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Rabbi David Lyon  
Congregation Beth Israel, Houston

### “We are Israel”

It's been two years since I've been to Israel; that's a long time for me. But it's okay because Israel came to me and to you. Last spring, we had live, virtual tours of Israel with our guide, Lyana Rotstein. She prepared us for our congregational trip that will leave, God willing, next May 8, 2022. Israel also came to us through more conflict with its enemies, accompanied by a staggering rise in antisemitism. Though we're not unaccustomed to cycles of conflict, this time was notably worse, and the aftermath continues.

What made this conflict notably worse? Last spring's conflict was a raging convergence of events, including but not limited to, the eviction of Palestinian families in Sheik Jarrah, the end of Ramadan, the celebration of Jerusalem Day, conflict on the Temple Mount, then tense Israeli elections, and political tensions between Hamas, the terrorist organization that rules in Gaza, and the Palestinian Authority, which rules in the West Bank. All that was needed was a match for ignition. And then it came. Hamas fired round after round of rockets towards Israel, with the intent to kill and destroy. Israel responded. The world reacted.

What made it exceedingly worse is social media. Social media has no boundaries. Social media is the arena where ignorance and passions run amok, and passionate but uneducated people exchange bad information. On social media, anybody can enter places where they shouldn't be; and just because they're there doesn't mean that they know what's happening there. Social media is not a substitute for real understanding of very complex issues especially in the Middle East. Joining that conversation with only an opinion or a feeling, without any background, history, or commitment to its future, is harmful and destructive.

The appalling lack of education and understanding about the Middle East, its history, and all its people, has contributed to the deep crisis we're facing now. We can advocate for greater education and understanding for all people about the region's persistent issues. But we're a small population. For the education of the world's population, we can do little. For Jews, however, we must do more.

We must demand of Jews greater education and understanding about the region's persistent conflicts. To begin, we have get into the right frame of mind.

A story is told about the rowing team at Yeshiva University. Unfortunately, Yeshiva University lost every race it entered. Even though they practiced and practiced for hours every day, they never managed to place any better than dead last. Finally, the team decided to send Morris Fishbein, its captain, to spy on Harvard, the perennial championship team. Morris schlepped off to Cambridge, Mass, hid in the bushes along the Charles River, where he carefully watched the Harvard team at its daily practice. After a week, Morris returned to Yeshiva. He announced to his team, "Well, I figured out their secret!" "What? Tell us! Tell us!" his teammates shouted. "We should have only one guy yelling. The other eight should row."

For Jews everywhere, the challenge remains who should be shouting and who should be rowing. The teamwork required to cross the finish line is still a work in progress. And we haven't even decided what the finish line looks like; we only know that it's currently farther away than we previously thought. Those in reasonable frames of mind agree that a two-state solution is key. Within a two-state solution, efforts to promote socio-economic opportunity, cultural tolerance, and personal prosperity, can provide hopefulness and durability to such an outcome. Who are the reasonable people we need? They're all around us.

Unfortunately, polarization in the world and the U.S., in particular, has caused us to think that we have to choose sides, as if we're self-selecting to join teams for competition. Without warning, "us versus them" emerged as a brand to approach every current event, and we fell prey to it. It's not important to me to know which category you've chosen, and it's not important to me what category you've put me into, either. There's only one category to which we all belong: we're Jewish or we're allies of Jews. I'm a Jew. I'm a Zionist. I believe in Israel's sovereignty and freedom to fulfill its Biblical mission to enter the Land promised by God to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob, Rachel and Leah. And after the exile in 70 CE, after the Romans besieged Jerusalem, Jews hoped, prayed, and then fought for the Land of Israel. Israel is not a prize after the Holocaust; not a result of taking someone's country; and not a negotiable issue open for discussion. We can't let ourselves be categorized so that we might be

triangulated. We can only say that we're all Jews or allies of Jews, and that Israel, the Jewish homeland, is a fact on the ground and in our hearts. But it's easier said than done. We also have to learn from our own mistakes.

First, Gerald Baker, writing in the Wall Street Journal last May, takes issue with the progressive left. He only cites them to demonstrate that we get caught up in categories that do more harm than good. He writes, "The embrace of critical race theory and woke ideology in the cultural and political establishment...neatly reduces all tensions in human relations to a simplifying narrative of oppressor and victim, only this time not on the basis of economics but race." He alludes to the protagonists of modern progressivism who are Jews who simplify the narrative without understanding the pitfalls. He writes, "It takes extraordinary intellectual flexibility to represent the Jewish people, especially those in Israel." He doesn't believe that modern progressives have done justice to the narrative just because they've fit it into a category that serves them. Baker concludes, "We can only hope that the cease-fire in Gaza will lead to an ebbing in anti-Semitic violence in the U.S." And he acknowledges, "The Jewish people know all too well that the hatred may wane, but it never disappears. History tells us that hatred is at its most virulent when it can be hitched to a larger ideological message of victimhood, resentment and retribution."

His analysis hits me hard. I begin to ask myself, "Where have we failed to teach our children and grandchildren about Israel, both the people and the land; its hopefulness to return to a land promised by God to our ancestors, and the prayers fulfilled when Israel, the land was born?" Were Jews not victims throughout history only to find refuge in Israel, and to be spared antisemitic attacks we've endured across America, lately? Why do our children resent Jews and Judaism in Israel, and at home where we strive for survival? And why must Israel suffer retribution to justify its existence? In 2005, Ariel Sharon forced Israelis out of their homes to leave Gaza to the Palestinians. Israel moved out. It never fired a rocket on Gaza except to defend itself against terrorist attacks including random rockets, incendiary balloons, and tunnels from which terrorist attacks are launched on innocent Israeli civilians. In 2019, I walked into the terror tunnel in the north of Israel, dug by Hezbollah, Iran's proxy in Lebanon. I've never tasted such hatred in the air, and I've never felt so grateful for the men and women who defend Israel borders for Israelis, and, if we ever wanted it, for us.

Second, though Baker might be concerned about the progressive left, there are also reasons to be hopeful about it. To the credit of our Reform Movement, it is the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism that has steadily increased its voice and presence in Israeli politics and social culture. With HUC, the Reform rabbinical school, the progressive movement is currently represented by over 100 Israeli-born Reform rabbis trained at HUC in Jerusalem, serving Reform congregations and communities throughout Israel. And, the progressive movement, for the first time, is now represented in the Knesset.

Rabbi Gilad Kariv, a friend, and a frequent visitor to Beth Israel, is a Reform rabbi, attorney, politician, and now a Member of Knesset. He has the unique honor to speak for and about Reform Jewish points-of-view that are strong on Israel security and equally as strong on Israel's socio-economic and cultural issues. Israel's sovereignty is an obvious issue. Israel's socio-economic and cultural issues are vital, too, because they are where the people live and where their daily concerns and hopes for the future reside. Israeli Jews and Arabs, alike, and their Palestinian neighbors need to feel hopeful that the future they desire is one they can reach.

In his opening words to the Knesset, MK Kariv said, "Throughout this journey, I was well aware that Jewish tradition and culture are a central part of my identity, alongside the belief in equality between men and women, and the recognition that dignity for humankind, love of the stranger and the pursuit of justice and peace are values inseparable from my Judaism. Even then I was adamant that in 4000 years of Jewish thought, one can find both inspiring human sensitivity as well as fundamentalism, outbursts of creativity alongside deep conservatism. The question that always guided me was not "What is Judaism?", but rather "Which interpretation of Judaism will I choose?"

In Kariv's opening remarks, he is like the rowing teammate. He's not questioning the team or its purpose. He's asking who's yelling the orders and who's rowing the boat. He answered the question clearly. He said, "There is no contradiction between Zionism, Jewish solidarity, and a universal, humanitarian worldview." Further, he explained that amongst all the challenges that we observe and others claim are superior over all others, "is the promise of equality and opportunity to each and every citizen; the protection of human rights; the reduction of economic inequalities; the reparation of the relationship between

the Jewish majority and the Arab minority and encouraging coexistence; the prioritizing of the public interest over individual preferences; the promotion of social mobility and equal access to resources; the cultivation of a pluralist and tolerant society; the deep concern for the environment; and of course the striving for a political agreements and peace - not only with the Gulf state, but more importantly with those with whom we share the promised land.”

Kariv is not any more idealistic than his predecessors and colleagues in Knesset. David ben Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, once said, “To be realist in Israel, you have to believe in miracles.” But Kariv brings a greater appetite to address the human hunger for what each person needs to hope for a future that’s better than today. The obstacle to his idealism and our pragmatism, will be the persistent demand by Israel’s enemies all around her to erase Israel “from the river to the sea.” And among Jews, the other great fuel for such destruction will always be ignorance about history and myopia about what the finish line can still be.

On the day that MK Gilad Kariv spoke, he finished his opening remarks to Knesset with a poem. He explained that after the Sheva Berachot, the seven blessings that are recited at a wedding after the couple exchanges rings and vows, he would always read a song of prayer by Lea Goldberg, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Hebrew-language poet, author, and playwright. She wrote:

“Oh Lord, my God, please teach me how to bless and pray, the truth of falling leaves. And fruits of summers day, the freedom that it brings - to see to feel to breathe

To know, to yearn, and even fail.

Teach my lips a song that tells us how to praise

The morning and the nights the secrets of your ways. Guide my mind to find the truth, see through the haze 'cause I don't want no ordinary days”

My friends, we don’t want “no ordinary days,” either. We want days that are worthy of praise and blessings. We want for all God’s children a place to live and work, and to rest and play. We want to see that tomorrow is filled with hope, because we have all contributed to a path forward and a finish line set on the horizon that we reach ever closer with every passing effort we make, together. To see Israel, today, is to see a time and place that are not ordinary at all.

If you have not been to Israel, or haven't been in some time, please consider joining our Beth Israel trip to Israel. My wife and I, with David Scott, will lead the trip on May 8, 2022. Talking about Israel is important. Walking Israel is vital. And educating ourselves about its past and present is the best way, if not the only way, to ensure its future.

In the New Year, the sweetness we anticipate should include our hopefulness for all Israel. We are the people Israel, the Jewish people who are bound by one covenant with One God and one Torah. No Jew or Jewish ally should ever write-off or turn their back on Israel. We can do this together, we can lend our individual and collective voices, and we can reach a destination that is the continuation of a journey that began nearly 4,000 years ago. It has been threatened in every century, but never ended. Let us be the generations of Jews who contribute to the longevity of the Jewish journey, begun by Abraham and Sarah, and bequeathed to you and me. Amen.