

LOVING ISRAEL

On May 14, 1948, the Israeli Declaration of Independence was signed. Among other things, it says the following:

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

I think all Jews should be proud of those words and should see them, as we do the American Declaration of Independence, as an aspirational document. The American Declaration of Independence did not describe the nation as it was; over the years our country has grown toward it; I believe after 242 years we are closer to living those values, and we still have a way to go. In the same way, the Israeli Declaration of Independence described what Ben Gurion and his colleagues hoped for the new-born state. I think that Israel has done a pretty good job of growing into that document. There are still areas which need work; one example is that the guarantee of religious freedom enshrined in it seems to apply to every religion except that practiced by Reform and Conservative Jews. That is a different sermon. Israel is not perfect, but after all she has had only 70 years to grow into her declaration of independence. Let's see what she looks like in another 172 years.

This morning I do not want to discuss whether Israel is living up to her charter, but I bring it up because May 14 of this year was the 70th anniversary of that Declaration. And on that same day, another milestone occurred: on May 14, 2018, the U.S. Embassy in Israel was relocated from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

A short history: the Jerusalem Embassy Act was passed in 1995, with votes of 93-5 in the Senate and 374-37 in the House. It recognized Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel and called for Jerusalem to remain undivided. And it set aside funds for the relocation of the embassy. Congress has the power of the purse, but because the bill deals with foreign policy, an area the Constitution reserves for the president, language was included which allowed the president to sign a waiver every six months based on "national security interests." Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama all exercised that waiver, as did Donald Trump the first time the waiver expired in his administration.

On June 5, 2017, the Senate unanimously passed a resolution commemorating the 50th anniversary of the reunification of Jerusalem by a vote of 90-0, reaffirming the Jerusalem Embassy Act and calling upon the President and all United States officials to abide by its provisions. Six months later, on December 6, 2017, Mr. Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and ordered the planning of the relocation of the embassy. However, following the announcement, he again signed an embassy waiver. And then on May 14, the relocation

occurred. There was a lot of fanfare, with celebration on one side and threats of violence on the other. And then the world's attention shifted to something else, and the dire predictions did not come to pass.

But here's the thing that really surprised me. Within the Jewish community, the embassy move did not get the rousing response I thought it would. Given how thrilled we were when the Jerusalem Embassy Act first passed, given the fact that it has been a topic in every presidential election since, and that every President has promised to actually make it happen – given all of that, the actual event did not garner the kind of attention or celebration that I expected. Let me qualify that – Jews of a certain age were mostly thrilled. But the young people I spoke with had very little interest. Many didn't know that the embassy wasn't always in Jerusalem. And whether they knew or not, most of them had no idea why it was such a big deal.

It is not just the kids I know and happened to speak with. Across the country, every rabbi reports not just a decrease in love for Israel among Jews, but perhaps even more frightening, a lack of interest. The 2013 Pew Center Study of American Jews found that while 40% of American Jews over the age of 65 said they were "very attached" to Israel, that number fell to 25% for those who were ages 18-29. Increasingly Israel is viewed by American Jews with indifference, disaffection, and even animosity. With each passing year fewer American Jews understand why Israel means so much to those of us who are older, and they honestly don't know why Israel should matter to them. And that is our fault.

Okay, it's not just us. It's true that the media does not help. Four years ago Matti Friedman, a journalist living in Israel published an article detailing his experience as a reporter for the Associated Press. I encourage you to look it up. He gave many examples of the way the AP suppressed stories critical of the Palestinians and went out of its way to cover every flaw in Israeli society. And he says that his experience is mirrored in all of the major news bureaus covering Israel. So yes, the media is a problem.

It's also true that Israel often does not help her own cause. Even as American rabbis – Reform, Conservative and Modern Orthodox – do our best to inculcate a love of Israel, the Israeli government reneges on promises made about the Western Wall, and offers even more control over issues of personal status to the ultra-Orthodox. So yes, the Israeli government can be a problem.

Yet still I say that the diminishing interest in and love for Israel is mostly our fault, the fault of those of us old enough to know in our gut what might have been if in 1939 if only there had been a State of Israel for Jews to flee to. It is the fault of those of us who remember the feeling of impending doom that came over the Jewish world in May of 1967 when Nasser boasted that he would destroy Israel, and many of us, even in Israel believed it would happen. It's the fault of those of us who, 45 years ago today sat in Yom Kippur services and learned with horror of the surprise attack which came within a few miles of succeeding in wiping Israel off the map.

It is our fault that so many of our kids don't know why Israel should matter to them because we have failed to adequately impress on them at a gut level the simple fact that for two thousand years our people have been victims, and that is only the existence of the modern state of Israel

which has changed that. They have grown up in a world in which Israel not only exists, as it already did when I was born, but one in which Israel is the dominant power in the region, and they cannot even remotely imagine the insecurity that Jews felt even 100 years ago.

And of course, it's a good thing that my generation is the last one after two millennia to live with any sense of Jewish powerlessness. It's a good thing that our kids have grown up in a country in which Jews have entrée to any school, are active at every level of government, and where anti-Semitism is something they are surprised still exists. It's a good thing that they have grown up in a world in which the State of Israel is strong, and every one of them can take a free ten-day trip to see it for themselves. It's good. And it's a problem.

The older generations remember the past, remember the threats, remember being victimized, so Israel's power gives us a sense of security and comfort. There have been times when that power has led to mistakes, but we who remember what it was like before are more forgiving of Israel's mistakes because we would not go back to being victims.

The younger generations only know Israel as powerful. They learn Jewish history, with all of its dangers, but for them it is only history. And so they do just as we have taught them. We have taught them that because of our own history, Jews have an obligation to support the downtrodden and protect the victims of power. And when you look at the media, who seems more downtrodden, more victimized than the Palestinians? For me, born in 1960, Israel will always be little David, one tiny country confronting the Arab Goliath – 22 countries sworn to her destruction. For our kids? In their lifetime, Israel has always been Goliath, occupying the territory of a downtrodden people. No matter how carefully Israel behaves, it is still an occupation. My mindset is that Jews were victims and thanks to Israel will not be again. For many of our kids, the Palestinians are the victims, and Israel is the cause.

Now I know that it's much more complicated than that. I know how many times and in how many ways Israel has tried to make peace, and I know that first the Arab nations and later the Palestinians rejected each and every one. As Abba Eban famously said, they never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. But that knowledge comes as a result of my life experience, my reality. It is not the life experience of those substantially younger.

It's very troubling. But as I told you last year, Jews are forbidden to lose hope. So this morning I want to share with you something that we are doing, and several things that you should do to turn the tide, to help the next generations, and ourselves as well, to reconnect with the existential importance of the State of Israel.

First what we are doing here. Under Rabbi Allison's guidance, and with much hard work on the part of our teachers, we have completely reimagined the way we do Israel education. Israel is already spoken about in every grade, but it is now going to be a central part of the curriculum in 5th, 7th and 12th grades. In 5th grade we are going to begin with love. We want to help our 11-year-olds understand how much the land of Israel has meant for our people in the past, why it has meant so much and what its modern existence has done to protect the Jewish people. We are going to help them to develop a deep connection with the land and the people of Israel, without caveats. We are not introducing the difficulties. And please be clear, this is not about hiding

anything from our kids. It is about teaching what is developmentally appropriate. A young child thinks their parents are perfect and loves them unconditionally. As they grow, they learn that their parents are not perfect, that they make mistakes. But the love remains, and is now strong enough to handle the mistakes. This is what we are trying to recreate, in a small way, between our kids and Israel.

In 5th grade, we begin with love. Then, in 7th grade, we can start speaking about the wars as well. In 7th grade children are emotionally and intellectually ready to deal with the complexity of the Middle East. They can hear the many sides of this story, they can begin to understand why this conflict has been so intractable. Most importantly for me, they can learn about what is going on right now, they can hear about the plight of the Palestinians, they can hear about the struggles of liberal Judaism for recognition, and, if we have done our job right, they can still care about Israel, still love Israel, even while disliking and criticizing some of her behavior.

Finally in 12th grade, we will prepare them for what they may face on a college campus. Again, we are not going to hide things. We are not going to pretend that Israel's actions are always pure. We will share with them the Palestinian narrative as well as the Jewish one, and most of all give them the tools they will need to have meaningful discussions on campus with those who are willing to engage in dialogue. And we will give them the tools they need to respond appropriately to those who are not willing to have conversations.

I want us to do one more thing for our 12th grade. I want us to offer them the opportunity to join our congregation's delegation to the AIPAC policy conference in Washington, March 24-26. spring. They will be able to participate in programming designed for High School students, also intended to give them the tools to discuss Israel on college campuses. This past year eight of us went to the conference, and we are all planning to go back, and I hope that many of you will join us. Here is what Rabbi Michael Gold said about last year's conference: "Throughout the AIPAC conference I heard people on opposite sides of every issue talking to each other. Democrats and Republicans sat together. Jews, Christians, and Moslems sat together. In a society which is more and more divided, people who disagree need to talk."

That may not be the AIPAC you imagine, so a few words about the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. I have always been a little leery of AIPAC, because all of the people I knew who belonged were very far right on the subject of Israel. Those folks tended to support settlements and the like, and so I assumed that AIPAC did as well. When I finally really looked in to AIPAC, here is what I learned: AIPAC's sole mission is to nurture and grow the relationship between the United States and Israel, primarily by lobbying and teaching Senators and Representatives about the strategic importance of our alliance. They have a separate organization which brings freshman Senators and Representatives to Israel for tours and high level briefings. Though many AIPAC members do hold positions on the right of the political spectrum, AIPAC itself does not take positions on the issues confronting Israel, such as settlements or the peace process. The only exception is that AIPAC supports a two-state solution.

The most important thing I learned about AIPAC is that they have been working for years with whichever party is in control in Israel, and whichever party is in control in the United States. The organization is neutral with regard to politics, Israeli or American. Both of these things – not taking positions and remaining politically neutral, are what distinguishes AIPAC from other Jewish organizations, such as ZOA on the right and JStreet on the left. These are organizations with specific policy agendas, and you should support whichever one speaks to you. But everyone can also support AIPAC, because unlike the others, it is actively bi-partisan. Whatever your politics, if you believe that there should be a strong relationship between our two nations, you should support AIPAC.

There are other things you can be doing right now to help our kids feel a connection to Israel. One is to make sure that they hear the positive stories about Israel which don't always make the news. Stories like the millions of dollars Israel has spent to create a safety corridor for wounded Syrians to come to Israel and receive life-saving medical care. It is a safety corridor that the US and the Europeans said was impossible to create. But Israel did it, quietly. And Israelis protect the identities of the thousands of Syrians they have helped, because seeking help from Israel is a death sentence in Syria.

Our kids should hear that anywhere in the world there is a natural disaster, Israelis are among the first on the scene, and usually the last to leave. It was true of the hurricanes in Puerto Rico, Florida and Texas. And it was true when those teachers and students were trapped in a cave in Thailand. It was an Israeli team using Israeli technology that made it possible to save them. When our kids speak of Israel as a heartless oppressor, we need to counter with the true stories of Israel going out of its way to help people who revile her, for no other reason than it is the humane thing to do. Stories like this are antidotes to the poison they hear.

Another thing to do is to make sure your kids and grandkids see you making donations to Israeli organizations which are doing wonderful things for people of all nationalities and religions. The truth is that in every area of our lives, we always put our money where our heart is. We spend money on our children; we donate to institutions we love; after natural disasters we give because the victims tug at our heart strings. We give to people and places we love. So how many of us give money to any organizations in Israel? Guide Dogs for the Blind which provides dogs to people who are blind, not just to Jews who are blind. Leket, which feeds families that are hungry, not just Jewish families who are hungry. Red Magen David, which sends ambulances to help anyone who is ill, not just Jews. There are dozens and dozens of organizations like this in the State of Israel. It is Israel that provides this kind of care for all its inhabitants irrespective of religion. Put your money where your heart is. Find one or two organizations in Israel to support, and make sure your kids and grandkids know that you are doing it, and why you are doing it.

And finally, go to Israel. If you have never been, it's time. If you have not been in ten years, you'll be amazed at the difference. Come with me, go with another group. And if you have kids or grand kids, take them along. Last week's bat mitzvah, Sarah Weinstein, visited Israel just before her ceremony here. In her d'var Torah, she explained even better than I can why you

should go to Israel as a family. Here are the words of thirteen year old Sarah: “Three weeks ago I went to Israel for the first time and it really changed the way I see things. I saw the places that were described in the Torah for myself, with my own eyes. Of all the sites we saw one thing in particular stood out to me. I went to the spot in the Jordan River where Joshua crossed into the Promised Land. Not only did I see it in person, but I was able to actually put my foot in the river itself. I stood there, looking over at Jordan and saw the actual place where my Torah portion took place. It was amazing. All of a sudden, my Torah portion became real to me. I guess I had understood it in my head, but after visiting Israel and seeing, feeling, tasting and definitely sweating it, I understood it in my heart.”

This is what we need for all of our people, young and old. That they should understand Israel in their hearts, that they should love her, warts and all. Not excuse her failings, but love her despite her failings.

None of this is to say that Israel is perfect, that Israel never mistreats Palestinians, that Israel should not do a better job with her own Arab citizens. It is to say that Israel already behaves on a higher ethical level than most nations; that Israel and the Israeli Defense Forces live by a code of conduct unknown in any other country in the Middle East; and that no nation on earth is subjected to more minute scrutiny of every misstep.

It is to say that when American Jews discount Israel’s overwhelmingly ethical behavior, when we take it for granted and only focus on her mistakes, we play into the hands of those who hate her.

It is to say that when a rabbi speaks about all the positives of Israel and you think to yourself, “Yes, but,” then you have fallen into the trap of holding to an unfair standard a nation of human beings who want nothing more than to be allowed to live in peace.

We are doing all we can here at TBA to help our kids love Israel, warts and all. You can do your part. Come to the AIPAC conference; share the positive stories about Israel that our kids need to hear; support humanitarian organizations in Israel, and make sure your kids know why; and take your family on the trip of a lifetime. If we do all of this, I am confident that the next generation of Jews will be able to say about Israel, “I understand it in my heart.”