

Kol Nidre 5772-Israel Is Too Important Not To Speak About Rabbi Richard Litvak

Just two weeks ago, an article appeared in the national Jewish press, saying that Israel has become such a divisive subject that few rabbis would risk speaking about it at the holidays this year, knowing they were bound to please some and alienate others. Last week, an editorial appeared in the Jerusalem Post by Jewish History Professor Gil Troy. He wrote, “Any rabbis afraid to talk about Israel to the congregation during the High Holidays should quit....” (Jerusalem Post 9/27/11). So what’s a rabbi to do? Speak about Israel? Not speak about Israel?

What I’ve chosen to do is to talk about Israel because Israel is too important not to talk about. I want to start with our Temple Israel policy. I am proud of our policy. At the behest of 150 rabbis, the synagogues of northern California are engaged this year in promoting civil discourse about Israel. I’m proud because we already pioneered this process last year and became a model of a congregation that can support Israel strongly and affirm individual conscience and the right of every member to his or her opinion on Israel. We support a free exchange of ideas while also setting boundaries that prevent our Temple from being used for efforts to delegitimize Israel or support the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement. Most importantly, it says that educating ourselves and advocating for and supporting Israel as a Jewish Democratic state is a shared value of our Reform congregation. We encourage our whole membership to find his or her way to do that.

Israel has been important to me since I was a child. My family put money in a blue box and planted trees in Israel. But what I remember most clearly was the day I received an Israel Bond for my Bar Mitzvah. It was a beautiful document. It said I have a stake in the future of the Jewish State. All of us here tonight have a stake in the future of the Jewish State, even those of us who are not Jewish. We often think of the millions who would not have perished in the Holocaust had there been a State of Israel for Jews to go to. Among those who went to the gas chambers were the Jewish husbands and wives of non-Jews, whose lives were forever shattered, because there was no Israel for refuge.

My junior year in high school, I sold Fuller Brushes door to door to earn money to go to Israel. I went down my mother’s Hadassah list and that month was the number one Fuller Brush Salesman in Northwest Missouri. The next summer, I used my Bar Mitzvah Israel Bond, in addition to money from selling Fuller brushes, to go on a NFTY summer high school trip to Israel. I felt for the first time the incredible history of the Jewish people and the amazing feeling of being in a country where the majority is Jewish. The Hebrew language came alive. I noticed the values and teachings of the Torah suffused everyday life in a way that can only happen in a country where Jews are the majority. I remember seeing for the first time, the Torah quoted on a sign on a bus: “Rise before the aged,” meaning give an older person your seat. Riding the bus in America is a fairly mundane experience. Even this mundane experience in Israel was a chance to learn and practice Torah, even for the most secular. There was so much art—(both traditional and modern)-- that emerged out of Jewish themes, texts and historical experience.

I have been to and lived in Israel many times since then. The most recent was just last January. I went with 30 Bay Area rabbis and Akiba Tor, the Consul General of Israel from the

Israeli Consulate in San Francisco. One highlight was meeting with two Israeli Supreme Court Justices for two hours, one an Arab Supreme Court justice from the Galilee. We learned that any person, including Palestinians in the West Bank, can directly petition the Supreme Court. It's called a Bagat. They review about 10,000 of these a year. In some cases the court has ordered the army to reroute the security wall/fence when cases have been brought by Palestinians that the encroachment on Palestinian orchards or fields could not be justified by security needs. We talked with journalists about the free press that Israel has where dissenting views are spiritedly discussed. This includes access for press from around the world. We learned about the ways the Birthright College trip to Israel has strengthened the Jewish identity of several hundred thousand young American Jews.

Finally we visited places that make us proud of Israel's contribution to the improvement of the life of the world. We heard about the drip irrigation system developed by Israel that enables famine and drought ridden African countries to produce 50% more crop yield with 40% less water. We visited one of the most innovative electric car companies in the world and one of the largest solar energy companies, Bright Light, which invented and is now building for PG&E, the largest solar energy grid in America which will power 137,000 homes. We heard Israel is number one in medical device patents per capita, including the camera pill that will soon revolutionize the uncomfortable colonoscopy. There are more Nobel Prize winners per capita than any other country including its tenth this week. Israel is on the cutting edge of High tech r&d including key technology found in the cell phone, the digital camera and the cat scan. While the Arab Spring saw riots and stalled changes and much violence, over a half a million Israelis this summer protested in Tel Aviv the high cost of housing and the growing disparity between the wealthy and the poor. That would equal about 30 million or more Americans, all protesting peacefully without a shot fired. I mention all this because I think it is important to first think about what Israel means, what it has achieved, and how we can be proud.

But on this night of Kol Nidre, we must also face the challenges. In that regard I love the story about Moses being informed by God about the Promised Land. God says, "I'm going to give you a land with rich valleys, beautiful hills and a wonderful coastline. It will be a rich land flowing with milk and honey." Moses says, "That is wonderful, God." "Well, yes and no," God replies. "I haven't told you yet about who I'm giving you for neighbors." This is what's on our mind and about what we worry.

Israel is in a very difficult spot, increasingly militarily threatened and diplomatically isolated. Israel has Hezbollah on the northern border in Lebanon and on the southern border, Hamas in Gaza. They are both Iranian clients who have thousands of missiles and rockets trained on Israel. Both are sworn not only to Israel's destruction, but to the destruction of Jews everywhere. There's deterioration of Israel's relations with its two main historic allies in the Arab world-Egypt and Turkey. Both are undergoing Islamization. In Egypt the long time peace treaty with Israel is at risk with popular sentiment, empowered by the Arab Spring, calling for abrogating the treaty. The rejection of Turkey by the European Union has resulted in a more Islamic government and society. Having been rejected by Europe, Turkey is turning instead towards being a major player in the Middle East. This has begun with severing many of its ties with Israel, and the use of threatening language towards the Jewish State.

The threat of the Iranian nuclear bomb is also on the horizon. The UN Atomic Energy Commission just announced this week its concerns. In the meantime sanctions backed strongly by the United States, are kept relatively weak by Iran's trading partners in China and Europe. We feel like we are reliving in its own way the inability of the world to stop Hitler in the lead up to the Holocaust. We have another country who has announced its intention to annihilate six million Jews and is building up the armaments to do it. It is a threat to the Middle East, Europe and the United States as it builds long range missiles to deliver these nuclear bombs. And yet, like then, the world, through lack of concern for the Jews, because of greed and desire for trade, does nothing to stop Iran. We can only continue to encourage our country to continue taking the lead in strengthening sanctions against Iran.

What is most on our minds and in the news is the bid by the Palestinian Authority to gain recognition of a Palestinian State at the U.N. Most authorities say that 90% of the likely solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been decided for some time. It was put forth by Prime Minister Ehud Barak at Camp David and at Tauba under the leadership of President Clinton. Only two summers ago, Prime Minister Olmert in private talks with President Abbas, put forward exactly what the Quartet, including the United States, is calling for now: a token return of Palestinian refugees to Israel, general boundaries of pre-1967 with border adjustments with land swaps to take in the vast majority of the Israeli settlements, with Israeli rule of most of Jerusalem but a Palestinian capital in some part of East Jerusalem. But at the last minute, the Palestinians were unwilling to accept it and Prime Minister Olmert had to resign due to an election fund scandal. Then under Prime Minister Netanyahu, the Palestinians let nine months of a demanded ten month Israeli freeze of settlement building go by, coming to the table and not really negotiating, only during the last month. Instead they called for a further settlement freeze as a condition of negotiations. In these years, Israel even tried unilaterally pulling out of Gaza to give Palestinians a chance at an experiment of complete autonomy. What Israel got for uprooting its military and civilians and completely withdrawing was seven years of Hamas, dedicated to Israel's destruction launching thousands of rockets and missiles on Israeli civilians in Sderot. Israelis look at this history and are understandably fearful. Withdrawing from the majority of the West Bank could easily lead to a takeover by Hamas and a Palestinian Iranian client state with missiles able to strike 65% of Israel's civilian population in minutes. Even the best new Iron Dome missile defense system could not defend against that.

In addition, there are severe doubts about the basic tenets of faith that have been the foundation of the near agreements between Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas. Just two weeks ago President Abbas declared that his land had been "occupied for 63 years." This is not just the land captured in the Six Day War. He means that even the land given Israel 63 years ago in 1948 by the UN is occupied land. President Abbas chose inflammatory language accusing Israel of "a multipronged policy of ethnic cleansing." He called the security wall, "the racist annexation Wall" without mentioning the thousands of suicide bombers that caused it to be built. In his speech, President Abbas called the Holy Land sacred to Christians and Muslims, with no mention of the 3,500 year history of the Jewish people there. He has also called for all Palestinian refugees to be able to return to Israel, in essence turning it into a second Palestinian state. So it's no wonder that the Israelis are fearful and hesitant in the negotiations now. Based on what they have seen and what they have heard two thirds said in a Yediot Achranot poll this

week that they believe there will never be peace with the Palestinians. The security issue is real. The fears and the risks are enormous.

On the other hand, it is true that Israel must find a way to help establish a Palestinian State. It can't rule over several million Palestinians and remain a Jewish and Democratic state. Because of this 62% of Israelis still favor a Two State solution though they have less hope for it now. Maps of previous negotiations described have included three quarters of the settlements inside new Israeli borders, especially those around Jerusalem. The most controversial decisions are actually about removing some of the smaller settlements, like the 3,500 person settlement of Kiryat Arba, just outside of Hebron. It is proposed that after removing the Settlement, a secure corridor be established instead from Israelis to be able to the tomb of our Biblical matriarchs and patriarchs. For this, Prime Minister Netanyahu would have to go against some of his coalition partners, like the National Union, which opposes giving up any territory for a Palestinian State. On the other hand, the Kadima Party, headed by Tzippi Livni, and the party of previous Prime Minister Olmert, has the single largest number of members in the Knesset. It still favors the territorial compromise on the settlements that was put forth by Olmert. This includes land swaps for settlements in a way that keeps more than three quarters of them-as I just mentioned, especially around Jerusalem. A long time strong supporter of Israel, our own Leon Panetta, now Secretary of Defense, spoke to reporters this week on his way to Israel and following Israel's announcement of building 1,100 more apartments in Gilo in Southern Jerusalem on previously Palestinian land. He asked, "Is it enough to maintain a military edge if you're isolating yourself in the diplomatic arena?" As a friend and supporter he is saying, to keep America as a strong ally, Israel needs to be more nimble in the negotiating arena. We can understand Israelis wanting to keep the current Netanyahu coalition given its realistic fears. It has accepted the recent Quartet plan for negotiations for a two State solution and for restarting negotiations without preconditions.

On the other hand, Secretary of Defense en route to Israel last week said that Israel needed not only military security but to be less isolated diplomatically for her security. A unity government with Tzipi Livni and Kadima could provide more nimble negotiating and thereby less diplomatic isolation. We'll have to see what transpires in the democracy of Israel as the New Year opens. In any event from AIPAC to J-Street, American Jewish organizations opposed the Palestinian Authority seeking recognition of statehood by the United Nations. This is an end run, trying to get the U.N. to create a Palestinian State without the Palestinians having to negotiate the hard issues with Israel directly to establish peace. We are grateful to President Obama and the Congress for their telling the world the United States will not allow the UN to give the Palestinians full statehood and that statehood will only come from direct negotiations with Israel.

I think our challenge at this dangerous juncture is to understand, and share with others the history of the situation, Israel's legitimate security needs, and the understandable fears and reticence Israel has about the negotiations for a Palestinian State. This is particularly true since President Abbas' going to the UN feels like the Palestinians are trying to avoid real negotiations with Israel and are trying to get the world to impose a settlement.

A good way to enrich our sense of why Israel is important to us, is to read, [A Dream Of Zion: American Jews Reflect On Why Israel Matters To Them \(J.Salkin-Jewish Lights\)](#). I'd like to conclude with a portion of an essay in this book by my friend, Rabbi Janet Marder, of Temple Beth Am in Los Altos. I think it expresses what is most important for us to take to heart about Israel on this important night at this important time.

“Some of what I love is the *idea* of Israel: a country created out of desperate necessity by Holocaust survivors, refugees from pogroms, idealists and kooks who believed in the impossible; the intense, dynamic collision of Jews of every color and culture and ideology; the noble dream of translating Jewish teachings and ideals into practical politics; the miraculous re-establishment of Jewish sovereignty after centuries of powerlessness almost led to our extermination.

“Some of what I love is the *reality* of Israel: the automatic teller machine that spits out a receipt wishing me a happy Sukkot... street signs in Hebrew, named for...great figures in our history; concerts that begin with the crowd singing Hatikvah; public lectures, literature, films, plays and even rock music that wrestle with Jewish themes; ... Friday afternoons in Jerusalem; the buses that stop running, the quiet that falls over the city and the streets full of people carrying flowers home or walking to synagogue. Israel is the only place in the world that offers me public Jewish space – an external environment that reflects my inner identity. I belong there, in a way that I belong nowhere else.”

“I am not blind to the other realities of Israel. There are loud cell phones and TV talk shows where everyone screams at the same time; there is rudeness and vulgarity in the culture; there are painful economic and social inequities, political corruption, racism and bigotry; the frightening voices of religious extremism (tonight we think of the burning of a mosque in northern Israel this week by extremist, which the government and people of Israel have strongly condemned) and the denial of religious rights to Reform and Conservative Jews...”

“And always there is the shadow of war – past, present and future – and the pernicious effects wrought by hatred and violence on the human soul...”

“I do not expect Israel to be perfect, as I do not expect the people I love to be perfect. I see them as they are, and I see the potential in them, as well. I do my best to understand them. I rejoice in their strength; I grieve when they suffer or go wrong...”

“Israel speaks eloquently to me of courage and endurance and self-sacrifice, of the love of children and the stubborn dream of peace. Israel testifies to our people's refusal to disappear from history. It is the assertion of our right to live. It is the only government in the world that cares for and protects that right.”

Let each of us find ways to actively support Israel at this crucial time. Go to Israel on our Temple web site and you will find pathways to political action from AIPAC to J-Street. You'll find humanitarian opportunities in through the Jewish National Fund, Magen David Adom, and Hadassah. You'll find ways to help Israel strengthen democracy and social justice through the New Israel Fund. You may find in ARZA-Association of Reform Zionists a chance to do all the above. You will also find pathways to the Israeli English papers on line, Haaretz and The

Jerusalem Post, so you can learn about what is happening and being said and debated in Israel. Find your pathways, your place, to be engaged in supporting Israel this year.

We pray that peace will begin to come in the near future. We fear that it may be far off. Either way, the beauty and meaning and joy of Israel are with us here and now. Let us step up to our responsibilities to speak out for her security and encourage her continued democracy and struggle for social justice. Then as the Psalmist states, we will, “Rejoice with Jerusalem and be gladdened by her.”

Final Story and Remarks: Kol Nidrei 5772/2011

I'd like to conclude with one of my favorite Israeli stories. A guide is taking a group of American Jewish tourists around Jerusalem. To orient them he begins with the rabbinic tale of two brothers, one married with children and one single. At night the single one says, “Why should I have half of the grain we grow, I am only one person.” In the dark of night he takes half his grain and puts it in his brother's barn. His brother meanwhile thinks, “I have a wife and children to help out, my brother is alone.” He takes half his wheat and in the dark of night carries it to his brother's barn. In the day light they each see their barn full and don't know what to make of it. Then one night at a full moon, they bump into each other, arms full sacks of grain and realize what is happening. Due to the brotherly love, on that spot Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem.

Then adds the guide, “There were also two other brothers, one with a wife and children and one single. One thought to himself, “I have no wife and child and I get only half the wheat. I need more since I'll have no one else to take care of me in old age.” So in the dark of night he crept into his brother's barn and took half the grain. The other brother thought, “I have four mouths to feed. I deserve more than half.” In the dark of night he crept into his brother's barn and took half the bags of grain. In the light of day they were perplexed that they each had only their half share in their barn. Then in the light of the moon, they bumped into each other, arms full of bags of grain and realized exactly what was going on. And on that very site, they build the Knesset, the Parliament of Israel.

Why do I like that story? Because it reminds us from the start that Israel is both the fulfillment of many of our highest ideals. At the same time, it is a normal country with its own flaws and foibles. Some of the greatest of Zionist thinkers, like Herzl, looked forward to a Jewish State that would be a light unto the nations. Others like Ben Gurion looked forward to a state as he said, “that had its own Jewish prostitutes and thieves,” the normalization of Jewish life. Most of all it shows that like Jews everywhere, we can face difficulties by laughing at ourselves. Forbes Magazine rated Israel the 8th happiest country in the world. In spite of all the difficulties and dangers, Israelis have a sense of purpose and a family like sense of belonging.

Let us look to them and what they can teach us. Let us look to our religion to find purpose and our synagogue to find family like community. For Israel can teach us that these can help us to be happy in spite of the difficulties and fears that we each face in our lives.

Tzom Kal-may you have a light fast. Shabbat Shalom