

Yom Kippur PM 5775

And so we gather on this Yom Kippur Eve, perhaps the most holy moment of the year. And it is not only a holy moment, it is a serious moment, a somber moment. It is a moment when our words should be directed only to the most serious and somber of subjects. And for that reason, tonight, we focus on...puppies.

What could be more wonderful to talk about than puppies? They are cute, they make us laugh and they are fun to cuddle with. Everyone loves puppies. In late nineties cable, there was even The Puppy Channel, 24 hours a day of puppies, puppies and more puppies.

Okay. I confess. I am not going to talk about puppies. But I am tempted. Particularly after an article in the *New York Times* last week.

We American Jews are divided on the subject of Israel. Maybe more than divided. Polarized. Perhaps in some way reflective of the polarization that, as we discussed last week, permeates American society today. The Times article noted that rabbis are scared to discuss Israel during these High Holy Days. If they show sympathy for the casualties in Gaza, they are attacked from the right. If they show sympathy for Israel's right to the territories, they are assailed from the left. A lot of rabbis have been looking for something else to talk about...puppies sound pretty good.

No puppies. The times are too critical. We have genuinely important things to discuss and not to do so would be shirking our responsibilities as Jews. The challenge. We here represent a variety of views on Israel. Were we Israelis, our votes would range from Meretz on the left to Yisrael Beitenu on the right. Given that range, are there things, important things, we can say about Israel about which we can all agree?

I believe there are. And not only do I believe that, I believe that which unites us is what will prove most important of all.

The September 18 issue of *Time Magazine* published an essay by Jennifer Moses, a Montclair writer who spoke here several years ago about Jews in the South. The headline?... "Dear Fellow Liberals: I'm Done Apologizing for Israel."

There is something to what Jennifer writes, and in her case she arrived at her conclusion through an unusual path. Her oldest son, after graduating from Swarthmore, moved to Israel. He studied Hebrew and joined the IDF, the Israel Defense Force. As Jennifer wrote: "he spent much of July in Gaza, as part of a team dismantling terror tunnels. In New Jersey, where the rest of his family lives, we didn't know, from one day to the next, if we'd ever see him again." Any parent can imagine how she felt.

The essay reviews the unfairness and lopsidedness of world opinion on Israel. Amnesty International's estimate that Boko Haram has killed 1,500 Nigerians so far this year. That 1,000 Pakistani women are slain in honor killings each year. The hundreds of thousands killed in Syria. Yet it seems like the world focuses more and more on Israel. Last week I spoke with an American medical academic who fronts for Israeli academics to get papers published in European scientific journals. The impact of the BDS movement - boycott, divestment, sanctions - is hard to gauge, but it is there and it is not good. Many are worried and they are right to be.

In a similar vein, it was hard not to notice the media's focus on the destruction in Gaza. The endless stream of photos of victims, of shells of buildings, of a landscape that looked uninhabitable. Many feel much of the supposedly objective media lost its objectivity, in pursuit of the most lurid possible images or, as many believe, due to outright Anti-Semitism. I do not share that view, but I understand why some may.

And perhaps nothing better captured the frustrations of many than the tunnels. Dozens of miles in total length, some big enough to drive a vehicle through. Solid concrete walls, fully lit, housing enormous quantities of explosives and arms. All this at a cost of tens of millions of dollars, dug with no other purpose than to facilitate terrorist attacks on Israel. And we have not even mentioned the continuing stream of rocket attacks which precipitated the latest combat. My daughter Molly and I spent the last night of the 2012 hostilities in a safe room on Kibbutz Ezer, along the Gaza border. How moving it was to spend those days with old time kibbutzniks, socialists from Israel's early days, who genuinely

sympathized with the Gazan civilian population, but were weary of life under these conditions.

In his speech at the United Nations this week, Prime Minister Netanyahu tied together Al Qaeda, ISIS, Hamas, and other Islamist movements across the Middle East, in an effort to show that Israel's challenges are also the West's challenges. Nothing is ever that simple, of course, but the rise of Islamic fundamentalism throughout the region is a reality, and not to see connections is myopic. And Netanyahu was right to remind the world of the danger it faces, not just Israel but the world, if the ongoing discussions to build allies to combat ISIS enable Iran to arrive at what Netanyahu called the "threshold" of building nuclear weapons.

All of these matters are important and scary and real. But at the same time, we cannot ignore sides of Israel that we would prefer not to see. The Israel that continues to establish new settlements and housing in the West Bank, including this week, even as it officially promotes a two state solution. The Israel that, in the critical areas of education and health care, continues to treat not just its Arab citizens but even its darker skinned Jewish citizens as second class? The Israel that, not so different from our own United States, may be prospering in the aggregate but in a way that, year by year, sees the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Some say we should not say such things even if they are true. Particularly among friends, I say not only that we can, but that we must. Otherwise our relationship is not genuine.

Does being scared for Israel mean one cannot also be critical? And does being critical of Israel mean that one cannot also be scared for her? It depends from where the feelings come.

The Talmud tells us the story of a debate in the Sanhedrin. The school of Hillel and the school of Shammai were divided concerning a certain matter of halachah. As the discussion grew heated, a *bat kol*, a heavenly voice, called out and said *elu v'elu divrei elohim chayim...* ("These and those are the words of the living God..."). Why? Because both were uttered with sincerity. Both were articulated in a sincere attempt to understand what is true. Both came from a place of love.

Ohavei tzion, lovers of Zion, come in many colors. I am scared for Israel. And I take issue with Israel. This can mean tumult, but no contradiction. But to American Jews, I fear this tumult hides what should concern us most.

Years ago, Temple B'nai Abraham announced a program that, to the best of my knowledge, is still unique among American synagogues. Thanks to the generosity of our extraordinary benefactors Eric and Lore Ross, every year we offer a \$5,000 no-need scholarship to any of "our" college students who spend a semester at an Israeli university. Several of our young people have benefitted from this opportunity, I have seen first-hand the impact it has had on them. They learn Hebrew. They know Israel and feel at home there. They understand Israel in a way that will always be an integral part of them.

I must confess. While the quality of the experiences has been what I expected...the quantity, not so much. One year three students spent a semester in Israel, the next year one, then two, then one again. The average? About 1.5 students each year. Or put another way, out of the possible universe for this particular cohort, maybe 4-5% of our college students spend a semester in Israel. I thought it would be more. I wondered, are we doing something wrong? Are we unusual?

We are. But not in the way I expected. I did some research. I spoke to people in the overseas program offices of the Israeli universities. A Hillel official was kind enough to track down information. And when I put it all together, this is what I found:

Roughly 400,000 young American Jews are full time college students. This year, a thousand of them will spend a semester in Israel. In other words, on an annual basis, about one per cent of the possible universe of students spends a semester in Israel. One per cent. This at a time when several hundred thousand American college students study abroad each year. This at a time when financial support for programs in Israel is robust and available. This at a time when as an American Jewish community we wring our hands over our young people's lack of connection to Israel. One per cent.

Inevitably this is the moment when someone remarks, well, what about Birthright. For those unfamiliar with the name, Birthright is a program Jewish

philanthropists established in 1999 to provide any Jew between 18 and 26 years of age a free ten day trip to Israel to get to know and learn about the country. Every year thousands of American Jewish students participate in one of these trips, including of course many from Temple B'nai Abraham.

I have spoken to dozens of them. They have a great time. Often they are moved, prompted, even inspired to incorporate greater Jewish practice and involvement into their lives when they return. And the trips are designed to do just that, aiming toward a peak emotional experience reinforced by the camaraderie of the group you travel in, an experience not impeded in any way by hanging out at the bars in Tel Aviv.

But while Birthright serves a useful function in fostering engagement with Israel, we must be candid. At eight and a half days of content per trip, it is not the same as other experiences. I spoke with the director of a program that sends hundreds of high school students to Israel every summer for five to seven weeks. The difference in impact of that kind of program vs. Birthright? In the word of this education professional: "exponential." And I think that is what common sense tells us as well.

A decade ago this program peaked at 1,400 teens one summer. This past summer, 650. And even if it is the result of unintended consequences, much of that we can attribute to Birthright. I have spoken to so many parents, parents who have the resources, and they say, why should I spend thousands of dollars to send my son or daughter to Israel for the summer when, in another year or two, they can go for free.

Yes, in another year or two they can go for free. And that's nice. But it's not the same thing.

Why should we care about Israel? The Torah explains God's choice of Noah to survive the flood by noting that he was (HEBREW), "a righteous man in his generation." At the UN this week Prime Minister Netanyahu noted, as many do, that Israel is the only true democracy in the Middle East. I think he is setting the bar kind low, but he is right. But I ask you. Is that a reason to care about Israel?

We Jews love to pass around emails about Israel: Israel the world's greatest per capita producer of Nobel prize winners, 18 Israeli inventions that can save your life, Israelis have the highest percentage of college graduates of any country in the world. So what. Don't get me wrong. That's kind of neat. And it makes us proud. But the implicit message is that these are some of the reasons we should care about Israel. Well, what if these things weren't so? Does that mean we wouldn't care?

Do we love a spouse more because of how much money they earn? Do we love a child less because their grades are poor? Of course not. We are better than that.

Israel is important, because thousands of years ago God said to a man named Abraham, "Lech I'cha, go to a land that I will show you."

Israel is important, because from our beginnings as a people, our fate was inextricably linked to the land.

Israel is important, because for centuries upon centuries, phrases like "a new light shall shine over Zion," "next year in Jerusalem," and "let us speedily rebuild in our own day" have regularly fallen from our lips.

Israel is important, because the twentieth century saw the rebirth of that ancient land and the twenty first century sees it continue and hopefully thrive, and we desperately want the land to be the beacon to the nations God challenged us to make it.

And if Israel is important, we must know it. And the best way to know Israel truly, is to be there. We may not live there. But it can be a place we know, and understand, and in which we feel at home. And if we believe Israel is important, then those are things we should do.

There is much regarding Israel about which we may not agree. Dinner table discussion at the Kulwins can be lively, though we usually avoid coming to blows. But I hope as much as I hope anything, that the centrality of Israel, and the importance of Israel, are beyond evident. And if we believe Israel is important, the next step is clear.

Temple B'nai Abraham is as vigorous as any congregation I know in urging its members to travel to Israel. And when we go as a congregation, we do our best to see and hear from all sides so that we understand Israel as it really is, not Israel from the pages of a tourist brochure. Many of us have been there, and many of us are old enough that the importance of Israel is something we intuitively grasp.

But that is not the case with the next generation, which is coming of age in a different reality, where Israel's existence seems a given, where the tumult surrounding Israel causes so many not to defend it, nor to contend with it, but to withdraw entirely. And that we cannot allow.

We are a large congregation. We are a prosperous congregation. We do care about Israel. And every year, many of our teens should spend summers in Israel, and every year, many of our college students should spend semesters there. They benefit academically. They benefit personally. They benefit spiritually. And most of all, Israel becomes a part of them in a way that it otherwise simply cannot.

The efforts in which many American Jews engage to ensure Israel's wellbeing are critical and must continue. As, I believe, are the efforts in which many American Jews engage to advance the Israel that lives up to its promise. But if our passion for Israel is to continue, a new generation must learn, first hand, why this is so important.

As parents, as grandparents, as aunts and uncles and family friends, every adult here is in a position of influence on some young person. Can we compare what a 16 year old gets out of a teen tour to the West Coast as opposed to a summer in Israel? Twenty years in the future, what will remain meaningful with today's college junior? A semester in London or a semester in Tel Aviv?

None of this costs any more, and I make a commitment to every student in our congregation. If a program of real length is something you want to do, and the money is not there, I promise you. I will find it. Why? Because this is important.

Puppies. No puppies tonight. For the Jew, grappling with Israel is a sacred task, as sacred as this very night. If Israel matters to us, then we have to do what we can. We have to ensure Israel is safe. We have to ensure Israel remains central to

the Jewish people. We have to ensure Israel is everything to which a Jewish state aspires.

It's very simple. If Israel matters to us, we have to be prepared to give of ourselves. And to give of our children.

Va-ya-ash-vu... Each shall sit under his vine, and each shall sit under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid.

Kane y'he ratzon...May it be God's will. Amen.