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**Danger**  
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As we begin a new year, the words of Ecclesiastes ring in my ear – Ayn Hadash Takhat Hashamesh – There is nothing new under the sun. In the Middle East, talks have begun again between Palestinians and Israelis, but the prospects for peace are slim. Unfortunately, recent experience shows that peace talks herald the beginning of a more dangerous time. One of the most destructive, demoralizing periods in Israeli history occurred after the failure at Camp David in 2000. President Clinton’s attempt to forge a peace accord with PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat unleashed a second Intifada – a campaign of deadly suicide bombings against city buses, grocery stores, restaurants, discos, even at a Passover Seder. So it’s not surprising to find little optimism that today’s talks will lead to peace.

Unfortunately, the Palestinians are one of the smaller problems Israel faces today. There is still an existential threat posed by fundamentalist Iran, which despite sanctions by the U.N., the E.U., and the United States, continues to pursue its nuclear program. There is the threat from Hezbollah in Lebanon, which possesses more missiles now than it did at the outbreak of war in 2006. And Hamas in Gaza has re-armed through tunnels under the Egyptian border. The sad truth is, the challenges facing Israel are so grave that her generals predict that in the next war, rockets will strike Tel Aviv and civilian casualties will outnumber those of the military. Israel is preparing for these threats – building massive underground shelters, and conducting civilian action drills. A nation which was undeterred by threats of poison gas during America’s invasion of Iraq will not allow itself to be overcome today.

Unfortunately, I feel like a broken record, singing the same song year after year: Israel is in danger; we need to stand up for her. But Israel is endangered, and we have an obligation to stand by her side. But while it is vital that we are aware of the trials yet to come, I’m fearful that this image of an embattled nation, which relies on support from American Jews, could become the only picture of Israel our children will ever know. And this picture is flawed.

This picture fails to convey the image of the modern, democratic country we read about in Start Up Nation, the book by Dan Senor and Saul Singer, which describes a first world country with a booming economy. It fails to convey Israel’s vital and vibrant cultural and arts scene; its leadership in innovation, technology and, the environment. Israel is one of the greenest countries on earth, not only because of the solar water heaters on the roof of every building, or its use of recycled and brackish water, or its efforts to build the infrastructure to support a national system of electric cars. How about the fact that Israel is the only place on the planet to have reversed the effects of global warming; the only place where deserts are shrinking and the climate is becoming more moderate. And most incredible of all, despite all of the challenges in front of it, Israel is happy. In the 2010 Gallup World Poll, which ranked 155 nations on their sense of well being, Israel was ranked as the 8th happiest place on earth. (By the way, the U.S. ranked 14th). Yes, all of these are also images of Israel today.

And so too is the image of Israel as a nation where Jews are struggling with their religious identity. One of the great ironies of the 19th century Zionist movement is that the banner for a Jewish state was carried by secular Jews. Theodore Herzl, the man who wrote: “If you will it, it is no dream...,” who

founded modern Zionism, was not driven to return to Zion because of a religious calling. Herzl was a proud, secular Jew who rejected the traditions of our ancestors; a man who tried to live an emancipated life in Europe and turned to his Zionist idea only when it became clear that this was not possible; that Jews would never be granted equal rights or opportunities in Europe. If Herzl had been born here, in 21st century America, if he had been given the opportunity to live our lives, the thought of a creating a Jewish state never would have crossed his mind.

The heroes of the Zionist movement were not *dati'im* – they were not religious Jews. They were *halutzim* – pioneers. They were idealists whose religion was more akin to Communism than Judaism. They were young men and women who believed, not in the power of worship, but in the sanctity of labor, of reclaiming a barren land, of draining swamps and planting crops, of building a new country in a neglected land. They fled from Europe, not only to escape a civilization which would never accept them as equal, they also fled the stifling culture of the Jewish ghetto, a religious community that did not speak to them. This is why, when they established the state, they turned religious affairs over to the Orthodox community. Not because they valued Jewish tradition, but because they didn't. What they valued was founding one place on earth where Jews would have control over their lives; where we could be sovereign.

To capture a sense of their religious ambivalence – listen to how David Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister pictured his country. He saw it not as a place where all Jews would observe the Sabbath, but as a country like any other. "Israel," he said, "will be a normal country when Jewish thieves and Jewish prostitutes conduct their business in Hebrew."

And yet, while "religion" was not on the minds of the *halutzim*, the circumstances which accompanied the founding of the state, the destruction of Jewish life in Europe, the murder of six million of their brethren, created an inextricable bond between those pioneers and the rest of the Jewish people, no matter where we live.

During my time in Israel this summer, I heard a presentation on this bond by Professor Paul Liptz of Tel Aviv University and Hebrew Union College. He shared two seminal experiences he's had in his thirty plus years in Israel. The first took place in the early '70's after a visit to Rhodesia, where he was born. As soon as he returned, Paul received an order to report to military headquarters in Tel Aviv. When he arrived, he was handed a package of papers and told to write a report on Rhodesia's infrastructure – on the major roads in and out of the cities; on the conditions of the airport and other locations where aircraft might land; on the location of the power grid. In short, the military wanted to know, if Rhodesia's Jewish community was threatened, what resources would it need to use to rescue them.

Paul's second experience took place later that decade. The military called him to meet with soldiers who might be tasked to fly into Iran and ferry out the Jewish community in the event of the fall of the Shah. As he met with the soldiers, many expressed frustration at this potential mission, since the situation had been deteriorating for a while, and the Jewish community had enough time to make arrangements to leave on their own. They also knew that Israeli soldiers entering Iran during a revolution were likely to die there.

As Paul's session came to an end, one soldier suggested the unit vote on if they would agree to serve on this mission. Paul urged them to delay. He told them to go home and think it over. But the soldiers would have none of it. As the day ended, they voted, and reported their unanimous decision that if called to fly into Iran to rescue Jews, they would serve.

These stories touched my soul; the sense of unity, loyalty, the power of community. How would we

describe someone who is willing to risk his or her life to save another? Wouldn't we call it love? The sense of love that Israelis have for the Jewish people, that they are willing, time and again to offer up their lives to protect, not only their family, their land, their people; they are literally ready to sacrifice their lives for people they have never met. These are not abstract ideas. This is reality. And it's not only a story about the past, it's every bit as true today.

This year, in February, I met a Yemenite family that was spirited out of Yemen by Israeli agents who risked their lives to save them. There is no greater Jewish value than this – to come to the aid of another, even at the risk of your life. What does being Jewish mean to a secular Israeli? It means an absolute commitment to the survival of our people.

You know, we have it easy. There are no American Jewish rescue teams preparing to bring Jews out of hostile countries. No, the most that we are ever asked to do for our people is to write a check. And you don't need me to tell you that we have trouble even doing that. The number of American Jews who think their obligation to the Jewish people is making sure their child becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah is astounding. While Israelis are ready to sacrifice their lives for strangers, many of us aren't willing to belong to a temple and support our congregation after our child's Bar Mitzvah. It makes me wonder which group of people is more religious – secular Israelis or American Jews?

Actually, to characterize today's Israelis as "secular" may no longer be completely accurate. During my studies at the Hartman Institute, I heard a presentation on Israelis who are searching for meaning in traditions their parents and grandparents rejected. Rani Jaeger, one of the founders of Beit Tefillah Yisraeli, shared some of the subtle, even unconscious ways that Judaism is being woven into Israeli culture. He showed us newspaper ads that use the holidays to attract shoppers – stores advertising cleaning supplies at Pesach, for instance. He spoke of mainstream musicians who've produced pop versions of religious songs and watched them climb the charts and become top ten hits. He discussed one of the most popular TV dramas – a show called "S'rugim," (which means "knitted kippah") that follows the intertwined relationships of young, modern orthodox and secular Israelis. Not only are people watching this show, but they are drawn to the characters and the issues they face.

He also spoke of the supplementary teacher training, which for the first time is bringing Jewish values education into secular classrooms. While teachers do not earn a great deal of extra pay for becoming certified in this curriculum, the interest level is so high that there are wait lists for teachers wanting to receive the training.

The fact is, today's Israelis are not content to live by the decisions of their elders. The halutzim might have rejected the relevance of Judaism for the culture of the state, but today's young people have a desire, a need, to learn about Jewish tradition and values and integrate them into their lives.

Rani gave an example of how this is playing out. He shared the difficulties Israelis have with commemorating Memorial Day, and then 24 hours later, celebrating Independence Day. In such a small country, Memorial Day touches everyone. If you haven't lost someone in your own family, you know someone who has. So there is a great deal of trauma in suddenly moving from a national day of mourning to a time of celebration. And for some, this transition is too harsh, too stark to bear.

Rani's group looked for a way to address this heartache, and found it in our tradition. They took the idea of Havdalah – the service separating Shabbat from the other days of the week, and created a new type of Havdalah, separating a time of national mourning from a celebration of a nation's birth. They based the service on the words of Kohelet – "There is a time to be born and a time to die." The first time they conducted this service, a father who lost his teenage son in war, thanked them for giving him a way to

find solace – to acknowledge his pain and sorrow, before moving on to celebrate his country’s triumph.

Another difficulty Israelis face is that, although they live in a Jewish society, they lack *a place* to connect with their community. Houses of worship are Orthodox. And since they are not Orthodox, they don’t go there. Instead, on days like Memorial Day, they gather at their High School where the names of classmates who perished are inscribed on the wall. While the High School setting works for Memorial Day, it doesn’t work for everything. Israelis need a place where they can go, to share in times of celebration and times of mourning. They crave a place where they can connect with those around them. They seek rituals to help them live in a meaningful way. As Rani sees it, his generation is experiencing a new beginning as they embrace Jewish tradition to bring wholeness into their lives.

You know, there are many similarities between what is emerging in Israel and the evolution of Reform Judaism. Over the years, we have also become more comfortable with tradition, reclaiming practices that were discarded by previous generations. I think it’s possible that in the near future we will see the emergence of an indigenous “reform” Judaism in Israel that will link Americans and Israelis together; a Judaism that understands our traditions and is ready to use them in new ways, to elevate and sanctify modern life.

Unfortunately, though, while I can picture a connection between us, I can also see the opposite. I can see the two most important Jewish communities in the world drifting apart. Our Israeli brethren are in a much stronger position than we are today, demonstrating time and again their love for the Jewish people through their active commitment to defend and preserve it. They have the luxury of living, not in a Jewish neighborhood, but in a Jewish country, *and yet they still crave a stronger connection to Judaism*. They want to be part of a community, to join together for celebrations and find comfort in sadness. They want to feel connected to their heritage, and build a Jewish future for their children and their country.

Meanwhile, we are moving away. Like the rest of American society, each generation of Jews has drifted farther away from the previous one – both physically and spiritually. While Israelis are reclaiming traditions, on the whole, we find them burdensome and inconvenient. We prefer a secular lifestyle to one that is religiously oriented. In fact, this has become so well established, so clear, that when Jewish traditions, when our holidays for instance, conflict with American culture or customs, not only do we choose to follow the American path, but it’s rare that we even pause long enough to recognize that there was a conflict in the first place. Yes, it’s quite ironic that Israeli and American Jews might end up practicing the same form of Judaism, and yet our paths may never cross. For just as Israelis are embracing their heritage, too many of us are growing accustomed to neglecting Judaism and letting it go.

This summer I spent two Shabbats in Jerusalem and a third in Tel Aviv. On that third Friday night I headed over to the Namal – which is sort of an Israeli version of Navy Pier. It’s a port filled with restaurants, shops, and entertainment. As I walked along the pier, I came across a large group of people. They were gathered in a semi-circle, on 700 chairs, facing towards the sea. In front of the gathering, along the sea wall, was a small group of musicians and readers. Everyone was holding books in their hands, filled with traditional prayers, modern songs, poems, and alternative readings. There was no rabbi or cantor to lead a service, but it didn’t matter. The group prayed together, sang together, and watched the sun set slowly into the sea.

When we came to the Amidah, a prayer which is said in the direction of Jerusalem, one of the service leaders told us that we could turn toward the east if we wanted, or we could continue watching the sunset and just direct our hearts to the east.

Praying towards the setting sun, watching its yellow melt into the sea, may not be traditional, but it is beautiful. And as I stood there, I suddenly realized that it was actually more appropriate to face the sea than to turn towards Jerusalem. Because the inspiration for that service, the inspiration for the Judaism that Israelis are starting to practice does not come from Jerusalem, it comes from the West. It comes from Reform Judaism, from us. We have brought something new, unique, and special into the world, a Judaism that gives meaning to the challenges of modern life, that inspires the young, that touches the soul; a Judaism that is connecting Israelis to the heritage of their ancestors, and can still do the same for us.

Friends, Israel is more than a beleaguered nation fighting for survival. It is a strong, vibrant country, a world leader in technology and medicine, an innovator in agriculture and science. Its cultural scene is filled with theater and dance companies, orchestras, and film. It is a country that has moved away from the idealism of the halutzim, and has started looking for new traditions and values to replace those founding myths. And the place where they are finding their answers is in our heritage – in Judaism.

We have an opportunity to be a partner in this great experiment in Jewish life – not just to watch the rebirth of a Jewish land after 2,000 years, but to participate in the renewal of the Jewish religion. In this congregation are hundreds of men and women who are already engaged in this renewal, who give to our people with their hearts, souls and might. Judaism is a vital part of their life – not just a piece of their past, not just an inheritance to instill in their children, but a living ethic which brings them joy and comfort, adding balance and meaning to their lives.

As we begin this New Year, may the growth and renewal we see in our Jewish homeland inspire us to work for that same goal for ourselves. May we grasp hold of our faith, support our community, and bequeath a living legacy to the generations that are yet to come. Let us be proud, not just of the accomplishments of our brothers and sisters; let us be proud of what this American Jewish community can offer to the world.

Let us be proud enough not only to belong to it, but to build and support it.

Amen.