

**Erev Yom Kippur / Kol Nidre 5768**  
**Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen**

*Al Tifrosh Min HaTzibor* - Not turning our back on Israel

This year let us reflect on what might have been, or as my Sci-fi-reading husband would call it, let's explore an 'alternate history'. It was 60 years ago, in 1947, that the United Nations took up resolution 181 for the creation of a Jewish homeland in the state of Israel. While the debate was heated, the opposition had more support, and so the resolution failed. The United Nations did not see a need to create a place of refuge for those displaced from the atrocities of World War II or the need for a Jewish homeland. After all, the Jews were content living in countries throughout the world, why did they need their own land?

Today, the sliver of land in the middle east is currently being fought over by the surrounding countries of Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, and sometimes even Iran and Iraq, all who lay claim to this highly contested territory.

Since 1948, Jews around the world have assimilated into their own countries and our prayer for a return to Zion seems empty and hopeless. Many congregations have even gone so far as to remove it from their liturgy.

The land is too volatile for anyone to possibly see first hand where our patriarchs and matriarchs once dwelled and the city of Jerusalem is under piles of rubble and rubbish. Judaism's holiest sites are but a memory and only presented to our students as a place in our history, as mysterious as the hanging gardens in Babylon.

Israel was a fleeting hope and dream and we pray that some day our children might visit this ancient land and uncover her beauty. But for today, 60 years after what could have been, we mourn the loss of a land God promised our ancestors and pray that those who have no place of refuge or who are persecuted in their own lands will find peace.

Fortunately, today, I do not have to deliver that sermon. Today, we **do** celebrate the accomplishments and dreams fulfilled of this splinter of land in the Middle East that belongs to the Jewish people and whose people contribute so much to our world.

Can anyone here imagine what the world would be like without Israel? There are those that argue that Israel as our Jewish homeland does not hold the same relevance as it used to, now that there are more Jews in the United States than Israel. However, I would like to suggest that Israel is very relevant and maybe, we take her a little for granted.

Allow me to demonstrate what I mean. Did you know that, Israel, the 100th smallest country, with less than 1/1,000th of the world's population, can lay claim to the following:

- Israel has the highest ratio of university degrees to the population in the world.
- Israel produces more scientific papers per capita than any other nation by a large margin - 109 per 10,000 people - as well as one of the highest per capita rates of patents filed.

- On a per capita basis, Israel has the largest number of biotech start-ups.
- In the field of Medicine, Israeli scientists developed the first fully computerized, no-radiation, diagnostic instrumentation for breast cancer.
- The cell phone was developed in Israel by Motorola, which has its largest development center in Israel.
- Most of the Windows NT operating system was developed by Microsoft-Israel.
- The Pentium MMX Chip technology was designed in Israel at Intel.
- Voice mail technology was developed in Israel.
- Both Microsoft and Cisco built their only R&D facilities outside the US in Israel.
- The AOL Instant Messenger was developed in 1996 by four young Israelis.[\[1\]](#)

Israel is more than the home of the Jewish people. Israel is a major contributor to the world's economic and political sphere. Israel goes beyond being the homeland of the Jewish people and a place in which we say, "next year in Jerusalem."

Yet this statement of "Next year in Jerusalem" is challenging for liberal Jews. How many of us are truly ready to pack up everything and move to a foreign country so that we might fulfill this promise? Honestly, not many of us, but thankfully, it is not meant to be a required directive.

"Next year in Jerusalem" is not meant to be taken literally – that is, it is not meant to say that it is our hope for all Jews to be living in Israel next year. Wow, if you think the traffic in LA is bad, imagine Jerusalem on a Friday afternoon after such a massive emigration!

When the statement was first introduced to our Passover Haggadot, it was an idealistic notion that the Messiah would come during the next year, the world would be perfected, and the Temple would be rebuilt. Even Haggadot in Israel read, "Next Year in Jerusalem, the rebuilt." Next year in Jerusalem, according to our progressive idealism, is an expression of solidarity with *Klal Yisrael*, the community of Israel, and that the entire Jewish community, past, present, and future, may finally be united as one.

As a united community, it is our obligation to support both Israel, the country, and the community of Israel, the Jewish people. In 1999, the Central Conference of American Rabbis stated in their Statement of Principles that Israel, along with God and Torah, are the three pinnacles of our identity.

Israel is defined in these principles as being made up of both the people and the land. As a Jewish community, we rejoice in the accomplishments of the country and recognize the unique qualities of living there. As the Reform movement, we support full civil human and religious rights of all Israel's inhabitants and strive for peace with Israel's neighbors. It is imperative that Israeli and Diaspora Jewry remain vibrant and that Jews living outside of Israel strive to learn Hebrew as a living language and visit Israel. The principles state that Jews living in the land can learn much from Diaspora Jews in the creation of Progressive communities and that ultimately, Israel gives meaning and purpose to our lives.[\[2\]](#)

All of this is good as an exercise in educated dialogue but doesn't provide a compelling reason for the significance of Israel among the Reform Jews of the United States, and doesn't solidify

an emotional connection to the Holy Land among many of us in this congregation. The question is: **WHY** do we not feel a connection?

It's difficult to find a connection to a land that is 3,000 miles away and somewhere that many of us have never traveled. But we do feel a sense of camaraderie when Israel is doing something that makes us proud. Who remembers when Israel declared her independence and was then immediately assailed by the surrounding countries? Who remembers the pride Jews around the world felt when this small, newly formed country was able to defend herself against all odds and arise victorious? Who remembers in 1956 when Egypt, Syria and Jordan signed a military agreement against Israel and in response, Israel captured the Sinai and Gaza strip to defend her borders. Who remembers in 1967 the six-day war during which Israel **again** defended her borders, this time from attacks on all sides from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Who remembers when in 1973 again Israel persevered when Syria and Egypt plotted, executed, and ultimately failed in a surprise attack on Yom Kippur? Who remembers 1982 when Israel had to defend herself against the terrorist attacks of the PLO who pushed their way into Southern Lebanon after having being expelled from Jordan in 1970. Israel was able to create a buffer zone between Lebanon and Northern Israel in order to protect those in the Northern Israeli towns and villages.

It is a sad state that Israel has suffered over its entire existence, such that there are those from every generation who can speak to an act of aggression against Israel and say "I can remember". We are grateful that each time she has needed to defend herself, we, from 9000 miles away, feel proud to be Jewish when she succeeds.

However, we are challenged to feel proud of Israel even when she is not militarily successful. At a luncheon in the United States following the 1973 victory, Yael Dyan, daughter to the great military commander, Moshe Dyan, thanked everyone for coming out to celebrate Israel's victory and she noted the sense of pride in the room. Yet, she left those in the room stunned when she challenged them with this question: 'How many brave Israeli soldiers have to die in order for the world Jewish community to feel proud of Israel?'

These are powerful words. What is it about Israel that makes us feel proud? When are the times that we do not feel proud? And when we are not proud of Israel, is it so easy, being 3,000 miles away, to just turn our backs and say, 'I don't live there and therefore, Israel is not relevant in my Jewish life.'

Our pride for Israel has been challenged in 1982, 1984 and in recent months when Israel went beyond taking up arms only when directly threatened. Israel has been questioned regarding the ethics involved in taking pre-emptive measures to protect her borders, even when the country is simply defending her citizens who live too close to neighboring Arab villages that are lobbing katusha rockets into their neighborhoods. Our pride has been challenged as Israel struggles with the issues of the Palestinian right to a state of their own, but not willing to discuss a future with a terrorist government overseen by Hamas and Hezbollah.

But like our child who is always in our hearts, even when they make a mistake or challenges our patience, we still love that child. What makes our family relevant? Are they only relevant when

we need them or when they do something that makes us proud? Is our family relevant only when they can do something for us? Is our family relevant only when they live close by? No. Family is always relevant. Family is always family.

We need to remember that Israel is our family. Today, as Jews in America, we may not have a daily need for her, yet there are many throughout the world who do. Israel is still a safe haven for those who are fleeing persecution and harm. Even today, Israel struggles with the desire to care for those who are forced to flee the Sudan in the midst of genocide. Israel is questioning, 'should a country sworn to provide a safe haven for Jews open its gates to Africans fleeing the murderous conflict in Sudan?' Should she become the immigrant route for all people who are suffering? A recent editorial in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz said, "Assistance to Muslim victims can illustrate much better than any international public relations campaign that the principles by which Israel was established are universal and do not discriminate between humans based on religion or race." (By Ron Bousso) We, the Jews of America, may not need Israel, but Israel is extremely relevant for those who do seek shelter under her wings.

We may take for granted all that Israel provides and we may even challenge that the Intel Pentium chips, cell phones and medical break-throughs could very well have taken place anywhere in the world. But these achievements are based in Israel and hence Israel is relevant not only to us but to progress and innovation throughout the world.

Finally, there is the distance. While I wish it were so, I have no magic wand to make Tel Aviv appear on the far side of Catalina Island. No Midrash or rabbinic story can help us here. But while it is easy to ignore that which is so far away, allow me to challenge each of us with this question. How many times have you traveled outside of the United States? How many times have you returned to that favorite Hawaiian island or taken that trip to Europe? When will Israel become a destination on our travel log? When will this exotic country with amazing food, sites and even spas become a priority for our travel plans? Yes, it would be the hope to travel to Israel for spiritual reasons as a main driving force, but I recognize that relaxation and exotic adventures are high on the priority list of vacationers today. Israel has all of that and more. In our world of jet planes and travel deals, Israel is not that far away. Might I even recommend a great tour you can join with your family and friends that requires no planning on your part, leaving in December 2008? All that is required is an open mind, an open heart and a desire to return to the place where our ancestors stood and were inspired. Join with Matt, Dahvi, Yoni and me for our multigenerational tour to Israel in December 2008. This is an opportunity for us to explore this land either as new visitors or returning pilgrims. There will be multiple opportunities for adult only excursions with our Israeli guides and family oriented experiences with educators. All the while having 24 hour access to me, your rabbi. What more could you ask for? Oh yeah, we'll even do the spa thing near Ein Gedi! Let's make Israel relevant to us all as we explore together as a congregational family. And it will be the easiest Chanukah shopping you'll have to do in a long while. Information and the itinerary for this incredible experience is available on-line at the TBS website – [www.tbsoc.com](http://www.tbsoc.com)

60 years ago this year the United Nations voted for the creation of the Jewish state of Israel on a sliver of land in the middle of hostile neighbors. And yet, while this small country continues to fight for her survival, we must continue to remember, Israel is relevant in our lives and we would

not be the same without her. There is much we can learn from Israel and there is much Israel can learn from world Jewry. May we never turn our backs on Israel and may we always continue to pray for peace within her borders and for all of *klal Yisrael*, the community of Israel.

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[1] <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1600302/posts>

[2] A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism adopted in Pittsburgh, 1999 by the Central Conference of American Rabbis