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For many years, with rare exception, it has been my custom to speak about Israel during the High Holy Days. Sometimes I feel guilty about it. I know any sermon I give about Israel will be a slam dunk crowd pleaser, at least among those congregants who unabashedly support Israel.

Yet Israel is becoming an increasingly contentious topic, especially among younger Jews. In some congregations Israel has become so controversial that rabbis are afraid to speak about it. A recent poll commissioned by AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, indicates that a majority of American Rabbis are afraid to share their true feelings about Israel, half because they fear their positions are too liberal for their congregations and the other half because they fear their opinions are too conservative.

I count myself among the majority.

When I discussed this quandary with my daughter, Margalit, and asked her opinion about what I should say about Israel this year, she had one word of advice: "be honest." The problem with being honest about my thoughts and feelings about Israel is that they are not simple and neat. They are complicated and conflicted. I guess that's part of being a Jew.

I love Israel and I support Israel's right to exist and right to defend herself. Israel is the national homeland of the Jewish People. A little over two thousand years ago we were exiled from our land, but never lost our dream and resolve to return there. There

has always been a Jewish presence in *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel, and over the centuries Jews have always tried to move there.

When Jews began to returning to the land in earnest in the late 1800's, they had no plans to create a state. They only wanted to live there alongside the Arab population.

It was the antipathy, animosity, rejectionism, and violence of the Arab population that led to the UN partition plan and the eventual declaration of statehood. Egypt, Jordan, and Syria immediately attacked the new state. If they had not, Israel today would be geographically smaller than it is and there would be no Palestinian refugees.

While some Arabs remained in what would eventually become the borders of 1948 Israel, others fled. Not all Arabs, however, left of their own free will. Recent historical studies have shown that the Israeli army forced some Arabs to leave their homes and become refugees.

In his book, "My Promised Land – The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel," Israeli author and journalist Ari Shavit tells the tale of some of these displaced Palestinians and the injustices done to them. He describes the expulsion of the Arabs of Lydda, near Ben Gurion Airport, at great length. Shavit writes, "Lydda is an integral and essential part of our story. And when I try to be honest about it, I see the choice is stark: either reject Zionism because of Lydda, or accept Zionism along with Lydda.

...I will not damn the brigade commander and the military governor and the training group boys. If need be, I'll stand by the damned. Because I know that if it wasn't for them, the State of Israel would not have been born. If it wasn't for them, I would not have been born. They did the dirty, filthy work that enables my people, myself, my daughter, and my sons to live."

Lest you think that Shavit is some radical left wing self-hating Israeli, I want you to know that he recently spoke in San Diego on behalf of AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby, and will speak here again in November at the Jewish Book Festival.

As I said at the outset, I believe that Jews have the right to settle in the land of Israel. After our exile we never found a new home and never forgot our old one. Jews were always considered foreigners in the countries in which we lived and subjected to discrimination, persecution and violence. Modern Zionism is the movement that brought us back to the land of our ancestors, a land that we never gave up.

I categorically reject the views those who call all Jews living in Israel “settlers,” as if we were unlawful invaders of our own homeland. But at the same time I acknowledge that another people, the Palestinians, also have a claim to the land. I am not suggesting that those Palestinians who left their villages should now have the right to return to them. The Jewish settlement of this land is now an incontrovertible fact, just as the American settlement of lands that used to belong to Native Americans is a fact.

But I do acknowledge their claim, and the pain and suffering that the establishment of the State of Israel caused Palestinians. I say this knowing full well that to date, all Palestinian leaders, including Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, continue to insist on the “right of return” as part of any possible peace agreement, and that their refusal to accept financial reparations instead is one of the major stumbling blocks to a peace settlement. I also say this firmly agreeing with Israel’s rejection of any “right of return.” Such a return would destroy the Jewish State and be an existential threat to the Jews living there. However, we must acknowledge the injustices done to

the Palestinian population and understand the depths of their anger in any discussions and negotiations.

Secondly, I personally make a clear delineation between the pre-1967 and post-1967 borders.

First, I agree with the annexation of Jerusalem. Under Jordanian control Jews were denied access to our holiest city and its Jewish quarter, which for years lay in ruins. We were also denied access to our historical and sacred sites, especially the Western Wall and Temple Mount. This must never be allowed to happen again. Giving up Jerusalem would be, to paraphrase Psalm 137, like cutting off our right arm, or more accurately our heart.

But I consider any of the West Bank not formally annexed by Israel to be occupied territory. While one can argue whether under international law Israel is entitled to keep this land as a consequence of war, or is obligated to give it to the Palestinians, my argument against West Bank settlements is moral, not legal.

First, Israel has never formally annexed most of the West Bank. Nevertheless, she has permitted Israelis to settle and build cities on land that is not officially Israel.

The settlement movement was founded not by those worried about Israel's security, but by Orthodox Jews with messianic ambitions. They believe that reclaiming Biblical Israel is part of the messianic process, and that to give up any part of Biblical Israel is to sin against God. Their settlement of the West Bank has little to do with the safety of Israelis and more to do with their belief that they are following God's will.

The problem with settlements on the West Bank is twofold. First, as I have already said, these settlements are not in the State of Israel. They are in territory that

was seized during the 1967 war. Since the “ownership” of this land is in dispute, I do not believe that Israelis should be settling there.

Second, within Israel’s pre-1967 borders, Jews are the majority. In the West Bank, Palestinians are the majority but they are not in control of their own destiny. They are under Israeli control. Even in the autonomous areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority, Israel reserves the right to intercede if she senses a terrorist threat. Palestinians need Israeli permission to move about. Israeli soldiers have been put in the position not of defending Israel but policing a population that utterly rejects the legitimacy of their authority.

For centuries Jews have lived as second-class citizens in countries that have denied them full freedom and control over their lives. Israel is treating the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories the same way. I fear what this experience is doing not only to the Palestinians, but also to Israelis who not only fear Arab violence, but hate Arabs. I believe it is not only for the sake of the Palestinians, but also for the sake of the Jewish psyche and soul, that the occupation must end and that Palestinians be allowed to become masters of their own fate.

I began by saying that I was going to be honest about my feelings about Israel. Now that I have shared with you my anguish about Palestinian refugees, Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, and the building of settlements, I am going to tell you why, that while I still oppose the building of the settlements, I do support the continued occupation of the West Bank.

This is the sad truth: Even if Israel uprooted every single settlement, moved back to the pre-67 borders, and even, God forbid, gave up Jerusalem, there would not be peace. In fact the opposite is true: Israel's survival would be threatened. The recent war in Gaza confirms this.

A few weeks ago I attended an AIPAC Rabbinic Seminar in Washington, D.C. One of the speakers was Mosab Hassan Yousef. Yousef is the son of one of the founders of Hamas. He turned against his father and Hamas' terrorist ideology. For ten years he was a spy for the Shin Bet, the Israel Security Agency. Yousef's information saved the lives of countless Israelis and Palestinians. He eventually converted to Christianity and now lives in the United States. In fact, he lived in San Diego for awhile. You can read about his life in his book, "Son of Hamas." I highly recommend it.

Yousef called Hamas a "ghost." What he meant was that while Hamas is the name of a group, it represents an ideology that goes by many other names: Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, ISIS, Khorasan, and similar radical Islamist organizations. They share one common goal: to conquer the world, to reinstitute the Caliphate, to execute non-believers, and to impose Sharia law on everyone. These groups believe in Jihad, Holy Islamic War, and that infidels deserve to die.

When Israel unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza Strip, the hope was that the residents of unoccupied Gaza would take control of their lives and improve their standard of living. Instead, Hamas destroyed the infrastructure that Israel had left behind, moved their armaments and fighters close to the border, and started firing missiles and mortars at Israeli cities, villages, and civilians.

Sympathizers complained that Israel, who controlled the border crossing into Gaza, would not let in certain goods, such as cement and other building materials. “How could the Gazans be expected to build infrastructure and prosper economically without them?” they cried

It turns out that Israel’s refusal to allow cement and other building materials into Gaza was well-founded. Building materials smuggled from Egypt were not used to build schools, parks, and hospitals, but to build tunnels to hide weapons for use against Israel. They also were built to allow terrorists to enter Israel proper and murder Israelis.

Hamas’ public stated goal is to destroy Israel. For those who criticize Israel for its blockade, what country in the world would provide help and support for an entity bent on its destruction? Yet despite the ongoing attacks against its civilian population, even in the heat of battle Israel continued to provide water, electricity, and humanitarian goods to the residents of Gaza.

If you look at the Hamas charter you will also see that Hamas is not only bent on the destruction of Israel, but world Jewry. The following is a direct quote from the Hamas charter:

“...Hamas has been looking forward to implement Allah’s promise whatever time it might take. The prophet, prayer and peace be upon him, said: The time will not come until Muslims will fight the Jews (and kill them); until the Jews hide behind rocks and trees, which will cry: O Muslim! there is a Jew hiding behind me, come on and kill him!”

Israel did not want this war. Israel did everything she could to avoid an armed response to the rockets and mortars. After the war began Israel agreed to numerous ceasefires which Hamas then broke.

There is no question in my mind that Israel not only must defend itself against Hamas, but refuse to negotiate with Hamas. Hamas' primary concern is not the wellbeing of the residents of Gaza, but the destruction of Israel. If Hamas cared about Palestinians, its fighters would not fire missiles from and hide their armaments in civilian areas. They do so because they want civilian casualties. They believe that massive civilian casualties will turn the world's attention from their murderous deeds to the condemnation of Israel. Using civilians as shields is a cynical and murderous way to engage an enemy.

Hamas is not some radical group that came out of nowhere. Hamas was elected and put into power by those they now govern, the residents of Gaza. As President Obama has said, "Elections have consequences." Hamas is whom the residents of Gaza wanted to govern them. The civilian casualties they suffered, while horrible, sad, and regrettable, were the consequences of that election and that choice.

Sadly, a recent poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research showed that Islamists clearly lead presidential and parliamentary polls. Why do Palestinians favor Hamas? According to the poll, 53% of Palestinians believe only an armed struggle will lead to a Palestinian State, while only 20% favor non-violent means.

While I believe Israel should withdraw, excluding Jerusalem, to the 1967 borders with some land exchanges for the major settlement blocks, I do not believe a negotiated peace is possible at the present time. The two sides are too far apart.

Nor do I believe that Israel should unilaterally withdraw. That would be insane. Unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon placed Hezbollah on Israel's northern border, and unilateral withdrawal from Gaza placed Hamas on its southern border. With the

continued threat from Iran and the new threat of ISIS in Syria, Israel is already surrounded by enemies bent on her destruction. Risking another terrorist threat from the West Bank would not only be intolerable, it would be suicidal.

While I believe Palestinians should have control of their own destiny, I draw a line when that destiny includes harming Israel or Israelis. I hate the separation fence that cuts Israel off from the West Bank. It is a stain on the land. But I support it because it keeps suicide bombers out and has saved countless Israeli lives. I don't like all of the checkpoints that Palestinians must suffer, but they keep the bad guys and their weapons and their suicide vests from harming Israelis. Until the Palestinians cease their campaign of denial, violence, and incitement against Israel, Israel must defend herself and her citizens.

Self-defense and self-preservation is one of the most basic of all human rights. I agree with my colleague, Rabbi Menachem Creditor, who wrote in the Huffington Post, "I'm done apologizing for Israel... We will do what we must to protect our people. We have that right. We are not less deserving of life and quiet than anyone else."

(Huffington Post, 7/21/2014)

At the AIPAC Rabbinic Conference I also heard a lecture from Einat Wilfe, an Israel politician and former member of Knesset. Wilfe defines herself as a "liberal." As an Israeli liberal this is what she had to say: "Any true peace arrangement demands deep recognition of the Jewish People's sovereignty in their land. They do not have an exclusive right, but they do have an equal right. Jewish people who come to the land of Israel have come home."

She also said that she does not believe that there will be a grand final peace agreement in the near future. Instead she sees the conclusion of smaller agreements that will slowly bring Israelis and Palestinians closer together, with the freedom and rights of both sides slowly being recognized by the other.

I sincerely hope that one day there will be peace between Israel and her neighbors, but until that day comes I stand firmly with Israel's right to protect and defend her citizens. I don't always agree with her policies, just as I don't agree with every decision that members of my family make. But my love for my family and my love for Israel will always supersede any disagreements I may have with them.

This is what I ask of you as well. Israel is the homeland of the Jewish People. Israel is the center and heart of our history and our faith. While there may be legitimate difference of opinions about Israeli governments and Israeli policies, I hope that these will never stop you from supporting Israel, defending Israel, standing up for Israel, visiting Israel, and loving Israel.

For the last several years I have attended the AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington, D.C. AIPAC's mission is to further the US-Israel relationship.

Despite public perception, it is not a monolithic organization that stifles honest discussion among those who support Israel. It does provide many forums for learning not only about Israel, but about the Middle East in general, and American foreign policy.

Last year a small delegation from Tifereth Israel attended. This year's Policy Conference will take place in Washington, D.C., from March 3 to March 5, 2015. I would

love for as many of you as possible to attend with me. Please speak with me or Bob and Karen Zeiger for additional information.