

PARSHAT NOACH
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I have just returned from a week's visit to Israel. Most of my time, except Shabbat with my family in Modiin, was spent in meetings on behalf of the Jewish people. In Jerusalem I was present at meetings of the Jewish Agency Board of Governors. These were followed in a retreat center outside of Jerusalem, Ma'ale HaHamisha, with meetings of the World Zionist Organization's Zionist General Council. It was a very busy time which included meetings with the President of the State of Israel in his residence, a visit to the Knesset to lobby members on issues that are important to Diaspora Jewry, and a meeting with the Prime Minister in his office. It is always wonderful to be in the State of Israel, and especially so with members of the Jewish people from around the world, who gather to support it and to work on its behalf as well as on behalf of world Jewry.

Yet, we know that these are challenging times. We need not rehearse the challenges that are present on the borders of the State of Israel: the war in Syria; ISIS close to the Israeli border; Hezbollah with its missiles trained upon the State of Israel from Lebanon; terrorist actions in Sinai; migrants in Jordan; wars in Yemen and in Iraq; and terrorism, unfortunately, sometimes on the streets of Israel itself.

It was also a time for us to examine Israel's international standing and to recognize the importance of our support in this battle. While Israel seems sometimes to be a pariah in the international arena, behind the scenes Israel has been approached by nations in Africa and Asia for support concerning their technological and military advancements. Even some of the "so-called" Arab moderate states have reached out to Israel, and while none of them publically will identify those talks or meetings, we know they are taking place. However, sometimes situations arise in the international arena which make us focus on the difficulties Israel has amongst the nations of the world.

The most recent one was the anti-Israel resolution adopted by UNESCO in Paris. In a resolution submitted by Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, and Sudan, entitled "Occupied Palestine", the committee on October 13, and then the Executive Committee on October 18, condemned Israel as the Occupying Power for any and all work that is being done in East Jerusalem. Israel was condemned for changing the distinctive character of East Jerusalem and not safeguarding the cultural heritage of Palestine. It was condemned for stopping the freedom of worship and Muslim access to their Holy site Al-Aqsa. The committee deplored the Israeli decision to approve a plan to build a two-line cable car system in East Jerusalem. And, it deprecated the continuing Israeli unilateral measures and decisions regarding the Ascent to the Mughrabi Gate. This is the gate which leads in to the Temple Mount in which Israel has buttressed for safety purposes.

For good measure the resolution also deplored Israel's military confrontations in and around the Gaza Strip and the civilian casualties caused there and strongly disapproved of the ongoing Israeli illegal excavations, works, construction of private roads for settlers and a separation wall inside the Old City of Al-Khalil Hebron.

But the most disturbing part of the resolution was the negation of not only Israel's, but the Jewish people's claim to the Temple Mount and to the Kotel, the Western Wall. The resolution refers to the Temple Mount several times as Al Haram Al Sharif, the Islamic term for the Temple Mount, without mentioning that it is the holiest site in Judaism. It also uses the term Buraq Plaza, placing the Western Wall Plaza in quotes, appearing to deny a Jewish connection to the site. Even The Tomb Patriarchs in Hebron and Rachel's Tomb outside of Bethlehem are noted by their Arabic names.

Last Wednesday, on October 26, another UNESCO Committee, the World Heritage Committee, adopted a draft resolution entitled "The Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls," by a majority of ten countries voting in favor, eight abstaining and two opposing the text. This resolution, which accuses Israel of various violations, echoed the previous decision in referring to the Temple Mount compound solely by its Muslim names. This time, the draft did not even mention the importance of Jerusalem's Old City for the "three monotheistic religions." Israel's Ambassador has claimed that UNESCO is simply a theater of the absurd.

This re-writing of Jewish history and our claim to our past was decried not merely by the Israeli government, but by the U.S. Government, members of the Senate and all Jewish organizations. Having just returned from Jerusalem, the eternal capital of the Jewish people, I wonder how it is possible for UNESCO to claim that we have no right to the city, nor a historic stake in the Temple area and at the Kotel, and how it can not only rewrite history, but negate it as well.

In addition to this, Palestinian officials announced a year-long campaign to commemorate 100 years against the "crime" of the Balfour Declaration. While the Jewish community around the world is gearing up for the Centenary of the declaration recognizing our national homeland, the Palestinians have declared it a "colonialist project". This is a new Palestinian effort asking Britain to atone for the big crime it had committed against the Palestinian people.

Deliberately, I made two pilgrimages to the Kotel in the Old City of Jerusalem. On the first occasion, after one of the meetings of the Jewish Agency, I proceeded there by myself. I walked through the Jaffa Gate, circled through the Jewish Quarter, passed the Cardo, and made my way to the Kotel. There were visitors from everywhere and I heard many languages. I descended the steps to the Kotel Plaza and there saw people on both sides of the Mechitza, in the men's section and the women's section, offering their personal prayers. I, of course, joined on the men's side, said my personal prayers, and joined a Minyan for Mincha. I felt like I was going back 2,000 years. I know my forefathers and yours, and maybe even some of our foremothers, stood in this same area, and no matter what UNESCO said, we have been there for millennia. As I returned from the Kotel in the Old City on the window of the jewelry stores there was a sign: "Come in and sign our petition to UNESCO." After standing at the Kotel, that is what exactly what I did. The people of UNESCO and the nations who supported the resolution must know how I felt.

The second time was Wednesday morning, the first day of Heshvan, Rosh Hodesh. I joined the Conservative Movement, the Reform Movement, and Woman of the Wall, as they

took 14 Sifrei Torah in the hope that the Women of the Wall, who come each and every Rosh Hodesh, could pray in peace in the women's section. For the first time, the Sifrei Torah were allowed into the plaza area. While there was some violence, pushing and shoving, this time the police intervened and allowed the Sifrei Torah to come forward. Many of us joined outside the women's area and participated from afar in our prayers. It was truly a momentous scene to see the Women of the Wall participating in their service and hearing their voices. At one point, even men walked into the women's section. While there were some young Haredi kids yelling and sounding whistles, the prayers took place with a minimum of commotion. There was then an egalitarian Torah reading held in the Kotel Plaza. We all paraded in song as we left the Kotel and the plaza.

While there is no resolution yet to a more egalitarian approach to the Kotel, and this was raised with the Prime Minister on a number of occasions, this was another opportunity to show once again that this is a Jewish area and no matter what UNESCO states we will return to it again and again.

In our meetings with the Prime Minister and government officials, the UNESCO resolution was simply ridiculed. The Prime Minister said, when he joined us in the Knesset, that he felt that there was even a small victory as both Tanzania and Croatia, who had voted with the resolution, had changed their minds. Italy also recognized the fallacy of the resolution. In fact, a new archeological find was announced by the Israel Antiquities Authority. It is a document, a shipping invoice that was sent over 2700 years ago from Na'arat, mentioned in Chapter 16 in Joshua, near Jerusalem. It says in ancient Hebrew: "From the King's maidservant, from Na'arat, jars of wine, to Jerusalem." The Prime Minister is quoted as saying: "Here is a letter from the past to UNESCO. It is written Yerushalima. It explains, in Hebrew, our connection to Jerusalem and the centrality of Jerusalem."

As to the Balfour Declaration: On November 2, I sat with well over 200 committed Zionists from Israel and around the world, as we debated the future of Zionism and attempted to understand what the next 100 years of the Balfour Declaration, the next 120 years of the opening of the Zionist Congress in Basel, will be like. The future is challenging, but it is also promising. With all its problems, Israel's population is growing. With all its challenges, Israel has new relations with countries in Africa, in Latin America, and in Asia. With all of its difficulties, Israel's technologies, innovations, and start-ups are being sought after by the entire world. The future is bright even with all of those challenges, difficulties, and present dangers,

As I return from Israel, I suggest we look at the broader picture and the coming horizon. Israel is still a land of promise and it is ours. In Jerusalem, there is an enormous amount of building and new hotels are going up everywhere. Even with the dangers on the exterior borders and the challenges within Israeli society, people are optimistic and filled with hope. It is our task to make that optimism become a reality through our own activities including visiting Israel, sending our children and grandchildren there, being involved in Israel advocacy here in this country, knowing the truth and spreading it to our Jewish and non-Jewish friends, learning Hebrew, the language of our people, and maintaining ties to the Jewish people around the world who need us and whom we need as well.

As I return from Israel I can say with great pride and faith “Am Yisrael Chai.”