

Rosh Hashanah Day 5775  
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### **Be for Israel “If not now, When”**

This summer was very difficult for me, although it didn't start out that way. It began on June 16<sup>th</sup>, when thirty of us from Emanuel touched down at Ben Gurion airport. I think everyone was a little nervous. We didn't really know each other, most of us had never been to Israel and didn't know what to expect, and it was the first time some of the children had been out of the United States. Our ten-day trip was filled with history and road trips and archeology and Shabbat together in Jerusalem, and a great bond was formed between all of us on the trip, and it was also formed between each one of us, and Israel.

As far as the tensions between Israel and Gaza or the West Bank, we didn't feel it (although there was one incident, it was on the Syrian border, and there were few reports about it). And in fact, our tour guide, a woman who grew up in the U.S., but now lived on a kibbutz in the North, went out of her way to talk about the cooperative existence of Jews and Arabs in Israel, in the West Bank, and within the borders. And our experience was a reflection of that. We swam with Palestinian kids in the Sachna, a natural spring swimming area in the North, there were Muslims and Jews vacationing together in kibbutz K'far Bloom. We stopped to refresh at an off-road market near the Dead Sea and ate our arctic limon popsicles next to some Arab women enjoying their lunch. From our view as tourists, it felt like people were just trying to live their lives as best they could, and we left there feeling like there was hope for the Arabs and Jews living in and around the west-bank to live in peace together. We arrived home with warm feelings about each other and Israel. It was a great feeling.

Then the boys were found dead. Then a 17yr old Arab boy, from East Jerusalem, was burned to death by Israelis in retaliation for those three Jewish boys. Bombs then began to rain upon Israel from the Gaza strip, IDF air raids and troops entered Gaza, innocent people were killed and wounded on both sides during this war that lasted fifty days. Ten days of beauty and peace and good food and laughter and singing and great feelings gave way to worry and anger and helplessness, and war and killing and hatred. We had just been there and acted like we were in the United States, free of fear and terror. We were hanging out on the beach, sitting in roadside cafes, riding bikes along the Tel Aviv shore, strolling through the streets without a care in the world, along with everyone who lived there.

We didn't see the scars in the Israelis we met, scars from previous wars and attacks, and we could not have ever imagined what was going to happen in less than a week after we flew out of the country to our homes here in Southern California. All of the sudden, in the middle of a normal summer in Israel, with

people going to work, spending time with the family and going through the every day grind, over 82,000 brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters were called up to serve in the military. Sirens blared in the cities and towns all over the south, an even in Tel Aviv, as over 3,000 missiles were targeted towards them, only 735 of which were shot down by Iron Dome.

It's very difficult for us to relate to this in the United States. We are safe. We get upset when a street is blocked off and we have to change the route on our navigation. It's been nearly 25 years and I still remember the sensation I felt every time the sirens went off when I lived in Jerusalem in 1991, when 40 scud missiles were launched towards Israel. We had to go into a sealed room and wait for the O.K. to leave. I will never forget that feeling, and I felt it only about a dozen times.

We just can't relate. Almost every single Israeli in this room has heard many, many sirens in their lifetime. Many have heard bombs, and all experienced war inside or on the border of their country. It doesn't matter what decade they were born. Israel's neighbors, Israel's enemies, have tried to destroy her ever since she became a Jewish State in 1948. And there have been sirens, bomb shelters or wars in 48, 56, 67, 73, 82, 87, 90, 97, 2000, 2006, 2012, and now 2014, and that doesn't take into account the random indefensible suicide bombers that were a common occurrence before the border fence went up.

And this one, in 2014, let us make no mistake about it, this was a war against a terrorist organization, whose sole purpose, plainly written in their charter, is the annihilation of the Jewish State of Israel. These terrorists are no different than Al Qaeda, Islamic State - ISIS, Hezbollah, or Islamic Jihad. Israel was protecting herself from terrorists who had engineered and built over 30 tunnels from Gaza into Israel designed to attack and kidnap Israeli citizens. These tunnels were built with the money and resources given to Hamas as the leaders of Gaza for the welfare and growth of Gaza and its inhabitants. Israel was fighting against terrorists who had already launched about 10,000 rockets into Israel since Israel pulled out of Gaza in 2005. The IDF reports that over 5 million people are currently living under the threat of rocket attacks. The fact that only 6 Israelis were killed from thousands of rocket attacks this summer is a testament to the value that Israel places on its citizens lives and their protection. And regarding these rocket attacks, listen to how Dr. Gadi Taub, an Israeli historian and author put it in a back yard of one of our congregants this past summer, "What do you think America would do if 1,000 missiles were launched from Mexico into Texas?" I don't think it would take a thousand missiles – how about one near El Paso? It is very difficult for us to relate so far away, here in Los Angeles, in Beverly Hills, with this beautiful music and prayers, and the freedom and security we feel from being Jewish and American.

I'm not feeling that freedom and security in the same way right now. This year we are talking about Hillel's famous quote, "If not now, when?" But the text actually

has two questions that come before it – and today, they are extremely important questions for every Jew on this planet. Because the world reaction to this war was not a reaction about Israel alone, it was about you and me. It was about being a Jew. The whole quote is: *If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?*

With that in mind, consider the first question: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” Filter that through the Jewish lens. “If we are not for ourselves, who will be for us?” No one will. The dream of the Jewish State was built upon the premise that the Jewish people need their own political homeland as a refuge from anti-Semitism. Hertzl felt it, and so has every generation since Israel’s inception. Almost 700,000 Jews came to seek refuge in Israel during the first three years of Israel’s existence. Many were from the Holocaust, from displaced persons’ camps in Germany, Austria and Italy. They were also from Bulgaria and Poland, and Romania. And in that first group was nearly every Jewish community from Libya, Yemen, and Iraq. The late fifties and sixties saw the Jews from Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt arrive. The seventies saw the first Russian Jews, and the 80s and 90s saw more than 20,000 Ethiopian Jews arrive, including 15,000 in May of 1991, which I watched happen on my living room TV in Jerusalem. By the way, if you read the New York Times just yesterday, 6,000 French Jews have requested to leave France, many will end up in Israel.

History has proven that there are times we must be for ourselves. By “ourselves”, I mean Jewish people everywhere. This war and the world reaction to this war has been shocking and outrageous. In the month of July alone, protests against Israel went on all over the world. But the signs at these protests were not always about Israel. They were against Jews. In July of this year, the World Zionist Organization reported that there were 318 anti-Semitic incidents, not anti-Israel incidents, anti-Semitic incidents. An increase of over 383%. In Europe an increase of 436% in anti-Semitic incidents, South America, a 1,200% increase, South Africa, 600%, 100% in Canada, and 127% increase in anti-Semitic instances in this United States of America. Recently, Robert Ransdell, a write-in candidate for US Senate from Kentucky, campaigned with the slogan, “With Jews we Lose.” Stones were thrown through the window of Holland’s chief rabbi. In Italy, a synagogue door was defaced with the words: “Judey pigs. We will kill you a lot.” Swastikas were drawn on synagogues and signs from Calgary to Capetown to Caraca, Venezuela. Teenagers stormed a school bus with Jewish kids in it in Sydney, Australia, there was an attack with a baseball bat in Paris; firebomb attacks in Toulouse and Germany; vandalized cars in Miami; smoke grenades in Budapest. There were news reports about a Belgian doctor refusing to treat an elderly Jewish woman with a fractured rib, His advice to her son, who called on a medical hotline: “Send her to Gaza for a few hours and she’ll get rid of the pain.”

Right now, for the world, there is no difference between Israel and Jews. Because the reality is that we are Israel, the people. Whether we live in the

Jewish State, or in the state of being Jewish, we are all Israel. We *are* tied together.

And we need that tie more than ever right now. “If we are not for ourselves, who will be for us?” No one. Now is the time for us to renew our pride in our Jewish heritage and in our Jewish state. Now is the time to show our outward support for the country that has welcomed and saved every single Jew that lives there from the anti-Semitism that brought them there.

The second question: “If I am only for myself, what am I?” It would be absurd for me to suggest that we only support Jewish or Israeli causes. To be for Jews alone, without participating in the world, only separates us and kindles an “us vs. them” attitude from us and everyone else. We all know of so many worthy organizations that are doing incredible things in the world, and they aren’t specifically “Jewish.” *Tikkun Olam*, the Jewish value that urges us to help to make this world a better place works best as, and should be, a universal imperative to help all of those in need.

In addition, “If I am only for myself, what am I?” when it comes to the situation between the Israelis and the Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank, I feel for the Palestinian *people*, those who are just trying to make a living, take care of their families and live in peace and harmony and prosperity. All people deserve to live in freedom. So I am, and will always be for the people. But right now, terrorists represent that people, and the opportunity of freedom for the Palestinian people will only come, I fear, when the people, and not terrorists, govern them. Recently, I saw the son of one of the founders of Hamas speak at an AIPAC symposium in Washington. Mosab Hassam Yousef worked as an informant for Israel’s Shin-Bet (secret service) in the West Bank. He was asked a not so simple question, “What can Israel do to bring about peace in the region?” He stared up at the ceiling a moment, looked seriously out to the crowd, and said, “Protect herself well.” I have always been hopeful that we would be able to find a peaceful solution between the Israel and the Palestinians – and I still hold onto that hope. But that moment, I realized that peace would not come as long as terrorists are in control over any country that borders Israel.

Finally, our last question: “If not now, when?” This is the time that Israel needs us. The people Israel need us. We are Israel, *Shema* Israel, listen Israel. Now is the time for pride in being Jewish, not for hiding. Now is the time to become aware of the growing anti-Semitism in the world, and not ignore it and say, “It could never happen here,” but find *your* way to do *your* part in combating it. Now is the time. If it means giving less to some of those other secular organizations that you have supported and give more to Israeli and Jewish causes, then that is what it may take, for now.

The State of Israel needs us. This is the time Israel needs our business. Israel has more startups per capita than any country in the world, and has 70

companies on the NASDAC exchange – third only to the U.S. and China. To invest in Israel's companies is not a long shot investment; it is sound business and helps Israel's economy grow. Israel needs America's support: Needs it in our houses, and in the House of Representatives; Needs it in the American organizations that support Israel, and in the over 25,000 non-profit organizations within Israel. And Israel needs us to go there. They need tourists. They need tourists because it shows them we care, and we need to go there because anyone who goes there feels something unlike the feeling anywhere else in the world. And I'll say it right now. If you want Emanuel to go, we will go again. Email me, "I'm going," the moment we get enough people for a trip, we go. Clear out the end of June, send the email. It keeps jobs, boosts the economy, and gives you more back than you can imagine.

If I am not for the Jewish people, who will be for us? Right now, I believe no one.

If I am only for the Jewish people, what am I? Not fully participating in the responsibility to make the whole world a better place.

If not now, when? There are pockets of history where the survival of a people is dependent upon their awareness and action. This past summer, Israel has been tested, both the State and the people. The two are, and will forever be linked. We, here, must always remember that Israel is made up of people whose parents or grandparents took a left out of their country, and our Jewish communities in the U.S., our ancestors just happened to take a right. The countries of origin of nearly every citizen of Israel are the same as the countries of origin of nearly every person in this room. We are Israel, and we need ourselves right now. If not now, when?