

Rabbi Kulwin, Erev Yom Kippur Sermon 5773

It is a little known piece of history that when Theodore Herzl was deep in his efforts to establish a modern Jewish state, an opportunity arose that was hard for him to resist. It would have provided for the establishment of a Jewish state in a way that was easy, diplomatically acceptable, and could occur quickly. Herzl became its champion.

As you may have surmised, this opportunity was not located where present day Israel is. In fact, this would-be Jewish state was not even to be in the Middle East. It would rather be located in what is now the Republic of Uganda. True story.

Herzl was about the only one who thought this a good idea. Not a well educated Jew, and thoroughly secular, Herzl felt the solution to the Jewish problem could be found any place the Jewish people could establish as their land. What he only began to grasp later, however, was that as far as the Jewish people was concerned, there was only one land, that could be our land.

That land, as always, is a tumultuous place. At one and the same time, the religious establishment wields power unlike any country in the west and even more than many in the east...yet Israel's position on gay rights is among the most enlightened in the world. In twenty years the key Israeli stock index has gone up seven hundred percent...yet income disparity among Israeli Jews has widened to unprecedented levels.

Israel possesses what friends and enemies alike regard as one of the world's great militaries; yet, as Prime Minister Netanyahu reminds us daily, the threat from Iran looms.

Israel is a complex, challenging, ever changing place. From a Jewish state, we should expect no less? The obligation, as we at Temple B'nai Abraham interpret it, is to engage. Each of us must determine for ourselves how we view the Jewish state, how we relate to it, and what our own vision for it is.

What we cannot do, however is ignore it. Last week I spoke of *Avraham*. Abraham, and God's call to Abraham, and Abraham's acceptance of that call. And

it was not merely that Abraham accepted God's request that Abraham become the patriarch of a new people. There was an additional element beyond God and the people: the land. The new people was to establish itself on a particular piece of land, *eretz yisrael*, the land of Israel.

"Go forth from your native land, from the house of your father, to the land that I will show you." In the first few seconds of the existence of the Jewish people, the land becomes an inextricable part of the equation.

We are in a time at Temple B'nai Abraham when Israel is much on our agenda in meaningful and serious ways, and in that regard I am honored to follow the leads set by Rabbis Prinz and Friedman. The Temple sends at least one group to Israel every year at this point, a record matched by few other synagogues. In recent months more teens than ever participated in summer Israel programs and the March of the Living. Close to fifty of us attended the AIPAC policy conference in Washington.

I hope you recall that a year ago we announced the creation of the Ross Fellowships for Temple B'nai Abraham college students who spend a semester at an Israeli university. Every student is eligible for a \$5,000 scholarship on a no need basis. This year, three of "our" kids, Jodi Scher, Caroline Adelson and Arielle Pinsker, took advantage of the opportunity to spend the spring semester at Tel Aviv University. In February, the congregational mission led by Jeff and Robin Kollin was able to spend a Shabbat dinner with the girls, and it was a fun and moving experience for us all.

Our educational efforts regarding Israel are expanding as well. Speakers the year ahead include Rabbi Uri Regev, one of Israel's most famous and most important civil rights activists; Archeologist Ian Stern, who will speak with us about the conflict between the study of the ancient world and the politics of the modern world; and historian and journalist Gershom Gorenberg, former editor of the *Jerusalem Report* and author of *The Unmaking of Israel*, a bold and unflinching examination of the modern state.

And just one more item, but perhaps the most exciting. For several years now, the MetroWest Federation has provided Rishonim, young people from our partner city of Rishon L'tzion, who take a year off between high school and the

army to perform educational outreach in our community. This year we have our "own" Rishona, a wonderful young woman named Adi Ben Harosh. Adi will be deeply immersed in our schools, enhancing the significant Israel curriculum of our Director of Jewish Learning, Melissa Weiner. Adi is charismatic and fun and utterly delightful. There will be many opportunities to get to know her. In fact, Adi is staying with Bruce and Susan and Mark Greene for the first half of the year. We will soon begin to look for a host family for the second half. Maybe you?

I speak about Israel almost every year at this time. I generally steer clear of Israeli politics. I do this because, as a congregational rabbi, my "job," as I see it, is less to push you in one way or another regarding Israel itself, but, more simply and bluntly, to get you to care. Levels of American Jewish commitment to Israel are frightening; worse among young people but not great anywhere. Israel is not as important to us as it should be.

We who sit here, as evidenced by our interest, by our travel, by our children's travel, by our charitable giving...we who sit here, we are among those demographic slices of American Jewry that care most about Israel. And that is meaningful and that is gratifying and that is wonderful.

However, it is not enough to care that Israel exists. We must also care about the kind of Israel that exists.

This evening, I share with you two concerns.

Forty five years ago, Israel won the Six Day War. Even for the nonbeliever, it seemed like God was on Israel's side. Vastly outnumbered in every military metric, somehow, Israeli tenacity and intelligence and valor and utter commitment prevailed. It was a glorious moment for the Jewish people, yet even in the glory of that moment, destructive seeds were planted. Israel, just twenty years after its own founding from the ashes of the Holocaust, Israel, the country of refuge for Jews from the Shoah and throughout the world, Israel itself became an occupier.

Let's be clear. Becoming an occupier was precisely the right thing to do. In schoolyard terms, Israel won that land fair and square. But forty five years later, this part of that glorious victory rings a little hollow.

What should have happened? In a perfect world, a multi party negotiation should have occurred that would have restored the land to an original owner, or perhaps given the land to a new owner. But that was not going to happen here. Jordan did not really want the West Bank back and Egypt felt similarly about Gaza. More headaches than they were worth. The Palestinians for decades were led by a raving megalomaniac far more interested in power than peace. And underneath it all, of course, a little thing called the Khartoum Resolution, in which a 1967 summit meeting of Arabi heads. of state formulated the three famous Nos. "No peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel."

Hardly an auspicious beginning. Israel was trapped. It did not want to annex the territories. The challenge of integrating that many Palestinians into a Jewish state would have been untenable and the diplomatic obstacles formidable. Thus began four and a half decades of one of Israel's ongoing nightmares.

Except not everyone thought so.

Israel's founding fathers were not overly concerned with what the new nation's borders would be. They were not indifferent, but there were other peoples in the land, various forces at work, a British Commonwealth that could be both paternalistic and petty. What those founders cared about was that that the modern Israel has clear, identified borders within the Biblical land of Israel.

But there were some then, and more now, who believe Israel had a divine right to the entirety of that ancient land, and obtaining that land by any means was a divine imperative. "God intended us to live on this entire land." That is hardly what David Ben Gurion envisioned.

The conflict continues. Many Israeli governments have turned a blind eye to the development of the West Bank, or tacitly or openly supported it. Settlement activity continues. A group of militants sneaks out of an established settlement at night, puts up tents on a new hill, a new settlement is born. The new settlement, like the old, is illegal, but nothing is ever done about it.

The Ariel University Center, on land that is according to Israeli law occupied, not part of Israel proper, has now been certified an official Israeli university by the Israeli Council on Higher Education.

Things big and small occur and become facts on the ground.

Perhaps we assume that the territories are necessary for Israel's security. That may not be the case. A growing number of Israeli military and political leaders argue just the opposite. That maintaining the occupation is what is worst for Israel. Many of these individuals belong to a growing movement called *cachol v'lavan*, Blue and White, founded by Admiral Ami Ayalon, former head of the Shin Bet and former Commander in Chief of the Navy. Blue and White is pointing out that things are not as black and white as we think.

The Palestinians have done plenty of awful things. Munich and bus bombings and kidnappings. But now, the point should not be who has perpetrated what or whose hands are cleaner. The point is, what is the goal? What do we want to have happen? What do we want of a Jewish State? Even if it is not our fault we ended up here, do we want to be occupiers? Whose vision of a modern Israel should prevail?

At this point, the story gets personal.

My mother in law, Betty Barr, passed away this summer. Eighty-four years ago she was born in a shack high in the West Virginia mountains, in a village called Augusta, far from just about everything. Her home had no electricity. It had no indoor plumbing.

Betty was bright, and unbelievably driven. She spent much of her adolescence in the relatively urban town of Capon Bridge. She was the first of her family to graduate from high school. She then crossed the Virginia border, and enrolled in the small nursing school in the small town of Winchester. A few years later she met Seymour, my father in law. She embraced him; she also embraced his Judaism. She was converted by the rabbi of Washington Hebrew Congregation, today still the largest and most prominent synagogue in the capital, and that rabbi married the young couple as well.

In the little synagogue she and Seymour founded in Winchester, Betty occupied every position there was from President to dishwasher. You name it. She became a member of the regional and national boards of what is now the Union for Reform Judaism, and was on the executive committee of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods. Hers was the table at which wandering Jews were always invited to Shabbat dinner, and hers was the guest room in which the student rabbis, who came to lead services on a biweekly basis always slept. And on an off Friday night, when there was no student rabbi, she and Seymour tossed a not so enthusiastic Robin and her sister into the car as they drove an hour and a half to the DC suburbs to attend a service.

My mother in law was extraordinary. She had her faults...but she was one of the finest Jews I have ever known.

Early on, Robin and I decided that Israel must be an important part of our family life. We wanted our children to know the land well, and feel at home there, so that they might someday be in a position to choose to live there based upon a sense of comfort, that it was already a place they felt at home. This was a priority.

We have taken eight family trips to Israel. Both kids spent a summer and a full semester of high school there. Noah added a summer of 24 hour a day Hebrew immersion, a post high school semester at Ben Gurion University, and spent this past summer in Tel Aviv as a Hebrew speaking staffer for the Association of Civil Rights in Israel. Molly is in Israel now, working this year in a nursing home and studying Hebrew.

I confess to you a not so secret secret. I hope one or both of them end up in Israel. My reason is selfish. It would mean the fulfillment of my own Zionist dreams; and it would mean that Robin and I had, in my opinion, given the Jewish people the greatest gift we could.

Regarding my kids, however, a problem. Israel doesn't want them.

Because that extraordinary Jew Betty Barr was converted by a Reform rabbi, by the strict Orthodox law which governs such things, my children, in the eyes of the state of Israel, are not Jewish. They are not eligible to become citizens.

I have been intellectually aware of this, of course, but as the kids have gotten older and discussions of aliyah have thus begun to have more significance, it has now hit me emotionally as well. Are there ways around it? Absolutely. Are there legal fictions that can be brought to bear? Without question. Does that make me feel any better? No. It doesn't.

When the state of Israel was founded, the Ultra Orthodox religious parties were invited into the ruling coalition. Ben Gurion and his colleagues figured those parties' days were numbered...that with the establishment of the state of Israel, religious Judaism would have lost much of its impetus, and would wither on the vine. That did not happen.

The Ultra-Orthodox, the Haredim as they are called, have been a part of virtually every ruling coalition since the state was founded, whether the lead party was liberal or conservative. The Haredim are easy. Give them authority in the few areas they really care about, and they will vote your way on the rest. In fact, they have a lot in common with the settler movement, some of whom are Haredim, others of whom are simply extremists. The settlers, as well, will be happy to vote your way as long as you give them the couple of things they care about. What does all this add up to?

- A West Bank where at any moment hundreds or thousands of Israeli soldiers put themselves in danger to guard tiny settlements that were illegally built in the first place.
- A West Bank where the Palestinians wonder if the Israelis are serious about peace as they see less and less land that may become a part of negotiation.
- An Israel where billions of shekels are given each year to the Haredi community for its own network of schools and yeshivas, where it teaches a curriculum from the seventeenth century.
- An Israel where tens of thousands of young Haredi men are exempt from that most universal of Israeli experiences, army service.

- An Israel where the Haredi community exercises a veto over who is a Jew, deciding who can marry in Israel and, even, who can come to live in Israel.

The majority of Israelis resent the Haredi power, the majority of the Israelis resent the settler movement, the majority of Israelis want a two state solution and want Israel to work toward it. Have the Palestinians done all they could? Of course not. But both sides could do more.

A little while ago, I said it is not enough to care that Israel exists. We must also care about the kind of Israel that exists. I believe that with all my heart. Like we here at Temple B'nai Abraham believe, if we value the principles of democracy and pluralism, if we want Israel to be just to all its citizens, if we think that one Jew is just as good as any other Jew...then we must be candid and admit that there are aspects of Israel today that dismay us. But that does not mean we can love Israel any less. If anything, we must love Israel even more.

For Israel needs us. This evening, I mean that in two ways. First, the impact, the support, the involvement, the physical presence of Diaspora Jews supports Israel and connects Israel to the world. And to say it invigorates our own identities is an understatement. I love the saying of the early Zionists, that they would go, *lvnot u'L'hibanot*, "to build and be rebuilt by the land," and so it should be with us.

But in another much more immediate way, right now, Israel of course needs us. Iran. For a subject so much in the news, there is so much we do not know. How far along is Iran, really? How real is the danger, and how soon? Did Prime Minister Netanyahu confound President Obama or did President Obama dis Prime Minister Netanyahu? Before the UN General Assembly this morning, President Obama vowed that he will not tolerate a nuclear Iran, and no option is off the table, but there is still time for a non-military option to work. Is he right? Or is it time to draw the red line?

The list of questions goes on and all of them are scary and there is little if anything we can do about any of them. But there is one thing we can do. As Jews who care about Israel, we can help ensure that concern about Iran remains part of the ongoing American dialogue at the very highest levels. That the danger posed by Iran remains front and center in American foreign policy. We may disagree among ourselves on tactics, but we can all make our voices heard that the United

States must continue to be firm and unyielding. There are concrete things each of us can do, and shortly after the holiday you will receive a list.

This morning, I spoke to a good friend about what I hoped to say this evening, and what I hoped to accomplish. He was silent a moment. Then he asked, "Why should I care?"

I understood his question. I can stand here and make the most cogent, the most compelling, the most persuasive case possible for a just Israel, a secure Israel, an Israel that truly is a light to the nations. But what does that have to do with me? How is that relevant to the comfortable life I have here? How is it germane to me and my family?

Israel, is your story.

Abraham who settled in the land, was your ancestor.

David who designed and Solomon who built the Temple in Jerusalem were your ancestors.

For more generations than you can count, every single one of your father's father's said the *tefila* every day, praying for a return to the land.

Those who went there a century and a half ago, who braved the elements to drain the swamps and make the desert bloom? They were your great great grandparents.

Both the six million, and those who survived the Shoah, who found holy refuge in *eretz yisrael*? They were your aunts and uncles and your cousins. Perhaps even your grandparents or parents or brothers or sisters.

Those who live in Israel today, be they soldier or student, Tel Aviv businessman or Kibbutz beekeeper, native born or a Russian? They are your family.

Literally, Israel, is your family. Literally, Israel, is your story.

That's why. If that's not enough...I don't know what to say. But I suspect that for all of us here, it is enough. Just as within these walls we try to treat one another as family, we follow the Talmudic instruction, *kol yisrael arevim ze baze*, each of us, every single Jew, is responsible one for the other.

We pray for a future that knows peace. We pray for a future that knows justice. We pray for a future that knows generosity of spirit. We pray for a future that knows caring without end.

We pray for the day when within Israel, throughout the Middle East, and throughout the World, the words of the prophet Micah will come true: "*va-ya-ashvu ish...*" "When each shall sit under his vine, and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid." Amen.