

Israel this Year

Please know that what I am about to share with you comes from my deep and abiding conviction that Israel needs to be in the world, that her security needs are deep, complex and of paramount importance in a Middle East that is raging out of control of civilized behavior, and with all of the ancillary anti-Semitism in the world. Israel remains a refuge for Jews who find it impossible to stay in the country where they are residing.

I have had the privilege of always living in a world where there is a modern State of Israel. From my earliest days I was imbued with love of Israel as part of my Jewish identity. Our congregation is named after the people Israel--and the modern state is named after our people. We feel close to the State of Israel here--you can see it when our board voted to buy an Israeli bond and make a donation to Magen David Adom. You can see it on the mural where in the center the green mountains of Vermont roll into the Judean Hills outside Jerusalem. Our identity with Israel, our people and Israel, the country, is powerful.

Which is why when Israel is hurt, we hurt.

My words for today began to be written in early Tammuz, that is, July, in the week that we have learned of the deaths of Naftali, Gil-ad, and Eyal. Two sixteen year olds and a nineteen year olds. Taken, really, before their lives could begin. Their lives' potential lost, much like the loss of the six million Jewish individuals during World War Two. What they could have been we will never know. Within a week, a revenge killing took place as an innocent Arab 16 year old was immolated in the Jerusalem forest. Despicable and against the rule of law. The perpetrators were soon caught.

This spark turned into the relentless bombardment of civilian Israelis by Hamas's rockets. Long range rockets threatened Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, in addition to the short range harassment around Gaza's borders.

Finally after months of being under rocket fire it has ceased.

Finally after months of being under attack the terror tunnels built from Gaza into Israel proper have been destroyed.

Finally after much of Gaza was destroyed by the IDF, there is a restless quiet.

We all know that Hamas' rules of engagement put innocent civilians, including women and children at risk.

We all know that Hamas *modus operandi* was to launch its weapons from hospitals, UN schools, residential areas, and other places with no regard to civilian life.

We all know that in addition to terrorizing Israeli civilians, Hamas' "pay-off" is a destroyed infrastructure in Gaza.

And we should know that the people of Gaza are reluctant to criticize Hamas because of Hamas' well-deserved reputation for brutally killing those it considers "collaborators" with Israel.

Now we have Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the Palestinian Authority, speaking to the United Nations last week, saying that "In this year, proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly as the International Year of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, Israel has chosen to make it a year of a new war of genocide perpetrated against the Palestinian people."

Abbas demanded an end to the occupation and asserted that Palestinians faced a future in a "most abhorrent form of apartheid" under Israeli rule.

Abbas' words are viewed by many in and outside of Israel as a *casus belli*, a declaration of war. The United States, in particular, is dismayed by Abbas' words.

The blunt reaction of the Obama administration to the speech testifies to the fact that the White House got the memo: Abbas is in a defiant mood, and believes that rocking the boat, even violently, is his only hope of moving the boat forward.

The United States slammed Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas's speech at the United Nations, in which he accused Israel of "genocide" against the Palestinians, saying it was "offensive" and undermined peace efforts.

"President Abbas's speech today included offensive characterizations that were deeply disappointing and which we reject," said State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki.

“Such provocative statements are counterproductive and undermine efforts to create a positive atmosphere and restore trust between the parties,” she added.

Nahum Barnea, an Israeli columnist, called Abbas a liar--as he observed that the UN is a place for liars to regularly spread their mistruths. Abbas knew it was a lie, and yet he said it, hoping that the lie would hold. Genocide is a term which must not be uttered recklessly.

Abbas' move has three goals: The first is to try to impose an agreement on the Israeli government which it is not interested in through international sanctions; the second, assuming that the first one fails, is to at least punish Israel by weakening it in the international arena; the third is to prove to the Palestinian street that Hamas is not the only one fighting Israel – Abbas is fighting Israel too, in his own way. This need grew stronger in light to the fighting ability demonstrated by Hamas throughout the Gaza operation.

He believes that using force is the only way he can squeeze concessions out of Israel and that using force is the only way he can push the US back into a more active role in helping the Palestinians get what they want.

These two narratives fiercely held about this land, this spot of earth, rarely coincide and most definitely conflict. These are narratives that engender strong emotional responses, responses that lead people on both sides to lose their lives.

What makes this so sad is that the people are, first and foremost, human beings.

They are also distant cousins, if you will, people who are sharing a small part of the earth that continue to make claims that are impossible to fulfill. There will never be a world without the state of Israel.

The land where the State of Israel is will never go back to what was there before it. And until the Palestinian leaders in the West Bank and Gaza internalize this fact there will always be horrific flare ups that lead to the loss of human life.

Given that peace seems an impossibility, I suggest that in its place, given the tense and entrenched emotional narratives, is an uneasy accommodation.

Let me explain. The cost of the ongoing conflict to the quality of life of the Palestinians is a tax that, if removed, would allow for cooperation with the Israelis in improving so many aspects of life.

Agronomy.

Medicine.

High technology.

Water.

Energy.

Environment.

And more.

Take away the narrative of hatred.

Let's say for a moment that the people never have to like each other--but can agree to replace terror and restrictions on movement with advances that could make Israel and the territories heads and shoulders above the rest of the region.

Instead of the impoverished conditions that create the fertile minds for extremism to take hold, there could be education directed toward improving the quality of life.

Instead of resorting to violence, people would embrace cooperation--perhaps begrudgingly, but without spilling blood.

Instead of allowing the pot to boil over time and again, there could be a true sharing of technologies that have allowed Israel to become a western innovator.

Alas, the systems of governance on the Arab side seem to be irretrievably broken with respect to this conflict.

We saw it vividly with Hamas this summer.

We heard it with Abbas' remarks to the United Nations last week.

Happily, amidst all of the bad news, most Jews maintain a strong connection to Israel. According to the famed 2013 Pew survey of American Jews, 75% say they have [a strong sense of attachment](#) to the Jewish people, and 89% say that caring about Israel is either an important (44%) or essential (43%) part of being Jewish

So--what do we do?

First we need to acknowledge that we do not live in Israel, we live here. The threats they face all around them--Iran, ISIL/ISIS, Syria, Hamas, Hezbollah, terrorist tunnels, ill-defined borders with hostile populations--this is a recipe for a security situation that must be managed by Israelis, with the strong support of Israel's allies, especially the United States.

Make no mistake about it: the United States is one of Israel's strongest supporters in the world, no matter who is president or who are the members of the congress.

Two, we, who have chosen not to live in Israel, can still rightfully celebrate all of the advances that Israelis have brought to the world.

Three, we must always visit Israel and support tourism to Israel. These dollars matter, but more importantly, our presence matters to the Israeli people.

Four, we must affirm that even when the government of Israel does something with which we disagree, that Israel is a democracy, and democracy is inherently messy. One only has to watch television, surf the web, read the newspapers, or listen to the Israeli radio to understand that the debate over what the Israeli government has done, should have done, will do, should do, will always be loud and ongoing.

WE know that Israel is far from a Jewish utopia.

Yet in a world where fundamentalism and fear prevail,

where anti-Semitism still requires there to be a place where Jews are able to go,

where autocracy and despicable acts capture the world's attention,

there is still Israel.

For us, for our people who live there, for those who need her.

There is Israel.

And this remains our obligation: to love Israel without becoming apologists for Israel, to continue to pursue her ultimate well-being, and to remind the world that we are still here and will remain in the world.