

Yom Kippur Kol Nidrei 5775 A Tale of Two Israels

Gmar hatimah tovah – may we be sealed for a good year.

As I prepare for these *yamim noraim*, these days of awe, I like to consult with friends and family and share ideas and thoughts.

A few weeks ago, a friend asked me what I was going to speak about on the holidays. I told him that Rosh Hashanah would probably be about my family's houseboating adventure and the lessons it taught me.

"Sounds good," was his reply. "And what about Yom Kippur?"

"I am going to give a Yizkor sermon about..." (wait a second, I can't tell you that part – come back tomorrow!) I concluded: "...but I am not sure about *Kol Nidrei*."

"Aren't you going to talk about Israel?"

"Well, of course; I'm, I'm just not sure how to present it – it's so complicated...."

"Too complicated for Emunah – you've gotta be kidding."

"Good point – maybe just too complicated for me...."

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Tonight I want to talk about two Israels.

No, not the Jewish and the Arab, not the rich and the poor, not the secular and the religious – but about *Yisrael shel malah* and *Yisrael shel matah* – the heavenly and the earthly Israels. I want to speak about them tonight – *Kol Nidrei* night, the holiest night of the Jewish year when we are gathered here in our *tallitot* at the beginning of our fast, when we have asked *mehilah*, for forgiveness from relatives and friends; when we are about to ask forgiveness from God.

Why?

Because there is so much at stake.

I want to take a step away from the daily reminders of the earthly Israel, the disproportionate press coverage, the petty details of the picture and turn our hearts and our minds first to the heavenly Israel.

Some of you may remember, as my mother told me, the time before there was an Israel. Some of you may remember that before it became a reality, there was a dream, actually more than one dream. There was the two thousand year old dream of a return to a divinely-promised national homeland, the dream that permeates our

davening – and there was a dream of Jewish sovereignty, of becoming a nation among nations. The dream that, according to the greatest modern Hebrew poet, Hayim Nahman Bialik, who died before it became a reality, necessitated even having Jewish criminals.

But the dream is not Jewish criminals; the dream was to create a Jewish state. A state that would be self-sustaining and contribute to the world in fields like science and health, in justice and mercy, and, yes, even in military strength. It would be a place where people lived in harmony with each other and with the land. And, for Jews, it would be a place where we could always come home, where they would gather us in, no matter how weak or poor or persecuted we were.

That is just the beginning of the dream, the general outline, the reason we fall in love with Israel. And it is that love that we need to keep before us, even when the earthly Israel falls short of our expectations – and do remember how often it actually approaches the heavenly vision.

Let's start with the most recent: last summer's war. It was tough on Israel's supporters; it was sometimes hard to keep the whole picture in front of us.

Once again Israel had to defend herself from intolerable rocket-fire. It did its best to fight back morally, warning its enemies to prevent civilian losses. It fought as best as it could against an enemy that hid itself and its weapons in mosques, hospitals, and UN schools.

Israel used its rockets to protect Israeli children; Hamas used children to protect rockets. Need I mention that Hamas is a terrorist organization whose charter explicitly calls for the destruction of Israel and praises the killing of Jews? The same Hamas that murdered two of my good friends, Matt Eisenfeld and Sara Duker, *zikhronam livrakhah*, may their memories be blessed, on the first bus 18 bombing in Jerusalem eighteen years ago.

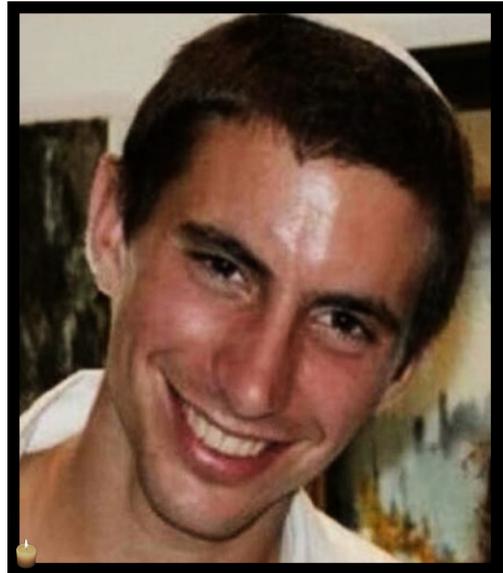
This summer, Israel was put into an intolerable situation. President Obama explained it plainly: "I have been clear throughout the crisis that Israel has a right to



defend itself.

“No country can tolerate missiles raining down on its cities. No country’s people should live day-by-day rushing to bomb shelters every half hour. No country can or would tolerate tunnels dug under their land used to launch terrorist attacks. America has been – and will continue to be – supportive of Israel and its right to defend itself in concrete terms.”

After spending a week incommunicado on vacation this summer, my family arrived at my cousins’ home, the Greens, in Hamilton, Ontario, where we learned of the tragedy of Hadar Goldin, the Israeli soldier who was thought to have been kidnapped in the middle of the war. While in the end, it was determined that he was killed (Hamas has still not returned his body), we were all desperate not to leave him behind.



While we were with the Greens, we learned that their grandson had been called up to serve in the Gaza war. Suddenly, everything took on an entirely different feeling as our concern for him grew. We realized there was little we could do for him at that time, but pray and hope.

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In reality the earthly Israel is inevitably flawed as all human endeavors are. It has faults and missteps. It is far, far from perfect. But, at its best, it is shaped by the heavenly Israel.

It is our responsibility as Jews who care passionately about Israel to help move the earthly Israel a little bit closer to the heavenly Israel, that vision that danced in the dreams of our ancestors must be before us as well.

In that vein, I would like to mention a few areas where we can help. We can continue to be active, actually, no, make that we must become MORE active supporters of Israel.

We can still speak out for peace, for the dream of a two-state solution, made more difficult by recent events, but no matter how elusive a vision, it remains the only moral and peaceful solution for Israel and the Palestinians.

This two-state solution requires mutual understanding and mutual respect. Previously, Israel offered 97% of the territories to the Palestinians along with the recognition of a Palestinian state in return for recognition of the Jewish state and Israel's right to exist. Let's encourage Israel to make that offer again and let's hope there are some courageous Palestinian leaders who would accept this offer.

And let us not be afraid to criticize Israel.

First, while Israel worked hard to prevent civilian casualties in this summer's Hamas-induced war, I wish it had worked even harder. It must investigate the cases where civilians were killed and injured to see if there was any wrongdoing. If there was, those responsible should be punished to the full extent of the law.

Second, Israel needs to work on its extremists. Now, Israel's extremists are not like the Muslim extremists – *l'havdil* – let us differentiate. That said, there are clearly some people hell-bent on spreading hate and even acting on it – destroying Arab crops and even committing acts of violence like the terrible murder of Abu Khadeir and the beating of his American cousin.

Third, Israel must treat its own Arab citizens better. While Israel does do a better job than its neighbors, I am not satisfied to measure Israel by the yardstick of its neighbors. It's not in the best neighborhood. Israel should be judged as an earthly Jewish state rooted in our tradition's values, aspiring for the *Yisrael shel malah*. And when it does not live up to those values, to our values, that is a problem. While Arabs have many rights and privileges in Israel, as of yet, they do not get their fair share of the pie. Perhaps if they did, they would be more loyal and less of a fifth column.

Fourth, Israel must work harder with Palestinian moderates. Now, you might say, there are not that many of them. And sadly, that is true. However, we should reach out to those that do exist and prop them up so that we can find some partner with which to discuss peace.

Fifth, Israel must have its Haredi ultra-Orthodox community become part of the labor force and serve either in the military or in some form of national service. It is only

fair and just. This population needs a better education so it can be a productive part of the labor pool and the overall population. They must educate their students in civics, in democracy, in math, and not get a disproportionate part of the education budget. As the recent brouhaha over Haredi men refusing to sit next to women on an El Al flight, this group must learn how to better fit in with the rest of contemporary Israeli society, especially the female half of the population.

Sixth, religious freedom and religious pluralism. If an Imam officiates at a Muslim wedding or an Orthodox rabbi at a Jewish wedding, it is registered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. How ironic it remains that I, as a non-Orthodox rabbi, cannot officiate alone at a Jewish wedding. I could go on and on, but you get the point. That status quo must change.

Last and hardest, Israel must work harder for peace. That means it should change its perspective on the settlements. Why Israel cannot take some sort of timeout on building is simply beyond me. Israel should be working to remove settlements that are located in areas that Israel intends to leave. Wouldn't that change the discourse?

In a recent piece, Rabbi Donniel Hartman confessed that his resolution this New Year is to be a "Peaceaholic." This, he explains: "reminds us that we are obligated to not fall prey to self-righteousness and a perpetual, self-exonerating blame game, which frees us from responsibility, because, 'It's not our fault,' 'They started it,' 'There is nothing that we can do.' As one commanded to seek peace and pursue it, it is forbidden for me to do anything which undermines the possibility of its actualization under the protection of the argument that peace will never happen in any event, and therefore my actions are of no consequence."

If we truly aspire to *Yisrael shel malah*, we must be the "adults" in the situation and take our responsibility to do the right thing seriously.

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Finally, this *shmitah*, this Sabbatical year which began on Rosh Hashanah, when biblically the ground was to lie fallow and slaves were released, reminds me that, for our community, we must be more focused on *shmirat halashon* – watching how we speak.

Now, I know there are times I have failed in this regard and for this, I ask for your *mehilah*, for your forgiveness.

But far too many times, I have seen or heard inappropriate language about Israel. Conversations have deteriorated quickly into name-calling. And emails are a particularly unhelpful medium – one where we do not hear people’s tone or see their faces, making it difficult to ascertain the full meaning of their posts.

Email is not the place for a rich, textured conversation about Israel. Face-to-face, calm conversations are what we need. This summer we spent an evening discussing Ari Shavit’s book: *My Promised Land*. As opposed to zinging unhelpful emails back and forth, over 50 people came to discuss a nuanced reading of Israel. We shared our own different perspectives on Israel. We did not all agree, but we all grew from the experience.

I hope we will have more book nights where we can share in healthy ways – discuss our passion and criticisms of Israel in a respectful manner, especially when we do not agree. That is what our community deserves and what Israel needs.

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But as this new year, 5775, dawns, we can do more – a lot more for Israel.

So, yes, I am speaking about Israel and I will continue to speak on Israel. I will support and rally for Israel. And Rabbi Fel and I will be leading a group from Emunah to the AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington this coming March. I will continue to lead groups to Israel like our Emunah cycling club, the Lexington Minutemenschen on the Hazon/Arava Institute Israel Ride next month (no, it’s not too late to donate!)

We are raising money for the Arava Institute, an organization that brings together Jewish Israelis, Muslim Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians to study and work on the environment – we could use more of that type of cooperation!

But I will also choose to speak carefully about Israel. I can be supportive and even criticize. Like a good friend who is honest with us, we can do both.

But most importantly, for us, we must speak civilly and kindly about Israel with each other. Yelling about Israel whether electronically or in person helps no one. So, let’s build a community where we can be passionate Zionists who share different paths and who help bring people into an encounter with Israel.

Let us not let apathy or internal discord be added to our list of enemies. We have enough of those.

I look forward to all of us building that type of passionate, yet nuanced, pro-Israel community – one that moves *Yisrael shel matah* a little bit closer to the *Yisrael shel malah*.

Thank you for being my partners in this.

May this *shmitah* year, 5775, be a year of peace and wholeness, a year of *shalom*, for us and for Israel.