

Rabbi Joshua Samuels
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A New Narrative for Israel

Forty years ago in San Francisco, my childhood rabbi was listening to the radio as he was driving to temple to lead Kol Nidre. He couldn't believe what he had heard: Syrian tanks had infiltrated into the northern settlements of Israel. "This must be a flashback from the Six Day War," he thought. And then it became clear. Syria and Egypt had coordinated a surprise attack on Israel during the holiest day of the year.

My rabbi dumped his planned sermon. As the service began, the congregation was quiet. Throughout the service the temple administrator handed bulletin updates to the rabbi on the bima and he read them aloud to the community.

In Los Angeles at another synagogue worshippers listened to the radio, reminiscent of pictures of Jews all over the world huddled round radios during the UN vote in 1947 concerning the statehood of Israel.

And across the country in Connecticut a mid-size congregation was in the middle of a capital campaign to build a new synagogue. As the news hit that evening the board and rabbi decided to drop the fundraising and instead begin to raise money for the war effort in Israel.

All over the country, people were frightened. There was a real sense that Israel would not survive. After a swift and astonishing victory just six years earlier, Israel was still intoxicated by its success. Unfortunately, various leaders at the time did not heed some warnings either. These are just a couple reasons why they were completely caught off guard by this attack. During the very beginning of the Yom Kippur War, Israel was confronted with its own mortality. This was real and devastating. Over 3000 soldiers were killed and scores injured. Israel's neighbors had entered deep into the country.

During this war the American Jewish community was united in its support for Israel. Elderly Jews pledged huge sums of money. Younger Jews flew to Israel and helped with the effort, especially in the kibbutzim as the men were off fighting. Even Jews on the margins of their communities joined with everyone else. It didn't matter what denomination one was

affiliated with or what political party one was registered under—generally speaking, American Jews were one.

Well, a lot has changed since 1973.

For one thing, Israel fights wars completely differently than they did decades ago.

The percentage of the GNP dedicated towards defense went from 45% in 1973 to under 7% today.

Israel has made peace treaties with two of the countries they fought against in 1973: Egypt and Jordan.

Israel's expertise and innovation in agricultural and in the hi-tech industries have been models to many countries and today has the third highest number of companies listed on the NASDAQ stock exchange.

Israel is the only country in the world that entered the 21st century with a net gain in trees.

There is one change, however that isn't as positive. It actually has nothing to do with Israel, but with our attitudes towards Israel.

Since the creation of the state and throughout the 1970's, American Jewish support was overwhelming. There was a sense that we were all in it together. Today, however, this is far from reality.

Just 63% of Jews feel emotionally connected to Israel and the number drops when we look at Jews below 44 years old.ⁱ

There is a growing attitude amongst younger Jews especially that Israel is not relevant in their lives. It's not even on the radar of many Jews today.

What is going on? Why is there a sense of apathy towards Israel amongst many Jews in America? "Why is there an increasing number of Jews who are questioning the significance of Israel in their lives and even the legitimacy of and importance of Jewish sovereignty?"ⁱⁱ

Dr. Daniel Gordis, prolific author and Senior Vice President of the **Shalem College** in Jerusalem writes, "To a generation of Jews who witnessed or survived the Holocaust, or to those can still feel in their bones the dread of May 1967 around the Six Day War or the terror of the first days of the

Yom Kippur War, the need for a Jewish state seems patently obvious. To those born later, however, this is decreasingly true. More and more, a younger generation of Jews, tired of a conversation about a conflict that they intuit is not going to end, bored to the point of resentment by a discussion that never elicits anything new or inspiring about the Jewish state, feels that it has had enough.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words, the crisis-based narrative that once focused on Jewish survival is no longer relevant. Sure, Israel is still threatened by her neighbors, especially nowadays with situations like we see in Syria and Iran. And while Israel is experiencing a period of calm right now, we are all well aware that this can change in an instant. But, there is no imminent threat as there was back in 1948, 1967 and 1973. And Israel is certainly not seen as the victim any more. Some might say that Israel acts more like an aggressor these days.

Israel is no longer the only safe-haven and sanctuary of last resort for Jews in peril.

This crisis narrative that once demanded unwavering support of Israel, does not speak to many of us who did not live through those precarious times.

It seems that for Israel to once again be relevant and a significant part of one’s Jewish life, then we have to change the narrative. It can’t focus on Arabs, Palestinians, land for peace, or even the whole peace process. These are just way too political and divisive, not to mention irrelevant to a large percentage of Jews. Furthermore, Israel is greater than those issues anyway. Israel is much more than a region plagued by terrorism. Israel is even much more than the only true democracy in the Middle East.

A new narrative must speak to Jews and especially younger Jews in a way that generates meaning in their lives. We must first ask the question: Why is the existence of Israel important? Secondly, how is it relevant in my life?

The Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, “is a center of transformative thinking and teaching that addresses the major challenges facing the Jewish people and elevates the quality of Jewish life in Israel and around the world.”^{iv} They have created a program called Engage Israel that addresses this narrative issue.

They recognize that a new narrative must accomplish a few goals.

First: The significance of Israel cannot be predicated on a language of superiority. Language that describes Israel as “the center” and life outside of Israel as “the Diaspora” must be reconceived.

Second: Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people, not just Israelis. Israel cannot be the project of Israelis alone with the rest of world Jewry acting as spectators. The new covenant must grant world Jewry the rights and responsibilities that come with being a partner in building and shaping the future of Israel.

Third: This new narrative must be rooted in Jewish ideas, values and experiences that offer world Jewry a vision of a relationship with Israel that contributes positively to the future of Judaism and the Jewish people. Such a narrative must be founded on ideas that have the power to generate the excitement and involvement necessary to encourage engagement in a new covenant with Israel.

We are called, b’nei Yisrael, the children of Israel. Yisrael means, “one who struggles with God.” We are a people who question and argue. Being in a struggle is not necessarily a bad thing since one who struggles with someone is, by definition, in relationship to them. We need to step back into the ring with Israel and re-ignite our relationship with her. Perhaps we need to re-examine our assumptions that have defined our relationship to Israel.

Thankfully, Judaism does not require faith statements or agreement with a religious figurehead as a sign of legitimacy. We encourage argument, uncertainty and doubt. Skepticism is healthy. I encourage you to struggle with Israel. I encourage you to figure out how the existence of Israel can enhance your connection to Judaism.

Make Israel a topic at a Living Room Learning session; find an Israeli pen-pal for your child who is becoming a bar/bat mitzvah; encourage your children and grandchildren to go on a Birthright or NFTY trip; come with me on a congregational trip within the next few years. Rent Israeli movies. Make the connection.

Israel is the reality of a two thousand-year-old dream. Out of a desert blossomed a first world country. A colleague recently reminded me that even the Hatikvah speaks to the Jewish people and not just the Israelis. We sing, “As long as the Jewish spirit is yearning deep in the heart...” nefesh yehudi.

Look, this change in narrative is going to take a while to permeate the hearts and minds of American Jews. But, if we value the existence of Israel, its connection to Jewish life and its potential for transformative Jewish experiences, then we need to begin speaking about it in a whole new way. We can't afford for a new generation of American Jews to simply not care. Our fellow Jewish brothers and sisters worked way too hard for our Promised Land to become as irrelevant as the destruction of the two Temples.

My hope this year is that we enter into a new conversation that embraces Israel and the Jewish people as equal partners in writing the next chapter of Jewish history.

ⁱ http://www.jewishfederations.org/local_includes/downloads/4606.pdf

ⁱⁱ Shalom Hartman Institute iEngage Program

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://danielgordis.org/2013/06/21/time-to-change-the-israel-conversation/>

^{iv} From their website, www.harman.org.il