

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah Day 2 – 16 – I ‘Heart’ Israel Challenge

Over the summer a parent came to me very worried. His daughter was about to start college. “Rabbi,” he asked, “What can I do to prepare her for when she is confronted with BDS?” I told him not to worry. His daughter was not likely to confront BDS – it should be the least of his worries. As most people who support Israel know, the BDS movement – that’s the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement – seeks to delegitimize Israel, especially on college campuses. Here is the thing about BDS though. It is incredibly ineffective at getting boycotts, divestments or sanctions to happen, especially at college campuses. There are 2400 four-year colleges and universities in this country. There were divestment resolutions last year at 34 of them. So, your child is not likely to encounter it and if they do, it is not a personal attack, but a political one in the student government. Oh, and of those that have been targeted, not one university has actually divested. Even on the rare occasions that a student government passes a resolution, the Board of Governors that controls the investments of the university politely dismisses it. So why do we hear so much about BDS? Because that is what they are good at – they are good at getting attention. That’s their goal and it is why they keep active.

That is not to say that Antisemitism on campus is not a problem; it is. However, we make a mistake when we suggest that all Antisemitism is BDS and by emphasizing BDS so much, we give it attention that it doesn’t deserve. The Antisemitism that our children are likely to confront is much more insidious than that. It comes from Anti-Israel statements from professors and being ostracized from social justice groups because they are Jewish. It comes from challenges in casual conversations with friends and insinuations in the student newspaper. For all of these situations, the best way to prepare our children is to make sure they have a short, simple, and heartfelt answer about why they feel the way they feel about Israel. Unfortunately, most are not able to give that answer, and sadly, most of us can’t articulate that answer either.

I realized this while listening to a talk by Jeffrey Goldberg, the writer and analyst for the Atlantic. I had the opportunity to see him speak recently and someone asked him to help us understand why a new generation of American Jews just doesn’t seem to be as attached to Israel as we are. “Why don’t they care more?” It’s a common lament among us lovers of Israel.

Goldberg replied that an older generation of committed Jews connects to Israel because of the Holocaust and the Six Day War. It is a generation who remembers what it was like to be helpless and have nowhere else to go. It is a generation whose Jewish identity is defined by the pride they felt when Israel repelled the combined might of the Arab powers in just six days.

But there is a new generation of Jews who know a different reality and a different experience of Israel. These Jews believe that the United States will always be a haven where they can be safe. These Jews remember the First and Second Intifadas better than the Six Day War. These Jews occupy a world of cynicism and moral relativism, a world where situations and moral codes don’t matter, where standing in front of a child to defend him and hiding behind one to defend oneself are judged equally, where a democratically elected leader whose politics you don’t like is reviled more than a despot who openly tortures or kills his own people, where response to rocket fire and attack tunnels with superior military might is seen as disproportionate aggression rather than necessary defense of civilians.

But that’s not necessarily why this generation is less connected to Israel than we are; it just paints the background for a failing that is all our own. Goldberg explained that we seem to have assumed that by being raised in Jewish and Zionist households our children would intuit the value and importance of Israel to the Jewish people, and to us as individuals. So, we spend lots of time teaching them how to deal with Anti-Zionism on campus and Antisemitism too. But we fail to articulate to them a simple,

cogent, substantive reason to love Israel and to want to see it thrive. It's like giving someone a box and telling them to defend it with their lives without telling them what is inside it. Eventually the box simply becomes a nuisance, an undefined obligation. Without knowing what makes the box important, without knowing its contents, it becomes a burden, not an asset. That is what Israel has become for our next generation because we haven't given them a simple reason why it is so worthwhile, and so a younger generation of American Jews has come to view Israel as a problem. That's how we have presented it, without ever explaining why it is worth the trouble.

Well Mr. Goldberg, I accept your challenge. Though I have stood here many times and expressed my love for and concern about Israel, I am not sure I have ever articulated my own reasons for that love in a simple, memorable way that could be understood by anyone from any background. The fact is, I found doing so pretty challenging. How does one sum up everything about something so important in just one sentence? And yet, to be able to do so is so crucial for Israel's future. So, here is my explanation for why I love Israel in just one sentence.

I love Israel because it is a blessing for the Jewish people that allows us to fulfill our purpose of being a blessing to all people. That's all – it is a blessing for us and enables us to be a blessing for others. Now let me explain what I mean:

Today we read the story of the *akeidah*, the Binding of Isaac. As the story draws to a close, God says, "...because you have done this thing and you did not withhold your son, your only one, I will surely bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand that is on the seashore...And through your children shall be blessed all the nations of the world, because you hearkened to My voice." It is a blessing that is repeated many times to Abraham and essential in that blessing is the promise of the Land of Israel.

But that doesn't really make sense does it? I mean, if Abraham's job is to be a blessing to everyone he comes into contact with and if that will be the job of his descendants, us, then why do we need a Homeland? Doesn't it make more sense to be spread throughout the world as we have been for the last 2000 years? We affect more people that way, so why not? Well, apparently, that's just not the way God wants things done. When there are lots of Jews spread throughout the world, we can make a difference in a lot of little ways. But the vision for Abraham is grander. The vision of the Torah is a home base, a place for the Jewish people to call their own and to use as a platform for bringing blessing into their lives and into the world. This is not the vision of a bunch of little workers bees dedicated to God spread to every corner of the earth, but the vision of a great hive that is so much greater than the individuals inside, dedicated to bringing blessing into the world.

The modern-day state of Israel is fulfillment of that promise to Abraham. We did okay fulfilling our mission through 2000 years of exile spread among the nations of the world, but it was never meant to be that way. Israel is a platform for spreading blessing into the world and I would submit that is exactly what it is has been since 1948.

As far as a blessing for the Jews, well that's no question. The early Zionists were inheritors of the idea that Israel is the source and home of blessing for the Jewish people. Long before the Shoah, the Jewish people kept our eyes and hearts on Israel not simply as a refuge but as a place to flourish. In 1897 Ahad Ha'am wrote, "This Jewish settlement, which will be a gradual growth, will become in course of time the center of the nation, wherein its spirit will find pure expression and develop in all aspects to the highest degree of perfection of which it is capable. Then, from its center, the spirit of Judaism will radiate to the great circumference, to all the communities of the diaspora, to inspire them with new life and to preserve the overall unity of our people." Now, I know the age of prophecy ended thousands of

years before Ahad Ha'am wrote that, but I would swear that his words were divinely inspired, because that is exactly what has happened. Indisputably, Israel has been the place where we have thrived as a people, even more than here in America. Israel has been the incubator of Jewish art, science, religious thinking and self-understanding. While we may have found safety in America, we have found so much more in our return to Zion; we have found ourselves.

And what about a blessing to the rest of the world? Critics of Israel would have you believe that Israel has been nothing but trouble since its inception, but that could not be further from the truth. Israel has been a shining light in the darkness of the Middle East. It is the safest country for Christians in the region. More than 300 Muslim Imams receive salaries from the Israeli Ministry of Religion. Women have had equal rights in Israel from its inception and a woman was elected to the highest office in the land, a mark some other enlightened democracies have still not achieved. Israel is a world leader in upholding the rights of the LGBT community and its military is a leader in integrating transgender soldiers. When a natural disaster or terrorist attack occurs, Israel is the first nation to offer support and when it is invited in, it is often the first to arrive on the scene. They get there quickly because there is a whole department of the Foreign Ministry dedicated just to that effort of helping others in trouble.

Because of Israeli innovation we are safer, our world is more accessible and we are better connected. Israeli technologies drive our cell phones, allow paraplegics to walk, keep our cars from collisions and allow quadriplegics to connect to the rest of the world with voice-activated cell phones. Israeli sensors and armor keep our soldiers safer, not just Israeli soldiers, but American soldiers. And how about this astounding fact - over the last three years more than ten thousand Syrians suffering from gruesome wounds have been treated at Israeli hospitals in the north before being clandestinely sent back to Syria, so that they wouldn't suffer consequences from being in Israel. Time and again, despite her critics, despite her attackers, Israel goes out of its way to be a blessing not only to the non-Jews living within her borders, but to all of humanity. Time and again Israel puts humanity above race, religion or tribe. That has always been the Zionist dream - to have a nation to be the platform from which the Jewish people can contribute to the progress of humankind. It is Abraham's blessing incarnate.

That is my "I love Israel" or "I 'heart' Israel" statement: I heart Israel because it is a blessing for the Jewish people that allows us to fulfill our purpose of being a blessing to all people. Now I pass the challenge to you. What is your I 'heart' Israel statement, your one-sentence explanation for why Israel is so important to you? I challenge you to craft that sentence and share it with your children, grandchildren, siblings, friends and neighbors. If you use social media, post it with the hashtag #IHeartIsrael. Collectively, we need to change the tone and tenor of our discussions about Israel and project Israel to everyone, especially the next generation of American Jews, as a positive force in our lives and in the world, not just something to worry about and be defensive about.

Of course, the dream is one thing and the reality is another. Israel is not perfect, no nation is and Israel is under more security, economic and resource pressure than most. Yes, Israel must find a way to resolve the conflict with the Palestinians. Israel must find a way to respect Judaism as it is practiced all around the world including right here at our Beth El. Yes, we should hold Israel to a higher standard. Yes, we should demand the best from our beloved nation in the East. Yes, we should be critical when Israel does not live up to the values and the dream described by hundreds of great Zionist thinkers over 2000 years of exile.

But we also must be forgiving of her inevitable mistakes and we must support her to help her forever improve in every way. A nation can strive for perfection, but it cannot achieve it. It is our task to help keep Israel on the right path as she journeys through the realities of Statehood. I think someone else's #IHeartIsrael statement sums up this notion of always striving for better while dealing with the reality of

the present pretty well. Shimon Perez, of blessed memory, said in a TEDTalk, “Don’t get caught up in the past...better dream...dream greater, dream large, don’t dream so small.” No one understood that perhaps better than Shimon Peres who saw all of the flaws and all of the possibilities – he dedicated his life to the dream amidst the sometimes harsh reality and if he could still say I didn’t dream big enough then I think we all have to embrace the dream and dream bigger.

But for now I leave you with this challenge – Yes support Israel by doing all the things I always say on the High Holidays. Sign up to join the cantor, Rabbi Ruberg and I at the AIPAC Policy Conference in March. Purchase an Israel Bond – you will receive your Bond Purchase Form by mail in a couple of days. But most importantly find a way to succinctly express your love for Israel in one sentence and share it with the world. That’s the #IHeartIsrael Challenge I lay before you today. I hope we are all up for it, because it is time we recapture the positive narrative of Israel. It is time we teach the next generation of Jews in this country why they too should be proud to have a home in Eretz Yisrael. It is time we proudly say, “Ahm Yisrael Chai – The Jewish Nation Lives.” It is time to do our part in fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham so long ago – that the Jewish people will be blessed and we will be a blessing to the nations of the world. Now you know why I ‘Heart’ Israel. I look forward to hearing why you do.

May God bless the State of Israel and those who dwell therein. L’Shanah Tovah.