

The Jewish State

Yom Kippur Eve 5772

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This past Spring, I was witness to an event which deepened my American Patriotism and at the same time helped me understand some of the complexities of the stalled Israel-Palestinian peace process. And I wonder if, perhaps, I got a glimpse of a way forward.

Israel as a nation and as a homeland for the Jewish people is very important to me. My father was born there and fought for its independence against the British. Since most of my mother's large extended family was wiped out during the Holocaust, almost all of my living relatives are in Israel today. The land and its people are not something to read about in biblical literature or the pages of the newspaper; Israel for me is not a place you visit once in a lifetime; Israel is very much alive and present. The streets of Jerusalem where Ida Rae and I walked hand in hand as young newly engaged sweethearts are as intimate and familiar to me as the street I live on now. Still, here on the West Coast, Israel is far away and the opportunities to actually visit are rare. Like the 12th Century Spanish Jewish poet Yehudah Halevi, "My heart is in the East, and I am at the ends of the West."

I love Israel not just for its beauty and for personal and familiar memories. I love Israel because Israel is my Jewish Ancestral homeland. I love Israel because Israel is a Jewish State.

So it has been with a great deal of dismay and concern that I have been watching the news about Israel. That, of course, is nothing new. For 63 years, we Jews of the Diaspora have been concerned about Israel. There has always been a sense of impending doom, a secure knowledge of insecurity, a deep seated awareness that Israel lives in a region that fundamentally resents its very existence – not because of any actions, but simply because of its presence. Israelis themselves are so accustomed to this anxious state of being, they hardly notice it. But we notice. We notice Israel's increased isolation which stems from a dragged out "peace process" yielding no final results. We notice a change in tactics on some fronts among Israel's enemies, from terror to de-legitimization. Unsubstantiated or disproven allegations lead

Israeli leaders and academics to being threatened with arrest in Western Countries. Boycotts and protests springing up in liberal Democracies, condemning Israel's right to defend itself against very real threats. An Arab Spring which, while celebrating long-delayed freedom from oppression, has opened up the repressed hatred of Israel and Jews – long stirred by the very leaders whom they have ousted. Those dictators knew that anti-Semitism could be a safe target for the feelings of oppression held by the “Arab street.” And all the while Iran continues its belligerent threats to Israel while racing to build nuclear weapons to carry out that threat. Israel lives in an increasingly dangerous neighborhood.

So I was thrilled when I had an opportunity to witness a very different reception.

I came to Washington DC with a sense of urgency and concern. I had watched as following Israel's Independence Day celebration, Palestinian protesters massed on Israel's borders and pushed over the fence to condemn that same event as “Yawm an-Nakba” or “The Day of Catastrophe.” I had listened to President Obama's speech to the State Department in which he laid out the basis for border negotiations with the Palestinians based on the 1967 armistice lines, with mutually agreed upon land swaps – the last part of which was conveniently ignored by Israeli and American right-wingers who wanted to condemn him. I knew the President and Israeli leaders would be addressing the 10,000 members of the National AIPAC conference in Washington, DC. I felt I had to be there. So with little preparation, I registered and attended the conference for the first time.

I was not able to arrive in time to hear President Obama's speech to the conference, in which he reiterated his and the United States government's unshakable commitment to Israel. But I was in time to witness a different and remarkable event, separate from the AIPAC Conference.

On the morning of May 24, I found myself in the US Capital building, seated in the Visitor's gallery of the House of Representatives. The gallery was packed and tickets were extremely rare. Through the generosity of one of our congressmen, I was presented with one of these exceptional passes, which I treated like a Willy Wonka Golden Ticket. The moment was exceptional because we were witnessing a joint meeting of congress. Unlike the even rarer “Joint Sessions” which are usually called to hear a Presidential address, “Joint Meetings” are usually called to hear from foreign dignitaries. Since the year 2000, there have only been 21 of these meetings. This was the 22nd.

I sat, frankly in awe as the seat of our national government filled with Senators and Representatives from across the nation and across the aisle. Although we hear so much about

the great divides in our political process, on that day there was none of it. Legislators, who months later threatened to close down the government or to shut off emergency relief funding for victims of natural disasters over partisan ideology, on that day greeted each other warmly. Perched high above the floor it was hard to see the intense divisions we read about. Sitting there, I was struck by the awe, the history, the importance of that place as the House chamber swelled to include House members, the full Senate and significant officials of the Administration. I was admittedly a little geeky, as I excitedly pointed out to the strangers sitting next to me: “that’s Dr. Steven Chu, Secretary of Energy!” “Those are my two Senators, Wyden and Merkley!” “Is that really Al Franken? He looks shorter in person.”

All these luminaries were assembled to hear from the Prime Minister of the State of Israel.

While I felt a great deal of Patriotic pride at witnessing our government, experiencing that chamber, I was overwhelmed with Jewish pride at the way the leader of the State of Israel was welcomed and respected throughout that historic session.

This was Benjamin Netanyahu’s second time to appear before a joint meeting of congress. During the first, fifteen years before, he spoke about the need for democracy to begin to take root in the Arab world. A decade and a half later, that process had begun. This was months before protestors in Cairo stormed the Israeli embassy and threatened its staff. With the help of President Obama and the US government those Israelis were saved. Still in that speech, in late May, the Prime Minister spoke of the promise of the Arab Spring to create a middle east of Democracy, prosperity and peace. An ideal, he said, that Israel longs for. He also pointed out that Israel is itself a model of that future. As he said:

We’re proud that over one million Arab citizens of Israel have been enjoying these rights for decades. Of the 300 million Arabs in the Middle East and North Africa, only Israel’s Arab citizens enjoy real democratic rights. I want you to stop for a second and think about that. Of those 300 million Arabs, less than one-half of one-percent are truly free, and they’re all citizens of Israel!

This startling fact reveals a basic truth: Israel is not what is wrong about the Middle East. Israel is what is right about the Middle East.¹

Then Netanyahu, after outlining the lengthy negotiating process, and the fact that all six Prime Ministers since the Oslo Accords, including himself, have agreed to establish a Palestinian state,

¹ Transcript: Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s address to Congress, Washingtonpost.com, May 24, 2011.

he went on to make what I thought was a startling challenge to the leader of the Palestinian Authority:

My friends, this must come to an end. President Abbas must do what I have done. I stood before my people, and I told you it wasn't easy for me, and I said... "I will accept a Palestinian state." It is time for President Abbas to stand before his people and say... "I will accept a Jewish state."

I was excited hearing this because it felt like a challenge which perhaps Abbas would be able to pick up. Or at the very least the world community could rally behind. After all, the problem hasn't been Israel's lack of serious commitment. Negotiations have led to the verge of a Palestinian state on three separate occasions: Camp David in 2000, Taba in 2001 and Israel in 2008. In the last of these offers, then Prime Minister Ehud Olmert offered a deal that should have been impossible to refuse: 100% of the West Bank, with agreed land swaps, Palestinian statehood, the division of Jerusalem with Muslim parts as the capital of the new Palestine and even, remarkably, turning over the city's holy sites, including the Western Wall, to an international body. Yasser Arafat walked away from the first two offers and Abbas from the third. All with no serious counter offer.

Nor can it be said that settlements are the core issue. Israel dismantled settlements twice before: in Sinai and significantly in Gaza, uprooting families and leaving behind huge investments. The Gaza withdrawal was unilateral, with no promise of any peace from the more than one million Palestinians living there. In turn Gaza became the battleground for a brutal civil war between Hamas and the Palestinian authority and subsequently the staging ground for continuous rocket fire into Israel, threatening civilians with a constant barrage of terrorist activity. The resources Israel left behind were destroyed. So was peace.

So while I was excited to hear that Netanyahu was putting another offer on the table, I was not optimistic that it would be accepted. And, I was frankly also disappointed that he went on in that same speech to make it easy for Abbas to ignore the offer, by including a long list of Israel's security requirements. The issues were real, but they were exactly the out Abbas would need. Of course, the Palestinians were not the intended audience of the speech – Netanyahu's home right-wing constituency was. But the speech, which was quite similar to the one he gave last week at the UN, gave the US Congress the opportunity to demonstrate their long-standing commitment to Israel's security. The near constant applause and standing ovations help me realize that despite Israel's growing isolation, the United States remains committed to her

security. The warmth I felt from the assembled dignitaries for the Israeli Prime Minister in that chamber made me proud to be an American, a nation that supports shared democratic ideals.

Still there is something a bit ironic about making the call for recognition of Israel as a Jewish state here in the US.

In 1948, President Harry S. Truman made the courageous and wholly unexpected decision to be the first nation to recognize the new-found state of Israel. As has been learned in later years, Truman was rather anti-Semitic, writing in his diary "The Jews, I find, are very, very selfish."² Still he was moved by what he had seen during the Holocaust "It is my attitude that the American government couldn't stand idly by while the victims [of] Hitler's madness are not allowed to build new lives"³ he later said. And so, over the objections of Secretary of State George Marshall, who feared it would hurt relations with Arab states, and Secretary of Defense James Forrestal who warned that the result might be the denial of oil resources in the area, Truman supported the UN Partition plan of 1947 which created a "Jewish state" and an "Arab state." On May 14, 1948 Truman recognized the State of Israel, eleven minutes after it declared itself a nation. Yet, surprisingly, the document Truman signed and delivered stated:

"The United States recognizes the provisional government as the de facto authority of the new Jewish State."

Except that the words "Jewish State" were crossed out and the words "State of Israel" written in their place, in Truman's handwriting.⁴ Truman, it seems, could not go so far as to call Israel the "Jewish State."

In fact, although the media have used the term "Jewish State" interchangeably with Israel, the first US official to actually use the term was not until 2001 – fifty-four years after the UN's explicit declaration in the partition plan. It was Secretary of State Colin Powell who, a decade ago, called upon the Palestinians to recognize Israel as a "Jewish State." President George W. Bush used the term repeatedly in speeches as has President Obama. President Obama used it in his first speech to the UN last year and this year at the AIPAC conference President Obama declared:

² Harry Truman's Forgotten Diary 1947, The Washington Post, July 11, 2003

³ Quoted from footage of Truman speaking, presented in the film *The 50 Years War*. A slightly different quotation appears in the book, *Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel*, by Michael T. Benson. 1997, p. 64

⁴ [President Truman's statement recognizing the State of Israel](#), May 14, 1948, "Handwriting of the President," Harry S. Truman Library, National Archives and Records Administration

. . . a genuine peace is the only path that will ultimately provide for a peaceful Palestine as the homeland of the Palestinian people and a Jewish state of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people.⁵

It is clear that this call for recognition of a Jewish State is something the Palestinians are not prepared to do.

Just over a year ago, Netanyahu made the offer of a quid-pro-quo – a freeze on West Bank Jewish settlement building in exchange for Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. It was instantly rejected by the Palestinians⁶. Just a few days ago Sari Nusseibeh, President of Al-Quds University in Jerusalem and a leading Palestinian thinker, wrote in Al-Jazeera “Why Israel can’t be a ‘Jewish State’”⁷ claiming, in part, that doing so would open the door to the 20 percent of Israel’s population who are Muslim, Christian, Druze or Baha’i to have their rights stripped away – something that has not happened in the 63 years of the Jewish State’s existence. The truth is, as Nusseibeh states, the Palestinians know that recognizing Israel as a Jewish State would be to give up the Palestinian “right of return.” Exactly so. Israel will not allow up to 7 million Palestinian descendants, many hostile to Israel’s existence, to become citizens and vote Israel out of existence. Israel has offered compensation to expatriates, but the point of two lands for two people is exactly that – to create a deserved homeland for the Palestinian people at peace with a homeland for the Jewish people.

The fact is, Muslims and Arabs already live in Israel and are welcome as loyal citizens. They serve in the Parliament. It is not at all clear that the reverse would be true in a future Palestinian state. Days before Abbas spoke at the UN the head of the PLO’s mission to the United States, Maen Areikat, appeared to indicate that all Jews would be required to leave areas that would be part of the Palestinian state. Not all Israelis – all Jews. Although he backed off of the statement in later days⁸, it is not clear what the status of Jews would be. If any.

Israel as a Jewish state is essential. It was the basis of Theodor Herzl’s vision, the founding Zionist dream of a homeland for all Jews. After centuries of statelessness, after a Medieval history living in and being expelled from endless nations, living most often as a second-class or

⁵ Remarks by the President at the AIPAC Policy Conference 2011, May 22, 2011. Official Transcript, Whitehouse.gov

⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/12/world/middleeast/12mideast.html>

⁷ <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/09/201192614417586774.html> (30 Sept., 2011)

⁸ <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0911/63513.html>

ghettoized and despised minority, Herzl's idea was a Jewish homeland on our ancestral land, the ancient Holy land of Israel. He called his book, outlining this vision, "The Jewish State."

That this dream became a reality is the heart of the conflict between the Jews and Arab world. See how often the language shifts from "Zionist" to "Jew" as the conflict continues. Abbas avoids this kind of rhetoric, but in his statement to the United Nations, he made reference to Muslim and Christian ties to the holy land, while omitting any reference to Jewish claims. Not just in Palestinian territory, in which there are major Jewish holy and historical sites, but any historic Jewish connection to the Holy land at all. Nowhere in his speech do the words "Jew" or "Jewish" occur. He repeatedly referred to 63 years of "Nakba" catastrophe. Not the years since the 1967 armistice, but the years since Israel's founding.⁹ Israel's very existence, and particularly its existence as a Jewish State, is for the Arab world, the heart of the problem.

This is hard for me to say. I believe strongly in peace, I believe that people of good faith can learn to live alongside even those they do not like. I believe, always, that in the end justice and peace prevails. But in a negotiation, both sides have to recognize the needs of the other. The Palestinian people, who have lived far too long under military occupation, and the dehumanizing effects this causes, deserve and should have a homeland. That homeland must come about not through unilateral declarations, but through negotiated peace. And the Arab world, including and especially the Palestinians, need to recognize Israel as a Jewish State. That is its meaning, that is why it exists. To deny it is to deny our essential reality.

Recently a dramatic event at the United Nations may pave the way for a different future. Last week, the foreign minister of Spain, one of the leading EU countries to support Palestinian statehood, stressed her commitment to Israel "as the embodiment of the project to create a homeland for the Jewish people."¹⁰ Remarkably, this is the first time such a statement has been made. However, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has been quoted as saying "it is silly to talk about a Jewish state."¹¹ No, it is not. Any more that it is "silly" to speak of France as the nation of the French. After all, the future Palestinian state will be the 22nd Arab nation. There is only one Jewish State. If the United Nations wants to make real progress, not symbolic progress, in Mid-East peace talks, the pressure would be on for more countries to recognize this reality and

⁹ <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/full-transcript-of-abbas-speech-at-un-general-assembly-1.386385>

¹⁰ <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/spain-recognizes-israel-as-jewish-homeland-for-first-time-1.386587>

¹¹ "Sarkozy: It is silly to talk about a Jewish State", Ynetnews.com 10/06/2011

turn the tide of isolation into one of welcoming. UN Nations should formally reiterate its 1947 stance and recognize Israel as a Jewish State.

Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people. It is an idea as much as a reality. Our return, the return of the Jewish people to our ancestral homeland after 2000 years of wandering, was not to create a nation like any other. It was to create a central location, a balance of ancient values and modern statecraft for the Jewish people. It is imperfect; its government can be too liberal sometimes, too conservative others. After 63 years of assault, it can be obsessed with security and sometimes forget the humanity of others. There is and always will be room for improvement. But the essential Jewish character of Israel unites Jews around the world. Israel is a Jewish state. Israel is our Jewish state – the homeland of our people. It is time for the nations of the world, for the Arab states, for the leaders of the future Palestinian state, may it come soon and in peace, to recognize this simple fact. Israel is a Jewish State.

As Prime Minister Netanyahu said, as I watched from the gallery of the Joint Meeting of Congress just a few months ago

It is time for President Abbas to stand before his people and say... “I will accept a Jewish state.”

Those six words will change history. They will make clear to the Palestinians that this conflict must come to an end. That they are not building a state to continue the conflict with Israel, but to end it. They will convince the people of Israel that they have a true partner for peace. With such a partner, the people of Israel will be prepared to make a far reaching compromise. I will be prepared to make a far reaching compromise.

May that time come soon, when two hands will meet in understanding and compromise. Then the words of the Psalmist will ring out:

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; those who love you shall prosper.
Peace be within your walls, and prosperity within your palaces.
For my brothers and companions' sakes, I will now say, Peace be within you. (Ps. 122: 6-8)