

For the Love of Israel
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Recently, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad phoned President Bush. “George,” he said, “I called you because I had this incredible dream last night. I could see all of America, and it was beautiful and on top of every building, there was a beautiful banner.” “Well, what was on the banner?” asked President Bush. Ahmadinejad responded, “Allah Akbar—Allah is God, Allah is great.” Bush replied: “You know, Mahmoud, I’m really glad you called, because last night I had a dream too. I could see all of Tehran, and it was a beautiful metropolis with a thriving economy. On top every building there was also a beautiful banner.” President Ahmadinejad asked: “And what was on the banner?” President Bush replied: “I really don’t know.... I don’t read Hebrew.”

We can share this joke when Israel’s place on the world stage is secure. Iran is certainly a threat, but Israel’s power remains far greater and more sophisticated than Iran’s. This wasn’t always the case. For many years Israel was vulnerable. This was certainly true when Israel declared independence and was immediately attacked by her Arab neighbors. We know how Israel’s first war ended; however, her longevity wasn’t assured on the eve of her independence.

What if Israel had lost the War of Independence sixty years ago? What would’ve become of the Jews? This is not a joke but rather the premise of the brilliant novel, *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union* by Pulitzer Prize winner Michael Chabon. Following the startling defeat of Israel, an arrangement was made for a “temporary” resettlement of Jewish refugees to the Federal District of Sitka, on the Southeastern Alaskan panhandle.

In sixty years the District developed into a teeming Jewish metropolis, with Yiddish language and culture and the Jewish religion as its driving force. But this settlement was temporary. Their sixty-year lease is to expire soon, and the District will revert to Alaskan control. The Jews of Sitka will be scattered once again, and will begin a new period of exile. This novel, set in 2007 on the eve of reversion, captures the anxiety of most, the ambivalence of many, and the messianic dreams of a few. The common thread is that the Jews of the Federal District of Sitka are preparing for the day when they will no longer control their own destiny.

Michael Chabon writes fiction; our reality is different. Israel exists and Israel is autonomous. Israelis have their own psychological, spiritual and ideological anxiety, but reversion does not loom.

Yet, sixty years after Israel’s establishment the feelings of the fictional Jews of Sitka— anxiety, ambivalence, and even messianic dreams—also describe those of many

contemporary Israelis as they wrestle with the current state of their nation and its prospects in the decades ahead. American Jews, too, are anxious, but more often ambivalent when it comes to articulating a personal connection to Israel.

Next May, Israel will celebrate her sixtieth anniversary and I wonder, do we care? Does Israel still resonate with American Jews and especially Reform Jews today? To look at the data, the answer would be a resounding no. I say this unequivocally because both the data and my anecdotal experiences support it. The 2001 National Jewish Population Study reported that just 21% of Reform Jews feel, “very emotionally attached to Israel.”

So, on this Yom Kippur, the day that our tradition provides for us to think, reflect, and consider, I encourage you to reflect upon your emotional attachment to Israel. And I encourage you to think about ways to develop an enduring personal attachment to Israel. This is a critical task I believe, because for us to remain a vital and vibrant Reform Jewish community we need to develop a deep commitment to Israel that is inseparable from our Jewish identity.

Many of us are already very committed to Israel. But many aren't. It is likely, however, that those whose bond to Israel is very secure are of my parent's generation. Those whose connection is more tenuous are of my generation, and younger. If you remember Israel's first thirty four years, from 1948 until 1982, when her long-term future was far from certain, you may have a different attitude than your children or grandchildren.

You remember Israel always in peril and on the verge of being swept into the sea. You remember the promise and hope for Israel's long-term viability once Israel entered into a peace treaty with Egypt.

My generation has different memories. Mine are of Israel as more aggressive, more powerful, and dare I say, more arrogant. My adolescent and young adult memories include the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the first and second Intifadas, the promise, then failure, of peace with the Palestinians. We remember the flame of hope that was extinguished in November of 1996 when a Jewish fundamentalist assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin following the largest demonstration for peace in Israel's history.

When I asked the Confirmation class, boys and girls born in 1991, how attached they were to Israel, I wasn't all that surprised that nine of ten indicated that they weren't attached at all, or simply didn't know. Should we despair, or do we hold out hope?

The lament of the psalmist could come to mind, “*Im eshtachaveh et yerushalayim*—If I forget thee O Jerusalem.” But rather than lament our failure to cultivate a personal attachment to Israel, I see an opportunity to reorient us to the East and to make Israel and Jerusalem a central part of our Jewish narrative.

This idea is hardly new. In fact, nine hundred years ago, the medieval poet Yehuda HaLevi wrote, from his home in Spain, “*Libi b’ mizrach*—My heart is in the East, and I in the far off West.” This poem has inspired many Jews who live outside of Israel to visit. It reflects the struggle of those who are spiritually connected to Israel but live elsewhere.

If we heed HaLevi’s words and begin to look eastward with greater regularity and if we have serious debates about the future of Israel, then we might be able to reverse this trend of ambivalence and confusion that is so common among American Jews, young and old alike.

“Sounds nice, Rabbi,” you might be thinking. “But where do we begin? You just don’t snap your fingers and discover that ambivalence has vanished.” However, if we learn more, if we plant seeds of knowledge and understanding to help develop our education first, then we will be on the right path. We need to cultivate an abiding love for *am Yisrael*—the people of Israel, *eretz Yisrael*—the land of Israel and *medinat Yisrael*—the state of Israel. We should strive to become *hovevei Zion*, lovers of Zion, lovers of Israel. Why? To bind us to a two thousand year tradition that places Zion at the center; to remind ourselves that a commitment to Israel cannot be separated from our Jewish identity.

After all, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel observed, “for two thousand years of statelessness, we never abandoned the land and the land has never abandoned the Jewish people.”¹

I love Israel. I’ve visited three times as a tourist and have lived there for an extended period of time twice. Every time I fly to Israel, and the plane touches down on Israeli soil, my heart flutters. Yet the Israel that I visited for the first time in 1981 is different than the Israel I lived in ten years ago. And I know that the Israel I will see this December as I lead a Temple Beth El trip is very different than the one I saw five years ago, during my last visit. I still love Israel, it’s just different today than it was twenty-six years ago.

My love of Israel has developed through study and travel. It has developed through my earnest attempt to master the Hebrew language. It continues to develop through my attention to the Israeli press through publications like the *Jerusalem Report* and *Ha’aretz Online*. It develops through my conversations with Israeli cousins and colleagues. When I fell in love with Israel twenty-six years ago, it was love at first sight. For the past three decades my relationship with her has matured steadily. Like all long-term relationships, it can be complicated. Israel acts in ways that make me very proud, and in ways that disturb me. I hold Israel to a very high standard, but as we know, she doesn’t always live up to it. And when she doesn’t, I’ll say something. That’s what it means to be open and

¹ From an essay, “Israel and Memory” by Rabbi A.J. Heschel in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 43

honest and to be able to express support and criticism, from a place rooted in commitment and love.

Israel's narrative needs to be part of our personal story even though we may read the story differently. I remain dovish—albeit less so than I was ten, fifteen years ago. Many of you are hawkish, likely more so than you were ten, fifteen years ago. We may disagree on points of history or policy. But that doesn't mean that either of us cares any less for Israel.

A piece of my heart has been in Israel for twenty-six years. But Israel has been at the center of Jewish consciousness for over two thousand years. Our spiritual and physical connection to *Eretz Yisrael*—the land of Israel, is described frequently in our liturgy and sacred texts. Since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., and the end of that period of Jewish sovereignty, Zion has always been in the hearts and heads of Jews, if not always beneath their feet. For two millennia, Jews traveled to *Eretz Yisrael* frequently, not necessarily to settle, but to pilgrimage.

The modern political Zionism of Theodor Herzl that was born a little more than a century ago in Basle, Switzerland, that encouraged permanent settlement in *Eretz Yisrael* was simply the latest and most resonant expression of Zionism. In 1897, at the First Zionist Congress, Herzl boldly declared his desire to establish a national homeland for Jews. Eventually his dream became a campaign for a Jewish state in historical Palestine. The dream became a reality just fifty years later. For the past sixty years, Israel has blossomed into a modern democracy that has resulted in many extraordinary achievements and created vast opportunities. Her leaders have also made poor choices and her people must live with the long term damaging effects of them. All democracies suffer growing pains; America has had them and still does; So, too, has Germany, Japan, and of course, Israel. If, however, our relationship with Israel is real and lasting might we not be able to better address some of the challenges that, inevitably, will continue to develop?

What does Israel mean to us? How do we form an enduring bond when we are confused, and when we hear conflicting messages from different vantage points? The more we know, the better we can judge. Everything starts with Israel education. We need to develop a new paradigm. We need to discuss Israel from a place of love. We need, as my colleague Rabbi Jan Katzew has suggested, “more lovers of Israel and fewer lawyers for Israel.” Rabbi Katzew, director of the Union for Reform Judaism's Department of Lifelong learning explains:

“Relationship to and optimally a love for Israel—*eretz*—land, *medinah*—state, and *am*—people, is integral to Jewish identity. . .As Rabbis and educators teach and preach about Israel in our schools, from the pulpit, to adults, teens and children, we

need to keep in mind a fundamental question that nobody ever considered to ask a generation ago: Why should I care about Israel?”²

Today, many young adults, especially those under the age of thirty, are confused by the messages they hear. As Daniel Sokatch has written in the Jewish Journal,

“Young American Jews go out into the world without the tools to navigate a positive relationship with Israel in complicated times. It’s not just that what they’ve been told about Israel doesn’t prepare them to respond to anti-Israel propaganda on college campuses and in the social justice movement, it’s that they’re not even sure how to make sense of what they watch on CNN, read in the newspaper or find on the Internet. They don’t know where Jewish myths end and truths begins, or where truths ends and anti-Israel demonization starts up.”³

And this isn’t only on college campuses. Many middle aged and older adults have the same difficulty as their college-aged children, trying to navigate Israel. There are many truths about Israel and myths as well. Now that Israel has a powerful, thriving economy and vibrant democracy, and is far less vulnerable today than it was a generation ago, the questions about Israel become more complicated. As Jan Katzew observed:

“A generation ago, Israel as a success story, fueled by a combination of Western guilt and Jewish pride, was a compelling historical narrative. Now, Israel is justifiably viewed as a regional power and along with power comes the capacity to abuse it. This context makes Israel education nuanced. The current generation of North American Jews has not fallen in love with Israel, and, as in any marriage, love is a creating and sustaining force. If Israel education is designed to make lawyers for Israel and not lovers of Israel, then we are reaping what we have sown. An Israel advocate is different from someone who feels a deep seated affection for Israel.”⁴

Katzew’s and Sokatch’s observations capture many of my own feelings and struggles as I try to teach Israel to my students and to the community. I am a lover of Israel. I have a strong connection to the land, people and state of Israel. I am an advocate for Israel. I share with others the extraordinary achievements of the Jewish homeland; I come to her aid when she is down, and I stand by her side when she is alone. I am also critical of some of Israel’s policies whether it is the ultra-Orthodox religious hegemony, the limited recognition of Reform Rabbis in Israel, or the manner in which the government treats her Arab citizens, Ethiopian Jewish refugees and foreign born workers. I think about how Israeli society will answer some important questions in the years ahead, especially “what does it mean to be a Zionist today?” Lovers of Israel will debate these questions furiously

² Rabbi Jan Katzew; “*Is There Part of Me in the East?*”; CCAR Journal Spring 2007

³ Daniel Sokatch, “*We Must Teach About Israel, Warts and All*”; The Jewish Journal, September 14, 2007.

⁴ Ibid. Katzew

and passionately. We may not agree on the answers but we have to be responsive to the nuances of the issues and the range of opinions.

If, however, it has been difficult to develop this love, because you are ambivalent or confused, then it will be harder to participate in the discussion. I've experienced this with people trying to make sense of what they see on the news. They feel ill prepared to discuss the issues confidently and feel battered by the intensity of the strong opinions and accusations lobbed from the left and the right. So they just give up. As we try to gain a better understanding of a complicated situation it often feels that charges and responses are presented very much in black or white. Rarely does there seem to be room for shades of gray.

Israel is turning sixty this year. To love and appreciate her is to accept the wrinkles of history and the aching joints of experience. Israel is a state of dichotomies; she is powerful yet vulnerable; her Jews are often religious fundamentalists or ardent secularists and more than 20% of the citizens of the Jewish state are not even Jews.

Israel has pockets of extreme wealth and abject poverty. There's no black and white in Israel. It not just the good guys against the bad guys. Rather, there is lots of gray, as one would expect in anything that is sixty years old.

So what can we do? I offer these suggestions shared by Rabbi Katzew. He speaks for many of us who yearn to build connections between American Reform Jews and Israelis. We can bring Israelis to our community to share their stories of living in Israel, not only the soldiers and politicians, but also the artists, educators and business people. We can better integrate Israel education into our spectrum of lifelong learning. We can learn Hebrew or at least inject Hebrew words into our conversations. We can foster relationships with Israelis. We can visit Israel, frequently and for longer periods of time. We can continue to nurture more lovers of Israel, and develop our own Jewish identity that is inseparable from Israel.

Not only can we learn from Israelis; they can learn from us as well. For many, their exposure to Jewish religiosity is solely through the lens of an ultra-Orthodoxy that they reject. We can show them the beauty of Reform Judaism through the power of creative prayer, of substantive Jewish learning that incorporates non-Orthodox perspectives and a desire to pursue justice as a religious rather than a civic mandate. We can show them that Judaism can be joyful, creative and purposeful. We can make Judaism meaningful for them.

If we desire the words of Yehuda Ha'Levi to ring true, "*Libi B'mizrah*—my heart is in the east," I offer a few tangible ways that we can strengthen our bond with Israel. First

and foremost, go and visit. There is absolutely no substitution for planting your feet on Israeli soil and seeing the beauty of the land with your own eyes.

If you are a tenth or eleventh grader this year, spend six weeks in Israel next summer with NFTY, the Reform movement's youth organization. If you are between the ages of 18 and 26, and have never been to Israel, take advantage of the extraordinary Taglit-Birthright program. This free ten-day trip, funded by some of our nation's most generous and innovative philanthropists, renews and reconnects young Jews to their heritage, their homeland and their people. If you are not NFTY age or Birthright age, then join me this December as I lead my first (of what I hope will be many) Temple Beth El trips to Israel. You should have received a copy of the brochure when you arrived tonight; we still have space, and I'd love for more of us to go. Whether you've been or not, this trip will connect or reconnect you in a new way to the land, people and state of Israel, and to your fellow TBE congregants.

Other ways to put our hearts in the east is by learning about Israel. Several opportunities for exploring our relationship with Israel will be offered throughout the year or read Israeli authors, like A.B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz, David Grossman, S.Y. Agnon and Edgar Karet. Subscribe to the *Jerusalem Report*, read Israeli newspapers online, and look to Israeli based media sources to provide another opinion, some of which are far more critical than anything you've seen in the American media. That's the beauty of a democracy bred free-press. Support Israel financially. Purchase a \$100 Mazel Tov bond from Israel Bonds; donate to Israeli organizations like Meir Panim. And please join ARZA: The Association of Reform Zionists of America. Your affiliation with ARZA is the best way to support our Reform brothers and sisters in Israel who are working hard to spread the light of Reform Judaism throughout Israel.

When the next National Jewish Population Study is unveiled, I hope that a much larger percentage of Reform Jews will be able to answer with greater conviction that they are "very emotionally attached to Israel." I hope that Torah schools, and Hillel Foundations on college campuses, can help orient young Jewish students eastwards, towards Israel. I hope we can provide them with the tools to discuss a mature and complicated State of Israel confidently, acknowledging the complexities of this beautiful, little state. I hope that all of us will pledge to learn more and make a concerted effort to develop a personal attachment to Israel. All these and more are important. The rebirth of Israel is another chapter in the evolving narrative of the Jewish people. May we continue to add our own words to the text and make Israel very real for ourselves and for future generations.

Amen