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Building Israel

My first memories of Israel came from Israeli teachers in Hebrew School, who introduced me to Jaffa oranges, and kibbutzniks in blue hats who drained the swamps and made the desert bloom. They taught me that being Jewish was about more than how one prays; it could also be how one works with their hands, faces challenges, and builds a country.

My first trip to Israel came when I was 19. I worked on a Kibbutz for eleven months and stayed on when the war in Lebanon began and half of the men were called up to fight. During that year I asked my Kibbutz family, the Ozinsky's, if I should make *aliyah*. "Only if you're going to live on a Kibbutz," they said. "Israel's changing."

My third year in Israel was 1987. While I studied, the Palestinians decided to revolt – it was called "the Intifada." Israel was caught off guard. As the Palestinian protests raged on, Israelis called on their government to respond. They called for change. Israel did, entering into the era of the Oslo Peace Process.

In 1995, when I came to Beth-El, there was still hope that Oslo might succeed. I remember giving a sermon suggesting that one day there could be two Jerusalems – one, comprised of West Jerusalem and part of the old city, that would remain as Israel's capitol; and the other, comprised of East Jerusalem and part of the old city, that could become the Palestinian's

capitol. Not everyone in the congregation agreed with that sermon. As it turned out, neither did the Palestinians.

After Israel spent a decade searching for a path to peace, the Palestinians decided to pursue a different course. They chose terror, and Israel changed again. With no other way to defend themselves and their children, Israel took a passive approach, building a wall to separate their families from suicide bombers. The world screamed. I cheered. Could there be a more righteous response to those seeking to kill us, than to simply keep them away?

Sometimes it's hard to remember that Israel is more than just a conflict zone. As the years have passed, she's changed in other ways. From an economy based on agriculture, Israel moved into science, medicine and technology. Based on their experience living in a water poor land, Israel developed new methods to conserve and recycle water, to desalinate the oceans, even finding a way to draw water out of thin air.

Israel has shared its agricultural knowledge with the nations of Africa; and even offered it to its enemies. In times of crisis, all over the world, Israel is among the first countries to respond. When wounded Syrians appeared at the border, Israel cared for them, making sure that when they were able to go home there would be no trace of Israel on their clothing, for that could be deadly. No matter, these survivors will always carry a piece of Israel in their hearts; as do the Syrian refugees living in Jordan, to whom Israel continues to provide covert aid.

The truth is, I could talk for hours about Israel's morality, her achievements. I could speak for hours about the evil practices of the Palestinians whose new method of "fighting the

occupation” is to send flaming kites and balloons into Israel, burning down thousands of acres of crops and wilderness areas; or their murderous neighbors to the north, the Syrians who gas and slaughter their own people. There’s no question that Israel is not a perfect country. But its merits far outweigh its sins. And for this we should feel a sense of gratitude and pride.

And yet if I’m honest, along with those feelings of gratitude and pride, these last few years *a sense of ambivalence* has crept into my soul; like we’ve been moving in different directions and I’m being left behind. Not just me personally, but us Reform Jews, us pluralistic Jews, us American Jews; that Israel’s attitude toward us is changing, which inevitably means that so will our relationship.

Where does this feeling come from? It’s a combination of things. It’s the government’s gymnastics over keeping its promise to create an area at the Kotel where Reform and Conservative Jews can pray like we do at home. It’s the publication of an Israeli Rabbinat blacklist of American Rabbis (Reform, Conservative and Orthodox) whose conversions are not accepted. It’s the “modesty” police in towns like Beit Shemesh who shame Orthodox girls for wearing dresses they deem too short. It’s displays at museums that omit references to the age of antiquities or geological events, for fear of challenging the beliefs of Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jews. It’s the creeping power of a fundamentalist sect of Judaism that rejects modernity and has more and more control over Israel’s civil and social life. It’s the feeling that Israel’s Jewish identity is changing so much that, *as a Jew*, I’m not sure it will still be a place that I will feel at home.

Now if there's a silver lining to this situation, it's that I'm not alone. There are actually many Israelis who share these same feelings – particularly over the issues that affect their daily lives. They're upset that a week ago, a religious party threatened to shut down the government if bridge work over a major Tel Aviv highway took place on Shabbat, so that tens of thousands of commuters could get to their jobs on time when the work week began. This should have come as no a surprise since last year, work on a high-speed train from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem almost shut down the government for the very same reason.

Over the last years, the religious parties have objected to convenience stores, coffee shops, restaurants and theaters being open on Shabbat. And since Israel has a six-day work week, it leaves Israelis with far fewer options for enjoying their “one day weekend”.

When it comes to the big picture, Israelis are unhappy that they have to foot the bill for the Haredi way of life. Since they spend so much time studying instead of working, and have large families, their community receives a disproportionate share of governmental support.

Israelis are also upset that, while the Haredi community is happy to take handouts, it's unwilling to do its share to protect the country. A few years ago, the government passed a law requiring their children to perform civil service or serve in the IDF. The result has been protests in the streets. Meanwhile, those Haredim who have decided to fulfill this obligation are ostracized from their community.

Religious tension is also present in the modern Orthodox community, whose children willingly serve in the IDF. Some Orthodox troops have objected to listening to Hatikvah when it's sung by

a woman. And recently, a group of soldiers turned their back on their commanding officer, refusing to follow an order, because she was a woman.

Yes, it appears that Israel is changing. But it's not only we American Jews who feel alienated; there are millions of *sabras* who are uncomfortable as well. Where did this issue come from? Surprisingly, it goes back all the way to the founding of the State. You can hear its echo in the words David Ben Gurion spoke on, May 14, 1948, when he took to the airwaves to declare Israel's independence. I want you to listen to a bit of that address now, both to be reminded of the vision Israel's founders had for their country, as well as to see the roots of the internal challenge that Israel faces today.

"The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.

After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it, never ceasing to pray and hope for their return. In recent decades they made the desert bloom, revived the Hebrew language, built villages and towns, and created a thriving community controlling its own economy and culture. Loving peace but knowing how to defend themselves, they brought the blessings of progress to all the country's inhabitants, as they aspired towards independent nationhood."

It continues: "...On November 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz-Israel... ACCORDINGLY, WE

...HEREBY DECLARE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A JEWISH STATE IN ERETZ-ISRAEL, TO BE KNOWN AS THE STATE OF ISRAEL.

...ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; and safeguard the Holy Places of all religions...

...WE EXTEND our hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness...

WE APPEAL to the Jewish people throughout the diaspora to rally around the Jews of Eretz-Israel in the tasks of immigration and upbuilding, and to stand by them in the great struggle for the realization of the age-old dream - the redemption of Israel.

Placing our trust in the *Rock of Israel*, we affix our signatures to this proclamation in the city of Tel-Aviv, on this 5th day of Iyar 5708 (14th May, 1948)."

While this stirring text is worthy of study, there are just two observations I want to call to your attention. First: How did Israel's founding fathers envisage the character of this state? As you heard, Israel was to be based on freedom, justice and peace; would ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants, irrespective of race, sex or religion; guaranteed *freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture*. In short, this Jewish state was

founded on Western values. Israel was to be a country where we Reform Jews would feel very much at home.

The second observation: If you were to read the *entire* text, of the Declaration you would find that God's name is not to be found. This was not an oversight. The vast majority of Israel's Zionist leaders were proud secular Jews. They were not religious. And as we've seen, the vision they had for this state was of a pluralistic country, not a religious country or a theocracy.

There was, however, a small religious faction on the Council which approved the Declaration. It was led by Rabbi Yehuda Maimon, the leader of the Religious Zionist movement, who later became Israel's first Minister of Religion. Rabbi Maimon wanted a clear reference to God in the proclamation. As a result, wording was added to the final section that read: "Placing our trust in the *Rock of Israel* we affix our signatures...."

While this phrase "Rock of Israel" (Tzur Yisrael) is found in our prayer book, and is understood to refer to God, it was ambiguous enough to allow non-believers to accept that it was referring to the "land" of Israel. Therefore, they grudgingly agreed to this change from the original text.

Rabbi Maimon, however, was none too happy and objected to this euphemistic language. But Ben Gurion warned him that if he were to put the change to a vote, the rabbi would lose. So Maimon grudgingly accepted the compromise language.

Now if you read the complete text of Ben Gurion's address, you'll find it includes a promise that within 5 months the new state would adopt a Constitution. Israel missed that deadline, and 70 years later is still without it.

Several reasons have been given for this omission. The first, that immediately after the Declaration was broadcast to the world, Israel was attacked by seven Arab countries: Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, who sought to destroy the Jewish state before it had a chance to take root. Given these circumstances, it is quite understandable that Ben Gurion's deadline passed before a Constitution could be agreed upon.

But why, after the war concluded, did Israel still not adopt a Constitution? Most likely it was because the religious and secular parties held very different views as to the nature of the country. The religious parties believed that Israel was the work of God's hand, clearly evident in her miraculous rebirth and survival through the war of Independence; and furthermore, as a Jewish country, it already had a Constitution – the laws of the Bible and Talmud.

Meanwhile, as we have already seen, the secular Zionist founders of Israel had a very different kind of State in mind; a modern nation, whose citizens had the autonomy to choose their own path and need not be constrained by the religious practices and traditions of their ancestors. Today, those old divisions have grown deeper. And the inability to clearly define Israel's social and cultural identity has led to the alienation we feel here in America.

So where does that leave us now? The truth is, actually, it leaves us in good company. Earlier this week, the results of an annual survey on Religious Pluralism in Israel were released. It found that two-thirds of Israelis disapprove of how their government handles religious issues **and they want American Jews to intervene in the debate.**

The issues they're most upset about? Topping the list: The government's unequal support for the Haredi community, which comes at the expense of other societal needs. Next, 70% of Israelis want the government to recognize all forms of marriage. 70% want increased public transportation to be available on Shabbat. 66% want Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Judaism to enjoy equal status. Friends, Israel is calling for us to engage, for us to get involved. Still not sure? 65% of those who voted for Netanyahu want to hear our voice!

What can we do? Our movement has launched a Campaign for Religious Equality, to bolster the institutions of the Reform Movement in Israel: to add to the 100 Israeli ordained Reform Rabbis and 40 Reform communities and congregations; to support the work of Israel's Religious Action Center which uses the courts to fight against religious discrimination and coercion; to lobby members of the Knesset; to build connections with Israelis on the issues we share; and to continue to educate Israelis about Reform Judaism which teaches that respect for our Jewish traditions and values does not have to come at the expense of one's conscience, and that Judaism need not conflict with modernity.

Friends, we must not allow ourselves to be alienated or ambivalent. We cannot sit on the sidelines and watch others shape the direction of society; not in Israel and not in America. There are tools we can use to be engaged, to exercise power, to make a difference. And there is a desire among Israelis for us to do so. A majority of Israelis want us to show them, teach them, work with them, to create the type of society that their founders dreamed of; the kind of society that we cherish, the kind of country that can live up to its promise.

Let's show our Israeli brothers and sisters that we care for them, not only when they're fighting wars, but also when they're fighting for the soul of their country; striving to create a better quality of life for themselves and their children.

My first memories of Israel came from Israeli teachers in Hebrew School, who introduced me to Jaffa oranges, and kibbutzniks in blue hats who drained the swamps and made the desert bloom. They taught me that being Jewish was about more than how one prays; it could also be how one works with their hands, faces challenges, and builds a country.

As a congregation, as a community, we can help build a country by joining our movement's Campaign for Religious Equality. Please be in touch with me so we can discuss how can make a difference – for our sake and for the sake of Israel.

May 5779 be a year of action and involvement; of strengthening relationships and building something of lasting worth. Am Yisrael Chai!

ADDENDUM: Complete Text of Israel's Declaration of Independence

The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books. After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.

Impelled by this historic and traditional attachment, Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland. In recent decades they returned in their masses. Pioneers, ma'pilim [(Hebrew) - immigrants coming to Eretz-Israel in defiance of restrictive legislation] and defenders, they made deserts bloom, revived the Hebrew language, built villages and towns, and created a thriving community controlling its own economy and culture, loving peace but knowing how to defend itself, bringing the

blessings of progress to all the country's inhabitants, and aspiring towards independent nationhood.

In the year 5657 (1897), at the summons of the spiritual father of the Jewish State, Theodore Herzl, the First Zionist Congress convened and proclaimed the right of the Jewish people to national rebirth in its own country.

This right was recognized in the Balfour Declaration of the 2nd November, 1917, and reaffirmed in the Mandate of the League of Nations which, in particular, gave international sanction to the historic connection between the Jewish people and Eretz-Israel and to the right of the Jewish people to rebuild its National Home.

The catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people - the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe - was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of its homelessness by re-establishing in Eretz-Israel the Jewish State, which would open the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew and confer upon the Jewish people the status of a fully privileged member of the comity of nations.

Survivors of the Nazi holocaust in Europe, as well as Jews from other parts of the world, continued to migrate to Eretz-Israel, undaunted by difficulties, restrictions and dangers, and never ceased to assert their right to a life of dignity, freedom and honest toil in their national homeland.

In the Second World War, the Jewish community of this country contributed its full share to the struggle of the freedom- and peace-loving nations against the forces of Nazi wickedness and, by the blood of its soldiers and its war effort, gained the right to be reckoned among the peoples who founded the United Nations.

On the 29th November, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz-Israel; the General Assembly required the inhabitants of Eretz-Israel to take such steps as were necessary on their part for the implementation of that resolution. This recognition by the United Nations of the right of the Jewish people to establish their State is irrevocable.

This right is the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State.

ACCORDINGLY WE, MEMBERS OF THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL, REPRESENTATIVES OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ERETZ-ISRAEL AND OF THE ZIONIST MOVEMENT, ARE HERE ASSEMBLED ON THE DAY OF THE TERMINATION OF THE BRITISH MANDATE OVER ERETZ-ISRAEL AND, BY VIRTUE OF OUR NATURAL AND HISTORIC RIGHT AND ON THE BASIS OF THE RESOLUTION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, HEREBY DECLARE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A JEWISH STATE IN ERETZ-ISRAEL, TO BE KNOWN AS THE STATE OF ISRAEL.

WE DECLARE that, with effect from the moment of the termination of the Mandate being tonight, the eve of Sabbath, the 6th Iyar, 5708 (15th May, 1948), until the establishment of the elected, regular authorities of the State in accordance with the Constitution which shall be adopted by the Elected Constituent Assembly not later than the 1st October 1948, the People's Council shall act as a Provisional Council of State, and its executive organ, the People's Administration, shall be the Provisional Government of the Jewish State, to be called "Israel".

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

THE STATE OF ISRAEL is prepared to cooperate with the agencies and representatives of the United Nations in implementing the resolution of the General Assembly of the 29th November, 1947, and will take steps to bring about the economic union of the whole of Eretz-Israel.

WE APPEAL to the United Nations to assist the Jewish people in the building-up of its State and to receive the State of Israel into the comity of nations.

WE APPEAL - in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us now for months - to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions.

WE EXTEND our hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land. The State of Israel is prepared to do its share in a common effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East.

WE APPEAL to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally round the Jews of Eretz-Israel in the tasks of immigration and upbuilding and to stand by them in the great struggle for the realization of the age-old dream - the redemption of Israel.

PLACING OUR TRUST IN THE "ROCK OF ISRAEL", WE AFFIX OUR SIGNATURES TO THIS PROCLAMATION AT THIS SESSION OF THE PROVISIONAL COUNCIL OF STATE, ON THE SOIL OF THE HOMELAND, IN THE CITY OF TEL-AVIV, ON THIS SABBATH EVE, THE 5TH DAY OF IYAR, 5708 (14TH MAY, 1948).