

Israel: Our Treasured Nation

Yom Kippur Sermon 5772 by Rabbi Michael Schwab

Jerusalem, Sunday morning, 11:00 a.m., November 30th, 1947:

Dearest Mother, Dad and Naomi,

I walked in a semi-daze through the crowds of happy faces, through the deafening singing [of], "*David, Melech Yisrael, Chai ve Kayam*" past the British tanks and jeeps piled high with pyramids of flag-waving, cheering children. I dodged motor cycles, wagons, cars and trucks which were racing madly up and down King George Street . . . their running boards . . . overflowing with layer upon layer of elated happy people. I pushed my way past the crying, kissing tumultuous crowds and the exultant shouts of "Mazal Tov" and came back to the quiet of my room ...to try to share with you this never to be forgotten night.

[It all began] . . . at about 11:00 p.m. [when] there was a knock on the door, "We're getting through to America. Come on down. The voting [on the partition plan is] tonight." Ten pajama-

clad bodies crowded into a room with space enough for five and sat tensely round the battered radio . . . We got through just as the announcement of the majority vote was made: thirty-three in favor, thirteen against and ten abstentions. [The plan had passed!]

Ecstatic, we hugged and kissed each other frantically, then stood rigidly at attention and sang *Hatikvah* fervently. [*Kol od ba'levav p'nimah Nefesh yehudi homiyah* -- As long as the heart of the Jew beats, And as long as the eyes of the Jew look eastward, Then our two-thousand year hope is not lost, To be a free nation in Zion, in Jerusalem].

Out came bottles of wine, biscuits and candy. We ate and drank and then . . . banged on all the doors to wake up those who had slept through the good news. All the students in the building scrambled up to the roof and, under the warmth of moon glow and wine, danced deliriously. . .

Confronting the watchman with the news, we demanded a bus to take us to town . . . In a mad scramble we piled in, body on body; down the road we raced like a million hearts on fire, headed

for the heart of Jerusalem. The streets in the city were beginning to fill . . . People poured out of their homes in a continuous ever - thickening stream. In the center of town crowds of happy people, hugging each other, dancing Horas and jigs, headed spontaneously, as we were -- drawn by some magnetic force -- to the courtyard of the Sochnut, the Jewish Agency building, which for years housed the hopes for a Jewish State in Palestine. Out came a flag and onto the balcony came Golda [Meir]. There were no words to suit the moment. Choked with emotion, she managed to say [only] “*Mazal Tov*” and down came tears, oceans of unrestrained happy tears. A group of us marched to the press room of “The Palestine Post” [now The Jerusalem Post]. Another round of drinks and embraces and crazy dances while we waited for the historic First Edition to come off the presses. . . Then [we] headed back to the Sochnut building, just in time to see a streak of warm beauty spring up out of the horizon and smile good morning to us. We looked at each other, drew closer together . . . and felt the thrill of experiencing a historic wonder, [of] dawn bidding Shalom to a Jewish State. . .

Rumor had it that Ben-Gurion had just arrived from Tel Aviv. . . Sure enough, there he was, standing on the balcony of the Sochnut building. He looked slowly and solemnly around him -- to the roof tops crammed with people, to the throngs that stood solid in the courtyard below . . . He raised his hand: an utter silence waited for his words. "*Ashreynu sheh zachinu la yom ha zeh.*" [Blessed are we who have been privileged to merit this day.] "*Tchi ha Medina ha Ivriyth,*" [Long Live the Hebrew State] . . . The moment was too big for our feelings. There were few dry eyes and few steady voices. Ben-Gurion tossed his head back proudly, tenderly touched the flag that hung from the railing and charged the air with electricity when he shouted defiantly, "WE ARE A **FREE PEOPLE.**"

Flags were hoisted everywhere and shopkeepers had decorated their windows with photos of Theodor Herzl, whose words have inspired and sustained Zionists until this day, "*Im Tirtzu ein zo aggadah*" -- "If you will it, it is no dream." Now that

it was happening, it seemed more than *ever* like a dream. My heart was bursting from joy.

Your loving daughter, Zippy”

Such happiness, such emotion, such appreciation, such pride. Zipporah Porath, a native New Yorker studying for the year at Hebrew University, who stayed in Israel from that moment forth, managed to capture for us that miraculous moment when the road to Statehood became a reality for our people so that we too, almost 65 years later, can experience the meaning of that night. Her description of the delight, the overwhelming sense of joy that was felt by those people that day, fills my eyes with tears of happiness and my heart with a fullness of meaning every time I read them. What a moment it must have been for the Jewish community that the dream of Jews all over the world, held dear in our hearts for two thousand years, finally became an achievable reality in front of their eyes. It was a moment in history when Jews everywhere, of all kinds and from all backgrounds, could truly celebrate – never

again would our people be without a homeland. It was a true miracle.

Today, as we sit here on Yom Kippur, reflecting on our lives and the blessings that we have, I want us to recapture that spirit that existed in the early days of Israel's formation. I want to thank God that the miracle of Israel is still a reality today. With everything that is going on in the Middle East right now I feel it is important for us to take the time to reflect on, and appreciate, what Israel truly means to us and to remember that our relationship with Israel is defined by much more than our opinion of Israel's relationship with the Palestinians, a relationship fraught with complication and multiple perspectives, as Rabbi Kurtz spoke about on Rosh Hashanah. I would like us to remember that we have so much to celebrate about Israel, so much of which to be proud, since that great moment when Israel was formed and when it became a reality in 1948. For Israel is facing challenging times and Israel needs us; it needs a Jewish people, and a world, that understands and appreciates how precious and valuable it is.

From the minute that historic vote was concluded in 1947 the great pioneers of the Jewish state worked tirelessly, and many sacrificed their lives, to successfully declare and defend the newly created State of Israel and establish it as an actual reality so that people like me, and even my father, never knew a world without the modern State of Israel. Since then, Israel has fulfilled so many dreams, has become invaluable to our people in countless ways and has contributed greatly to the world at large.

When Herzl began working towards the creation of the modern State he envisioned Israel, amongst other things, as a safe haven for all Jews, across the globe. He witnessed, first hand, the power of anti-Semitism and understood that the Jewish people needed a home. In 1948 Herzl's dream became a reality. Since its inception the Jewish State has successfully absorbed mass immigrations from persecuted Jews that have made *aliyah* from almost every nation on earth— Jews who survived the Holocaust in Europe, Jews from persecuted communities all over the Arab world, impoverished Jews from Ethiopia, and most recently Jews

from the former Soviet Union who are finally able to reclaim their Jewish identity. We do not emphasize and celebrate enough how important the establishment of the Jewish state has been for these immigrants, who were given a chance with the creation of Israel, to bequeath to their children an opportunity to live successful, happy and free lives as Jews, in a modern state with a bright future. For each of them Israel is now home – the first true home where they felt safe and accepted. And for each of us, Israel *can* be home if ever we want, or need it, to be. The establishment of the State of Israel has turned around the lives of millions of Jews and stands ready to do so for any of us in the future. For this alone we should be thankful.

Further, we can also celebrate the fact that Israel has become the leading center for the flourishing of Jewish culture and language. Unbelievable scholarship in Jewish subjects of all kinds is being produced in the Jewish State, from which we in the Diaspora benefit directly. Jewish educational material, Hebrew literature, cinema and theatre are prospering in ways that they

could not anywhere else in the world. The thriving of Jewish learning, religious life and culture in Israel not only enriches the lives of Israelis, it does so for Jews in every corner of the world, who look to Israel for inspiration, research, ideas and new cultural expressions of Judaism.

What is more, not only is Israel so vitally important to our people as a whole and to our tradition as an entity, it is also an incredible source of meaning to us as individuals – to you and to me. As all who have visited can attest, spending time in Israel can have a wonderfully positive impact on a person's Jewish identity. Walking the land, experiencing the culture and engaging in the Jewish environment there can bring the Jewish tradition to life for anyone, including those who have previously seen their Judaism as peripheral to their identity. In fact, Jewish organizations, like Birthright, and many before it, have heavily invested in this notion and have seen promising results. An experience in Israel helps to make our personal experience of Judaism come alive for us, especially for younger Jews, and is helping those of us who care

about passing down our great heritage to the next generation, to do so in communities all over the world.

And Israel's establishment has not just been good for the Jews. We can be immensely proud of the great economic and scientific accomplishments of Israel over such a short period of time and against such great odds. With the help of the influx of immigrants and the great entrepreneurial spirit that developed in our homeland, Israel has miraculously grown from a "third world" country with a tiny economy existing on a small slip of mostly rocky desert, into a highly developed nation with a first class economy that has made the desert bloom and which exports goods from agriculture and flowers, to cutting edge bio-technology and advanced security systems used around the globe. Israel serves as model for many developing countries for how to achieve prosperity in a hostile environment with few natural resources. In fact, little Israel ranks 15th among world nations on the UN's Human Development Index, has the highest ratio of university degrees to population in the entire world, produces more scientific

papers per capita than any other nation by a large margin and has the largest number of startup companies than any other country, except the U.S.

The list of Israel's scientific contributions to the world is long and illustrious. Israeli companies have developed landmark technologies that helped create cell phones, voicemail, diagnostic procedures for breast cancer, heart pumps, the pillcam, not to mention dozens of other more technical but just as impactful, technologies, devices and systems that have changed the world for almost everyone alive today. Take Shai Agassi for instance – once a top executive in a German software company -- he left his position to create his own Israeli start-up, “A Better Place” which has developed a cutting edge electric car network that is currently changing the industry in Europe and here in the US. Or, how about Israeli scientist Daniel Shechtman who just this past week won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. He is the third Israeli to win the award in chemistry, and the **10th** Israeli to win a prestigious Nobel Prize in the country's short 63-year history. As Dan Senor

and Saul Singer wrote in their book *Start Up Nation*, “If Israel adapted the advertising campaign “Intel Inside” with similar “Israel inside” stickers, they would show up on almost everything people around the world touch”. Our tiny Jewish State has contributed to the world in huge ways no one could have ever anticipated.

Plus we can be equally proud of Israel’s *democratic* tradition. The State of Israel is the only proven liberal democracy in the Middle East and has been since its inception. Every citizen, Arab or Jew, regardless of faith, has the right to vote and hold office. And in fact they do. No discrimination is permitted in Israel based on gender or sexual orientation – it is by far one of the most tolerant nations in the world in this regard. And while Israel is called the Jewish State there is not even an official state religion in Israel. Israel preserves the right of free speech and freedom of the press completely and does not censor its journalists or citizens. Israel has always been a haven of democracy and freedom in a

region where such values are only now *beginning* to emerge in some of the countries that surround it.

To truly illustrate the greatness of Israel's democracy at work, one need only look back to this summer to find an incredible example. As Rabbi Kurtz mentioned a number of weeks ago, a woman in Tel Aviv who couldn't afford her rent protested her eviction by pitching a tent on Rothschild Boulevard in the heart of Tel Aviv. She felt that Israeli society needed to respond better to those struggling in the current economy. As a result thousands of Israelis took to the streets to protest social policies that are affecting the standard of living for Israeli citizens. The demonstrations swept the nation, tent cities were erected in the streets and this lasted for weeks. There was little or no violence, not by the protestors or the police. No one claimed that the citizens of Israel did not have the right to speak their mind. In response, the government set up a commission, made up of leading politicians and community members, to address their concerns. It was a demonstration of democracy at its best. The people spoke

out in a civil, peaceful yet impactful way and their government responded in kind.

The fact is that Israel is a beautiful country: physically, culturally, religiously, politically and socially. Yes, it is fraught with problems, like most societies, including America, and it has the added struggle of existing in the neighborhood that it does. However, too often Israel is simply associated with conflict, with the difficult moral choices it has to make as a nation on a daily basis and with the media's incessant portrayal of Israel as the Goliath in her dealings with the Palestinians. No one is saying, most vocally Israelis themselves, that Israel has done everything perfectly or that there is no right on any one else's side. Poll after poll shows that Israelis firmly believe that the Palestinians should have a nation of their own. But the truth is, that Israel is **much more than this conflict, much more than its successes and failures in finding a resolution with the Palestinians**. We must never forget that Israel is none other than the realization of the dreams of millions upon millions of Jews for two-thousand years.

It is a shining example of a thriving democracy that is contributing to the world in countless ways. It is the only Jewish state that exists, nurturing Jewish culture and scholarship, protecting our ancestral sites and providing Jews around the world with a safe haven and homeland to which we can always return. It is a touchstone of our people, spiritually and educationally, and serves as an inspiration for Jews world-wide. Israel is a beautiful place, and precious, and it should be recognized and treated as such by our people and by the world.

However, on this score I must admit that I am a bit worried. I am worried because I am becoming more and more afraid that both Jews, and others, do not think about Israel in this way.

We/They continue to judge Israel solely based on their evaluation of Israel's relationship with the Palestinians. And as everyone knows this is an *extremely* complicated matter, which gets more complicated every moment. There *is* no simple, clear, moral path for Israel to resolve the issues – if there was, this conflict would have been solved already. Yes, Jews and others can certainly be

critical of Israel, we can decide that Israel is taking the wrong path on a particular issue, if after careful consideration, that is what we believe. However, regardless that should not be the totality of one's relationship with Israel. An evaluation of Israel's handling of the situation with the Palestinians is not the entire summary of the importance of the Jewish State, its meaning, its significance, its contributions and **its worthiness of our support**. Too often we get drawn into thinking about, and talking about, Israel only in relation to its conflict with the Palestinians instead of remembering what Israel represents to the Jewish people and to the world, in the bigger picture. In so doing, we not only do the State of Israel injustice but we do an injustice to ourselves, denying ourselves the rewarding and meaningful connection that we can create with this wonderful country.

What is more, looking at the bigger picture helps us to see that what is at stake when we speak about the existence and character of Israel is not just the here and now and it is not just the lives of Israelis. Please make no mistake – the fate of the Jewish

people as a whole is strongly connected to the fate of the State of Israel. The marginalization of Israel will be the marginalization of the Jew. The further Israel is delegitimized in the world, the greater the chances that incidences of anti-Semitism will rise, which will affect Diaspora Jews around the world. Support of the State of Israel is not only serious business for our Israeli kinsmen but for all Jews, everywhere, including us, our children and our grandchildren.

That leads me to my other worry. Israel is in a *particularly* precarious position right now. It is always hard to say such things, and even harder I imagine to hear, as some sectors of our community are continually raising the specter of crisis. Yet, this time I am detecting a heavy dose of worry even from sectors that usually aren't so easily rattled. Here is what I believe is making everyone so concerned.

First and perhaps, foremost, Iran, whose leader, as you know, has denied the right of Israel to exist, has denied the Holocaust and who has gone on record saying that Israel should be wiped off the

map. Iran is daily getting closer and closer to developing a *nuclear* weapon. If we have learned anything from our history it is that we should take an enemy very seriously when he makes genocidal threats against us, especially when that enemy is a head of state and even more so when that enemy has nuclear ambitions. To add to the worry, there is doubt amongst the experts that the Israeli air force, as amazing as it is, even has the capability for a last minute save on this one, as the nuclear facilities of Iran are multiple, well-hidden and are mostly underground, largely protected from aerial bomb strikes. Israel and the Jewish people are becoming ever more dependant on American and world pressure to stop Iran's nuclear program.

Second, and less known by the public, is the quickly deteriorating relationship between Israel and Turkey, or to be precise, between Turkey and the entire Western World. Many don't understand the significance of this falling out but Israel and Turkey have had a very close and strategically important relationship for a long time. However, recently the leadership in

the Turkish government has become Islamicist and antagonistic to Israel and the west. This about-face of Turkey is especially problematic because Turkey is a very industrialized nation with a significant economy and is one of the only countries in the region that is a part of NATO. Once a staunch ally, Turkey is turning against Israel, sadly adding itself to the list of potential enemies in the region at a time when Israel desperately needs friends.

And while the Arab Spring that you have been reading about, during which grass roots revolutions in the Arab world are overturning sitting dictators, will hopefully produce stable democracies some time in the future, for now it has caused great unrest in the Middle East, especially in Egypt. Egypt is another example of a country that has been at peace with Israel and has cooperated with Israel in many crucial ways for the last two decades. For a long time, Israel has had Egypt as a partner: in combating terrorism that was harmful to both countries and in maintaining peace along the Sinai border. With the ousting of Mubarak, the former Prime Minister of Egypt, official Egyptian

attitudes towards Israel are changing and Egypt's investment in its relationship with Israel is declining. Add that to the fact that Egypt is in turmoil and has allowed their border with Gaza to become fluid and less patrolled. This means that terrorists and weapons are flowing into Gaza more freely now and the Sinai is becoming a haven for criminal and terrorist activities. In addition to Gaza itself, which is becoming more and more dangerous, for the first time in a long while Israel has to worry about the security of its border to the south.

In the North, Syria too is in turmoil and that border is unstable as well. Plus, Hezbollah, which is backed by Iranian money and is overtly violently hostile to Israel, still holds power in Lebanon. The Northern border, which has always been a problem, is becoming more and more volatile as of late.

Finally, we come to the situation with the Palestinians. Before I even mention Abbas and the UN, we must not forget that Gaza is still openly hostile. Rockets continue to be fired on Israeli citizens at the pleasure of Hamas. And the situation with the West

Bank and Abbas, once so hopeful, is now taking a very depressing turn. Mahmoud Abbas, despite public and private pleas from President Obama and the other members of the Quartet, petitioned directly to the UN Security Council for statehood, instead of re-opening direct negotiations with the Israelis. In doing so, he violated virtually every previous agreement signed between Israel and the Palestinians, including Camp David, which all call for peace through direct negotiations alone. He will not get his state through the Security Council. President Obama has made clear the United States would exercise our veto on that matter, for which all of us should be thankful.

However, what is even more disturbing is that in his speech to the UN General Assembly, a speech made in front of the entire world, Abbas's language in regard to Israel became more extreme than ever before. He called the very creation of Israel in 1948 Al Nakba, the 1948 catastrophe. More than once he referred to Israel as an apartheid state, a charge that is patently false and extremely offensive. He referred to the Muslim and Christian connections to

the region, without even acknowledging in a *word* the Jewish connection there. And he has repeatedly stated he will not recognize Israel as a Jewish state. All of these developments sadly signal that Abbas, if he ever was, is becoming less viable as a partner for peace. After applying for statehood at the UN and making such incendiary remarks in front of the world and in front of his own people, he has made it harder than ever for the Palestinians and the Israelis to work out a lasting peace agreement together.

I tell you all this not to depress you but to share with you why I think your support for Israel right now is so crucial. Israel is extremely strong, economically vibrant and culturally rich. There are plenty of things *we* can do, *Israel* can do and the *world community* can do to help prevent either a major conflict in Israel or Israel's isolation in the region. However, we must not leave the resolution of such serious threats to chance. In these situations we must advocate for our people, for our brothers and sisters in the Land of Israel and for justice. If *we* do not, we cannot expect

others to do so. I implore each and every one of you to take a role over the coming months as an advocate and ambassador for Israel. Your efforts are important and can make a huge difference.

In that regard, here are a few things I am hoping you will do. Number one, support the work of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. AIPAC is not a political action committee and therefore does not give money directly to candidates. Nor is it a politically partisan organization, quite the opposite. Its leadership and membership is very purposefully made up of Democrats, Republicans and Independents who disagree on many issues, but who are *all* united by their love for Israel and the United States and their belief that the future of both countries is enhanced by being partners and allies. AIPAC's sole purpose is to nurture and strengthen the relationship between America and Israel, whomever the leadership of each country may be.

What I have discovered over my years of involvement is that AIPAC has forged incredible relationships with our members of Congress, and they have a reputation on the Hill for providing

reliable and accessible information on issues that face Israel and the Middle East. Therefore, I truly believe there is no better way to advocate for Israel **to the American government**, to ensure that the United States continues to allocate the proper foreign aid to Israel, which is immensely important, and continues to support Israel in the international arena. On that note I hope you will all consider coming with me to AIPAC's National Policy Conference this year. By doing so you can show our representatives in Washington how much Americans care about our country's policies towards Israel. The more that attend, the more our voices are heard. Flyers are available in the lobby for those who are interested.

Second, when you vote in any upcoming elections make sure you know where the candidates you are considering stand on these issues. If *we* don't make these issues a priority in a campaign few others will. If you have a relationship with an elected official, make sure they know you care about Israel and are worried about Iran, Turkey and the UN. If you don't have a relationship, create

one. Writing and calling your representatives office to let them know what you care about and thanking them when they take action to support Israel is more important than you can imagine.

Be active and informed. We have many Israel oriented activities here at Beth El and even more in the larger community. Most immediately we are hosting an Israel Bonds event in memory of our own Howard Kaplan. We also offer a number of educational opportunities about Israel, for example AIPAC will be sponsoring a three part educational series for Beth El members this fall and Rabbi Kurtz is currently teaching a Hartman Institute class about Israeli society. It is incredibly important to use our resources to support what we believe in and to use the knowledge we gain to influence those we can. There are many other organizations as well that do incredible work supporting Israel, too many to name. But whatever organization with which you are involved, redouble your support at this time and make a difference.

And finally, of course, *visit* Israel. No gift you can give yourself, and the Jewish State, is greater than this one. Go as soon

as you can. You won't regret it. You will enjoy and be enriched and Israel will be enriched by you. If you are a planner, know that Beth El is planning for a JUF Family Mission a year from this December – please consider joining me on that trip.

The bottom line is: Israel is an extremely special place, a treasure in this world, for us and for the global community. It is truly a place that deserves to exist in peace, like the United States or any other country. It is a nation that contributes amazing things to the world at large. It is a touchstone of meaning for our people and so many others. It is a haven for our fellow Jews. It is our ancestral homeland. And I believe that the fate of Israel will have a direct impact on the fate of Diaspora Jews, like us. It is of the utmost importance that we do whatever we can to support and protect our one and only Jewish State.

The pioneers of the State of Israel knew that: Ben Gurion, Golda Meir, Zipporah Porath. Michael Levin, my former camper and my wife's longtime family friend, who lost his life defending Israel in the war with Lebanon after knew that. And so many

young people, courageous, idealistic and brave who are making aliyah now know that too. Our own Beth El member Gabrielle Gordon, who grew up in our very community and who is now a commander in the Israeli army -- she knows it too. I leave you with her words -- use them as your inspiration to remember how lucky we are that the Jewish State of Israel exists in our time and why it is a privilege for us that we have the opportunity to help ensure that this blessing will be there for the generations to come. This is sacred work and something in which we all need to participate.

Listen to Gabrielle's words:

“Israel is a country where any Jew can call home. When you visit the country you feel as if you belong here, and as if you are part of it. You know that no matter what, you have something in common with the person walking next to you on the street. There have been countless times where I am offered a house to stay at by people I have known for only a few minutes. In Israel, no matter if you live on a kibbutz or a big city, there is always a community . . .

which you are a part of and in which people actually care about you. The army, which now takes up most of my time, brings people of all backgrounds, ages, and political standpoints together to work towards a common goal. In the army, everyone is “connected”. You all wear the same uniforms and have to do the same work.

I think more than anything though, the little details of the country are the reason why people love it so much. Of course, it is not a perfect country and Israel has many problems that need to be solved and many that are too complicated to be solved overnight. [But] I love that everyone takes advantage of the hiking trails, and that I can get a ride from the man in charge of security at the prime minister’s [residence]. I love that the commander of my base told all the lone soldiers, [like me, that] he is like our father, and that every time I go back to my kibbutz I am still amazed by the scenery. These are just a few of the reasons, and until you experience it for yourself, it is hard to understand. It is not the

right country for everyone to live, but it is nice to know that for every Jew, it is another place to call home.”

On this Yom Kippur let us all pledge to appreciate the Jewish State and to do our part to ensure that Israel remains the beautiful, vibrant and secure home we know it should be. *Gmar Hatimah Tovah*. May we, and all the people Israel, be inscribed for a year of peace, happiness and blessing, Amen.