

RH I AM
5771

It all began like this: God says to Abraham: “*Lech l’cha*, Go forth from your native land, from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation.”

From that moment, thousands of years ago, the land of Israel has been at the center of who we are as a people. We have been there continuously. For millennia we have prayed for the wellbeing of the land. In ancient times and in modern we have looked to the land as a place where our people may be safe, may be secure, may be free to fulfill our destiny as *b’nai avraham*, the children of Abraham.

We know from the Bible of the tumult, the turbulence, the chaos that often characterized the land in ancient times. The Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Romans.

A ninth century East African Jew named Eldad HaDani and a twelfth century Spanish Jew named Benjamin Mitudela both visited the land, and their writings reinforce that this small but special piece of Middle East real estate could be a rough and tumble place.

In the thirteenth century the Crusaders added to the violence to which the land was by now no stranger, and in our own day, we often feel that things are not so different. We view peace in the land as so precious, yet so fragile. We dare to hope...can it be achieved?

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Israel and the Middle East today often seem beyond comprehension. There are so many factors, so many voices, so many moving parts.... Sometimes, a careful choice of words and images helps us gain perspective. Two important, recent magazine articles help.

Jeffrey Goldberg, an American who served in the Israeli army and is one of the most insightful journalists covering the Middle East, wrote an article in the September Atlantic entitled, “The Point of No Return.”

After dozens of interviews with political and military leaders from Israel, the US...and quite a few Arab states, Goldberg concludes that a year or two from now, there is a 50% chance that Israel will launch some kind of pre-emptive strike against Iran. The danger is real. Israel knows it. The United States knows it. The Arab world knows it.

In fact, here is an extraordinary quote from Yousef al-Otaiba, the United Arab Emirates’ ambassador to the US. He notes that “while an Israeli attack on a Muslim country would undoubtedly provoke condemnation in the Arab world, you are asking me, 'Am I willing to live with that versus living with a nuclear Iran? We cannot live with a nuclear Iran.' I am willing to accept what takes place.”

A key Arab official agrees that, if it helps prevent a nuclear Iran from coming into existence, an Israeli attack on Iran would be good for the world.

Would such an attack actually happen? Who knows. It is complicated. By admitting to the possibility of such an attack, Israel fires a warning shot across Iran's bow. And across Americas' bow as well, hoping to push President Obama, who has called a nuclear Iran "unacceptable," into actions that match his rhetoric, perhaps further intensified sanctions, perhaps even military action.

In the words of the prophet Ezekiel, wheels within wheels within wheels. So much is unknowable. But of this we can be certain. In the land where Esther and Mordechai once vanquished the evil Haman, a danger to Israel and to us is unfolding.

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The second magazine article comes from the *Time* that arrived at home just a few days ago. The cover said it very simply: "Why Israel Doesn't Care About Peace."

Writer Karl Vick is a Middle East veteran though new to Israel, and his thesis is simple. Israel's economy is booming. Israelis are becoming prosperous. The security fence has kept the country free of terrorist attacks. Israelis are starting to enjoy the good life, and that enjoyment is taking up more and more of the time and attention that used to be devoted to the daily worrying of life in the land of the two Intifadahs.

Vick overstates his case but he does have a point. The recent book *Start Up Nation* suggests factors that contribute to Israel's thriving economy: the Russian immigration with its large numbers of world class scientists and engineers, Israeli universities that are among the best in the world, university students who are all the more serious because they are older and more mature, due to universal military service that itself teaches discipline and initiative, and finally we have the creativity and entrepreneurship that seem to come naturally from a tiny country long accustomed to dealing with huge security concerns.

Israel is about the size and population of New Jersey, and has more companies listed on NASDAQ than any other country in the world...except the United States.

Intel has invested billions of dollars in Israel, to take advantage of the extraordinary human capital that exists there, the scientists, mathematicians and engineers who live in Israel and who want to stay in Israel. Intel came to them, where they are and where they want to be.

However – and this is huge - all those scientists and mathematicians and engineers may stay in Israel only as long as they feel at least reasonably safe there. If Israel again becomes a dangerous place to live, those who have opportunities elsewhere may well take them.

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I thought about Jacob and Esau last week, as all eyes were riveted on Washington. Remember the brothers? How much they hated each other? Yet eventually they fell into each other's arms in loving embrace. Ken y'hi ratzon, may it be God's will.

I thought about Jacob and Esau while looking at photos of the five leaders standing and smiling together. Some may be pessimistic, some may even think the exercise futile. I choose to be hopeful. I believe in the principle that two people cannot talk to each other and hit each other at the same time. At the moment we are talking to each other.

Under President Abbas, the Palestinian Authority has made progress. There are miles to go, but the West Bank has begun to work. Things like garbage collection and electric service are more dependable. The PA's own police has begun to have an impact.

I believe Prime Minister Netanyahu arrived in Washington with a true desire for peace and a willingness to negotiate. He is probably the best possible Israeli leader to be in this position at this time. Think Nixon in China, or, better yet, Ariel Sharon in 2005. Because he was from the right, Israelis especially trusted him to negotiate disengagement from Gaza.

President Obama is not the most popular guy around these days, which makes it all the more impressive that he has taken on this complicated, complicated task. Many American Jews feel he has not been good for Israel.

I disagree. Many rabbis listened in on a conference call earlier this week in which President Obama could not have been more unequivocal in his appreciation and support for the strategic concerns of all the parties. American aid for Israel is steady. Some distrust the president for his perceived friendliness to the Arab and Muslim world, but I would respond that, especially compared to his predecessor, perhaps his kind of outreach will be useful in bringing that world, productively, to the table.

Having said all that, I am no Pollyanna. The weeks ahead will show and the posturing by both President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu has already begun. Nevertheless, we all share the hope, the prayer, that President Obama can use the power of his personality and the power of his office to bring the parties together and achieve some solid step that is good for all. How miraculous it would be for Jacob and Esau once again to fall into each other's arms...or at least be able to stand side by side.

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Ever since Abraham, this special piece of land has been at the heart of who we are as a people. God did not simply give us the Torah, nor did He simply say you will be My people and I will be your God. He did all this in *eretz yisrael*, in the land of Israel, the

land of our forefathers. No matter where a Jew lives, in Ein Kerem in Jerusalem or Essex County in New Jersey, it is our home.

The song Dayenu has many verses. One of them reads: *eelu hichnisanu l'eretzyisrael...dayenu*. If he had only brought us into the land of Israel, dayenu. It would have been enough for us.

For us. Those might be the most important words of all. For us. Some look at Israel as a country, a Jewish country to be sure, but a country and one far away. I do not think that is right. Israel is not a country. Israel is the Jewish people.

We should care about Israel because it is our past, our origin. It is the land of our birth as a people, the holy land. But why should we really care? Because we are family. Because we are all the Jewish people. We are all part of families. Families sometimes disagree. Families do not always see eye to eye. But families care. Israel is our family.

And because families care...there is much to be done. We must continue to publicize and challenge the danger of Iran. We must support the peace process. We must promote Israel's wellbeing and the rest of America and the rest of the world must know that we care...because it's about family. What must we do with our family? One word. In Hebrew, we say *mitchavuyot*. In English, "engagement." We have to be engaged. We have to be engaged with our mouths, with our feet, and with our hearts, and I would like to suggest three ways to do that..

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We have to be engaged with our mouths. Public officials listen. They really do. They pay attention to what they hear and that affects their actions. We have to make sure they hear what we want them to hear.

Those who support the federation support not only the unity and worthwhile work of the community, but the advocacy that goes on with local and regional elected officials. Membership in AIPAC ensures incredibly effective lobbying with all members of congress, even those whose constituencies include few Jews, and each is made aware how special the relationship is between Israel and the United States.

Here now is a way for you to use your mouth, make your voice heard, and help Israel. It could not be easier.

The Community Relations Council of Metrowest is collecting signatures for a statement encouraging President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton in their efforts on behalf of peace for Israel and its neighbors. Our goal is to collect 40,000 signatures of individuals from our community, and those signatures, together with others from across the nation, will be presented to the White House in a short time. Such statements are noticed, and every additional signature means it will be noticed that much more.

At the end of the holiday I will send you an e-mail. Please, take a moment, follow the link, and add your name to the list. Tell the President and the Secretary of State that a peace in the Middle East, a peace that is just for Israel and its neighbors, is important to you. By your signature you urge them to lead this peace process with all the fortitude they can.

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First our mouths, and now our feet. We need to go to Israel. We need to be there. Those who have gone know something happens that touches our very soul. Our sages taught of the mystical force of the *aveer yerushalayim*, the very air of Jerusalem. It restores, it heals, it cures. I cannot guarantee that it does all of that, but I absolutely guarantee that when you breathe that air, you know.

At Temple B'nai Abraham, we do travel. Members visit Israel often and over the decades literally dozens of Temple missions have taken place. More than sixty of us, from ages under ten to over eighty - will visit on trips in October and December. Travel to Israel is crucial. It restores us. We tell our brothers and sisters there that we are with them. By our presence we show the rest of the world more than that Israel is important. We show the rest of the world we and Israel, the Jewish people, are one. We are family.

However, I must confess a particular frustration. Our young people. Every year we intensively recruit high school students to go to Israel and learn first hand about the land. I throw myself personally into this effort; I exhort, I cajole, I'll be honest, I plead and beg!

This past summer a few of our youngsters were there, and I know that they had amazing experiences that will touch them for life. Yet every year I hear from so many parents whose children have no real plans, and end up going on a teen tour or some other program more for something to do than with a sense of genuine enthusiasm, and I ask why not Israel, and the response is a hem and a haw and an awkward moment.

And so to parents and grandparents of those this age, I say, let next summer be the summer your teenager goes to Israel. Let them spend four, five, six weeks there. The programs are amazing. Let them walk the streets and breathe the air and climb Masada and swim in the Dead Sea and pray at the wall and let them learn and have fun and be moved as they are changed forever. And don't ask them what they want to do tell them what you think they should do...guide them in a good direction of which you will both be proud.

Let's talk this fall. Find me, or I will find you. And, while these programs are surprisingly affordable, if money is an issue, let me know.

I also realized recently that of the hundreds of college students I have known in my years here, many of them have taken semesters abroad. Yet the number who have spent a term in Israel, I can count on one hand.

Our kids go everywhere, and for some, I know, they choose a destination because of a genuine and serious career related interest. I respect that. But for the majority, the opportunity to study abroad is about the opportunity to study abroad. So why not Israel?

Right now I am working on a ground breaking program for our own congregation so that our college students will find it incredibly easy to study in Israel. This will be an opportunity available to members of no other congregation in the country. I need a little more time...so stay tuned.

You may ask, why do I spend so much time on this particular subject? As a rabbi, I believe making travel to Israel more accessible is one of the most important things I do. I have yet to meet the person who, after a trip to Israel, does not return more conscious of their own Judaism, and more committed to it. We embrace our own family even more.

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With our feet, with our mouths, now, perhaps most important with all that is going on, we talk about what is in our hearts.

We Jews have prayed for Israel for a very long time.

Psalm 137: *Al naharot bavel, sham yashavnu...* By the waters of Babylon we lay down and wept for thee Zion. If I forget Thee O Jerusalem may my right hand lose its cunning, if I cease to think of you.”

A thousand years later our siddur came to include daily prayers that the land be blessed with abundance, that exiles be returned from the earth's four corners, that our people's spiritual core, the destroyed Temple, speedily be rebuilt.

And every Saturday morning, right here, we pray, “may Israel be a beacon of hope for the oppressed, a source of inspiration to all who are free.”

Because we are family we care, because we care we must act, and at this holiest time of year, we pray:

Oh God, the land Israel is holy, just as Your people Israel is holy. Grant our fondest wish. Make peace in our time. Put understanding and caring and depth into the hearts and minds of all and let them live as brothers. You have instructed us to be a light to the nations, so give us the courage and the wisdom and the strength to be that light. May we be your instrument in a peace true and sure. May the Israel of tomorrow be the Israel of which You have dreamed, and let us say. Amen.