

YK PM 5772

I had dinner with a rabbi friend Tuesday. He asked the question we rabbis all ask one another this week...what are you going to talk about on Yom Kippur? I said that on Kol Nidre I generally speak about Israel. He was thoughtful for a moment, and then he commented wryly, "I guess that's the one good thing about the Middle East...you always know what one of the sermons will be about."

Unfortunately, he is of course right. Here we are again.

This past week was a good one. Dan Schectman of the Technion was awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. He is the tenth Israeli to receive a Nobel Prize, and given Israel's small size and relative youth, I suspect Israel has produced more Nobel Prize winners per capita than any other country, including the United States. That makes us proud. And it should.

There is much about Israel that makes us proud. The bustling economy, its world leadership in high tech patents, its commitment to a highly democratic form of government in a region where that is, shall we say, not often a reality. We may disagree with actions and policies of a particular administration, but could we not say the same about this country?

There is much about Israel that makes us proud, but pride is not the first thing we think of these days. The first thing that comes to mind...is fear. We are concerned about Israel's future. Imagining a world without Israel is not impossible.

A few quotes from recent times.

A week ago, at a Tehran conference, Iranian President Ahmadinejad, proposed a "simple solution" to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Jews, he said, "should go home." They came from Europe, they came from Arabic lands, they should, he asserted, go back to where they came from. And the Holocaust? Never happened.

Much of the world thinks Ahmadinejad has a screw loose. Does he have a screw loose? Or does he know his audience well? It really doesn't matter. He is still the powerful president of a nation of nearly 80 million people, a nation with many powerful weapons.

In late spring, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas wrote a much noticed op-ed piece in the *New York Times*. He made an eloquent and articulate plea for international support for the establishment of a Palestinian state. His words were moving.

Alas, much of what made them moving was the liberty they took with the truth. Listen to this passage: "In November, 1947, the General Assembly made its recommendation (regarding partition). Shortly thereafter, Zionist forces expelled Palestinian Arabs to

ensure a decisive Jewish majority in the future state of Israel, and Arab armies intervened. War and further expulsions ensued.”

Wait a minute. I may be wrong. My memory is not always so good. But wasn't there something about five armies massed on Israel's borders? Wasn't there something about Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt vowing to wipe out the fledgling state before it began? And did they not play a key role in encouraging Arabs who lived in land the UN designated for Israel to leave?

Just a couple of days ago a startling statement came from a most unexpected place, my beloved Brazil. Reinaldo Azevedo, a columnist in *Veja* a weekly newsmagazine that everybody in Brazil reads – there is no equivalent here – Azevedo noted comments publicly made by Al Zeben Ibrahim, the ambassador in Brazil of the Palestinian Authority. Azevedo told a group of university students that “O israel deve desaparecer.” “Israel should disappear.” And disappear means...disappear.

We could go on. There are many, many people in the world who do not like Israel. The United Nations, it sometimes seem, has an entire department that does nothing but churn out anti-Israel resolutions. There have literally been hundreds...with hardly any against such stellar world citizens like Sudan and North Korea. Since its formation in 2006, two thirds of the UN Human Rights Council's resolutions condemn just one country. Israel.

These are things we know. The goal here is not *schadenfreude*, finding joy in misery. It is important to remind ourselves of these things. We have to remember that Israel lives under a genuine existential threat. Its very life is at stake. That is no exaggeration.

The United States is Israel's great friend. And thank goodness. The importance of that friendship is incalculable to Israel. Yes, we genuinely believe the United States benefits as well, but if we are candid, we admit that the scales are not really in balance. Israel needs the United States more.

The United States' friendship was evident during the recent meeting of the United Nations General Assembly. President Obama's speech could not have been clearer.

“America's commitment to Israel's security is unshakeable, and our friendship with Israel is deep and enduring...lasting peace must acknowledge the very real security concerns that Israel faces every day. Let's be honest: Israel is surrounded by neighbors that have waged repeated wars against it. Israel's citizens have been killed by rockets fired at their houses and suicide bombs on their busses. Israel's children come of age knowing that throughout the region, other children are taught to hate them. Israel, a small country of less than 8 million people, looks out on a world where leaders of much larger nations threaten to wipe it off the map...These facts cannot be denied...Israel deserves recognition. It deserves normal relations with its neighbors. And friends of the Palestinians do them no favors by ignoring this truth, just as friends of Israel must recognize the need to pursue a two state solution with a secure Israel next to an independent Palestine.”

Some, I know, feel President Obama has not been sufficiently supportive of Israel. I never felt that way. But even those who have, I hope, look upon him differently now. I believe he deserves it.

I emphasize this because Israel needs the United States. Desperately. If there is someday to be peace between Israel and its neighbors, we must be realists about how that could come about. And the only way for it to come about is for a key role to be played by a large, powerful, outside force respected by both sides. That is not going to be the United Nations. It will have to be the United States.

I wish it were not so. How good it would be for leaders Abbas and Netanyahu to sit alone in a room for as long as it took to come to some agreement. But that is not going to happen. America must be very, very involved.

In this remarks, I make no mention of the morality of Israel's position. And that is not because I do not think it moral. On the contrary, I think it very moral. Israel was given land by the United Nations in 1948 and was immediately attacked by five armies. Amazingly, it prevailed, and lived within those borders until 1967, when again it was attacked and again it prevailed, this time occupying the lands known as the West Bank and Gaza.

Ever since, the attitude of the large majority of Israelis has been simple: assure our security and we will give back the land. Prime Ministers Barak and Sharon made extraordinary offers of giveback...the other side has not been forthcoming. That sounds simple...but I believe it is that simple.

The occupation itself is a terrible thing. It is dehumanizing and degrading to those who lived under it and it cannot help but make those who implement it become people they would rather not be. But Israel has had no alternative.

But as time passes I become less and less interested in morality. Because more and more the fundamental question has less and less to do with who is right, and more and more to do with how do we end all this. It cannot go on forever. The Palestinian and the Israeli-Arab populations are growing far faster than Israeli-Jewish population. The Arab Spring seems, alas, to be a double edged sword. While it may lead to more open societies the impact on relations with Israel remains to be seen. And at the United Nations recently, while the United States and several of its traditional allies were clear and deliberate on their opposition to the declaration of Palestinian statehood, it was worrisome to note that the so called BRIC countries, the rising powers of Brazil, Russia, India and China, did not agree. They, it seems, are most motivated most by their specific best interests, as opposed to those of the whole world.

But we are not here to wring our hands. This Day of Atonement calls upon us to be open and honest with ourselves about our personal shortcomings and openly to face the challenges and responsibilities that lie in front of us.

That is why we raise this matter at this hour. For the Day of Atonement also calls upon us as a people to be open and honest with ourselves about the challenges and responsibilities, as a people, that lie in front of us. And while it is surely not the only one, for the Jew, there is, I believe no greater challenge than that facing Israel, and no greater responsibility, than what we must do about it.

We know Israel's wellbeing is enormously tied up with the United States. And the United States is where we live, where we pay taxes and vote, where we have a voice.

I would like to think that the American administration and congress are supportive of Israel because they believe it is the right thing to do, that Israel deserves this support. To a large extent I believe this is true. However, our elected officials are politicians. And there is nothing wrong with that; it is how our system works.

As politicians, they listen to what people say. They listen to what people care about. They note how many people say what and with what passion and concern and feeling they speak. American support of Israel has much to do, with what our elected representatives hear from us.

There are different ways we can make our voices heard, but there are two in particular I mention at this moment. First, a week from tomorrow, the CRC sponsors Step up for Israel, and advocacy seminar at the federation campus in Whippany. In just a few hours each of us can learn how we can be the most effective advocate possible for Israel, among our own friends, in the Jewish community, and in the community at large.

It is a great, great opportunity. Informational flyers are in the lobby upon our departure, and details can be found on our own web site.

Second. The clearest, most effective, most important voice American Jewish have is that of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. AIPAC concentrates specifically on America's relationship with Israel. Building bridges between American and Israeli politicians, ensuring congressmen with few or now Jewish constituents – like a senator from North Dakota or a representative from rural Utah – are informed on the Middle East.

Attending AIPAC's annual policy conference is an overwhelming experience. It is something one never forgets. A few people from Temple B'nai Abraham always attend. It would be wonderful to have more this coming March. And it just might happen. A Temple member who believes in AIPAC's mission is offering major subsidies for those who attend a Policy Conference for the first time. It is an unbelievably generous offer and has nothing to do with need. Call it an incentive. If you think you might be interested, let me know. I will be there. And I've been putting together names of some I would like to get to come with me.

Our voices are important. But even more important, is our presence. I am very, very proud of the many, many people who have travelled to Israel under the auspices of Temple B'nai Abraham. We have averaged at least one mission a year for the last many years, something few synagogues of any size can say.

And I am equally proud of those who travel on private trips, or with federation or other missions, and I love the way so many call to tell me they were there and how wonderful it was and how much they were moved and how strong a connection they felt.

I am proud that the number of our teens who have spent summers in Israel has slowly but steadily been increasing. And every one of them who has gone has come back to tell their friends they had the most incredible summer, ever.

As I noted last year at this time, I wish more of our college students spent a semester in Israel. A huge percentage of them go overseas. But they go to Australia or Italy. Spain or England. Great places. But not Israel. I have to admit. I am frustrated with the students who make these choices. I wish parents would put up a bit more of a struggle.

Jenna Rosenberg, a senior at Penn State, spent last spring at Tel Aviv University. She said it changed her forever. I want us to make more Jennas. And perhaps now we will.

All of us, I hope, recognize the names of the late Eric and Lore Ross, who during the lives, and through their legacies, were such extraordinary benefactors of Temple B'nai Abraham. In the honor, Temple B'nai Abraham now initiates something I believe does not exist at any other synagogue, anywhere.

This evening I announce the creation of the Eric and Lore Ross Scholarship, for study in Israel. It is simple. If a college student from our extended family chooses to spend a semester at one of the Israeli universities, they will receive an automatic scholarship of \$5,000.

This has nothing to do with need. It does not matter what they study. It does not matter what other kinds of support they receive. It is a statement that we as a congregation think this is an incredibly important thing for our young people to do. Because we understand...the impact it will have on the student, and thus on the Jewish people and on Israel, will be enormous.

When I came to Temple B'nai Abraham thirteen years ago, I really had no idea what I was doing. Except for two years in Rio de Janeiro, which were a lot of fun but not necessarily relevant to Livingston, New Jersey, this was new to me. I asked many people I met, I want to succeed at this. What do I need to do?

I got a lot of answers. Some were useful. Some less so. But I remember one in particular. A woman whom today I consider a close friend. She probably does not remember this, but I do. She said two words. "Love us." Her broader message was clear. If you "love" something...you know what to do.

I say to you this evening...love Israel. Love Israel when you are there. Love Israel when you are not there. Love Israel when she gladdens you. Love Israel when she frustrates you. Love Israel because she is our past. Love Israel because she is our future. Love Israel...and let that love move and inspire us to ensure that our vision of Israel endures in the land of our ancestors...because it is one of the most important things a Jew can do.

A final story.

In January, I spent a few days in Beer Sheva, helping my son get settled in for a semester at Ben Gurion University. One morning he slept in, and I drove an hour south to the university's desert research institute.

It was an eye opening visit. Researchers there tackle the hardest problems that face desert communities all over the world. How to grow crops with a minimum of water. How to extract the most energy from the sun. How to raise the healthiest possible camels.

Two hundred graduate students take classes and pursue research at the institute. The majority are from Israel. I asked my guide, what country does the next largest group come from? Here answer could not have surprised me more. Jordan. There are graduate students at this Israeli university institute from Jordan.

Jordanians need desert know-how for the wellbeing of their own country. An hour south of Beer Sheva, Israel seems to be the best place to get it. And that matters more than all the politics in the world.

Last January, I caught a glimpse, of what the future might hold. Kane Y'hi Ratzon, may it be God's will, and let us say, Amen.