

## ISRAEL SERMON

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It's a hard time to talk about making peace in the world. Especially in the Middle East. There is ISIS, there are extremists in Syria, and in Iraq, and in Afghanistan. There are terrorists everywhere. There is Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. There is Iran and its rhetoric regarding Israel. There are terrorist attacks in the United States, and there are attacks in Europe. It sometimes feels like an omnipresent and comprehensive war, waged by implacable foes, seeking to win the next battle with the Crusaders, battles from a thousand years ago. Unlike previous decades, the enemies now have money, modern armaments, and a new confidence as warriors. It is very scary!

The Europeans feel threatened for good reason, and as a result, right-wing political parties are gaining strength in France (Le Pen), Poland, Hungary, England, and in other countries, as well. There is a wish to pull back from globalization, which has fostered peace.

Any amount of immigration from embattled countries is seen as dangerous. Americans feel threatened, too, and it has given rise to a demagogue and the preaching of fear and hatred in our country, as well as retreat from globalization and proclamations of "America First".

Israel, small and isolated geographically, feels threatened existentially, situated, as it is, on the borders of extremism, in a region on fire, minutes from raging wars.

Israel, with a population of 7 million Jewish citizens and 1 ½ million Arab citizens – Christian and Muslim, exists in a world that is populated by 1 ½ billion Muslims.

With Israel, so threatened and with Israel so precious to us, why is it that there is so little discussion about Israel at Congregation Beth El Keser Israel? Never, in my

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lifetime, have I witnessed such a great silence in the Jewish world about what is going on in Israel, except, of course, in Israel, where there is constant debate about everything.

The State of Israel was established 4 months before my Bar Mitzvah in 1948. The discussions about Israel at that time were constant and passionate. I visited Israel for the 1<sup>st</sup> time on its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1958, when I was 22 and living in Europe. I have visited at least 25 times since, led trips and tours, and spent time there with my family. Many of you remember, as I do, that we talked about Israel incessantly in the 40's and 50's and following decades. We were proud of its achievements and its leaders, and we worried about its wars and its survival. We talked in our synagogues, at our dinner tables, at our organizations, everywhere.

Why the silence now? Is it because there is so much more disagreement and controversy today, among Jews, about how Israel should act and react, more disagreement among lovers of Zion than we can ever remember? Maybe there is a great silence, because we don't want to add to the polarization of the Jewish community. Maybe we are afraid that we can't really listen to each other and that we will only yell at each other.

## AREAS OF AGREEMENT

I think that our areas of agreement on Israel are still great.

- We Jews are unified in our love for Israel and our passion for its safety.
- We are unified in our pride in what Israel has accomplished in only 68 years of existence. It is the pre-eminent country in the world in its ability to do state-building.
- We are unified in our appreciation of Israel's economic achievements, its level of education, its democratic underpinnings, the rule of law.

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- We are unified by the fulfillment of the 2,000 year old Zionist dream, especially after the Holocaust, which is part of my generation's experience.
- We are unified by our pride in its accomplishments in religious thought, in literature, in film both in Israel and here.
- We are unified by our pride in its institutions and its contributions to the world in the fields of science, medicine, technology, and so much more.
- I think we are unified in our understanding of Israel's need to be militarily prepared. It needs superlative armed forces, well-armed and well-equipped. It lives and flourishes in a very dangerous neighborhood, where deadly enemies ominously threaten. These enemies of Israel are now ideologically more fervent and aggressive than ever before. They are ready to die for their cause. The dangers to Israel are greater than ever before.

## WHY THE SILENCE ABOUT ISRAEL?

Is criticism of Israel a moral issue?

Are we unable to listen to each other?

Can we have a discussion group at BEKI that addresses issues regarding Israel in a way that is thoughtful, respectful, and caring?

A few of us have come together to do this once a month. We have met twice, and the meetings have been meaningful and fruitful.

**This is a test**

## MY POSITIONS

I would like to share with you some of my positions. I am asking you to really hear them and try to understand, and I will try to do the same for you.

IT IS REALLY HARD.

Let's see if we can have this conversation.

### **SOME OF MY POSITIONS**

- It is my position that it is legitimate and loving to criticize those we love. We criticize our parents, our children, our friends, ourselves, our country. It is unloving and irresponsible not to, when we think they are making mistakes. It is the essence of the Jewish prophetic tradition.
- It is my position that Israel's short term strategy of containing and counter-striking its enemies is necessary to its survival. It has to respond to provocations, to stay well-armed and battle-ready, to build its defenses. But that doesn't offer security in the long term.
- It is my position that Israel has to have a long-term strategy for peace and justice. It is not enough to respond to each hostile action. That long-term strategy, a two-state solution, was clear for decades, but it no longer is. That is partially due to the establishment and growth of settlements in the West Bank, to settlers who have an expansionist view of Israel, and to a religious ideology to return to Israel's Biblical borders. The "Two- State Solution" was envisioned by the United Nations' partition plan in 1948, and was and is the only path to peace and justice.
- It is my position that the only long-term strategy for Israelis is to make peace with its neighbors. That requires signaling an intention to make peace by calling for a demilitarized Palestinian state and assisting in its establishment. Prior to the 6 day war in 1967 this was always Israel's position, but the Palestinians, led by Yassir Arafat, had no serious intentions to negotiate in good faith. Now Fatah indicates serious intentions, but Bibi Netanyahu's administration does not and has not. The

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Jewish settlements send the loudest message to both Israelis and to Palestinians – and to the rest of the world!

- Signaling an intention to make peace requires a halt, and cessation, and a withdrawal of Israeli settlements on the West Bank. Every concession to settlement-building has consequences that are lethal to a long-term strategy of peace.
- Settlement-building increases the appetite of Israeli expansionists and the right-wing religious to take possession of the whole of Palestine and Jerusalem, even to build a new temple. It radicalizes some of our people to the point of abusing, dispossessing, and even murdering innocent Palestinians who have NO power. Absolute power breeds corruption and oppression. The settlements have contributed to a “wild- west” scenario.
- It is my position that settlement building also radicalizes the Palestinians by increasing their sense of powerlessness and of hopelessness with regard to having a state EVER. They have lived for 50 years under Israeli occupation, with no citizenship, no human rights, no civil rights, and very little recourse in the face of injustice. We all know that prolonged hopelessness breeds radicalization. We had JEWISH terrorists under the British occupation prior to 1948. The Irgun and the Stern Gang, and the Palmach, too, were Jewish terrorist organizations. The Irgun carried out the 1946 bombing of the British Mandate headquarters in the King David Hotel, and they were responsible for the death of many British soldiers for years.

In 1967 there were no Hamas and no Hezbollah. At the end of the 6 day war the Palestinians felt liberated and flooded into Israel to visit with family and friends. David Ben Gurion advised Israel’s government to give back the land they conquered and to make peace. They didn’t do it, but I can tell you from personal experience that I often led groups or travelled myself all over the West Bank in

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the late 60's, during the 70's and into the 1980's. There was no sense of danger or even unfriendliness.

Is Israel's ONLY response to Palestinians' unhappiness and restiveness to tighten the screws of occupation more firmly? Where will that lead? Bulldozing homes, uprooting olive groves, humiliation, collective punishment. Is it not immoral and irresponsible for those of us who believe that this is a colossal mistake, that will cost us many Jewish lives, to remain silent?

- It is my position that these policies and the lack of the articulation of long term goals and solutions have led to increased antipathy toward Israel among well-meaning people all over the world – not to mention the anti-Semites. It has led to losses among our young, our idealistic Jewish youth, some of whom look favorably on BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions), and it has led to discussions on campuses about “apartheid” in Israel, with comparisons to South Africa. It has led to a dangerous alliance between Netanyahu's Israel and the American extreme right and people like Donald Trump, who was welcomed as a hero at the AIPAC convention.

## JEWISH STATE

My last point is that Israel is a JEWISH state We Jews prayed and wept for this for 2 thousand years. Netanyahu has lately required that the Palestinians recognize it as such in formal agreements.

Is it a Jewish state because 7 million Jews live there or because it has given the rabbis control over marriage and divorce and the Kotel?

NO! It has to be more than that! The Jewish state has to be an OR LAGOYIM (a beacon to the nations) MAMLECHET KOHANIM V'GOY KADOSH (a kingdom of priests and a holy nation). To paraphrase what John F. Kennedy asked regarding Black people in America in the 1960s, “Are we to say to the world and to each other that Israel is the land of freedom and democracy, justice and opportunity except for Palestinian Arabs?”

- ❖ **It is my position that in order for Israel to be a true Jewish state it has to adhere to Jewish ethical and moral values and precepts. That is our raison d'être. Those are what we gave to the world through Christianity and Islam, but we don't apply them in our own Jewish country, Israel?**

The most central precept in Judaism according to the Torah and the Rabbis is empathy. The Jews saw EMPATHY as the central ingredient that is necessary for the survival of the human species. We are commanded to imagine the humanity of people other than ourselves. It is our paramount responsibility as Jews.

Edmund Burke called this the “moral imagination”, the idea that our ethics should transcend our own personal experience and embrace the dignity of the human race. (Jennifer Boylan in a New York Times “op-ed”). Immanuel Kant called it “The Categorical Imperative”. (“Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a Universal Law”)

The Torah proclaims in Leviticus 19:18 a long time before Burke and Kant: “V'ahavta l'rayacha kamocho ani Adonai” (And you shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord)

And further explains a few sentences later in Leviticus 19:33 “V'chi yagur itcha ger b'artzechem lo tonu oto. K'ezech mikem yiyeh lachem, hager hagar itchem v'ahavta lo kamocho ki gerim heyitem b'erezt mitzrayim ani Adonai elohaychem” (And if an alien lives among you in your land, do not oppress him. He shall be to you like a citizen, native born, and you shall love him like yourself, because you were aliens in the land of Egypt). We say it every Passover.

Hillel articulated the Golden Rule before Jesus. It is the commandment to have empathy, without which our species won't survive. He said all the rest is commentary.

**WITHOUT EMPATHY ISRAEL IS IN DANGER OF LOSING ITS JEWISH IDENTITY. THIS IS ABOUT THE JEWISH GIFT TO HUMANITY.**

MY POSITIONS

**Can we talk together?**