

Rabbi Sidney M. Helbraun  
Temple Beth-El  
Northbrook, Illinois

**Sermon on Israel**  
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For some people, the High Holidays mark the end of summer. But for me they have an entirely different significance. For me, the coming of the High Holidays marks the end of the Shul Shopping season.

No, I'm serious. For a good two months, and really up until Rosh Hashanah itself, families ask to meet with me to find out about our congregation. Some families wish no more than a chat on the phone, while others want to come in and speak in person.

It's funny, but it almost always happens that while we're talking, someone will bring up the subject of Hebrew School. And inevitably, the husband will tell me how much he hated it. (As if he's the only one.) I swear, sometimes I wonder how it's possible that the Jewish people has survived these last 30 years, because as far as I can tell, no Jewish kid ever liked Hebrew School. Not one. And if there is one of you out there who enjoyed going to Hebrew School, tell me that you're not too embarrassed to admit it.

Now for some reason, people think that the rabbi must have had a different experience with Hebrew School than they did. Well, let me reassure you, not only didn't I love Hebrew School; I failed Hebrew when I took it in High School. It's true. You can ask my mother.

But when I think back to those days, I can still remember sitting in the classroom, writing in my Machbarit, reading from the Siddur, and stopping at the 7-Eleven to buy candy on the way to temple.

One of my most vivid memories comes from our yearly Yom HaShoah commemorations. Each year, all of the students were gathered together in the Community Hall and seated on cold, gray, metal card chairs. The lights were turned off, and we'd hear a clicking sound as the movie projector began to roll.

Now I don't know whose idea it was to show Holocaust documentary films, horrific films like *Night and Fog*, to fifth and sixth graders. I don't know if it was discussed at School Board meetings, or if it was simply an executive decision by our principal, but watching those movies, seeing those graphic images of our people standing behind barbed wire, looking more like walking skeletons than actual human beings; seeing mass executions and heaps of naked bodies bulldozed into mass graves; watching those insane images of man's humanity to man, NO, of man's inhumanity to Jews, well, they left their mark on me.

Those movies left a message deep within my consciousness. They formed an indelible memory about the history of our people, and they helped to create the framework for how I have viewed Judaism ever since. Those documentaries did more than show me the horrors that a person can be subjected to simply because he is a Jew. They were a graphic lesson, irrefutable facts testifying to what it meant for our people, a tiny minority on the face of the earth, to have to depend on the good will of others for our safety and well being.

In every age, in each generation, for over two thousand years the Jewish people's survival has been

dependent on the good will of others. We were not strong enough to protect ourselves. But those gruesome films, films which no parent would allow their children to watch today, instilled the message that if Judaism was to survive – if our people was to survive, indeed, if my own family was to survive, then we could no longer afford to rely on others. No. If Jews were to survive into the 21st Century and beyond, we would need to be able to take care of ourselves, protect, and defend ourselves.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, there was only one path that the Jewish people could take. The only response to the horrors we endured when our fate was in the hands of others was to ensure that from this day forward our fate would be in our own hands. And the creation of the State of Israel, our own country, gave us an opportunity to achieve this goal.

And as I grew up, that very same Hebrew School that filled me with the horrors of the Holocaust, also taught me about the miracle of the Six-Day War, when Jews proved that we would no longer be victims to be shoveled into mass graves. Instead, we were taught that our people was reborn and that we were heroic. In Hebrew School we heard about Jewish soldiers who stood up against the armies of five Arab nations; nations sworn to finishing Hitler's job and driving us into the sea.

Israel did not crumble under their threats. The Jewish people was not going to be victimized again. Instead we were strong and brave. Israel faced the threat head on, and was triumphant. And I, a small Hebrew School student, I was proud of our people and their accomplishments.

Those were heady days, some thirty years ago. Those were days when Israelis were role models. They were “new” Jews, and children like me just couldn't wait to become Halutzim – pioneers, just like them. Back then, this pioneer spirit pervaded community events, like the Walk for Israel. The Walk was more than just a rally. Back then we walked a mile for every year of Israel's existence. Participating in the event did more than raise money; it also gave you a sense of accomplishment. It said that you had that Halutz spirit in you, that you could be a hero too, just like our Israeli brothers and sisters.

Looking back, I also remember, as you must as well, the year that we arrived for services on Yom Kippur, and the rabbi announced that Israel had been attacked and was in grave danger. Voices hushed, and the auditorium grew still. People even stopped arguing over “whose seat it was.” And we prayed. We prayed in silence for the safety and survival of our people.

No one was confident about the outcome of that war. We were worried. Israel was in trouble. And I did all that an 11 year-old boy could do. I picked up a Magen David Adom Can at Hebrew School, and I started going door to door, asking our neighbors to Help Support Israel. Of course, I was a little nervous at first. But amazingly, every time a door was answered, people contributed to my can. (I didn't realize how hard it is to say “no” to a neighborhood boy with a cause.)

So I went door to door. Now I didn't think that the money I collected would save Israel, but I knew that I needed to do something. I needed to reach out in some way. I needed to help in the war effort. I couldn't just sit on the sidelines when the future of my people was at stake. So I did what I could. I canned for Israel.

Six months ago, I “canned for Israel” again. The CCAR, the Central Conference of American Rabbis was holding its conference in Jerusalem and I was going to go. As you know, the newspapers were screaming about suicide bombings. CNN, Fox News, NPR, even the American Government was issuing travel alerts. My wife, my parents, and many of you suggested that it was not a good time to go. And the truth is that you were right. It wasn't a good time to go. It was a horrible time to go. And that, as much as anything else, was what drove me. **It was a horrible time to go to Israel. But I needed to go to at**

**least feel like I was standing with my people in an hour of need.** Now I know that I'm not a soldier who could protect the front lines. But at least I could stand with my people and let them know that they are not alone. At least I could spend a few days with them. It was better than nothing.

In hindsight, I can now say that when I returned home I was literally shell-shocked. As it happened, my visit **was** a truly horrible week, even by Israeli standards. There was a shooting attack in an upscale Tel Aviv restaurant on the day I arrived. There was a machine gun attack at a Bar Mitzvah celebration in a hotel in Netanya two days later. There was the Jerusalem cafe (Kafit) that I suggested we stop at to get a bite for lunch, but my friend wanted to go somewhere else, and 15 minutes later, we heard that a terrorist with a 100 pound bomb on his back was pushed out the door and tackled on the street. No one was injured in that incident; but still, I could have easily been in that cafe. And then, two days later there was the other cafe, Moment, that I passed as we were looking for a place to sit down for dinner. One hour later it was blown up, while I was still eating at another restaurant less than a mile away.

After calming myself down and calling Debbie on a friend's cell phone, the group of us walked back to the hotel. I went to my room and put on the TV. There were 11 young people killed in that attack and dozens wounded. I sat there, in a daze, staring at the television screen, watching the reports, and worrying with the TV broadcasters that the report of noise at the other end of Jerusalem could be another bombing.

Six months ago, I went to Israel promising myself that I would be careful. I have a wife and children at home who depend on me. And yet, despite my promise, despite my best intentions, was it really anything more than luck or chance that kept me from my death during that visit?

When I returned home from Israel, I came back with a new perspective. I felt the dangers that Israelis feel as a part of their daily life. I understood how, simply going to the grocery store could become a dangerous activity. How letting your children take the bus to school could require a tremendous leap of faith. How sitting in a cafe could be considered an act of defiant courage. How the basic tasks of daily living could become a terrible strain. I understood how an Israeli could tell her relative, who was visiting the country with me, and offered to go over for a visit, (our hotel was a five minute walk from her apartment) – I understood her when she told him: “Don't come – it's not safe to walk the streets – I wouldn't.” I understood her. I understood all of it. I felt it in my bones. And today, I can still feel it in my heart.

And then when I came home, and I saw all of the talk on TV, and in the Trib and New York Times. And I listened to the “evenhanded” approach of the press that treats a murderer and his joyous mother with the same degree of respect as it does the family of the grandmother and the child who he had just blown to pieces, and I was outraged. I wrote letters. I spoke at the temple. I spoke at clergy meetings. I spoke in the High Schools. And I will continue to speak.

The press, the Europeans, the leftist groups on college campuses, they all have it wrong. The fact is that for the last two years, Israel has been under attack. Her men, women, and children have been targeted. Her buses have been targeted. Her buildings have been targeted. And there is nowhere in the country that is safe from that threat.

Despite the relative quiet of these past few weeks, the threat to our people has actually grown larger. For when the inevitable happens and our country attacks Iraq, it will not be the citizens of New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles who will feel the Iraqi response, it will be our people in Israel.

Over the last few weeks, Israel began inoculating its citizens with Small Pox vaccine. They have once

again started to distribute gas masks, and they're sending Iodine tablets, to protect the people from radiation, along with them. Yes, Israel is preparing to defend its people from biological and nuclear weapons. It may be the United States that will bring the War on Terrorism into Iraq, but Israeli civilians will be on the front lines receiving the brunt of the response.

Israel faces a precarious situation. It faces a threat to daily life from the Palestinians; a dangerous biological or chemical attack from Iraq; and an attack against its credibility from the press, the governments of Europe and left wing groups across the globe.

I never thought that I would say these words, but we are truly fortunate to have a friend like President Bush in the White House. If it weren't for his statements on the Middle East, if it wasn't for his principled stand, I think I might have gone crazy. After all, how can my view of the Middle East be correct if everyone else in the world sees things differently? Thankfully, our government has taken a consistent approach, and provides a degree of protection for Israel against the forces that would otherwise swoop down on her without a second thought.

But still, despite our government's support, there have been times that I have asked myself, how come I have such a different viewpoint than so many other people, who I tend to agree with on so many other issues? Why do I think that they're "right" about other things, but "wrong" about Israel? This dichotomy has forced me to carefully consider what is behind the viewpoint of these other groups. And this is where I believe they are coming from.

In viewing the Middle East, there are two underlying facts that stand out in many people's minds. First, Israel unquestionably has the strongest army in the region. They are a military force. So when the Palestinians rise up against the Israelis, they are seen as "Davids" standing up against Goliath. And everyone knows that David is always right. After all, why would David pick a battle that he cannot win? What could make him fight a war that will cost him his life? Only the certainty that he is fighting for a just cause. Thus, many people believe that the Palestinians wouldn't be fighting the Israelis unless their cause was just, because the odds are stacked too high against them. Therefore, they reason, the Palestinians must be right.

The second underlying fact for many people is that Israel is a Western country with a Western economy, while the Palestinian territories are Third World cities with third world economies. If you walk the streets of the West Bank, you will see how little the Palestinians have compared to the Israelis. You will see how hard their lot in life is. And you will see how much they suffer. Of this I am sure. The Palestinian people do suffer. And I am also certain that Israel's policies have caused a great deal of pain.

I have seen with my own eyes, homes that Palestinians built on their own land that were destroyed by the Israeli Army because Israel does not want to allow "new facts" to be created on the ground. I have seen checkpoints that prevent Palestinians from traveling freely from town to town; from getting to their job; even from getting to a hospital. I have seen groves of trees that were cut down to build new roads to Jewish settlements.

So, no, the Palestinian's lot in life is not easy. Their suffering and hardships are real. And Israel, as the occupying nation, has responsibility for some of it. And so, giving them the benefit of the doubt, I would suggest that when the nations of the world view the situation, they see a Palestinian people that is suffering and a powerful Israeli army that is occupying the land, whose policies contribute to that suffering. And they say: "How can Israel possibly be in the right?"

Go to any college campus and you will hear those arguments. "The Palestinians are suffering," they say,

“and Israel is responsible. Israel is the occupier. They have the stronger army. They are responsible. They are guilty.”

The problem with these arguments is that they miss the point. They fail to take into account that if the Palestinians would lay down their arms, stop making bombs, and arrest their militants, as they promised to do eight years ago, that Israel would hand the land over to them. If the Palestinians would stage non-violent protests, the West Bank and Gaza Strip would be theirs – tomorrow. If the Palestinians would resolve to live **with** a State of Israel, then a million Israelis would stand by their side and demand an end to the occupation. But when a people attacks innocent men, women and children, when they blow up families at a Passover Seder, when they attack Pizza Parlors and Pool Halls, when they shoot husbands and wives asleep in their bed, and then search for their crying baby and shoot her too, when a people allows terrorism to spring forth from their land, and celebrates these despicable, inhuman acts, then you cannot blame those who are being terrorized for defending themselves.

You know, way back in 1948 there was an incident that could have caused a civil war in Israel. The incident surrounded a ship called the Altilena. Back in those days, Israel was preparing to fight a war against the Arab nations. If they lost, Israel would have vanished. The nations of the world had imposed an arms embargo against Palestine, so neither Jews or Palestinian Arabs could purchase weapons. But that didn't stop Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, or Saudi Arabia from acquiring and using weapons of their own.

Now, in the days before the State was formed, there were several Jewish groups that fought for Independence. The two largest groups were the Palmach, led by David Ben Gurion, and the Irgun, led by Menachem Begin. The Irgun had managed to get a boat loaded with weapons, the Altilena, to the coast of Israel. This was a major success because weapons were desperately needed.

When Ben Gurion heard about the shipment, he went right to the Irgun and told them to turn the weapons over to him. The Irgun balked at this demand. “We got the weapons,” they said, “and we'll use them.” But Ben Gurion insisted. He said, “if you don't turn over those weapons, I'll blow up the boat.” The Irgun again refused, and when night fell, they began to unload the shipment. But Ben Gurion kept his word. And while Irgun men were on board, the boat was bombed. Several Irgun men died in the blast.

This incident led to enmity between the leaders of the Irgun and the Palmach. Indeed, when Ben Gurion became the head of the Labor party, it was said that he would agree to form a government with any other party, except for the Likud – which was headed by Menachem Begin.

Now why did I tell you this story? Because it explains why today there is a State of Israel, but no State of Palestine.

David Ben Gurion took a harsh action. He destroyed weapons that his country desperately needed for a coming battle. He ordered the bombing of a vessel while other Jews were on board. And yet, despite those facts, what he did was right.

Ben Gurion was right because he knew that if Israel was to exist as a country, it needed to have one army, responsible to one leader. If Israel was to exist, then there could not be two or three different groups of fighters, creating their own agendas and following their own orders. There needed to be a uniform position, and a single solitary objective. Ben Gurion risked a civil war, but his actions created a chain of command. It created a unified leadership that was responsible for the decisions and the welfare of the State. It changed the fundamental nature of the situation from that of guerilla warfare with the

intent being to destroy an enemy, to that of nation building, where the goal was to build a country.

Over the course of these last eight years, since he signed the Oslo Accords with Yitzhak Rabin, Yasser Arafat has had the opportunity to do what Ben Gurion did. He was handed the reigns of government by the Israelis. He was given the title of President by the nations of the world. But he never once acted to solidify the future of his people. He never challenged the structure of his society to transform it from a culture of guerilla warfare, to one of nation building. Instead, he actively encouraged and supported the various terrorist groups within that society.

In all his years of leadership, Yasser Arafat never tried to transform himself or his people. He has never changed directions. He has never seized the opportunity to build a nation, opting instead to continue to blame, and try to destroy Israel. And more than anything else, this is the reason that his people, the Palestinians suffer.

Arafat has never taken responsibility for the actions that occur on Palestinian territory. Instead, he claims that his hands are tied. Even when the Israeli government allowed him to create a police force and supplied it with weapons, over 40,000 weapons, he never tried to use the arms at his disposal to unify his people, to create one army, to build a nation. Instead, he has continued to do all he can to murder, main, terrorize, and destroy the Jewish State.

The situation in Israel and the territories today is the direct result of a conscious policy by Yasser Arafat. As a result, Israel suffers. The Palestinian people suffer. And Yasser Arafat accumulates a 1.3 billion-dollar bank account abroad.

The fact is, it's always easier to blame someone else for our own shortcomings, then it is to look in the mirror and take stock of ourselves. It's easier for husbands to blame wives, for children to blame parents, for CEO's to blame government regulations or a lack thereof, and for Palestinians to blame Israelis. This is nothing new. But it is tragic.

So where does this leave us? Where does it leave Israel? It leaves us with a long road ahead. And it leaves Israel with a situation that is mostly out of its control. In the short term, Israel must secure its borders. It must build a security fence. And it must remain strong until the Palestinian people decide that it is more important for them to build a nation of their own than it is to destroy our nation. Israel must wait until a new leadership emerges, a leadership that speaks with one voice for all of the Palestinian people. A leadership that will deal with the terror groups that kill innocent Jews and cause pain and hardship for their own people. They must wait until there are Palestinians who care as much for the fate of their children as the Chicago Tribune does. They must endure the anger of the rest of the world, which cries for the suffering of the Palestinians and blames them. They must be strong and united. And we must do what we can to help.

A month and a half ago, Herb Keinon, the diplomatic correspondent for the Jerusalem Post spoke in our congregation. He shared what daily life is like in Israel today, and it is no different now than it was six months ago. But he also gave an analogy for what it feels like to be an Israeli today, and anyone who heard him speak cannot help but feel haunted by the image he painted.

He said that to be in Israel today feels as though you're stranded on a sinking ship. No one comes to visit a sinking ship. Any sense of peace or security is short lived. Life takes on the feeling of an unending siege. A sense of hopelessness is pervasive. And every time a terrorist strikes, this sense re-emerges. Every day that hotels sit empty, every day that restaurants and cafe's close down, every day that the economy decays, adds insult to injury.

Current projections are that Israel will face a 14 to 15 percent unemployment rate next year. Israeli's face boycotts of their products and produce all across Europe. Internally, how can you ask people to go out and spend their money when it's not clear that they will make it safely to their destination, let alone back home again? Israelis face tremendous hardships: economic, social, and psychological. And yet, they will not give up. They will not walk away. The Jewish dream of a land of our own will not die on their watch. They are making sacrifices, true sacrifices for the sake of the entire Jewish people. And while they stand on the front lines, we cannot let them stand alone. We must reach out our hands and let them know we stand with them. We must bolster them, for they need our help today, just as they did 29 years ago when the Yom Kippur War began. They need our support, physical, emotional, and financial support.

There's no secret to how we can do this. We can travel to Israel; take part in a mission. We can contribute to the Israel Emergency Campaign through the JUF. We can invest, not donate, but invest in Israel Bonds, and receive a pretty competitive return on the investment as well. Thanks to modern technology, we can directly support the Israeli economy by purchasing Israeli goods. Go to *BuyIsraelGoods.org* and find an up to date listing of Israeli goods and services in our community. Become active in our Israel Action Committee. Write letters to the editor, emails to our Congressmen and Senators, to the President, and thank them for supporting Israel. Join a PAC – AIPAC or our local Protect our Heritage PAC. Keep yourself informed. Speak to your neighbors. Find something, some way to connect.

It's a long time since I was in Hebrew School, but even then I knew that, as a Jew, I owed a debt of gratitude to Israel for the sacrifices they made for me – for my family and for me. There is no doubt that Israel continues to make those sacrifices for all of us. And the least we can do, the least, is to stand up in a time of need, and lend whatever we can to help them.

Adonai oz lamo yiten, Adonai yivarech et amo vashalom. May the Lord give strength unto His people. May the Lord bless his people Israel with peace. Amen.