

We all are connected to Israel, but how will we listen to each other?

Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker, Rosh Hashanah 5771, September 9, 2010
Mount Zion Temple, St. Paul, MN

The cover of Time Magazine this week features a large Star of David made up of daisies with the headline in the middle: "Why Israel Doesn't Care about Peace."

In response, some of us may jump to Israel's defense. Some of us may shrug our shoulders: "Doesn't involve me." Some may be confused how to respond. Some may be outraged by media bias. Some may feel exhausted by years of defending Israel.

One thing, however, seems perfectly clear to me: we may have many different reactions and hold varying opinions, but all Jews are implicated by that cover, whether we like it or not, whether fair or not. A Star of David accompanies the words, "Doesn't care about Peace."

This year, we are asking everyone to wrestle with their relationship with Israel in the spirit of our ancestor Jacob who wrestled with a divine being and became Yisrael, literally one who wrestles with God. Today I am speaking of *Medinat Yisrael*, the State of Israel, not the other aspects of Israel, *Am Yisrael*, the people of Israel, which Rabbi Adler addressed last night nor *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel, which I will discuss on Yom Kippur.

Today is about the Israel we often think about, the democratic nation-state founded in 1948 as the third sovereign commonwealth in Jewish history. The first *Medinat Yisrael* was under Joshua, the Israelite Judges and Kings; the second was under Ezra through the Maccabees and the Herodians. Each of the three have had different boundaries; each one with different forms of government, from monarchist to theocratic to democratic.

If you are comfortable in your relationship to Israel, I ask that you engage even more deeply this year and not check any of your values or beliefs at the door of support. As will become clear, I also ask that you help create a safe place for others to speak freely, something that is so needed in the American Jewish community today.

If you are uncomfortable in any way or not engaged, I invite you to raise your questions and critiques, also to help create a safe place for dialogue, and to consider taking a leap of loyalty about why Israel is important to Jewish identity.

We have a broad spectrum within our congregation, from those who do not connect in any way with Israel to two people, Madeline Stander and Mara Finver, who have recently made the most significant choice of *aliyah*, moving to Israel. We ask of everyone to be open, to listen, and to learn.

In that spirit of learning, I want to share a story from 63 years ago. Since younger generations only know an Israel beginning with wars in Lebanon and through intifadas and Time Magazine covers, and baby boomers grew up with an embattled Israel that miraculously survived in '67 against the entire Arab world, then it is clear how different it would be -- and how far removed from our perspective today -- to know what it felt like to live through Israel's founding.

In his autobiography, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Amos Oz describes the night of November 29th, 1947 as the United Nations voted to create a state for the Jews. Oz's description as an 8 year old boy at the time is so poignant that I am compelled to quote it in mostly in full:

After midnight, towards the end of the vote, I woke up. My bed was underneath the window that looked out on the street, so all I had to do was kneel up and peer through the slats of the shutters. I shivered.

Like a frightening dream crowds of shadows stood massed together silently by the yellow light of the street lamp, in our yard, in the neighboring yards, on balconies, in the roadway, like a vast assembly of ghosts. Hundreds of people not uttering a sound, neighbors, acquaintances and strangers, some in their night clothes and others in jacket and tie, occasional men in hats or caps, some women bare headed, others in dressing gowns with scarves round their heads, some of them carrying sleepy children on their shoulders, and on the edge of the crowd I noticed here and there an elderly woman sitting on a stool or a very old man who had been brought out into the street with his chair.

The whole crowd seemed to have been turned to stone in that frightening night silence, as if they were not real people but hundreds of dark silhouettes painted on to the canvas of the flickering darkness. As though they had died on their feet. Not a word was heard, not a cough nor a footstep. No mosquito hummed. Only the deep, rough voice of the American presenter blaring from the radio which was set a full volume and made the night air tremble, or it may have been the voice of the president of the Assembly, the Brazilian Oswaldo Aranha. One after another he read out the names of the last countries on the list, in English alphabetical order, followed immediately by the reply of their representative. United Kingdom: abstains. Union of Soviet Socialist Republics: yes. United States: yes. Uruguay: yes. Venezuela: yes. Yemen: no. Yugoslavia: abstains.

At that the voice suddenly stopped, and an other-worldly silence descended and froze the whole scene, a terrified, eerie silence, a silence of hundreds of people holding their breath, such as I have never heard in my life either before or after that night.

Then the deep, slightly hoarse voice came back, making the air shake as it summed up with a rough dryness brimming with excitement: Thirty-three for. Thirteen against. Ten abstentions and one country absent from the vote. The resolution is approved.

His voice was swallowed up in a roar that burst from the radio, overflowing from the galleries in the hall at Lake Success, and after a couple more seconds of shock and disbelief, of lips parted as though in thirst and eyes wide open, our faraway street on the edge of Kerem Avraham in northern Jerusalem also roared all at once in a first terrifying shout that tore through the darkness and the buildings and trees, piercing itself, not a shout of joy, nothing like the shouts of spectators in sports grounds or excited rioting crowds, perhaps more like a scream of horror and bewilderment, a cataclysmic shout, a shout that could shift rocks, that could freeze your blood, as though all the dead who had ever died here and all those still to die had received a brief window to shout, and the next

moment the scream of horror was replaced by roars of joy and a medley of hoarse cries and “The Jewish People Lives” and somebody trying to sing “Hatikvah” and women shrieking and clapping and “Here in the Land our Fathers Loved”, and the whole crowd started to revolve slowly around itself as though it was being stirred in a huge cement mixer, and there were no more restraints, and I jumped into my trousers but didn’t bother with a shirt or pullover and shot out of our door and some neighbor or stranger picked me up so I wouldn’t be trampled underfoot and I was passed from hand to hand until I landed on my father’s shoulders near our front gate. My father and mother were standing there hugging one another like two children lost in the wood, as I had never seen them before or since, and for a moment I was between them inside their hug and a moment later I was back on Father’s shoulders and my very cultured, polite father was standing there shouting at the top of his voice, not words or word-play or Zionist slogans, not even cries of joy, but one long naked shout like before words were invented.

...But my father said to me as we wandered there, on the night of the 29th of November 1947, me riding on his shoulders, among the rings of dancers and merrymakers, not as though he was asking me but as though he knew and was hammering in what he knew with nails, Just you look, my boy, take a very good look, son, take it all in, because you won’t forget this night to your dying day and you’ll tell your children, your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren about this night when we’re long gone.

And very late, at a time when this child had never been allowed not to be fast asleep in bed, maybe at three or four o’clock, I crawled under my blanket in the dark fully dressed. And after a while Father’s hand lifted my blanket in the dark, not to be angry with me because I’d got into bed with my clothes on but to get in and lie down next to me, and he was in his clothes too, that were drenched in sweat from the crush of the crowds, just like mine (and we had an iron rule: you must never, for any reason whatever, get between the sheets in you outdoor clothes.) My father lay beside me for a few minutes and said nothing, although normally he detested silence and hurried to banish it. But this time he did not touch the silence that was there between us but shared in it, with just his hand lightly stroking my head. As though in this darkness, my father had turned into my mother.

Then he told me in a whisper...what some hooligans did to him and his brother David in Odessa and what some gentile boys did to him at his Polish school in Vilna, and the girls joined in too, and the next day, when his father, Grandpa Alexander, came to the school to register a complaint, the bullies refused to return the torn trousers but attacked his father, Grandpa, in front of his eyes, forced him down on to the paving stones and removed his trousers too in the middle of the playground, and the girls laughed and made dirty jokes, saying that the Jews were all so—and-sos, while the teachers watched and said nothing, or maybe there were laughing too.

And still in a voice of darkness with his hand still losing its way in my hair...my father told me under my blanket in the early hours of the thirtieth of November 1947, ‘Bullies may well bother you in the street or at school some day. They may do it precisely because you are a bit like me. But from now on, from the moment

we have our own state, you will never be bullied just because you are a Jew and because Jews are so-and-sos. Not that. Never again. From tonight that's finished here. Forever.'

I reached out sleepily to touch his face, just below his high forehead, and all of a sudden instead of his glasses my fingers met tears. Never in my life, before or after that night, not even when my mother died, did I see my father cry. And in fact I didn't see him cry that night either: it was too dark. Only my left hand saw."¹

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Oz brings alive what is now a historic footnote. His words touch the euphoria, the surreal sense of the miraculous that after two thousand years of homelessness, Jews would have a place to call home.

Today Israel is not simply the result of that vote of '47. Like any country, Israel is the sum total of decisions by leaders over sixty two years, many both supported and vehemently opposed by Israelis and Jews around the world. Unlike any country, because of its significance also to Christians and Muslims, Israel is under a microscope of world attention that highlights its challenges, not the least of which is the perspective and context of being in the middle east. Because of the reality of its growing military strength since '47, its unasked for role as occupier, and successful PR against Israel, over the past decades, Israel has been transformed from David to Goliath. But that is only the beginning of its challenges. In this past year, headlines of the Gaza flotilla, a woman arrested at the Western Wall for carrying a Torah, gender segregated buses in Jerusalem, a Knesset bill about conversion to Judaism that would have alienated the vast majority of Jews in the world if passed, and continued building in disputed areas that affect future peace agreements result in many American Jews feeling more alienated from Israel. Even the renewed peace process which actually shows signs of potential success is met with what is called "peace fatigue" as if that should even be allowed! If it were not for Birthright and other successful ventures in the Jewish community, we would be seeing many more Jews alienated from Israel.

In a seminal and widely quoted article in the New York Review of Books this past June, journalist Peter Beinart diagnosed this disengagement from Israel as a result of the Jewish community leadership's promoting a pro-Israel right or wrong attitude.² He argues that there is healthier debate within Israel about any decision the government takes than appears to be allowed in the American Jewish community. The results are a wake up call:

In a 2001 survey, American Jews were asked whether they would say yes to the statement: "I am very emotionally attached to Israel." About 70% of Orthodox Jews said yes; 40% of Conservative Jews and only 20% of Reform Jews.³ 20% could imagine

¹ Oz, Amos (2003). *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. New York: Harcourt Inc. p. 355-59.

² Beinart, Peter. "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment," *New York Review of Books*. June 10, 2010. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/10/failure-american-jewish-establishment/>

³ Exact numbers were: 68% Orthodox; 39% Conservative; 21% Reform.

conveying the importance of Israel in their lives to someone else with the power of Oz's father.

Without a new approach to Israel, liberal Judaism is ceding the relationship to the Jewish state to Orthodoxy who in general are more comfortable with Israel, who do convey the importance of Israel parent to child and, who are, in general, more content with the status quo religiously in Israel and in relations with the Palestinians.

And the numbers of Orthodox are growing. This is shared not begrudgingly only factually. "According to a 2006 American Jewish Committee survey, while Orthodox Jews make up only 12 percent of American Jewry over the age of sixty, they constitute 34 percent between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four." A third of young Jews are now Orthodox. Not all Orthodox have the same views on issues such as settlements, but the majority certainly support them which has significant future political implications as well.

There are simply far too few Jews in the world not to engage everyone about Israel. Consider that in 2010 there is just now the same number of Jews in the world as there were in 1914, 13.5 million Jews in the entire world. It is a staggeringly small number considering the impact of our people. It is also a chilling number considering there were 17 million in 1939. Today, a little over 40% of the entire world Jewish population lives in Israel and another 40% in America. These are the two poles of Jewish living today. Our relationships have become more inter-dependent than ever before. Whether we see it or not, our destinies are linked. Israel has, for the first time, recognized this. Recently the government created a department for Diaspora Affairs aimed at strengthening Judaism outside of Israel. And, as one example of our dependency on Israel, The Knesset can pass laws that affect our Jewish status. We have a connection to Israel. The only question is: What voice do you want in it?

Beinart concludes his article: "[C]omfortable Zionism has become a moral abdication. ..Let's hope [we] can foster an uncomfortable Zionism, a Zionism angry at what Israel risks becoming, and in love with what it still could be."

It is possible to follow Beinart's plea. When we have speakers from differing perspectives and organizations -- as we will this year -- including J-Street in October and AIPAC in November, we are fostering uncomfortable Zionism. When our Bulletins all year will include many voices reflecting on core questions and a blog available for everyone to respond, we are not shying away from what Israel risks becoming. When we can "Stand with Israel" as our sign prominently says on our lawn, but also "pray for peace in the Middle East" as it also says, we are loving what Israel still can be.

In June, when forty five people, ages spanning eight decades, joined for a 15 day Mount Zion trip, we saw a more nuanced Israel and listened to more voices than many first-timer trips. We saw a theater production in Jaffa, unique in the world, of actors who are deaf and blind teaching in their performance art the yearnings of the human soul. One remarkable day began waking up in Jerusalem looking out from our hotel over King David's tomb on the original Mount Zion with the sounds of church bells, the call of the Muslim muezzin, the chants of Jewish prayers. We met Robi Damelin, from Parent's Circle, whose members are Palestinians and Israelis who tragically have lost a child in the conflict and have nevertheless chosen to work for peace, building relationships with each other and teaching groups around the world. We drove to Efrat, a Jewish

settlement in the West Bank, and met with its spiritual leader orthodox Rabbi Shlomo Riskin who brought a human face and reasonable voice to at least one of the many different groups of settlers. We ended that day in the foothills of Jerusalem at Neot Kedumim, the beautiful Biblical landscape reserve in Israel, where we planted trees and tasted each of the seven species of the land of Israel mentioned in Deuteronomy.

Seeing Israel first hand makes a difference; you too should go if at all possible, but we can engage Mount Zion in Jerusalem without leaving this Mount Zion.

Friends, our voices are needed in this conversation.

We will listen to each other in the spirit of the ancient debates between Hillel and Shammai. According to the Talmud, after three years of debate between the students of Shammai and Hillel, a bat kol, a voice of God descends into the study hall and announces, *Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim Chayim*, "These and those are the words of the Living God." Both opinions are honored and even given divine sanction. Who are we to know that our approach ultimately is the right one? In truth, different views are often right for different times. When we listen, we learn.

The *bat kol*, divine voice, continued, "These are those are the words of the living God, but the law is in agreement with the rulings of Beit Hillel." Why Hillel? Because "they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai, and were even so humble to mention the words of Beit Shammai before their own." (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b). Our conversations, even when debates, should emphasize humility, flexibility and embrace of dissent which has been fundamental to our survival for 2000 years.

We no longer have the outdoor scene that Amos Oz described where people share a historic moment, listening to a radio. Natural community moments and conversation are hard to come by. We will have them at Mount Zion this year. We will show how to have difficult conversations, wrestling with Israel, and still be one community.

Even during the debates between the schools of Shammai and Hillel, we learn that they socialized together thus putting into practice the biblical text "love truth and peace." (Zech 8:19)" We can love truth, but peace trumps truth. Despite Time Magazine's provocative question and limited journalism, Israelis do want peace. And so do we, both at Mount Zion in Jerusalem and within our St. Paul Mount Zion by listening well to each other.