

Israel@60

On this holiest day of the year, in the moments before Yizkor, I want to speak to you of a topic that I feel is essential to our lives as Jews – Israel. You might think that since I feel this way I should make aliya and I have to admit it is something that Dassy & I considered once upon a time, but for now we are committed to living our Judaism right here in the good ole US of A, just like the rest of you. So now you might wonder why do I think Israel is so important to your life as an American Jew? Ahad Ha'am, the 20th century father of Spiritual Zionism, said it best when he described world Judaism as a wheel with its hub in Israel and spokes reaching out to every Diaspora community. From the time of our first dispersion in 586 BCE to this day, every Jewish community has had a link to Israel; sometimes that link has been spiritual, at times educational, financial or even physical. There have been times when there was a one-way flow either from Israel out or from out to inside Israel. I have no doubt that what is needed today is a flow that goes both ways, with Israel nurturing us and with our community supporting Israel.

Never in the history of American Judaism has this connection been as tenuous as it is now. Many of you can remember back to 1947 the

excitement and the fear as the UN voted to create the State of Israel. You remember the hopes and prayers of 2000 years of exile drawing to a close. You remember the wonder and the awe at the establishment of a Jewish state. There was a time when mentioning Israel was the way Jewish fundraisers got us to open our wallets and give to the Jewish State. Today's young philanthropists are just as likely to give to their alma mater, as to Israel, more likely to give to worthy causes, like cancer and AIDS research, than to the UJA that funnels money to Israel. There are many worthwhile and under funded causes that can use your support and giving to them is meritorious, but if we don't support Israel, no one else will. However, more than Israel needs our dollars, Israel needs our support. I hope that last week when Marlene asked you to fold down your tab to support Israel Bonds that you did it and if you have not that you will, call the office we'd be happy to send you your pledge card.

It was once a forgone conclusion that American Jews would defend Israel against the media, in our neighborhoods and at the water cooler. But today, some of those most critical of Israel are Jews. In the newspaper and on TV Israel often gets a bum rap. They talk about "the cycle of violence" however, that gives the impression that both sides are culpable. How is it

morally equivalent when Israel empties the home of known terrorists of family and friends before demolishing the house, when Israel conducts very dangerous house to house searches for terrorists rather than bomb the homes so that there will be as few civilian casualties as possible; while the Palestinians teach hatred of the Jews to their children, brainwash young people into believing that blowing yourself up along with Israeli women and children is a meritorious act? Which is not to say that Israelis don't do bad things, they do; it's a war. I don't approve of or condone everything that the Israeli army does in defense of Israel, but then they don't need my approval, I'm watching from the sidelines, not living with the horror on a daily basis. Have you read any of the reports coming out of Sderot? In the most recent edition of the Jewish Week there is an article about the experience of a rescue worker living in the heavily bombed Israeli boarder town of Sderot.

Last week's rocket attack in Sderot, which hit near a nursery school on the second day of the new school year, brought into sharp relief the stress under which Sderot citizens and emergency workers live. And it was a reminder of the week in May when the southern Israeli city came under its fiercest attack since the beginning of the second intifada, with more than 100 rockets falling over the course of several days.

Ido Zolati, 30, a social worker in the Sderot Welfare Department, is coordinator of emergency affairs for the city. Below is a diary he kept of a single day during the worst of May's barrage.

6 a.m.: The alarm rings. I get out of bed and remember that yesterday I arrived home from work at 11 p.m. after another crazy day. I get organized, wake up the family and drink the first coffee of the morning. My wife departs with a kiss and asks, "Don't be a hero and try to save the world." In her eyes I see fear and decide once again to ignore it, to repress her worries and not enter into a discussion that would raise the frightening reality that I find myself in.

8 a.m.: On the way I listen to Galai Zahal (the Army radio station) and as usual they are talking about Sderot. At the entrance to the city I cross the main junction and hear a "Red Alert" — the sign that a Kassam rocket is about to fall. I am in an open area; I hear a loud boom. I look in my rearview mirror and see that a Kassam has fallen on the junction that I passed only a half a minute ago. No injuries. I can proceed.

11 a.m.: We contact the local authority. "The Kassam fell in an open area," they tell us. Suddenly, a call from home. "Have you organized an appointment with the baby clinic?" my wife asks. Again I forgot. I promise I will call in another 10 minutes and know that I am not going to have time for this. We hear crying from the photocopying room. An employee is falling apart. It's difficult for her. How much longer will we need to suffer this reality?

3:30 p.m.: Another telephone call; on the line is a resident whose windows were blown out following a rocket attack. "What can I do?" he asks. I try to help him as best as I can and during the course of the call I look towards my desk and see a list of urgent matters to attend to. Another call. I am not able to get back to the list.

8 p.m. A telephone call: "A Kassam has fallen and there are many trauma victims. Come with your team." I take my mobile phone and head back to work.

4 a.m. Boom! I jump out of bed, screaming "alarm!" My wife wakes and calms me down. "It's just the garbage truck backing up," she says quietly. I go back to sleep. In my dreams I see

ambulances. People screaming. A mother looking for her daughters. A house destroyed. A dog injured. A boy screaming like a madman. We have to do something. We have to.

These are just excerpts from the article which can be read in its entirety on line. If you don't read the Jewish press, then you don't have a balanced picture of what is going on in Israel, you don't get it from the general press. That is the reason that so many of us are part of groups like Jewish Media Watch or Honest Reporting.com Israel needs us to be here advocates because she isn't getting fair treatment in the press.

Worse, on campuses across the country, we have lost the PR battle. We need to do more and we need to do it more effectively. Our own young people have bought into the myth of an oppressive Zionist regime and are hostile to our Jewish homeland. Israel is not perfect, not by any means, but it is a country grounded in Jewish values, ours is a culture devoted to life. There was a political cartoon this last year that showed a Palestinian with a gun hiding behind a stroller with a baby in it, while there is an Israeli with a gun standing in front of a carriage with a baby in it. Theirs is a culture of death. Have you read any of the reports of captured terrorists? They believe that what they are doing is right, is just and is blessed by Allah. You cannot reason with a fanatic, you cannot dialogue with someone who believes that

what they are doing is holy. Israel is engaged in a fight for survival. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman wrote:

“Israeli soldiers...got ambushed for the very best reasons: they have so much more to do with their lives and they live in a society that empowers and enables them to do it... Young Israelis dream of being inventors and their role models are the Israeli innovators who made it to the Nasdaq. Hezbollah youth dream of being martyrs, and their role models are Islamic militants who made it to the Next World. Israel spent the last six years preparing for Warren Buffet while Hezbelloh spent the last six years preparing for this war.”

After 9/11 we thought that the world would understand what Israel has been going through for years. We were under the misperception that most of the world would now sympathize and support Israel as sought to defend herself from terrorists willing to give their own lives to take the lives of their enemies. Perhaps for a short while there was some understanding, some sympathy, but nothing transformative or lasting. Now six years later, our lives have returned to normal, we have memorials to commemorate the event, but life goes on as it must; while sympathy for the Zionist State waned. The world is as critical of Israel as it ever was, so who will defend the Jewish State on the world scene if not us?

Israel enemies in this world are many. I'm sure that most of you saw the mysterious articles in the newspapers about Israeli Air force jets bombing

Syria. There has been little concrete information coming out of Israel, our own government and surprisingly even from the Syrians themselves. It has been reported even without being confirmed Iran purchased nuclear material from the North Koreans that was in Syria that Israel attacked and destroyed. I suspect that so little has been officially said because everyone involved knows exactly what is at stake and what transpired. Israel will handle Syria, but needs our support in dealing with Iran, politically there is no good way for her to do it herself. You can help now! Monday at noon at the UN there will be a National Rally to Stop Iran Now! People will be coming to NYC from all over the country by plane, by train – all we have to do is leave work or school hop on a bus and we're there – it is so easy, shouldn't we be there?

Even closer to home you have an opportunity to help Israel. Non-Jews view Israel very differently than we do. Think about not having our connection to Israel, not reading the Jewish press, not having any of the pro-Israel access that we have and all you know about Israel is what you see in the news and hear people say – you'll end up with a rather negative view of the Jewish Homeland. Our JCRC is sponsoring a program throughout the UJANNJ area trying to get Jews and non-Jews to dialogue about Israel. On Sunday, Sept. 30th 2 PM at the Y there will be a program entitled: Hope for Peace in

the Middle East: Understanding Israel. It has been marketed to all the churches in Wayne. I hope that you'll go and you'll encourage your non-Jewish friends and neighbors to go as well.

Israel is under attack from another front as well. In the last few months there have been four different documents published by Israeli Arabs calling for Israel to assert her democratic ideals and expunge her Jewish nature to be a land for all her inhabitants. There have been American academics and left leaning Jews who have supported this call. I understand the American support for this position; it is an importing of American democratic ideals to Israel. America is the great melting pot; we take people of all backgrounds and try to make them feel welcome here. It is the American dream. However, Israel is not just another country it is the ONLY Jewish nation in the world – every other group has a place to call their own, if Israel ceased to be the Jewish state, then we would be homeless once again. After the Shoah we all know how unacceptable that is for us. While it is true that Israeli Arabs do not get fair treatment in Israel, they do have a better life than their “Palestinian” brethren. While I sympathize with them, they need to understand that they are the ones choosing to live in the Jewish state. If I were to use the synagogue as an example, I'd point out that you don't have

to be a Conservative Jew to join Shomrei Torah or send you child to our Religious School. However, we are a Conservative synagogue and so we teach the values and practices of CJ regardless of the orientation of a particular family sending their child to be educated here. We see the same issue at Schechter schools – many of the students come from homes that are not affiliated with Conservative synagogues, but whether they are from Reform, Orthodox or secular homes; the school's affiliation is with CJ and so that is what is taught. We need to be supportive of Israel as she rejects the call to remove the Jewish element from their constitution, from HaTikvah, from the government. Israel is and must remain the Jewish state.

However, more than anything else Israel needs us to come, to visit, to viscerally show our support. For many years, fear kept us away from Israel. Europeans vacationed in Israel, Christian groups visited Israel, but American Jews stayed away. Teen programs dropped off precipitously, thankfully, the number of our youths who go to Israel is back up, encourage your teens to visit Israel on one of the many USY Pilgrimage trips. Family Bar/t Mitzvah trips are back in vogue; college students in record numbers are participating in Taglit Birthright trips. As you may know Jews aged 18-26 who have never been to Israel on an organized trip are entitled to participate in a free

10-day visit to Israel known as Taglit/Birthright Israel. Our Movement sends students via our Koach college program. All of our qualified students are encouraged to register. All this is good. In the Orthodox community a year in Israel between High School and college is the norm. We don't see those numbers, but I can tell you that the number of HS grads in our Nativ program has grown exponentially in the last few years. We need to be encouraging and supportive of our children when they want to go visit or study in Israel and more we need to go.

I can't begin to tell you how meaningful and powerful an experience it was when a dozen of us joined the UJA J2J Mission to Israel last February. To be in Israel with a group of 350 was simply amazing. We talked about trying to set up an Isarel@60 trip for this year, but it never got off the ground. However, I can tell you that American Jews are going to Israel this year in record numbers, the country is literally sold out in honor of the anniversary. As well it should be. Next time you are planning to go to Aruba, go to Eilat instead. Next time you want to go visit historical sights in Italy, go to see the historical sights in Israel instead. Next time you want to go hiking in the wilderness, go hike the Negev. Israel has so much to offer. It is up to us to take advantage of it.

But I started by sharing a vision of a relationship that goes both ways. Not only does Israel have a great deal to offer us and need our support, but we have a lot to offer Israel. Twenty percent of the Israeli population considers itself *Hiloni* or secular and many are hostile to the teachings of Judaism, if they don't learn Jewish texts, Jewish history and Jewish values, then some day we'll have Israelis who don't know why Israel is or should be the Jewish State. Twenty-five percent consider themselves *Dati* or Orthodox and have a very skewed and limited vision of what it means to be Jewish that does not include what we do here. Fifty-five percent of the population considers itself to be "Traditional" but are not sure where they and their Judaism fit, they know that they are not *dati* and not *hiloni*, sound familiar? I think that *Masorti*, which means tradition and is the name of our Movement in Israel, has a lot to offer. Meanwhile we continue to read headlines on how the Israeli government is going to make *aliya* by converts even more difficult at the behest of the Orthodox establishment. Conservative and Reform rabbis still have no standing in Israel; they can't do weddings or funerals. Conservative synagogues don't receive the state funding that the Orthodox shuls get – we need to teach Israel about pluralism and tolerance.

One way that we can do that is by making aliya to Israel, now I know that Aliya is not for everyone. It takes a special type of person to uproot themselves and relocate in the Jewish Homeland. But I hope that you'll at least take the time to pick up one of the Nefesh B'Nefesh booklets in the lobby and read about life for American Conservative Jews in Israel; to see how our people positively impact Jewish life in Israel. We need to be supportive of Masorti Judaism, we need to join Mercaz USA, our Movement's Zionist arm here in the US to help fund and support the pluralistic type of Judaism that we practice and we pray will someday be normative in Israel.

Israel has seen too much hatred, too much death, and too much suffering, may they be blessed with peace, as we rise to remember those that we have loved and lost. ALUASA.