

“Israel *Isreal*” - Something of a Miracle

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Perhaps a few folks here at TBI have noticed how little I’ve spoken and taught about Israel. This is a new thing in my rabbinate. There are so many ways Israel has figured in my work. I led two congregational tours there, in 2007 and 2011. For 30 years I was the expert on it in Northern Wisconsin, which is more a tribute to how isolated we were than to my expertise. In 1991 when the first scuds fell on Tel Aviv, I was sitting at the news desk of the ABC affiliate giving live commentary. I was always speaking on the peace process, at UW campuses, at churches, and even Rotary. I was on the AIPAC national advisory council because the congressman for the 7th district chaired the Foreign Affairs Appropriations Committee. On a more personal level all my children did a semester at the URJ’s high school in Israel. At least every other year, I gave a High Holiday sermon about Israel. So why have I fallen so quiet here at TBI?

It’s partly because Rabbi Heilman made it so central to his time here. Really, what could I add? Partly because nothing has the potential to split a congregation like wadding into Israel issues. If you talk about the need to maintain US aid to Israel, you’ll be accused of stifling Palestinian human rights. If you talk about the suppression of Arab Israeli rights, you’ll be accused of being naïve and not caring about Jewish lives. A rabbi shouldn’t be afraid of wadding into difficult waters, but perhaps I was drawn to other things.

Few of us here remember when Israel was founded but we sure remember when she was young. The Weavers, the voice of left wing, 1950’s America, sang of Israel’s glory, the place where true socialism, free of Stalinist vices, lived. What was more utopian than the kibbutz? The trouble is, such idyllic images couldn’t stand up against the realities of the world.

I remember a Federation slogan when I was a teen that read:

Israel *Isreal*

One of Theodore Herzl’s maxims was to make us a nation among the nations, what was expressed more earthily as, we will know we’re a nation when our jails are populated by Jews. Or more formally, when the Jewish state is wrestling with what it means to have power, moving between the poles of the ideal and the practical, between the corrupt and the naïve. What it is to be a state. And that has certainly been the case with Israel over these past 74 years. What then is it reasonable to expect Israel to aspire to? What are the ignoble realities it must contend with if it is to exist at all?

Our tradition has always had a polyphonic voice. We are to be a light to the nations, harbingers of peace, and ever watchful for injustices done to the weak and poor. But less comfortably, it also praises and welcomes God’s wrath against our enemies and the victories, often military ones, over them. And that is forever where the very real state of Israel lies, at once creative and compassionate and fierce, resolute, and wary. Israelis move between the poles of justice, power, and compassion.

So, two things to keep in mind about why Israelis have a different focus from that of American Jews. The first thing is Israel's political history. It is very much a *fin de siècle* nation, born out of the end of empires, like the Ottoman, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian, and the concurrent rise of nation states such as Hungary, Germany, and Poland. Add to that two world wars and the Holocaust and we see that Israel is born in and out of extraordinary historical events. Everything about its historical setting is complicated and violent. Nothing is more apt than Chaim Weizmann's maxim that no one gives a nation on a silver platter.

The second thing to keep in mind is the trauma that underlies the Jewish emigration there and it is a long list: pogroms in Russia and Ukraine, German Jews fleeing the Nazi state in the 30's and Holocaust survivors arriving in '47 and '48, Jews fleeing the Arab world from 48 to the late 50's, the Ethiopian Jews arriving in the 80's and early 90's, and the Soviet Jews who were free to come in the 90's. Most Israelis came as refugees from persecution, bearing a violent or traumatic story. Every Jew I've met, who grew up in an Iron Curtain country, has said to me, "you Americans, you are so naïve." Israel's body politic brings a very different experience to the table than do we American Jews. We are brethren with contrasting histories.

And because of this what we focus on is different. The American university world cares profoundly about the detritus of European history especially colonialism with its dual evils of indigenous destruction and the enslavement of Africans. Few Stateside communities are as much children of academia as are US Jews. Four generations of American Jews, Boomers, Gen X, Millennials and now Gen Z, have been schooled in this ethos in which Israel is the last of the colonial settler states, the only one that has failed to give its indigenous people freedom.

Therein lies the irony; so many of the states created after World War II experienced extraordinary transfers of population, including most countries in Eastern Europe, and Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and China. For all of them this great, mostly forced movement of peoples, is accepted by the world as fact. No one is arguing to redo the 1947 partition of India. For much of the world Israel is the last remaining issue from World War Two. Which is a shame because 77 years later it is still accepting displaced persons.

Which brings us to some final truths, ones that upend right and left-wing Jewish takes on Israel's political dilemmas. The first is that we cannot wish the Palestinian people away. No people who are half the population of a state will live quiescently without rights. There is good reason to think Israeli Arabs will find a real home in Israel. There is also good reason to think that the people of Gaza and the West Bank will never acquiesce to living without citizenship, to wit, without the vote, without equal legal status, and without passports issued by the state to which they pay taxes or control their borders. We can live in denial, but without some sort of political settlement this issue will continue to burn. And make no mistake both sides share plenty of blame here. I have no wisdom to add about what a settlement might look like. 25 years of missed prognostication has humbled me and many others. But that does not mean the issue has gone away.

The second truth is that Israel is far, more secure than we often think. All of its wars since 2006, which were in their day described as failures, Lebanon and the many Gaza campaigns, have been effective in stopping or keeping attacks in check. And while Israel might be a pariah on US campuses and in many progressive circles, its place in the world community grows ever more secure. Whole swaths of the Sunni Arab world have begun to make strategic and economic cause with Israel. Israel is not about to be pushed into the sea.

And Israel is its own truth, it is a place of crazy paradoxes. Its ever-growing *haredi* [ultra-Orthodox] population will continue to give it a dynamic quite apart from anything we know. For its *hiloni* [secular] population, it is a bastion of human rights, for LGBTQ peoples, for the disabled, for women, and for democracy and civil society. We need not fear critiques of Israel or learning that Israel has clay feet. The other side of the maxim no one is handed a nation on a silver platter is that no nation has a history free of troubling stories; not Canada, not Sweden, or even New Zealand. Rather, as American Jews, we should talk openly about what concerns us about Israel and share this with Israelis. We are family, we should know each other. But we should also remember that having spoken our piece, Israelis have a host of reasons for coming to their own conclusions.

And two things to finish on. Of all things we love about Israel as American Jews it is *Eretz Yisrael* as a place of Jewish public space. Everything about Jewish as normal delights us, whether it's the Hebrew signs on the stores, feeling Shabbat draw near on a Friday afternoon, or the sight of Jews defending Jews. What I hear the most from congregants who visit Israel is their sense of awe at this. It never gets old. Israel's meaning will change for each generation of American Jews but the wonder of it will not. If you have not gone there and can, go. And if you have been, go again.

Secondly, a modest proposal: Don't be afraid to find Israel's dilemmas interesting rather than forbidden. Don't be afraid to have your curiosity about the Jewish state lead where you did not expect. There is so much about Israel that is mesmerizing, witness the popularity at TBI of the Israelis TV series, ones that are about the ins and outs of daily life, secular and religious. As for the troubling things, to live is to find out things that are troubling. The Torah is page after page of troubling things. But we Jews have thrived because we do not shrink from the troubling. And if whomever you are reading, watching, or debating with suggests that Israel should, effectively, cease to exist than they have placed it into its own category, one where it is forbidden to live by the realities all nations face, where only it is held accountable for the upheavals of 75 years ago. And remember, there is comfort and strength in the reality that Israel is real and that will always be something of a miracle.