

What It Means to Be a Jew
Chapter III
Why Is Israel So Special to Us
Kol Nidre 5769
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It was nearly 33 years ago in November of 1975. The United Nations had just passed a horrific resolution condemning Zionism as racism. Shocked, I walked from one clergy office to the other in the Interfaith Center which housed our Reform synagogue as well as several of Columbia, Maryland's Christian congregations. I went to express my dismay and invite the ministers to join me at worship the following Shabbat to express solidarity with our congregation over this shocking resolution.

Some were sympathetic, but I shall never forget one pastor's response. "Steve," he said, "you've taught me a lot about Judaism, and I consider you a friend. But I have neither interest in nor sympathy for Zionism."

What makes me sadder is that the same scene could easily happen today. Even worse, statistics show that many Jews today have neither interest in nor sympathy for Zionism, the idea that we Jews should have a state in the Land of Israel.

More and more Jews are ignorant of its history and therefore vulnerable to the propaganda of those who decry Israel as an outlaw state of Jews who arrived in the 40's to steal the Palestinians' land. More and more self hating Jews join the anti-Semitic chorus that uses such terms as "racist", "ethnic cleansing", "apartheid" or even, may God forgive them "Nazi" to describe the policies and actions of the Israel government.

On this holiest day of the year let us not delude ourselves nor allow others to delude us. We Jews are joined to Israel at the hip. The Land of Israel is an integral part of what it means to be a Jew.

Our connection did not begin in 1947 when the United Nations voted for the creation of a Jewish state.

Our unbroken physical and emotional connection to that land dates to the beginning of our emergence as a people—4000 years ago—when the Almighty said to Abraham: "Go forth from your native land and your father's house to the land that I will show you." That land of course is Israel.

Today, fundamentalist Christians are Israel's staunchest supporters. But there is reason to wonder whether their support is based on genuine respect for Jews and Judaism. Or does their biblical literalism sees the Jews' return to Israel as a pre-requisite for Jesus to appear on the Mount of Olives and bring about the conversion of the world—Jews first, mind you—to Christianity?

On the other hand, liberal Christians respect Jews and Judaism but often have a tragic blind spot when it comes to accepting and appreciating the reality of Israel.

An example of this is an organization called ***People of Faith*** from whom I receive weekly e mailings. ***People of Faith*** offers sincere good wishes on Jewish Holy Days and supports many good causes, but in almost all of their emailings they castigate Israel, condemn her treatment of the Palestinians, and advocate policies which would threaten her very existence as a Jewish state.

Finally, a few weeks ago, after ***People of Faith*** urged support of and participation in a rally to "Free Gaza" from what they described as Israeli oppression, I posted the following response on the organization's blog:

People of Faith has turned itself into a morally bankrupt joke! Free Gaza indeed! Israel evacuated Gaza, uprooting many of its citizens for only one reason: to make an overture for a lasting peace with people who have proven over and over again by their words and their actions that the only peace they will accept is a peace where there is no Jewish State of Israel on the map of the Middle East. When she left Gaza, Israel left behind a thriving greenhouse industry. Hamas leaders in Gaza bulldozed it. The Palestinians in Gaza had the opportunity to build an infrastructure, to build schools and hospitals; they had the opportunity to turn Gaza into a seacoast showplace of modern urban planning. The Palestinians eschewed all of these opportunities that Israel afforded them and chose instead to use Gaza as a launching pad and hiding place for terrorist activities. The children of (the close by Israeli city of) Sderot have been traumatized by these activities. Ashkelon has been under attack (Funny to think of People of Faith raising a voice on behalf of the children of Sderot, isn't it?) And then when Israel does what it must to protect its citizens from Gaza's bombs and bullets, People of Faith rises up on its hind legs to condemn Israel. For rational thinking people, People of Faith has lost all credibility.

People of Faith needs a lesson in history, and many Jews do as well. They either don't get or don't want to get that Israel is surrounded by 22 hostile Arab nations who would like nothing better than to wipe that tiny beleaguered, yet strong and proud country off the face of the earth. They neither understand nor appreciate the risks Israel has taken or the concessions Israel continues to make – in the elusive and seemingly vain hope that her Palestinian neighbors will finally agree to live side by side with her in peace and harmony.

For several hundred years until the end of World War I the vast land area of the Middle East was under the control of the Ottoman Turks. Since the end of World War One no fewer than twenty-two Islamic nations have established themselves. Twenty-two Arab peoples have realized their hopes for nationhood, sovereignty and recognition from the world community. Jews also lived in the land controlled by the Ottoman Empire. Why does the world begrudge us one tiny sliver of land to realize our national aspirations, when twenty-two Islamic nations have realized the same dream?

After the Holocaust, the world realized that had there been an Israel to which Jews could flee, Hitler never would have destroyed 2/3 of European Jewry.

And so the United Nations voted to partition the land into two small states: one Arab and one Jewish. A man in a drunken stupor must have drawn the borders of the two states because they were so artificial and hard to defend. The sliver of land designated as the Jewish homeland was mostly desert, but no matter. The Jews of the world rejoiced that our 2000-year-old hope for nationhood was finally a reality.

But the Arab world had other plans. The Arab world vowed to drive the new Jewish nation into the sea. Azzam Pasha, secretary-general of the Arab League, boasted that the rivers would flow with Jewish blood, "This will be a war," he exulted, "like the Mongolian massacres, like the crusades."

It turned out he was wrong. The Jewish nation, against overwhelming odds, did manage to establish itself, but the Arab dream to wipe her out persisted. For nineteen years, the Arab world boycotted Israeli goods and terrorized her borders.

In 1967 the Arabs again mobilized for all out military attack. They closed the straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping and ordered United Nations troops to leave the Sinai desert. The U. N. led by Secretary General U Thant complied without a whimper.

There lay Israel, vulnerable to annihilation, ready, as Egypt's President Gamal Abdul Nasser promised, for his troops to "drive Israel into the sea." Amazingly, though, as Jews of the world trembled for her survival, Israel launched a preemptive strike against its enemies.

In six days, Israel drove the Egyptian army across the Sinai desert to the other side of the Suez Canal. In fierce fighting they drove the Syrian troops off of the Golan Heights where for years they had terrorized the citizens of Israel's northland with bombs and Katyusha rockets.

During those early June days when Israel's survival lay in the balance and her brave soldiers had more than enough worry fighting Egypt on the southwestern front and Syria in the north, Jordan stood poised to invade Israel from the east. Israel's Prime Minister Levi Eshkol sent a radio communiqué to King Hussein of Jordan warning him to stay out of the war and declaring that Israel has no desire to engage his troops or cross into East Jerusalem.

King Hussein ignored Prime Minister Eshkol's warning and joined his Arab brethren in their effort to wipe Israel of the map of the world. His troops invaded West Jerusalem.

Those were the toughest battles of the war, but, Israel liberated East Jerusalem and drove Jordan's troops to the other side of the Jordan River.

That is how the West Bank came into Israel's hands. Israel captured the West Bank for one and only one reason: Because Jordan used that territory to launch what they believed would be a fatal military attack against the Jewish State.

With that conquest Jews, for the first time in 19 years, could pray at the Western Wall. What they saw there, though, was most depressing. Jordan had turned Judaism's most sacred sight, into a filthy slum. Jordanian soldiers had desecrated the sacred Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives. They had turned tombstones from Jewish graves into latrines.

Immediately after the war, Israel offered to sit down and make peace with all of its enemies. The Arab world met at Khartoum, capital of the Sudan, and responded to Israel's offer with a declaration history has called the "three nos." There would be no recognition of Israel. There would be no negotiation with Israel, and there would be No peace with Israel. NO. NO. NO.

And that is the way it was for the next six years until 1973...Thirty-five years ago this night, Egypt in a surprise attack sent its troops across the Suez Canal and launched the Yom Kippur War.

I shall never forget, walking on to the bima on that Yom Kippur morning in Columbia, Maryland, when a wonderful man named George Baker of blessed memory approached and whispered to me, "*Rabbi, There is war in the Middle East. Egyptians troops launched a surprise invasion against Israel last night.*"

Israel's guard was down as the whole country had stopped for Yom Kippur! The costs of thwarting that invasion and ultimately winning that war were horrific. Two thousand Israeli soldiers fell in repulsing Egypt's sneak attack. Prime Minister Golda Meir took responsibility for Israel's lack of preparedness and resigned her post.

That war taught Israel that she can never relax. What a sad reality, but a reality it is. Subsequent years have seen our enemies commit unspeakable acts of terror against the Jewish State, foment two major Arab uprisings, and two horrible wars in Lebanon. And today a soon to be—if they are not already—nuclear Iran calls Israel a stain that they intend to wipe off the face of the earth.

Despite the strength of Israel's military, Israelis go to sleep every night and wake up every morning knowing that her neighbors want to destroy her.

But as we say in Hebrew, *af al pi chen*, in spite of all this, our Covenant is two-sided. Israel exists and only deserves to exist as "a light to the nations," a bastion of justice and righteousness, as an example for others to follow.

We cannot deny, nor should we, that the creation of Israel caused loss and displacement for many Arabs. I hope that reality will always sober us. I hope that reality will urge us to urge Israel to make every reasonable effort to reach a peaceful accord -- an accord that allows both the Jewish State of Israel and an Islamic/Christian Palestine to live side by side in mutual harmony.

When Palestinian spokespeople tell us that so many of their kinsmen lost their land when Israel came to be, they are correct. But they do not tell us that roughly the same number of Jews fled for their lives to Israel from political, economic, religious, and physical persecution in Arab lands.

The difference, of course, and it is a crucial difference, is that Israel absorbed refugees from Yemen, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Morocco and integrated them into Israeli society by providing them with language training, job skills, and housing. The Arab world, despite economic capabilities that dwarf those of all the Jews in the world, chose to maintain Palestinian refugees in squalid camps which for 60 years have been breeding grounds for hatred of Israel and terrorism.

This is Yom Kippur. It is a time for humility—not arrogance, and when we say our collective *al chayt*, our confessions on this day of days, we should not exempt the Jewish State.

For example, I believe Israel should not restrict the flow of basic foodstuffs, energy and water to Palestinian villages and homes as reprisal for a terrorist act. Collective punishment is wrong. Torture in any form and for any reason is wrong. I also believe that Israel can and should – without sacrificing its security concerns—do more than it does to ease the freedom of travel from place to place of Palestinians and Israeli Arabs.

I do not believe that supporting Israel means that we should relinquish the right to criticize any policy of Israel's that we think is wrong. But none of us should allow our criticism to provide aid and political ammunition for those – Jews and non-Jews alike – who seek to destroy the Jewish State.

We must never forget that Israel lives in a very bad neighborhood. We must never equate acts Israel undertakes to **protect** our people with acts that our enemies perpetrate to **destroy** our people.

We must never forget that if the Arab states renounce terror, lay down their arms, and acknowledge Israel's right to exist, there will be peace. But if Israel lays down its arms or relaxes its vigilance, there will be no Israel.

At every morning and evening service, on Holy Days, Festivals, Shabbatot and weekdays, we conclude our *Mee chamocho* prayer, with *Baruch Atah Adonai Ga'al Yisrael*. Blessed are You, Eternal One, the Redeemer of Israel.

Ga'al Yisrael: Redeemer of Israel. Redeemer of the spirit, Redeemer of the people, and Redeemer of the Land – the ancient, present and future – Land of Israel!

Amen