

Sermon for Yom Haatzmaut- April 28

I like to look ahead to the future which is why I can say that next year Israel will reach an important milestone. She turns 65. You know what that means? It means that she's eligible for Medicare and Social Security!

You laugh. But there is something significant about turning 65, even if I'm going to use an American analogy. And that is that at 65 you are considered to be a senior citizen. You are no longer a child, an adolescent, a teenager, a young adult, or middle aged.

No. You are now old and presumably wise.

And in thinking of Israel this week, turning 64, I realized why Israel is having such problems.

No. Not with her Arab enemies.

I'm talking about the problems it has with Jews, especially American Jews, younger American Jews, like the J Street crowd, for instance.

Jews who were not alive in 1948. Jews who weren't even alive in 1967.

In other words, Jews who only know Israel as it exists now. As a senior citizen.

There is a generation gap between younger Jews and those of us who have lived long enough to remember what it was like for Jews in America, for Jews anywhere in the world, before there was a State of Israel.

These differences can best be summed up by an old Beatles song.

When I get older losing my hair, Many years from now. Will you still be sending me a valentine Birthday greetings bottle of wine. If I'd been out till quarter to three Would you lock the door, Will you still need me, will you still feed me, When I'm sixty-four.

Remember that song? That is the lament today. Do we still need Israel at 64? Do we still support Israel at 64? These are the questions being asked today among American Jews?

Why support Israel? Why care about Israel?

The answer is an easy "I don't know," especially because Israel is portrayed in the media as the bad guy, the bully, the occupier, the violator of human rights!

But beyond that, I want to address another reason for this generational divide over Israel. One that I believe strikes at the heart of the problem.

A recent book, by Peter Beinart, call *The Crisis of Zionism*, has received a lot of attention lately for its criticism of Israel.

But why is there a crisis of Zionism? And who is facing this crisis?

The crisis that Beinart refers to isn't taking place in Israel. It's taking place here in America.

It's taking place among those American Jews who have their own definition of Zionism, which is seemingly at odds with the policies or definition of Zionism espoused by the Israeli government.

And this difference is highlighted by how these Jews see, not just Israel, but see Judaism as well.

To younger Americans, Jews and non-Jews alike, reared with Western values, raised in a multicultural society, Zionism is not necessary. In fact Judaism is not necessary.

According to this worldview, universalism is the goal, the way to live. Not tribalism. Not exceptionalism.

Judaism merely sets Jews apart. Zionism sets Israel apart.

Why can't all people live freely in Israel? Why does it have to be a homeland for Jews?

We no longer need a special homeland because we live as full, free citizens here in America!

It is why I read about an effort to get this, change the words to Hatikva because it's too much about Jewish aspirations which we don't need anymore.

So what's all the fuss? Why support a country at 64? It's old.

That was for my parents. It's not for me!

That is the crux of the attitude that is so widespread today.

And to that I have a simple response. Many responses actually.

First. Germany. This was the same response we heard from German Jews for nearly a century. They were assimilated. They were cultured. They reached the highest levels of society.

They too saw no reason to be "separate" as Jews.

And then 1933 came. And 1935. And 1939.

You know the rest.

The simple truth is that as safe and comfortable as we may feel, whether here in America or elsewhere, we will always be Jews. And there will always be those who do not like us.

And if something horrific were to happen to us, tell me, what should we do then?

Where should we go? Where can we go?

The one true crucial ideal of Israel, the one true promise of Israel, one that has lasted for 64 years, is that only, only, with a Jewish State of Israel, can all Jews have a safe refuge.

Only, only, with a Jewish State of Israel, can all Jews have a home.

And only, only, a strong Jewish State of Israel, will stand ready, willing and able to defend the Jewish people, wherever they may be.

But in our efforts to spread multi-culturalism, diversity, equality, and universalism, or whatever politically correct term of art you want to use to define current American society, we have lost sight of our history.

And we need to remind ourselves of that history.

You need to remind your children and grandchildren.

You need to speak to them and teach them our history.

You need to tell them what it was like before 1948.

And without being an alarmist, you need to impress upon them that, in the words of Daniel Gordis, "The Jews have a future because the Jews have a state."

But I guess if you don't care about Jews having a future, then who cares about Jews having a state.

"Will you still need me, will you still feed me, When I'm sixty-four."

The answer is YES. The answer must be YES.

And that is why, when you speak to your children and grandchildren, don't just tell them ancient history. Tell them modern history.

Tell them what Israel is really like. Impress upon them the advances made in science, technology, arts, health care.

Impress upon them all the good that Israel does. Show them. Teach them.

Tell them that the cell phone that they can't live without was invented in... yes, you know, in Israel.

Point them to websites that show Israel in a positive light and highlight some of what I'm talking about.

There is an organization called Step Up for Israel which does just that. It highlights all the positives that Israel has done and continues to do. I will be meeting with their representative next week about bringing a Step Up program here.

It's a way of informing you of what you don't read in the papers.

It's a way of giving you the information to take back to your children and grandchildren.

And it's a way of showing that Israel, while it may be ready to receive Social Security, is not ready to retire.

It's still strong and it's still vibrant. But can only remain that way with your help and support.

When you talk about Israel, this is what you must talk about.

Don't even make it political. It's not about that. It's not about the settlements, for example.

But to be honest, to have these conversations, you know these issues are going to come up.

And that brings me to the second part of what I perceive as this generational gap.

To paraphrase a recent television program, "Whose values is it anyway?"

You see, those who criticize Israel, those who claim that Israel violates human rights, etc, are doing so based on one faulty premise.

Yes, Israel is a democratic country. But it's Israeli democracy it's Israeli Zionism, and it's Israeli values by which it must live and be governed.

We make a very big mistake we impose our brand of American democracy and values onto Israel.

First, we don't have to live with what they live with. We're not worried about being attacked by Canada or Mexico.

Second, who are we to impose our American version of the Bill of rights, free speech, freedom of religion, etc, onto another country.

The criticism of Israel we hear from Beinart and the like is based on this faulty premise.

It's very easy to sit here in the comfort, safety and freedom of America and criticize another country for not living up to, not their own ideals or laws, but our American ideals and laws.

It's easy to do so when safety isn't one of your top priorities.

It's easy to do so when you're not surrounded by enemies.

It's easy to ask someone else to live up to high moral and ethical standards.

But tell me. Why aren't the Beinarts and J

Streeters of the world spending their energy criticizing the various problems facing America; the country they live in?

Why do they spend their time criticizing another country?

Why don't they extol what is good about Israel.

They criticize free speech in Israel? What other country would tolerate members of its own legislature calling for its very destruction?

Let us worry more about the shortcomings of our own country rather than on the shortcomings of Israel.

And let Israel, in her own judgment, determine her own policies, as espoused by her democratically elected leaders.

Let Israel, in her own judgment, determine

how to respond to terror and attacks.

But let us not, not, impose our idealistic American values on another democratic country.

We don't do it to Saudi Arabia, or Syria, or Egypt, or Iran.

We only do it to Israel. Because we can.

Because even at 64, even as a senior citizen, Israel actually cares what others think.

Because even at 64, Israel actually wants to do the right thing; wants to take the high moral and ethical ground.

But where after 64 years, the other side still doesn't recognize your right to exist, don't for a moment pretend that you can survive only with high minded ideals.

You can't. We can't. Israel can't.

And that is why we must stand up for Jewish interests, we must stand up for Israel, and we must teach our younger generation that Israel, and the safety, security and future of the Jewish people must be a priority in our lives.

There is a lot that Peter Beinart says which as you can see I disagree with. But to be fair to him, he did write something with which I wholeheartedly agree. A statement which sums up the problem and offers a solution. One to share with your children and grandchildren.

Beinart writes, "I call the failure to give young American Jews the Jewish education necessary to live committed Jewish lives a "tragedy." I say that young American Jews need to care about Israel more than they care "about global warming, health care, gay rights, and a dozen other issues."

That says it all. So if you take one thing away from this sermon I hope it is that last quote.

But I want to give you one more thing to think about and to share with those you come in contact with as a way of really understanding what Israel means

It's a song which was recorded by both Neil Diamond and Frank Sinatra. It's called "The House I Live In." And I will replace the word America with the word Israel.

What is Israel to me A name, a map, or a flag I see A certain word, democracy That is Israel to me

The land I live in A plot of earth, a street Or the people that I meet The children in the playground The faces that I see All races and religions That's Israel to me

The little town the city Where my people lived and died And the right to speak your mind out That's Israel to me

The laughter and the tears And the dream that's been a growing For more than two thousand years

That is Israel to me

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