

Erev Rosh Hashanah
September 9, 2018/5779

Rabbi David Lyon
Congregation Beth Israel, Houston

“Winning Israel’s PR War, Together”

Just three months ago, Rabbi Scott, my wife, Lisa, and I led a trip to Israel. Since 2010, it was our congregation’s fifth trip to Israel. A generous grant from the Stanford and Joan Alexander Fund makes it possible for us to provide exceptional experiences with lectures, politicians, generals and journalists. This past year’s travelers were mostly first-timers and those who hadn’t been to Israel in 30-plus years. Their reaction to their time in Israel runs the gamut from “remarkable people” to “awesome land” and “the food”. When the trip ended, everyone agreed that they wanted to return home and continue the journey they began in June.

Tonight, I want to bring you inside one of the highlights of our trip. We had an intriguing conversation with a man named Gadi Taub. Gadi is 53 years-old. He’s an Israeli historian, author, screenwriter and political commentator. He is a Senior Lecturer at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is also a writer for the left-wing Israeli newspaper, Ha’aretz, though he doesn’t subscribe to their political leanings. Such is the complexity of Israel. I had heard Gadi some years ago in Israel, and felt that it was important for our travelers to hear him, too.

Gadi arrived on time wearing his motorcycle leather jacket and riding helmet. And, with typical Israeli candor and approachability, he sat at the table with us and engaged us with insights and information for nearly 90 minutes.

First, he wanted to know what we had learned about Israel. We told him that we learned about Israel’s military. We went to an army base and saw the Merkavah, the greatest army tank in the world. We went to the Syrian border with an IDF general, who pointed out all the surrounding areas filled with Syrian and rebel forces.

When we heard artillery in the distance, someone asked the general, “Was that artillery? Are we safe?” The Israeli general told us, “You’re fine. If you can hear the bombs, you’re fine.” We went to Herzliyah, and learned from a young entrepreneur how Israel is second only to Silicon Valley in technology. And, we saw vast areas of plentiful orchards growing in places that only decades ago were either swamps or deserts. Ample evidence exists, we told him, that Israel is an amazing country, a “Start Up Nation,” and a true light to the nations.

Then, after teaching us from his historical and academic perspectives, he wanted to hear our questions. Above all the questions that we asked him, there remained one that perplexed us and we hoped that he could explain. So, we asked Gadi, why is it that Israel can’t win the PR wars? Why can’t Israel succeed in the media given all of its good news and humanitarian aid? Why can’t Israel get a break, after sending boots-on-the-ground to areas devastated by natural disasters and \$1 million dollars to Houston after Hurricane Harvey?

We didn't stump him. He had obviously thought about our question many times already. Gadi answered clearly. He said, "Israel's PR problem falls into an anti-Semitic archetype and bias against the Jewish state and Israel. The problem with those who are anti-Israel is anti-Semitism." And, he pointed his finger at the west's PR operations, which, according to Gadi, is built to create a blood libel. As a result of the blood libel of the Middle Ages, when Jews were viciously accused of using the blood of gentile children to make matzah, Israel, is, to others, inherently sinful. The western press continues to bait Israel by linking Israel to its past, even if that past is horribly wrong and unjust.

For example, Gadi spoke about the riots along the Gaza border with Israel. He was adamant when he said that these are not sieges, they're riots. In 2005, then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, pulled Israel's people and interests out of Gaza, completely. The only objective was to create a peaceful border between the sovereign people of Gaza and Israel. What happened? Democratic elections were held. They were thought to be the answer to Palestinian sovereignty and self-rule; but, the terrorist organization Hamas won. Ever since, Hamas has used its resources, its support from Iran, and its people against Israel.

Gadi told us that Hamas' recent marches against the border fence with Israel were about their right of return, which is the equivalent to the destruction of Israel. The common bond that links Hamas in Gaza, with the PA in the West Bank, is that neither one is for a two-state solution for two peoples. They are only interested in the destruction of Israel and Jewish lives.

And, while Hamas presses its own people to the border fence, the western press accuses Israel of a disproportionate response. We asked Gadi if he agrees that Israel's response is disproportionate. Gadi said, "No way! Not when Hamas hides among civilians and civilian locations. Hamas," he said, "will kill as many of its own people for PR purposes." We sat back in our chairs. We were deflated. We felt we'd never understand. But, we persisted: under such conditions, how does Israel win a PR war? He admitted that it isn't easy; it depends on teaching the truth to as many people as will listen.

At best, Israeli laws bind the people to do the right thing in ethical ways under the worst circumstances. The Israeli Supreme Court adheres to human rights laws. There's ample evidence of it on the Gazan border and the Syrian border. Israel provides oil and gas and electricity for Gaza. It provides hospital services for those who can't find it in Syria.

At worst, expectations are low and unremarkable. Gadi quoted President George W. Bush, whose speech writer coined the phrase, "Soft bigotry of low expectations." It's a clever way of saying that bigotry exists, generally, but it's not nice to talk about in plain terms. So, one's prejudice is expressed in milder ways while pretending not to be prejudiced. Nevertheless, prejudices run high and expectations for a positive change remain low.

The status quo looks like this: Power is wrong; weakness is right. Palestinians claim victimhood and Israeli-might is the reason. Gadi calls it "kitsch morality." It's founded on childish definitions about who has power over the proverbial hill; and, it maintains simplistic

expectations for a future that will never change as long as each party plays its current and intractable roles.

The difference is and the fact remains that with Zionism, Jews overcame victimhood. Whether one was a cultural, religious or political Zionist, Jews defined a new mission never to be victims, again. Their focus on the future was always reflected not in what the present was, but in what the future would be.

Our tour guide in Israel, Lyana Rotstein, pointed out that Israelis never ask themselves, “What if?” As in, should I go to work today; what if Syria breeches the border with Israel in the Golan Heights. Or, should we make plans for tomorrow; what if Iran deploys its missiles stored in Lebanon? She said there’s no time for “what if?”. There’s so much to do, today, for the sake of tomorrow.

It began with the way early Zionists saw their future and how they viewed themselves in it. Israel’s declaration of independence outlined three essential elements: it was a sovereign state; it had natural rights to exist; and, it would conduct its affairs according to self-determination. To date, none of that has changed.

By contrast, the U.S. State Department has long considered Zionism a colonial affair. After the British withdrew, the Balfour Declaration, which outlined a place for Jews and Arabs in the land, was, in the State Department’s opinion, a temporary solution until future lines might be drawn. They were horribly mistaken. When the U.N. declared that Israel was a sovereign state in 1948, Israel saw itself, not as a temporary colonial state, but as a land for its people. After 2000 years in exile, they were able to come home, not only from war-torn Europe, but from every corner of the world. It is this point-of-view that contributes to Israel’s remarkable future and the rest of the world’s consternation with its success.

Had Israel failed, it would have been a footnote in the history of the Middle East, and a conduit to the next iteration of political boundaries that would have defined the region. But, Israel isn’t budging. Israel is here to stay with the boundaries it was given and the boundaries that it won. Though no actual green-line exists on any official or politically recognized map, it’s a line that Israel will define when the time comes and with every intention of protecting its people and its future.

With such different definitions and points-of-view, what will be next for Israel in the company of its regional neighbors and world-wide foes? Gadi Taub suggests that the clouds are gathering. At this point in time, he said, political winds have shifted, but the Israeli-American relationship remains strong. Economic and political pressure is in the best interest of Israel; and, if we get it right, we’ll transform the region by demonstrating that terror doesn’t work.

Gadi lamented that for 2000 years Jews suffered; now, without shame, he said, “we live and party.” No one is glib and no one misunderstands what’s at stake; but, like our tour guide said, the “what ifs,” which surround them daily, don’t interfere with a great life in Israel.

Now, before we replace our yarmulkes with party hats, let's be clear about another threat to Israel; it concerns me greatly. Gadi put it this way: The real threat to Israel is liberal America. He didn't mean Reform Jewish views on social issues in America and Israel. He didn't mean democrats versus republicans. He meant that he was discomfited by liberal educational institutions that permit lies about Israel in light of freedom of speech and academic freedom, because there is no freedom of speech in hate speech, and there is no academic integrity in lies and anti-Semitism.

My fear is that on the future of Israel, liberal American students fall prey to Palestinian victimhood, which is alive and well. Advocating for Palestinians at the direct expense and risk of Jewish lives and Israeli sovereignty is a problem.

This past summer, some young people who traveled on a Birthright program to Israel, free of charge, disrupted the bus trip when they approached the West Bank. When the bus stopped, they vocally renounced Birthright as a one-sided propaganda mission and exited the bus. They ended their trip with young Jewish friends and walked into the waiting arms of a group known as "If not now?" "If not now?" is a far left-wing group that has, as its mission, three demands: Stop the War on Gaza, End the Occupation, and Freedom and Dignity for All.

Unfortunately, they fall into the gap that Gadi warned us to avoid. This far left-wing group misses many facts on its way to its mission. The fact is that there is no war on Gaza. Hamas won a democratic election and is a proxy for Iran. Ariel Sharon withdrew Israelis from Gaza, against their will in some cases. The goal was peace at the border. Since 2005, a conflict erupts from Gaza towards Israel, every two to four years with no other goal except the destruction of Israel. Israel's only defense, though some claim it's disproportionate, has been to defend its people and disable Hamas.

"If not now?" wishes to "end the occupation," and there's no question but that the occupation has been a thorn in many peace efforts. But, they fail to remember that Arafat was offered as much as 95% --- some say 100% --- of the disputed territories in exchange for peace with Israel. Arafat walked out of those peace talks. He couldn't return to his people and tell them that the war with Israel was over, and that they were going to be peaceful neighbors. Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas, inherited the plan to destroy Israel.

The final mission of "If not now?" is "freedom and dignity for all." The issues surrounding the Nation-State Law, notwithstanding, the fact is that Israelis protect and preserve their own and other peoples' freedom and dignity. Israelis permit everyone to pray, live and work in Israel; they save the lives of desperate women and children who would suffer in Gazan hospitals or at the hands of mercenaries in Syria. We know that Israel's enemies would not preserve freedom and dignity for all, especially Israelis and Jews. The idealism of "If not now?" is laudable, but they won't pay the price to achieve it; it's already been paid for, and will continue to be paid for, with the blood of IDF soldiers and Israeli families who live, not just in the disputed territories, but along undisputed sovereign borders.

One of my nieces participates in “If not now?” and I am puzzled why, a young, bright, Jewish woman, who is completely dedicated to Israel, would sacrifice so much energy and effort on false claims against Israel, and diminished hope in Judaism’s own future. Unless and until Israel’s neighbors eliminate their charter to destroy Israel, there is little Israel can do but persist in its efforts, first, to safeguard its people, and second, to demonstrate that they’re ready to talk peace when the words “peace” and “Israel” enter their enemies’ vocabulary.

I value the role of some left-wing programs, such as “Hand-in-Hand”, which links Israeli and Palestinian children and families to bridge their differences, and to see each other as human beings with similar hopes. Some progress between them and us has been achieved in such groups. But, even groups like “Hand-in-Hand” cannot create lasting peace between us; not while stubborn anti-Semitic and anti-Israel authorities in the West Bank and Gaza are tied to the old blood libel, and to Iranian leaders who fund Palestinian operations to raise tensions with Israel.

When Gadi left us, we weren’t confused or disillusioned. Instead, we were clearer and more ambitious than ever before. We wanted to know more about how to preserve the strength of Israel to overcome its enemies at its borders, not only in Gaza and the West Bank, but along the Syrian border on the Golan Heights, and the Lebanon border to the north. We wanted to rally everyone we could meet in America, to assemble for the sake of support of Israel’s peace. We wanted to look at history again to be sure that we didn’t repeat its worst mistakes on our way to making exceptional decisions for the Jewish future.

In the worst neighborhood in the Middle East, Israel needs all the allies it can find. Thankfully, the U.S. is a strong and unwavering partner in the best and worst of times. It might seem that it’s always the worst of times; but, it’s not true. Every trip we’ve made to Israel, despite the news in the western press, has been safe, educational, and amazing.

When we see our Israeli brothers and sisters, we have to see ourselves, too. In the 21st century, as Israel goes, so might every Jew also go. The State of Israel struggles with many issues on and within its borders, but its first priority is its security and sovereignty.

Finally, I was taught that the best answers come from the right questions. So, let me end by transforming our two challenging questions --- “What if?” and “If not now?”, which are like swords, into useful hypotheticals that they might become like ploughshares.

I’m willing to ask, what if Hamas and the Palestinian Authority accepted Israel’s right to exist? What if Iran ended its proxy relationship with Hamas and Hezbollah? And, what if Israel’s neighbors on its borders entered permanent peace agreements with Israel? To this set of questions, I am perfectly prepared to ask, “If not now?”

We want peace for our sake and not at the expense of others. And, we all want peace now; but Israel is not like an impetuous child. Israel is a masterful assembly of wisdom, tradition,

culture, heritage, language, and faithfulness. They are God's unique gifts to the people Israel. They are borne by all the people of Israel, that they should be preserved in our hands and loved in our hearts, now and forever. Let this be the truth the world will come to know. Ken Yehi Ratzon; may it also be God's will.

Amen.