

“Israel in Interesting Times”

In the summer of 1985, weeks before I left home for a year of study in Jerusalem, my parents wanted to celebrate with a family dinner at their club in Chicago. At the table, our waiter learned from my mother --- because she couldn't help herself from telling him --- that I was leaving for Israel. Then, without hesitation, but kindly, the waiter identified himself as Palestinian. Before the evening ended, he turned to me and said, “It's not your place.” My mother nodded in approval. She misunderstood him. Hers was not a political message; hers was a wish that I would come home at the end of the year. His was a political statement. I didn't know then that conflicts about Israel could start at a dinner club in Chicago. I hadn't even left yet.

The waiter's comment followed me all the way to Israel. And all year, I kept looking for the place he said wasn't mine: in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, the Golan, and even Eilat. In 1985-1986, Israel was quiet; no war, and no real regional trouble to speak of. Nothing distracted me from living a modified Israeli lifestyle, and learning in and speaking Hebrew. By springtime, I even said to myself that if I couldn't go back to America, I could happily be at home in Israel. But, I was going home and I was eager to return. I had concluded that Israel needs Jews in America, and I would be pleased to be one. My convictions were well-known among my classmates. At the end of the year in Israel, our class gave out half-hearted awards. My award read, “David Lyon: Least likely to make Aliyah!”

I'm glad to say that I've lived it down with multiple trips to Israel and great support for the land, the people and the language. And, I can tell you that in all the places I looked and studied and grew to love, I found that that place does belong to me. It belongs to you, too.

On trips with many of you, we have found our place in Israel.

We found it as soon as the airplane landed in Israel. When we stepped off the airplane and into the airport, we joined the rhythm of Israel. Tel Aviv, we found, was like New York City; and, Jerusalem was like a mash-up of modernity and antiquity, the west and the middle east.

We found a sacred place in Jerusalem. The awesome feeling of entering the Western Wall plaza cannot be overstated. The Western Wall, just a remnant of the Temple Mount, is still a place of great holiness and Jewish significance after more than 2,000 years. More than a monument to the past; it's a place of encounter where we join the ever-unfolding timeline of our people's experience. I can still see the place where my father, of blessed memory, once stood on the plaza, looking towards the Wall, before he walked to place his prayer between the ancient stones.

We found our place where deserts bloom with produce, where former swamps now support industry; and thousands of acres of plants are nourished by science and thriving on ingenuity. And, we found our place on the Golan Heights where the IDF accompanied us in jeeps to show us the dangerous border with Syria, they defend every day.

But, this past summer, I found new places in Israel. I traveled with AIPAC's AIEF, American-Israeli Education Foundation, with 16 other Reform and Conservative rabbis. It was an intensive week of lectures, observations, and engagement. One of our site-visits was to Israel's northern border with Lebanon, in a moshav called Zarit. When we arrived, we were driven by bus to a highly secure area. It was the place where, just last spring, Israel revealed their discovery of a terror tunnel dug by Hezbollah, the Iranian backed terrorist group in Lebanon. We came to see the tunnel. The Israelis already knew about terror tunnels in Gaza, and the world knows about them, too. But, this terror tunnel, and four others like it, was new. This one wasn't dug in the sand like they were in the south in Gaza. This one was dug through thick mud and clay. How did the IDF find it? Officials were suspicious when their technology detected vibrations and sounds within the earth. So, they began to penetrate the earth with ordinary PVC pipes. By drilling into the earth straight down they eventually punched through into an empty space: it was a tunnel! They went further down; they hit earth again and then, going deeper, they found more open space. What was it? It was a spiral staircase; it was a tunnel project deep within the earth.

Sometime later, the IDF lowered a small camera down a pipe into the tunnel. When a terrorist came up the tunnel to continue his excavation work, he saw a small object dangling by the ceiling. When he reached for it, a non-lethal explosive attached to the camera detonated. It scared the terrorist who ran from the tunnel surely to tell his fellow terrorists that they had been found out. The IDF had all the evidence they needed. They secured the tunnel on both ends, and installed a strong locked door on Israel's side. It was the door we entered.

Now, it was our turn. Like a Stairmaster in the gym, but in reverse, we descended hundreds of muddy, wet stairs in a closed-in stairway dug out of the heavy earth around us. The IDF added only a string of lights to assist. In some turns along the spiral stairs, we saw what the terrorists left behind: gloves, small shovels, and random objects. Finally, at a landing deep in the tunnel, we saw affixed to the tunnel wall a communications system. Wires ran to the other end well beyond our sight. At the same landing, was a track that ran containers of earth out of the tunnel to be emptied, like cars in a mine. Other tools, wires, and equipment were left just where they were dropped when the tunnel was discovered. The IDF estimates that \$3 million was spent on this tunnel. Four others brought the total spent to more than \$12 million dollars.

When we reversed course and ascended the stairs, we paused to rest our legs and to look up the steep passage to see where we were headed. Finally, we emerged. Shaken, tired and a bit muddy, we gathered at the entrance of the tunnel. Standing together, the IDF told us that a few days before us, another group entered to see the tunnel. Shortly after they entered, a woman in the group had trouble breathing. By the time she exited the tunnel, she was clutching her chest. Asked if she was okay, she said, "Never, have I breathed in the air of such hatred."

We caught our breath, too. Before we turned around to leave, we saw a mezuzah affixed to the door that the IDF built to secure the entrance. Why was there a mezuzah on the doorpost? The IDF soldier explained that once it was a tunnel filled with terror; now, with a mezuzah attached to the entrance, it's a tunnel protected by the IDF, blessed by God, and used to tell the story of Israel's challenges and Israel's hopes. This, too, was our place.

Another day was planned for the West Bank. We were escorted by Palestinian security to an office of the "State of Palestine" to meet Mr. Saeb Erekat, Secretary General of the PLO, and Chief Negotiator for the Palestinian Authority. We took our places at a large table in his conference room. On the wall hung a picture of Yasser Arafat, and about two inches higher hung a picture of Mahmud Abbas. Optics. Mr. Erekat entered the room with his assistant who sat ready with paper and pen, but never took a note. I began to understand why not. Mr. Erekat was not optimistic. He was disillusioned by what he had experienced. He said the Palestinian people put 40% of the blame on American presidents and Israeli prime ministers, and 60% of the blame on him. He said, "They haven't built us hospitals; they haven't built us schools; and, they haven't built us infrastructure." As he went on, I wasn't the only one who thought about what even \$12 million dollars spent on terror tunnels could have done for Palestinians in the West Bank. I wanted to say, "Stop building terror tunnels and start building opportunity." I didn't say it out loud; his assistant didn't need to write down my name next to my opinion. Despite many efforts, he said any change would have to come from within, but that any change in leadership, by which he meant who will lead after Abbas, will be a bloodbath in the streets. Finally, at this table --- his table--- I found a place that wasn't mine.

In the 35 years since the waiter spoke to me in Chicago, very little has changed for him. Therein lies one of the most unfortunate and confounding parts of the Middle East conflict. If he been given any glimmer of hope that Palestinian leaders would accept Israel as a reality; had his leadership been inclined to negotiate with Israeli leaders for recognition and real peace, then he might have said to me, as my mother looked on, "One day, my friend, it will be a place for you AND for me." It's exactly what Tal Becker, Legal Adviser of Foreign Affairs, told our group of rabbis, "We all begin with our own stories. The challenge is that changing belief even in the outcomes depends on believing that change is possible."

Is change possible? I'm not sure. Israelis say that conflict is part of who they are; Palestinians say that conflict is part of who they are. And, today, Americans can say that conflict is part of who we are. The problem is that we're defining not only what is our own conflict but also what is everybody else's conflict, which is different than the way they define it for themselves. It's an equation that leads us to essentially nine conflicts at once. Maybe we shouldn't expect change; maybe we should expect an era of managing conflicts. The three essential conflicts are these:

First, in Israel, the conflict might be crystallized in the following fact. We know that Israel aimed to land a spacecraft on the moon, recently. It failed to land. But, what many of us don't know is that unlike American orbiters and spacecraft that are sent on a familiar trajectory from earth into space, Israel has to aim for space in the opposite direction. I didn't understand

this, so I asked a young member of our congregation who's studying astrophysics to explain it to me. Due to high population areas, Israelis launch over the Mediterranean, but once they reach orbit, it makes no difference. But, geo-politics is still a factor; because an Israeli expert explained that, if Israel launched as others do, Arab countries surrounding Israel would shoot down Israel's rockets. This is part of Israel's reality and a feature of its conflicts. Despite it all, Israel still contributes to the world with spectacular innovation and ingenuity.

Israel is not perfect. Like any other nation, including our own, Israel makes mistakes. But, Israel is a small sliver of a country surrounded by hostile neighbors. Often trying to appear larger and more important, Golda Meir once famously said, "Israel and China are 1/3 the world's population." It's good to stand with others. Israel seeks partners with nations that can provide economic viability and political legitimacy.

Second, in Palestinian territories, Mr. Erekat as much as admitted that years of intractable conflict have defined generations of Palestinians and impeded his people's prosperity. But, when Arafat was offered more than 95% of the West Bank, which represented an end to conflict, he declined it. Why? He said, and I paraphrase, "I won't give Israel credit for minimizing the world's sympathy for the Palestinian people's cause." In effect, Arafat never wanted peace; he only wanted conflict that would lead to Israel's destruction.

Third, in America, conflict surrounds us on the left and right, and, when that double-sided conflict is aimed at Israel, we have reasons to be concerned. Abe Foxman used to say, and he said it from our bimah years ago, "One who criticizes Israel is not an anti-Semite; but, one who only criticizes Israel is an anti-Semite."

Today, Israelis like to say that they're "permanently in charge of the unimaginable." Israel believes that its foothold in the Middle East is permanent. Since the Israelites were exiled from Jerusalem in 70CE, Israel is their first permanent refuge in two millennia. So, Israelis have asked "If, God forbid, they came for us again, who would protect us?" and Israel is their answer. Though you and I are Americans, we are also Jews whose relationship with Israel is our hope. What would the world look like for Jews, without Israel? Whether left or right, American Jews need to be mindful of their contributions to Israel's well-being.

Tal Becker told us that his grandmother used to say to him, "Tal, put on a jacket, I'm cold." He said it's the epitome of the current situation between America and Israel. It's two different Jewish communities; and, each one is telling the other what it should do to resolve their conflict.

The conflict we share with like-minded Israelis, is that what is permanent will be temporary, and what is temporary will be permanent. What is permanent and at risk of being temporary? The land that we've known for more than 70 years; but, the conflict that has accompanied it is eroding confidence especially among young Israelis that the Israel they know will be forever.

What is temporary and at risk of being permanent? The border defenses between Israel and all its surrounding neighbors --- Gaza, West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, and, Iran, which is forcing its

way through Iraq and Syria, to create a land bridge to Lebanon --- are a remarkable demonstration of Israel's and its allies' strength. But should they be a permanent way of life? This isn't peace.

While we debate who is right and who is left, Zionism doesn't need to be debated by American or Israeli Jews. Be it cultural, political, religious, or secular, Zionism can be understood as the refusal to be a victim for anybody ever again. Israel's power isn't a sin; it's a necessary asset for defense and sovereignty. Used wisely, Israel's power can provide a home, a refuge, and a safe haven for Jews. But, not only for Jews; they provide a place for Arabs, Druze, Christians, and Armenians, too.

Today, the world is experiencing another catastrophic rise in anti-Semitism. No place has been untouched by it. Where a Jew bleeds, every Jew bleeds. But, Israel must remain a permanent place where we can tell our Jewish stories. We need to coalesce around the well-being of our Judaism and Israel's future. We need to gain allies who understand what is at stake.

Daniel Gordis, a leading expert on Israel matters, validates this in a recent newspaper column. He wrote, "American Jews are repulsed by the interminable conflict with the Palestinians, and chant 'End the Occupation,' often without regard for the risks Israelis might have to assume to make that happen. Most Israelis would like the conflict to be over, too, but if perpetuating the unique project that is the Jewish state means that the conflict will continue until the Palestinians demonstrate (not just declare) an end to their drive to destroy the Jewish state, Israelis will unhappily bear that, too."

He adds, "If the rift between American Jews and Israel is to be healed, salvation will come...in an overdue conversation between the world's two largest Jewish communities, to deepen our understanding of each other's differences, successes and vulnerabilities, in the hopes that we can learn from the best that each has to offer. In a world that is darkening for the Jews once again," Gordis concludes, "we need each other now more than ever."

He's right. That's why I'm so pleased to tell you that Kehillah High, the joint project of Beth Israel, Beth Yeshurun and Brith Shalom, and Houston Jewish Federation, for 8-12th graders will have its inaugural trip to Israel for 10th and 11th grade students this summer. And, maybe you're registered to travel to Israel with Cantor Trompeter, David Scott and me next June. These are two significant ways to begin to tell our Israel stories, again. Even if you're not traveling there soon, I'd still like you to tell your family your Israel story and where you found your place there. Don't tell them how the story ended; tell them how to keep the story going.

May the New Year be good to the Jewish people in all the nations and all the places we call home. Amen.