

SERMON ON ISRAEL—YOM KIPPUR AM 5773

Rabbi Suzanne Singer

I love Israel. As the daughter of a survivor from Auschwitz,
I strongly believe that we need a Jewish state – a Jewish home.
I can't tell you what an overwhelming feeling it is to walk through
the Yad Vashem museum, through the hideous testimonies to
the Nazis' attempt to exterminate the Jews,
and to emerge at the other end facing a large, picture window
that reveals the city of Jerusalem spread before you,
a testament to our return to the land of our ancestors.

Since its founding, Israel has been beset by enemies
forcing her to be on constant alert and constantly on the defensive.
So when Israel is criticized for being aggressive or bellicose
I bristle at the critics' lack of understanding of Israel's fragile position.
And when, again and again, the UN issues sanctions against Israel
over human rights violations, I consider it a form of anti-Semitism
given that there are far worse offenders around the world
who are barely called to accounting.

And yet, Israel is complicated, a state with problems,
some like any other nation, but many unique to this sacred place,
where there are no easy answers.

As some of you know, a group of congregants and I spent two weeks
in Israel this summer. We were impressed with so much about the country.

Perhaps first and foremost is the incredible struggle it took to establish this nation – we began at Mt. Herzl where we engaged in an interactive exhibit about Theodor Herzl's inspiring vision for a Jewish state, his admirable organizational skills, and his energetic diplomatic negotiations which launched the Zionist enterprise.

Herzl died 40 years before the state was established.

It took great determination, commitment and sacrifice on the part of pioneers, living under the harshest of conditions in pre-Israel Palestine, and on the part of Jewish defense forces, for Herzl's dream to become a reality.

As you know, following World War I, the British controlled Palestine. Despite the 1917 Balfour Declaration in which they affirmed the right to a Jewish homeland, the British were also trying to placate the Arab nations who were opposed to a Jewish state. So the British limited immigration to Palestine even during World War II when Jews tried to escape the Holocaust.

At the experiential Palmach Museum, we learned of the great heroism of the members of the Palmach – the elite striking force of the “Hagana” – the Jewish community's underground military organization.

From the summer of 1945 until the end of 1947, the Palmach brought 65 ships with tens of thousands of Jewish refugees and Holocaust survivors into Palestine from Europe--illegally. The Palmach also launched guerilla warfare against British rule, destroying police stations and radar installations, sinking naval vessels, mining the railroad system, demolishing the border bridges and more.

They paid a price for their heroism. We visited the cells of Akko prison, established by the British in the former Crusader fortress to imprison members of the Jewish underground.

Many were hung. But Herzl's dream finally came true.

We stood in Independence Hall where, on May 14th, 1948,

David Ben Gurion announced the establishment of the Jewish state.

At 4 o'clock in the afternoon, Ben-Gurion opened the ceremony by banging his gavel, prompting a spontaneous rendition of Hatikvah, which was to become Israel's national anthem.

On the wall behind the podium hung a picture of Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism. Ben-Gurion proceeded to read the declaration, and a rabbi led the 250 guests in the Shehecheyanu blessing.¹

Israel is only 64 years old, yet has accomplished so much.

We saw how the Israelis have made the desert bloom, employing modern drip irrigation which Israel invented to make optimal use of scarce water, growing vegetables and fruit, even bananas in a totally arid environment.

Some of you have read Start-Up Nation which documents Israel's economic miracle and the astonishing success of its high tech industry.

One review for the book marvels that Israel,

"a country of 7.1 million people, only sixty years old, surrounded by enemies, in a constant state of war since its founding, with no natural resources—

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israeli_Declaration_of_Independence.

produces more start-up companies than large, peaceful, and stable nations like Japan, China, India, Korea, Canada, and the United Kingdom."

The Economist notes that Israel now has more high-tech start-ups and a larger venture capital industry per capita than any other country in the world. As you drive around Israel, the country is growing so much, with high rises buildings going up everywhere.

Israel began as a quasi-socialist enterprise but has leapt into capitalism extremely quickly in the last number of years.

And this has created some problems. The gap between rich and poor is one the highest in the developed world. There are a few billionaires but many more people struggling to make it in a country where wages are low while expenses are extremely high.

Young folks starting out cannot hope to buy a home without the financial help of their parents.

According to the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, based on the average wage in Israel, it would take a couple 25 years to save the equity required to buy a house.

The shortage of affordable housing was one of the big reasons there were protests in the streets last summer.

Several hundred thousand demonstrators rallied against the high cost of housing as well as low wages, eroding social benefits, high food and energy prices, and weak labor rights.

Of course, Israel is a democracy, and the thousands of people who took to the streets, were able to do so without the army being sent out to repress them, as has happened in so many Arab countries in the last year. And it is precisely this democracy that allows us to see and to grapple with other growing pains the country is experiencing.

Israel's Jews can be divided into four groups according to their level of observance:

ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi; religious Zionists, traditional Jews, and secular.²

Although only 10 percent are ultra-Orthodox,

they have a disproportionate influence over governmental decisions.

That's because the Israeli political system is parliamentary,

and for any party to have a majority, they must form a coalition

with the ultra-religious parties. As a result, for example,

ultra-Orthodox men are exempt from serving in the army.

Efforts to remedy the situation faltered this summer

and resulted in the splitting of the coalition between

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's party Likud

and the more liberal Kadima party.

The ultra-Orthodox also receive welfare subsidies from the state

in order to study Torah -- more than 60 percent of ultra-Orthodox men in Israel do not work.³

² Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Daniel J. Elazar, "How Religious are Israeli Jews?"

³ The New York Times, Isabel Kershner, "Some Israelis Question Benefits for Ultra-Religious," December 28, 2010.

Dan Ben-David, executive director of the Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel, says fertility rates in the Haredi community make the issue especially acute; the very religious Jews are the only group in Israel having more children today than 30 years ago.

“They make up more than 20 percent of all kids in primary schools,” he says. “In 20 years, there is a risk we will have a third-world population here which can’t sustain a first-world economy and army.”

Only Orthodox rabbis have received salaries from the state, a situation that will begin to change following a court decision this past May when Reform Rabbi Miri Gold became the first non-Orthodox rabbi to be paid by the government. However, the funding of non-Orthodox rabbis applies only to those in rural communities, and not in cities. The non-Orthodox rabbis, unlike their Orthodox colleagues, will still have no authority over Jewish law or marriage and divorce. Furthermore, rather than being funded by the Religious Services Ministry, as are the country’s Orthodox rabbis, the liberal rabbis will receive their salaries from the Ministry of Culture and Sport.⁴

The ultra-Orthodox are also trying to keep women from the public eye, considering their presence to be immodest.

⁴ The New York Times, Ethan Bronner and Isabel Kershner, “Israelis Facing a Seismic Rift Over Role of Women,” January 14, 2012.

For example, in Jerusalem, women have been excluded from billboard advertising so as not to offend haredi sensibilities, and a major haredi neighborhood enforced gender-segregated sidewalks over the Sukkot holiday last year.

According to The New York Times, recently:

“the Israeli Health Ministry awarded a prize to a pediatrics professor for her book on hereditary diseases common to Jews.

Professor Channa Maayan knew that the acting health minister, who is ultra-Orthodox, and other religious people would be in attendance.

So she wore a long-sleeve top and a long skirt. But that was hardly enough.

Not only did Dr. Maayan and her husband have to sit separately,

as men and women were segregated at the event,

but she was instructed that a male colleague would have to accept the award

for her because women were not permitted on stage.”⁵

Additionally, despite a Supreme Court decision making it illegal for public buses

to be segregated or for women to be forced to sit in the back of buses,

we noticed several buses where the women were, in fact, sitting in the back.

According to Hiddush, an Israeli organization that advocates

for religious freedom and equality, there are over 60 private and

public gender-segregated bus lines in Israel.⁶

The Israel Religious Action Center, part of the Reform movement,

has been organizing freedom rides to desegregate these buses.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ JTA, Dina Kraft, “Growing gender segregation among Israeli haredim seen as repressing women,” November 13, 2011.

Says one of the organizers: “[I]t’s important to me that an ultra-Orthodox woman will...have the choice of sitting at the front of the bus...

There were groups of Orthodox women [on the buses] who told me, ‘This is good for us, this is what we want.’”⁷

During our visit to Israel, we met with representatives from the Israel Religious Action Center, part of the Reform movement, and the New Israel Fund, who gave us background on these issues.

Probably the most difficult meeting we had during our trip was the one with Rabbi Arik Ascherman, executive director of Rabbis for Human Rights.

Rabbi Ascherman took us to Silwan, a neighborhood in East Jerusalem which is at the center of a dispute over ownership of Palestinian homes.

As you probably know, one of the most contentious issues between Palestinians and Israelis in their attempts at negotiating peace is the status of Jerusalem. While Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, Palestinians also claim Jerusalem as the capital of their future state.

As with the issue of the settlements in the West Bank, facts on the ground – in other words, who is actually living on the land – may determine who gets to keep it -- when and if an agreement is ever reached.

An organization called Elad, which has the backing of the Prime Minister’s office, claims that the Palestinian village of Silwan in East Jerusalem, is the site of King David’s original city.

⁷ “Women Talk About Segregation,” Israel Religious Action Center Pamphlet, January 2012, p. 17.

Therefore, they have been buying up Palestinian homes in order to conduct archaeological research. The Palestinians have cried foul, asserting that the homes have been acquired illegally and that archaeology is simply an excuse to expand Jewish settlements in Arab East Jerusalem. According to Time magazine, “Today, more than 500 settlers, along with Uzi-toting security guards, live among Silwan's 14,000 Arabs. Elad's archaeological expansion continues, with 88 Arab homes marked for demolition to build an ‘archaeological park.’ The group also has plans for a parking lot, a synagogue, 11 new houses for settlers and a cable car to the Mount of Olives, where many believe the Messiah will arrive.”⁸

The guide on our congregational trip, an Israeli, countered that Palestinians who sell homes to Jews are considered traitors by their compatriots and therefore claim that the sale was conducted illegally. In addition, it is not always so clear who owns a house or a piece of land, given the problem of documentation in an area that has changed hands so many times.

So it is not always so easy to know who is in the right, who has been abused, whose rights have been violated. Undoubtedly there is fault on both sides.

So if I love Israel, why am I discussing these difficult questions, and why did I expose my fellow travelers to them during our congregational trip?

⁸ Tim McGirk, “Archaeology in Jerusalem: Digging Up Trouble,” www.time.com/time/magazine, Feb. 08, 2010 .

Because, like the representatives of the New Israel Fund, the Israel Religious Action Center, and Rabbis for Human Rights, I want to see Israel be an even better country than it already is. Because, during the High Holy Days, just as we try to improve, so too I would like to see Israel improve.

As Rabbis David Rosenn and Jill Jacobs write:

“We criticize not because Israel doesn’t have enough internal or external critics, or because it needs people who live thousands of miles away voicing an opinion on what sort of character its society should have.

We do it because we love and are connected to Israel, and because as Jews we feel a sense of shared responsibility for the fate of the Jewish state. This love requires us to speak up when Israel seems to be out of line with the values we share.

As the rabbis teach, ‘Love without rebuke is not really love.’”⁹

What struck us on our trip was that folks like Rabbi Ascherman with whom we met, though willing to face Israel’s challenges head on, demonstrated a fervent love for Israel.

⁹ Genesis Rabbah 54:3. From Rabbis David Rosenn and Jill Jacobs, “Marching for Israel, With Love and Criticism,” http://www.thejewishweek.com/editorial_opinion/opinion/marching_israel_love_and_criticism
Images: Center: NIF and other progressive organizations marching in the Celebrate Israel Parade in New York.

They are engaged in the hard work to find solutions, and they are convinced that Israel is capable of overcoming these problems. Indeed, a society can only be its best if we believe in its potential and if we realistically confront its challenges and its failings.

So what role can you and I play, as members of the Jewish Diaspora?

What can we do to cheer Israel on while holding her to our most deeply held Jewish values?

Our dear friend Rabbi Hillel Cohn suggests:

“We need to find the right ways to translate our love and pride in Israel into acts that have meaning. We need to visit Israel often.

We need to send our youths there for Israel experiences.

We need to be seen as partners rather than as benevolent and philanthropic patrons. And, I believe...that we need to be resolute in our advocacy of Israel being, above all else, a Jewish state...

We need to be advocates for civil and human rights.

Israel was founded as a democracy committed to universal values of individual liberty and the rule of law.

Dedication to human rights lies squarely within Jewish tradition...”

Israel’s president, Shimon Peres, believes there is cause for optimism where Israel is concerned. When he took office, he affirmed that,

“The outstanding achievements of Israel in its 60 years, together with the courage, wisdom and creativity of our young generation give birth to one clear conclusion: Israel has the strength to reach great prosperity and to become an exemplary state, as commanded us by the prophets.”

And to quote Rabbi Arik Ascherman again:

“...it is possible to achieve our dream of an Israeli society living up to our highest Jewish values, as expressed in our own Declaration of Independence.”¹⁰

So, let us love Israel fiercely while holding Israel to our highest standards.

The dream CAN become a reality if we are willing to work at it.

Theodor Herzl said it so many years ago:

“Im tirzu, ein zo aggadah – If you will it, it is not a dream.”

¹⁰ Quotes from Rabbi Hillel Cohn and Shimon Peres from Hillel Cohn’s sermon, “ISRAEL AT 60: WHAT HAPPENED TO OUR LITTLE CHILD?” given at the Tamar Chapter of Hadassah, Palm Desert, October 8, 2007.