

Israel
“Re-engage – Don’t Let Go as There Are Blessings Ahead”
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I was twelve years old when I made my first trip to Israel with my family and I fell in love. My next trip was in high school when I studied there on what would become the *Muss High School in Israel Program*. I would travel to Israel again on my honeymoon, and then again for my third year of rabbinical school. Each time I went I grew more attached. I have been back countless times for leisure, for missions and for synagogue trips for family *s’machot*. With all of this, my love for Israel has grown deeper and my attachment grows even more significant every year. In fact, one of my first sermons in this congregation was of the pull of the Holy Land. I spoke of being torn between my love for this great country of America, a land that has provided Jewish citizens and myself much more than any other country in history, and my deep visceral bond and indescribable tie to Israel. My parents instilled it, my schools have reinforced it, my friendship circles have encouraged it, and therefore, I am full-fledged Zionist. My stomach turns with every anti-Semitic article I read and I am enlivened with every new invention or every new discovery that is made. Each accomplishment reinforces my belief in the possibility of a sustained Jewish state, a homeland for our people, that is not just a 60-plus year experiment to see if we can govern ourselves and plot our own destiny.

Please understand that even though I was born and raised my entire life with a state of Israel in existence, there has always been a question mark. Maybe it is because of my parents’ paranoia. Maybe it is because there has never been a decade without a major war. Maybe it is because I have learned our history. Or maybe it is because I see the rampant anti-Israel vitriol that exists throughout the world. All of these things make me feel that Israel, a homeland for our people, is not a sure thing. Even on Yom Kippur, it is hard to fathom what my parents felt in 1973 during the Yom Kippur war when Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon simultaneously attacked Israel. As Jews throughout the world began to hear of the gang war that had begun nearly 40 years ago, I imagine they were sitting in their seats feeling what I have felt every day for my entire life. Is this it? Is this the end of the Jewish state and the beginning of the next exile? How many Jews will die this time? As Yehuda once said, “*Halevi Libi B’mizrach, v’ani b’sof ha’maarav.*” “Though my heart is in the east, I am in the farthest west.” He wasn’t making a geographical comment because we do feel so distant, so removed, so detached.

So you can understand my surprise when I read Peter Beinart’s damning indictment of the Jewish community which was based on the study by Frank Luntz. He explains why American Jewish college students were not vigorously rebutting campus criticism of Israel. Or the Danny Gordis’ analysis of the Steven Cohen study that showed “Non-Orthodox younger Jews, on the whole, feel much less attached to Israel than their elders.”

Then I realized it wasn’t the demographic that was being addressed. You see, the cohorts in the Luntz study were college students. In the Cohen study, the group was students to be ordained within the next five years, rabbis who were ordained between 1994 and 2011, and the rabbis ordained prior to 1994. In any case, Danny Gordis offers us painful instruction. He says basically there are four problems:

The first is memory. The Gordis generation remembers an Israel imperiled; the current generation is beset with “images of helmeted IDF soldiers with rifles chasing young boys who’d thrown rocks.” They don’t remember. We have forgotten that Israel was overrun and attacked and that we were the victims.

Second, “Despite the ongoing conflict, the fundamental goal of political Zionism has been so utterly successful that today’s students cannot imagine that Israel is actually at risk.”

The third reason is “They will do virtually anything in order to avoid confronting the fact that the Jewish people have intractable enemies. Their universalist worldview does not have a place for enemies.”

And finally, [what] “is lacking in their view and their approach is the sense that no matter how devoted Jews may be to humanity at large, we owe our devotion first and foremost to one particular people – our own people.”

Daniel Gordis went on to explain, “The war on college campuses is working at a time when most people are open to the ideas of others. There is a calculated and well-funded brainwashing of the college student – and Jews are getting caught up in it. It is not the demonstrations that are sometimes violent that worry me, and it is not the rhetoric shouted in the courtyards or the club expos. It is what is going on in the classroom that truly worries me, and it is not in the heated yelling matches that often find themselves here today and gone tomorrow.” No, it is the reasoned intellectual attack that has supplanted the visceral emotional attachment to Israel.

The Saudis understood that an entire generation could be shaped by the people who teach America’s best students. Now, they’re reaping the benefits of their strategic foresight. Dare we do less? What, we should ask ourselves, can be done to support those students who are feeling so vulnerable? How do we let them know there are many of us who hold them in extraordinarily high regard for their commitment, their tenacity, and their nuanced and brave positions? How do we exhort them not to give up, for they are the frontline in a battle that must be won, a battle to ensure that the next generation of American [Jews] is unabashedly committed to the continued flourishing of a Jewish State of Israel? (*Of Sermons and Strategies* posted by Daniel Gordis in featured articles on April 1, 2011)

Theories are plentiful, and diplomatic maneuverings abound and there is a proliferation of hypotheses and plenty of blame. We could speak of a two-state solution or a two-step solution as the Arabs would like. We could speak of the United Nations. We could engage in the debate about settlements and road blocks but then we would have to speak of terrorists and suicide bombers, of security barriers and rocket fire. All of this is exhausting and many of your eyes will have glazed over as this is a theoretical conversation about a far-off land of a faceless people. So let me put a face to all of this – Gilad Shalit.

As Benjamin Netanyahu said at the United Nations General Assembly, “And there’s one more thing. Hamas has been violating international law by holding our soldier Gilad Shalit captive for five years. They haven’t even given one Red Cross visit. He’s held in a dungeon, in darkness, against all international norms. Gilad Shalit is the son of Aviva and Noam Shalit. He is the

grandson of Zvi Shalit who, in the 1930's as a boy, escaped the Holocaust to the land of Israel. Gilad Shalit is the son of every Israeli family. Every nation represented here should demand his immediate release. If you want to pass a resolution about the Middle East today, that's the resolution you should pass."

Our Torah teaches of another brave soul who wrestled for his life, Jacob. Jacob was in a foreign place plagued by an enemy as he struggled to get free. In that moment, when Jacob is forever changed, it resulted in a new name and a new identity and he says, "I will no longer be held down by an enemy." He turns from defense to offense, and I paraphrase, "You think you will not let go of me but I will not let go of you until we turn this battle into something more positive. There are blessings to be had, and *Lo eshlechani*, I won't let go until I receive a bracha. Jacob turns to this adversary and he says *Ki Im Berachtani*, not until you bless me."

And to you I say the same, "*Lo eshlechani* – don't let go, *Ki Im Berachani*, there are blessings ahead." Then the story concludes, "*Lo Ya'kov ye'amer od shimcha, ki im yisrael, ki sharita im Elohim, vi'im anashim v'tochal.*" You will no longer be called Jacob. From now on you will be called Israel because you have wrestled with God and man and have prevailed.

We will prevail. We struggle with each other, we struggle with others, we struggle with God but we succeed, we prevail and we survive.

Netanyahu concluded his remarks by saying, "There's an old Arab saying that you cannot applaud with one hand. Well, the same is true of peace. I cannot make peace alone. I cannot make peace without you. President Abbas, I extend my hand – the hand of Israel – in peace. I hope that you will grasp that hand. We are both the sons of Abraham. My people call him Avraham. Your people call him Ibrahim. We share the same patriarch. We dwell in the same land. Our destinies are intertwined. Let us realize the vision of Isaiah – (speaks in Hebrew) *Ha'am Ha'holchim ba'choshech raor gadol.* "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light." Let that light be the light of peace.

Israel is a litmus test for how the world feels about the Jewish people and at this moment those feelings are ambiguous at best – hated at worst – we cannot afford to be uninterested, neglectful, or apathetic. There is not a single excuse for apathy, for lethargy or for indifference. So tonight I say re-engage, re-engage, re-engage. *Lo eshlachani* – don't let go. *Ki Im Berachani*, there are blessings ahead.