

**Israel: It's All In Our Family**  
*Rosh HaShanah* Morning 5766/October 4, 2005  
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When our older daughter Rachel, now the mother of our two grandchildren, was a toddler, Susan and I used to ask her: "Where's your *pupik*?" Finding your '*pupik*' (Yiddish for 'belly button') is an easy trick for a little kid. Usually, we don't pay much attention to our belly buttons, although, lately, with waistlines dropping lower and tight shirts rising higher, we are becoming a little more familiar with *pupiks* than I might choose. The latest trends aside, your *pupik*--your navel--is actually a hint at something from your past. It's all that remains of your umbilical cord, your first connection to an oxygen supply and nutrition, your original attachment to your mother, the only remaining vestige of the earliest moments of your life.

The famous Romanian religious historian Mircea Eliade writes that many cultures have developed a concept that there is a place on earth that is their gateway to God. It's center or, as Eliade sometimes calls it, the 'navel of the universe', a focal point for all that is sacred and transcendent in the world. Our Jewish people has such a navel. Mount Moriah, the setting of this morning's *Torah* portion, also identified in 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles as the Temple Mount, the city of Jerusalem and, ultimately, all of *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel, is that place in Jewish life. Our religious consciousness has understood these places as the navel of the Jewish universe, the focus of God's presence. Ever since King David first chose Jerusalem as his capital and his son Solomon's Temple was built on Mount Moriah, the Temple Mount, the city of Jerusalem and *Eretz Yisrael* have been the geographic and spiritual centers of Jewish life. Today the Western Wall, the last remaining vestige of the Second Temple that stood on that site, is where Jews still gather to feel close to God.

There's an old joke that goes like this:

The Chief Rabbi of Israel and the Pope are in a meeting in Rome. The Rabbi notices an unusually fancy phone on a side table in the Pope's private chambers.

"What is that phone for?" he asks the pontiff.

"It's my direct line to God!"

The Holy Father insists that the Rabbi try it out, and, indeed, he is connected to God. After the Rabbi hangs up, the Pope says, "The phone charges were 100,000 lira." The Chief Rabbi gladly hands over a huge packet of bills.

A few months later, the Pope visits Jerusalem. In the Chief Rabbi's study he sees a phone identical to his and learns it also is a direct line to God. The Pope asks if he can use the Rabbi's phone.

The Rabbi gladly agrees. After hanging up, the Pope offers to pay the charges.

The Rabbi looks on the phone counter and says: "One-half shekel!"

The Pope looks surprised: "Why so cheap!"

The Rabbi smiles: "Local call."

Because of this centrality of Israel in Jewish life, our congregation is embarking on a two-year programmatic thrust that we call our 'Israel Initiative.' Sponsored by our Israel Committee and under the direct leadership of our past-President Dr. Charles Nechemias, it is our hope to touch, motivate, and inspire each and every one of our members to broaden our understanding of and deepen our commitment to Israel.

In anticipation of this initiative, our Board of Trustees retreat almost a year ago focused on Israel. We were blessed to have the Union for Reform Judaism's *shaliach*, Yonatan Glazer, lead the program. At one point during the day, knowingly or not, he gave us our charge. There are many Jews, he observed, for whom Israel is already a core commitment. They are not a problem. Our challenge, he posited, is that too many Jews are on the periphery of involvement with Israel. How, he asked, do we move Jews from the periphery to the core?

How do I stand here and convince you in a sermon that Israel should, indeed must be an active part of your Jewish identity? What words can I say that will touch your heart and soul and move so many of you from the periphery to the core?

It is clear that many don't share my intense feelings for Israel and most especially for Jerusalem. Many digest sermons or lectures like this in a detached, intellectual, unemotional manner. Yes, you may think about my message, perhaps even agree. You might talk about it over lunch or dinner and then promptly put it out your mind. Why is that? Are we just so totally content and happy with our lives here in America that many of us feel that Israel is irrelevant? We know about anti-Semitism, and most of us feel very strongly about its potential for evil, but we likely also think that it will not affect us here in United States. I suppose most of us are just preoccupied with our everyday needs and sanguine about our lives. Others among us are perhaps blissfully unaware or just plain apathetic.

And we definitely have a challenge. A December 2004 study by the Zionist Education Department of the Jewish Agency for Israel clearly reveals that the attachment of American Jews to Israel has weakened measurably in recent years. This is the continuation a long-term trend that began in the late 1970s. The survey results include these statistics:

- 26% of us feel very emotionally attached to Israel. It was 31% just two years ago.
- 65% follow Israeli news closely, down from 74%.
- 39% talk about Israel frequently, down from 53%.
- 40% donate to Israel-related charities, down from 49%.
- 48% say caring about Israel matters 'a lot' to them, down from 58%.
- 57% affirm that caring about Israel is 'a very important part of my being Jewish', down from 73%.
- 2/3 say they at least sometimes 'disturbed' by Israel's foreign policy.
- Almost half said they are sometimes ashamed of Israel's actions, and 39% say they sometimes feel alienated from her.
- Overall, the survey showed that, while there is still much good feeling towards Israel, those feelings are greatly tempered by doubt, ambivalence, and qualification.

As Reform Jews we can't help but note that the recent National Jewish Population Survey showed that among those who identify with one of the three major religious streams in American Jewish life, we Reform Jews have the lowest level of attachment to Israel.

There has been a clear generational decline in commitment and support for Israel. We have failed to transmit to many in the younger generation the visceral passion so

many of us developed in our youth. We had the Holocaust, of course, as a motivator, the founding of the State and the 6-Day War. Yet we have failed to convincingly communicate even the basic ideas that Zionism is the national liberation movement of the Jewish people and that Israel is our historic homeland.

We have failed to convince many Jews of the truth of the reasons that Israel is so vital to Jewish life, let alone Jewish survival: that it is a country of refuge for those who feel the sting of anti-Semitism, that it is a place where we can proudly live with the rhythms of the Jewish calendar, a land where the Hebrew language can once again express the essence of the Jewish heart and soul, a nation where Jewish culture and arts can flourish, a state that enables our people to take our place as equals on the world's political stage. Israel is also our psychological rock whose existence allows us to walk just a bit more proudly in the Diaspora.

Ironically, there are Jews at entirely opposite ends of the spectrum who stridently oppose the very existence of a Jewish state. On the one hand there are those fundamentalist Orthodox Jews who believe that a Jewish state in the Biblical land of Israel can only be founded by the Messiah. At the other end of the spectrum are those Jews who operate under the banner of universalistic humanism. They believe that any Israel was and is a mistake. The struggle for a Palestinian state has become a cause celebre with some young and idealistic Jews rooting for the underdog. Shamefully and outrageously, many from both extremes have and continue to compare Israelis with Nazis.

Reform Judaism has an interesting history when it comes to Zionism and support for a Jewish national home. Today we take it for granted that we strongly advocate on behalf of Israel as well as for the acceptance of Reform Judaism there. However, just 120 years ago, our classical Reform rabbinic forbearers adopted the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 that declared that Reform Jews were 'no longer a nation' and they expected 'neither a return to Palestine...nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.' In part our Reform predecessors opposed Zionism out of principle, and in part they feared that national governments would treat us as disloyal citizens if it were shown that our allegiance lay even in part with a Jewish country.

The most zealous of these anti-Zionists helped to found the extremist American Council for Judaism. One of the Council's earliest supporters, Alfred Lilienthal, wrote, "...my faith does not pull me into a feeling of narrowly tribal kinship...Whenever I read of Americans singing the *Hatikvah*...or see youth groups raising Israel's flag beside the Stars and Stripes, I am outraged. For Israel's flag and anthem are symbols of a foreign state; they are not mine."

Lilienthal poses a very important question for us as American Jews: is Israel a foreign country? Of course in many ways the answer has to be 'yes.' We are American citizens, not Israelis. We show our American passports to gain entrance to Israel. We are the products of American culture and society. We speak English, not Hebrew. Even those of us who dearly love Israel return here to our families and to the feeling of 'being home' on these shores of freedom.

And yet, for us as Jews, Israel is not a foreign country in the same sense as Italy or Ecuador. To be a Jew is not, as Lilienthal asserts, entirely a matter of 'faith'. We are not primarily belief or creed or dogma. While religion is a central part of our identity and is, for many, including myself, essential to our very being, we Jews have, since Biblical

times, always defined ourselves as a ‘people’, or, as Mordecai Kaplan put it, a ‘civilization.’ As a people we retain loyalties and commitments that transcend nation and time. We have two flags on our *bimah*, and we live comfortably with both. As a people we are connected to a particular land. We Jews have lived in virtually every country in history, and we have survived almost 4,000 years, mostly in the Diaspora. We have adapted ourselves to many different cultures and societies, and we have adopted from them the best they have to offer. And through it all, whenever we have addressed our prayers to God, we have faced Jerusalem, the center of our Jewish universe. This is how we kept alive our dream of a return to the land of our ancestors as well as the bonds and ties to each other that are unfathomable to outsiders and mysterious even to ourselves. *Kol Yisrael areivin zeh bah zeh*, the tradition teaches: “All Jews are responsible for one another.”

So, no Israel is not exactly a foreign country for us. When you get off that plane just outside Tel Aviv there is something undeniably familiar, a palpable feeling of belonging, a sense that we just ‘fit in.’

Here then, is my ultimate hope for our Israel Initiative: that each and every one of us already has or will start to work on developing a relationship with Israel that feels like a link to our family. Family has the presumption of an enduring relationship. Family gets the benefit of the doubt. We can argue with our family but would never desert them. Families produce very intense feelings, often more than with other relationships. Yet bonds of connection and loyalty are always preserved even when disagreements arise. It’s not just that we’re stuck with our families. It’s that through thick and thin, along with a few close friends, they are always there when we need them; we can count on them, and they can count on us.

We are part of that core when we understand ourselves as a part of the family of the Jewish people, including, of course, our brothers and sisters in *Eretz Yisrael*. We are part of that core when we understand that wherever and whenever a Jew is harmed or in danger, all Jews are at risk, and that when one Jew hurts, the entire family feels that pain.

If you do nothing else after today’s service, please take a moment to consider your relationship with Israel. If you’re on the periphery of commitment to Israel, I beseech you to move into the core. And whether you’re in the core or on the periphery, I beg you—lend a hand. Register to participate in the upcoming World Zionist Congress elections and then vote for ARZA. Contribute to organizations that support Israel. Write letters to politicians on her behalf. Purchase an Israel Bond. Buy Israeli products. Subscribe to Israeli magazines and newspapers. Sign up for daily email reports on Israeli news. Join AIPAC. Come to some of our Israel Initiative programs over the next two years. And, most importantly, visit. If not with our Shaaray Tefila trip this December, find another one. But please, just do it!

Yes, this morning’s *Torah* portion, the ‘binding of Isaac,’ takes place on Mount Moriah, a spot destined to become the focal point, the navel of Jewish consciousness, even unto us this very day. Now you might think that the *Torah* focuses heavily on *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel. But here is a great irony: in fact, the *Torah* never uses the phrase *Eretz Yisrael*. The *Torah* refers to it only as Canaan. Rabbi Mordecai Elon explains this conundrum as follows: Canaan, he says, was only a ‘promised land.’ It didn’t become *Eretz Yisrael* until we made it so. When we transform it into the land of

Israel, then, he says, it takes on a higher level of holiness. Until then it's just...Canaan. Just because God gives it to us doesn't make it complete. That completion is up to us.

And remember: it's all in our family.

*L'Shanah Tovah Tikateivu. Amen.*