

## **Re-engage with Israel and with the Zionist Dream**

For Rosh Hashanah Morning

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How the internet began. In ancient Israel it came to pass that a trader by the name of Abraham Com did take unto himself a young wife by the name of Dot. Such a tall, beautiful, and muscular woman was Dot Com that she soon became known as: Amazon Dot Com.

Amazon Dot Com said unto Abraham, “Why doeth thou travel far from town to town with thy goods when thou canst trade without ever leaving thy tent? Let us place drums in all the towns and drums in between to send messages saying what you have for sale and they will reply telling you which hath the best price. And then the drums can be delivered by Uriah’s pony stable otherwise known as – UPS.”

Now Dot’s idea was an immediate success. Abraham sold all the goods he had at the top price without ever moving from his tent.

The land was so feverish with joy at the new riches and the deafening sound of drums that no one noticed the real riches were going to the drum maker, one William of Gates, who bought every drum company in the land and insisted on making drums that would work only with gates drumheads and gates drumsticks.

Dot said, “Oh, Abraham, what we have started is being taken over by others.” And as Abraham looked out over the Bay of Ezekiel -- or as it came to be known – ebay – he said, “We need a name that reflects what we are.”

So Dot replied, “How about Young Ambitious Hebrew Owner Operators?”

“Why that’s it!” exclaimed Abraham. “From this day forward we shall be known as Yahoo.”

And that's how the Internet really began.

When you hear me say "Israel," what is conjured in your mind? Is it "conflict"? Or is it "miracle"? Is it "headache" or "safe haven?" For some of us, Israel is irrelevant to our Jewish existence. It plays little to no role in our religious or cultural lives. For others of us, Israel is hugely important to our Jewish identity and among our highest Jewish commitments.

So here is what Israel conjures up in my mind: Israel is *the* greatest Jewish experiment of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

"Only in Israel," says rabbi David Ellenson, "are Jews responsible for the *totality* of its society...only in Israel do Jews possess the political sovereignty that allows for full Jewish *accountability*."

Israel is the only place on earth where the private sphere *and* the public sphere are Jewish. Indeed where everything is Jewish: "from the economy, to the culture, to the politics, to the army, to the character of society" (Rabbi Richard Hirsch).

How do Jews exercise political power? Military power? How do Jews define a domestic and foreign policy? Will Jews create a more just society? How will Jews apply Jewish values to issues of poverty, unemployment, and healthcare? Will Jews protect the human rights of minority peoples under its control?

Only a Jewish state can test for and answer all these questions. Only a Jewish *nation* can make real our prophetic mission to be "a light unto the nations." As American Jews, our form of Jewishness is individualized, privatized and family-oriented. We never have to deal with the ethical dilemmas of Jewish nationhood. That is why we are not the players in this great Jewish experiment. But we have an enormous vested interest in its outcome. More than we realize, more than most of us appreciate, the fate of American Jewry – our fate -- "is inextricably intertwined with the fate of the third Jewish commonwealth" (Rabbi Stanley Davids).

Zionism is the political movement for the reestablishment of a Jewish state and Jewish culture in its ancient homeland. Zionism has been labeled racism, colonialism, and imperialism by the propaganda machine emanating from the Arab world and from the European and American left. On many an American university campus, Zionism is politically incorrect. In some circles, Zionism is a dirty word. But I stand before you on this morning of Rosh Hashanah to proclaim: the cause of Zionism is just!

In the first centuries of the Common Era, the Jewish people were expelled from their own country by the force of the Roman Empire. For 2,000 years, Jews never forgot their historical attachment to that land. For centuries, Jews have yearned to return, emotionally characterizing life outside the land of Israel as *galut* – exile.

The purpose of Zionism is to rectify a 2,000 year old injustice committed against the Jewish people. The purpose of Zionism is to escape 2,000 years of European persecution or oppression or expulsion. In order to lead a normal life, a life without anti-Semitism, the 19<sup>th</sup> century founders of Zionism concluded that Jews had to dwell on their own land and be governed by their own state -- just like everybody else.

Jews did not return to their ancestral homeland to exploit Palestinians, to overpower or oppress them. Our people returned to their historic homeland to escape anti-Semitism, to transcend the aberration of statelessness, to rise above the anomaly of being fully accepted nowhere. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, two million Jews were on the run for their lives from eastern European pogroms. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, two hundred thousand Jews came to Palestine in dire need of refuge from nazi germany.

Some within the Arab world perceive the very existence of Israel to be an act of aggression against them. It was really an act of desperation. And how sad that the response of the Arab world to that desperation was unremitting hostility.

Jews came to build a country in Israel to make an end to Jewish statelessness. For statelessness translated into homelessness. Jewish homelessness translated into Jewish powerlessness. And Jewish powerlessness translated into the mass murder of Jews.

Fifty-seven years since Israel's founding, how has Zionism fared? Has Zionism delivered what it promised?

On one side of the balance sheet, we find:

- It's still dangerous to be a Jew even in the Jewish state.
- Israel has an official state religion – Orthodox Judaism – that suppresses liberal forms of Jewish religious expression.
- Israel has brought suffering to Palestinians.
- Israel's treatment of its Israeli Arab citizens has often been shameful.

For some of us, it's quite a shock to take off the rose-colored glasses, to understand that the Zionist dream did not produce the utopia it had envisioned. But let us get some needed perspective.

What country on this planet *is* a utopia? Can you name any modern nation-state whose birth has been immaculate?

Israel is just 57 years old. Zionism is still a work in progress. And there is another side to the ledger:

1. While the western democracies and even the united states closed their doors to Jewish immigration even in times of dire need, Israel has saved the lives of Jewish millions who were fleeing persecution in some corner of the globe: holocaust survivors, Jews from Arab lands, from Ethiopia, from the former soviet union. The existence of a Jewish state means there is one country where no Jew is ever turned away.
2. Soon to be the largest Jewish community in the world, Israel protects Jewish interests throughout a dangerous world. For centuries, Jews had to beg others for protection and for justice -- but no more. Israel has brought an end to Jewish powerlessness.

3. The Jewish state has been a tremendous source of Jewish scholarship and universal artistic creativity. Israel has given us Talmudists like Adin Steinsaltz; novelists like Amos Oz; poets like Chayyim Nachman Bialik; and world-renowned musicians like Pinchus Zuckerman and Daniel Barenboim.
4. Israel has done so much for the world. Israel is one of the world's greatest contributors to science, to medicine, and to humanitarian aid.

Israel rescue teams stand ready to help any country in need. Israel stands at the leading edge of computer science, medical science, and agricultural science. Israel is a world leader in cancer research, brain research, and stem cell research.

Did you know that intel's computer chip architecture is designed by Israeli engineers? Did you know that the first cell phone was developed by Israeli engineers? Did you know that the technology for aol instant messenger was developed by Israeli engineers? If time permitted, I could easily go on and on with many more facts of Israeli creativity that would surprise you. May it suffice to say that Israel is already a light unto the nations.

My fellow congregants, on this auspicious day, let us reaffirm our pride in Israel and our belief in the Zionist dream. Let us celebrate Israel's achievements for the world, for Jews around the world, and for us. Let us re-engage with Israel and a Zionism renewed.

I call upon every member of this congregation to plan a trip to Israel within the year. I cordially invite you to come to Israel with me this summer on a Temple Sinai congregational trip. All the important details – and an orientation meeting -- are forthcoming.

On October 30, come hear Rabbi David Forman, an American-born Israeli, speak about "Living With Terror: Morality Versus Security." On November 12 and December 11, join Professor Andrew Polsky and myself as we explore "Does Israel Matter: Where Are The Hearts And Minds Of America's Jews?"

As you have heard, Israel is for me a source of great personal meaning. I hope Israel has become a source of great personal meaning for you as well.

Above all, let us have faith. Faith in Jewish imagination. Faith in the Zionist ideal to create a decent, just society for everyone in the Jewish homeland. Faith in the two-state solution: one for Palestinians, one for Israelis, living side by side in peace and prosperity. Let us have faith in Jewish morality. Let us have faith in the indomitable Jewish spirit.

*Ki mitziyon tetzei Torah udevar adonai merushalayim.* For Torah will go forth from Zion and the word of adonai from Jerusalem.