

Congregation Beth Israel
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It's About Zionism

For months now I have been receiving many emails; too many emails concerning the State of Israel. Mostly these are not informational or humorous like many of the emails I receive daily. No, these have had a different kind of tone to them – as if to suggest that we, American Jews, know what's best for the State of Israel, the People of Israel and the Land of Israel from our perch here 10,000 miles away.

As you might know, a vast majority of American Jews have never been to Israel, do not speak the language or know the culture. But for decades now, the spirit of what Israel means to us as Jews and to the world as a whole have been at the center of our love and concern for our brothers and sisters living in the Jewish State.

Most American Jews who *have* been to Israel have done so through missions and trips designed to make them feel “at home.” From their hotel rooms overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem to eating falafel on the beaches of Tel Aviv and Haifa we have sustained a generation of “Five Star,” visitors to our Jewish Homeland. The Birthright Israel initiative has wooed thousands of young Jews to Israel with free trips filled with the sites, sounds and smells of Israel in order to engage them both socially and culturally with the Land of Israel. And with increasing familiarity we see pictures with the all too familiar stockpiles of ketusha missile shells in the background in communities like S'derot. In each of these “photo ops” I've seen posted on the internet or in our local and national Jewish newspapers these VIPs, dignitaries and politicians ironically have smiles on their faces for the cameras as they stand in front of the handiwork of terrorists.

Yet as we enter this New Year I do not believe that everything is as dire for the State of Israel as we may find in the hyperbolae and skepticism I have found in the hundreds of emails and internet links I receive throughout the year. That we are distracted by those who provoke fear and the threat of annihilation again is nothing new.

Zionism is by definition the antidote to such fear mongering from the outside. Zionism is the answer to the ageless question of the status of the Jews in the larger context of global anti-Semitism. As the contemporary Israeli lyricist, Ehud Manor wrote: “I have no other place to go. Even if my land is burning...This is my home.”

Perhaps this is the crisis of the State of Israel, a crisis not necessarily of potential for catastrophe from outside, but from a breakdown of identity from inside. When Israelis live in a world built up by the great Zionists of our era of Jewish history, but no longer understand what that work, their struggle and their vision represents, then we have a crisis!

In a moving article published this past year Rabbi Daniel Gordis makes this haunting observation:

When you've lost a sense that Jewish statehood is about changing the condition of the Jew, and when you can no longer recall that independence was designed to end the era of hunting season in which the Jews are the ducks, just because they're Jews, when any semblance of a Jewish conversation is thoroughly absent from your worldview it's hard to say much about why the Jewish need a State. It's hard to say why the high cost of living here is worth it. How do you explain to your friends, and to yourself, why you should drive your eighteen year old son to the base where he'll be inducted and hope and pray for three long years that he'll be okay, if you have no idea why a Jewish State matters?¹

The crisis is that Zionism was supposed to prevent the exact threat we are pondering this day. Jewish soldiers, boys and girls are dying and their parents, understandably, are beginning to ask, "Why?" Jewish boys and girls have abandoned their homes in Ashdod and S'derot with their parents who are wondering "is it worth it any more?" Jewish brothers and sisters are sleeping on the floors of their parents' rooms, making any kind of normal family life utterly impossible, elementary school kids have been wetting their beds and they don't know how much more they can endure.²

The crisis in Israel is therefore twofold. Number one, should the State of Israel care any longer about what the world thinks when it comes to defending its own people? And, number two, should the State of Israel care any longer what world *Jewry* thinks when it comes to giving away land, leaving the territories once and for all while acknowledging that there will continue to be enemies who are more interested in destroying Israel than in building a state of their own?

These issues, these crises are not ours' to decide any longer. While Israel needs the help of the Jewish community living outside the State of Israel now more than ever, the citizens of Israel have a completely different set of needs from us. The citizens of Israel need us to remind the world of why Zionism is

¹ Daniel Gordis, "The Shame of It All." Published via Rabbi Gordis' Web Site, "Dispatches from an Anxious State. (March 7, 2008)

² Ibid.

not only a political movement, but the result of a 4,000 year old heritage of Jewish values, Jewish culture, Jewish minds and Jewish security that we are commanded to share with the world.

As American Jews it is probably time for us to embrace this concept. To be a Zionist living outside of the Land of Israel is a tricky and challenging proposition. But at the core of Zionism in America must be the understanding that Judaism is at the core of Zionism. Zionism is not a partisan issue – it is not concept which is adept to the vitriol of party politics. Zionism is not a concept which is owned by any single organization or group. Zionism is not an all encompassing way of understanding or engaging in Jewish identity.

Zionism is part of what it means to lead a Jewish life, it is an understanding of our inexplicable and eternal relationship with God; it is an expression of our highest hopes and ideals for the world. To be a Zionist means to embrace the idea that God is at the center of this ideal, that the words of the Prophet Zechariah, “Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit,” mean something.

To be a Zionist means that all Israel understands our history. To be a Zionist means that all Israel is knowledgeable in the language of our people. To be a Zionist means that we must be able to articulate to the world the narrative of the Jewish people; to see ourselves as part of a several thousand year old conversation. To be a Zionist is to be courageous in the eyes of others and passionate in our resolve for a better world. To express our love and commitment for the People of Israel, the Land of Israel and the State of Israel through living Jewish lives; lives of faith, practice and good work. It is time to seek meaning in all of this chaos.

Our God in Heaven, we pray for the Land of Israel and its people. May its borders know peace, its inhabitant’s tranquility. And may the bonds of faith and fate which unite the Jewish of all lands be a source of strength to Israel and to us all. God of all lands and ages, answer our constant prayer with a Zion once more aglow with light for us and for all the world, and let us say, Amen.³

³ Translation of “Avinu She-Ba’Shamayim,” from The Gates of Repentance: The New Union Prayerbook for the Days of Awe. (CCAR Press, 1978)