

A Review of Israel and the Middle East 2015
Yom Kippur Morning
Rabbi Fred Guttman

Imagine the situation and try to picture this scene. In today's Torah portion, we are standing on the eastern shore of the Jordan River about to enter the land of Israel. Moses has led the people across the wilderness for 40 exhausting years. What once was a ragtag band of slaves, has now become a nation, *Am Yisrael*, the people of Israel. Now we have a common understanding of our past history. Now there is a dedication to our common destiny.

That common destiny is to enter and live in the Promised Land. Moses has done his part. God will not allow him to enter. He has led us this far, but we will now have to go the rest of the way under the leadership of Joshua.

The text stresses that all of us are standing on the precipice of this new journey into the Promised Land. The text says that with us are all of our men, women and children, the strangers in our midst; our leaders, our elders, our officers and our heads of tribes. However, it also says that with us are the people on the lower economic rungs of society. These are the people that chop wood and draw our water. From family to strangers, from rich to poor, we are all there, united as Jews with a shared goal.

The text goes on to say that everyone, every Jewish soul who is to come after us is also present at that moment, and that includes all of here today. In other words, I remember being there. I remember seeing some of you. Do you remember seeing me? Together, you and I are about to enter the Promised Land and to start the difficult task of implanting into the land our lives, values and ethics of Torah.

What has always struck me about this text is the fact that the unity of the Jewish people, then and now, has been paramount.

Some 1400 years after the time of the Torah portion in the year 70 CE, the Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. The rabbis teach us that it was destroyed not because the Romans were overwhelmingly powerful. Rather, it was destroyed because of our internal division and bickering.

The lessons are clear.

United, we proceed towards our destiny!

Divided, it is doubtful that we will ever succeed!

Starting with this realization concerning the need for Jewish unity, there are four points that I am going to share with you today.

First, this past year has seen among the American Jewish community an unprecedented level of internal divisiveness and bickering.

I know we can always expect squabbling from Republicans and Democrats, but I was appalled at the level of vitriol among Jews. Horrible emails and letters were written to Senator Chuck

Schumer for his opposition to the deal. Equally horrible emails and letters were written to Congressman Gerald Nadler for his support of the deal. Both of these men are long serving Jewish public servants. Both are Democrats. Both deserve our gratitude and respect for their service to our country and to the state of Israel. Both have been ardent supporters of foreign aid to Israel throughout their terms. The response of those in the Jewish community to demonize one or the other of these fine men was indeed inexcusable. In Yiddish, *ashande!*

We were anything but united as we were in today's Torah portion. We were approaching the level of internal quarreling which led to the destruction of the Second Temple.

Within the American Jewish community, people who supported the deal were sometimes referred to as traders. People who opposed the deal were sometimes referred to as warmongers. Even in Greensboro, in our Jewish community, harsh words were said by one Jew to another concerning this deal.

I am glad to say that Temple Emanuel managed to carry on a dialogue on this issue with dignity and honor. At the request of AIPAC, we held a briefing wherein AIPAC was able to present its position in opposition to the deal. A week later, we live streamed a conversation that President Obama had with the executive leadership of the Jewish Federations of North America wherein the president laid out the reasons for his support of the deal. In other words, we presented both sides!

Friends, it is now time that we as Jews let go of this partisan bickering. We need to get over this and we should even consider apologizing to one another for overheated and extreme statements. We need to respect that people can have different ideas about a subject and not be bad people.

We know that there can be an outrageous level of partisan politics in Congress. However, for our community, for the American Jewish community, for the state of Israel and for the Jewish people, this level of partisanship and bickering threatens the viability, welfare and unity of our community. We simply have too much at stake for ourselves and for our coreligionists throughout the world and in Israel, to be so divisive.

Point Two. Point two seeks to answer the question, "What should be our next step for those of who love Israel?"

We need to encourage the Congress to make sure there is strict oversight of the deal in order that the Iranians do not cheat.

We need to encourage the president to be very forthright concerning what the consequences will be should the Iranians be caught cheating.

We need to urge the government of Israel and the United States to reach bilateral understandings and agreements which will address the security problems that both sides agree could arise out of this deal, especially those concerning Hezbollah and Hamas. Doing this will enhance Israel's security and deepen the vital U.S.-Israel strategic partnership.

We need to urge the Congress and the President to develop a new strategy working with Israel and our Arab allies to counter Iranian aggression in the region. What is required for Israel to meet the security challenges of an uncaged Iran is dramatic. Our political leaders understand this and now must be encouraged to act in ways that show dramatic support for Israel.

On October 4, the Greensboro Jewish Federation will be hosting former Israeli ambassador and Middle East scholar, Michael Oren. We all need to be there to hear him speak.

We need to understand that more than 70% of the Israelis were against the deal. No matter how good the deal may or may not have been, it is the Israelis who feel threatened by it for they have been on the receiving end of rockets from Lebanon and from Gaza. Furthermore, just last week, the supreme leader of Iran announced that in 25 years Israel no longer exist.

So let me once again what state what should be obvious. Whether or not you supported the deal or opposed it, these should be our next steps and lobbying agenda. It is our responsibility to lobby Congress for oversight. For the sake of the security of Israel, United States and the free world, we need to put these past differences behind us and to come together with a sense of unity, mission and dedication.

Point Three.

There are problems closer to home with a movement called BDS. BDS stands for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions. The purpose of this movement is to economically starve the Israeli government and to isolate it within the international sphere. It seeks to delegitimize and demonize the state of Israel. It applies to Israel double standards which it does not apply to any other country. This delegitimization, demonization and double standards have been categorized by Natan Sharansky as being an indication of the basic anti-Semitism of the BDS movement.

Now I have to tell you that most Israelis, as do I, support a two state solution. But the threat of BDS, particularly on college campuses, is quite serious. This movement will not lead to compromise or two state solution.

According to the Israel on Campus Coalition, during the last academic year, the number of campuses plagued with anti-Israel efforts increased 31.2 percent and now stands at 181. "Students for Justice in Palestine—the most prevalent of the anti-Israel groups, whose members frequently express support for terrorist organizations like Hamas, Hezbollah, ISIS and Al Qaeda, while calling for the unequivocal destruction of the Jewish state—has opened new chapters on 40 additional campuses last year alone. The BDS movement expanded its efforts by 132 percent, to 44 campaigns last year." ("Going Back to School? Here's How to Fight the Israel Haters." Liel Leibovitz)

The BDS movement is also quite strong locally. A while ago, I attended a lecture at UNCG wherein there was a call to support BDS. In the presentation, a picture of an Israeli Bedouin tent with some desks in it was shown. The claim was made that this was typical of West Bank school. Actually it was not. This was a completely false statement. Incidentally, the West Bank schools are well built and funded and the students receive some of the best education in the Arab world.

One of our local colleges has eliminated the serving of Sabra Humus at its dining facility. This is just being nasty and indeed ironic because not only is Sabra Humus not made in the West Bank, it is not even made in Israel. The Sabra Humus which we purchase in the US is made in White Plains, New York.

Last year, in the aftermath of the war in Gaza, one local college held 14 programs in a three month period concerning the Middle East. They did not hold any programs to the best of my knowledge on racism or police community relations. As a matter fact, at one such[TG1] presentation, a Professor stood up and claimed that if students wanted to organize discussions on these topics, they should feel free to do so. However, he as a faculty member felt that what they wanted to do as faculty was to focus on the Middle East. Of the 14 programs presented that fall, 11 were blatantly anti-Israel.

Internationally, the American Jewish musician Mattisyahu was almost prevented from participating in a music festival in Spain. He was targeted by BDS supporters and was told that in order to participate in the festival, he would need to sign an anti-Israel statement. Mattisyahu refused to do so and the true nature of this anti-Semitic movement with exposed. Mattisyahu is an American Jew and not an Israeli. Eventually after an international outcry, the festival organizers backed down and Mattisyahu was allowed to perform. His response to BDS was to include songs about Jerusalem in his set.

So my friends, we have a lot of work to do tonight as American Jews, in combating the pernicious and hateful rhetoric of BDS.

Point Four

With all of the negative energy that I mentioned above, we need as American Jews to periodically remind ourselves why we love Israel and why we find Israel to be so incredibly special. Israel is the rebuilt national homeland of the Jewish people. Unfortunately, it seems to have been rebuilt in a very dangerous part of the world. Its existence and accomplishments are nothing short of a miracle.

Consider this.

On April 25, 2015, Nepal was devastated by an earthquake which measured 7.8 on the Richter scale. Nine thousand were killed and 25,000 injured. It was Israel who was first on the scene to come to Nepal's aide at its time a great need. Within 48 hours, trauma units from Israel arrived with equipment.

Closer to Israel, Israelis doctors have treated more than 1800 injured Syrians who have come to the fence on the northern border.

Last year, Israeli doctors saved the life of an Iraqi Christian girl whose family had fled ISIS. The young woman's heart was on the right side instead of the left and was malfunctioning.

Currently an organization called IsraAid is raising money from Israelis to help Syrians relocate in Europe. This is even more amazing when one considers the history of conflict between Syria and Israel.

Israel is a country with a Free Press. It is the only true democracy in that part of the world, regularly having peaceful elections and transference of power. Israel of the country dedicated to the rights of women and LGBT people.

In its history, fourteen Israelis have been awarded Nobel prizes, mostly of those in the field of science and medicine. Israel is a world leader in medical advances.

Israel as a leader in water conservation and desalinization. Its research is also leading the world in terms of renewable energy resources, particularly solar energy. It is the leader in designing processes which turn plastic waste into fuel.

This is the real face of Israel, not necessarily the one which one sees in the media.

Israel does extend aid to those in need because it is part of what it means to be Jewish nation. Helping those in need is a cardinal Jewish value.

The advancement of scientific knowledge comes out of a heritage of questioning and learning that is centuries old.

Israel is not a perfect country. Anyone who has ever visited there knows that quite well. Israel is a very complicated country. A key issue is the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians. There is much more that needs to be done by both Palestinians and Israelis in order to arrive at peaceful coexistence. Only the two sides working together will achieve peace.

But despite all of these challenges, Israel is indeed a miracle in this world. Here you have a people who had been brutalized by pogroms in Russia and Poland, people who have been expelled from country after country, people who had lost one third of their people in the Holocaust and people who after 1948 were savagely expelled from the Arab countries in which they had lived for centuries. This group, this ragtag bunch, similar to the ragtag bunch that Moses led, managed with the blood, tears and values to rebuild the Jewish nation in its ancestral homeland.

On this great globe, there is one place in the world, Israel, one postage stamp of a country wherein Jewish people can live a life of self-determination, self-defense and freedom. I am very proud of its history and you should be as well!

I am not blind to her faults and challenges any more than I am blind to the faults and challenges of the United States of America. I love both countries and I see both countries as the bastions of freedom against the forces of Al Qaeda, ISIS and Islamic radicalism. These two countries are nothing less than the voices of freedom and human dignity on the planet.

Therefore, I would like to end my sermon today with a prayer for the State of Israel. Following the prayer, the choir will sing the prayer in Hebrew. This beautiful rendition has been sung during the past few years at the March of the Living, on Israel Independence Day, when we marched to and prayed at the Kotel, the Western Wall in Jerusalem. This song touches my soul. Please open your handout to this beautiful prayer and join me in reading it together.

Our God in Heaven, Rock and Redeemer of the people Israel: Bless the State of Israel, with its

promise of redemption. Shield it with Your love; spread over it the shelter of Your peace. Guide its leaders and advisors with Your light and Your truth. Help them with Your good counsel. Strengthen the hands of those who defend our Holy Land. Deliver them; crown their efforts with triumph. Bless the land with peace, and its inhabitants with lasting joy. And let us say: Amen.