shavit, or *Start-Up Nation*, if you haven't already. Find inspiration in 21st Century Israel, just as a previous generation was fired up after the Six Day War. Participate in our winter Adult Sunday School series on Israel and Modern Zionism.

On Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate creation. We rejoice in the possibilities of new beginnings. Let 5775 be the year we fall in love with Israel all over again. Let us rekindle the flame, and keep it burning, as the Torah commands, "never to go out."

Amen.