

American Jews and the Flotilla Incident
June 11, 2010
Rabbi Rick Kellner

If they were taking nominations for word of the year, flotilla would be at the top of the list. It would not be too much to imagine that none of us probably have used this word very much in the past. In these last two weeks, we have been challenged to our very core. Everything that is familiar to us about what it means to be Jewish, about what it means to be American, about what it means to be a human being has been shaken. I know that this has challenged me personally. More so than the military incursions that took place in Lebanon and Gaza in recent years. As we watched those events unfold there seemed to be a greater understanding from the world because of the fact that Israel was reacting in response to attacks on their soil. This entire Flotilla incident just seems to feel different, I believe that it is worth exploring the reasons for the differences and also unfolding the layers of the various responses that so many have had.

My initial response went something like this, “Oh no, what did Israel do now.” Almost immediately I said, “We are missing something here; we don’t have all of the facts.” Subsequently we watched events unfold day after day, with one country after another lining up to condemn Israel and her actions. When we look at these events combined with recent government responses to building permits in east Jerusalem and Israel being unwilling to sign the nuclear non-proliferation pact, we find a series of events that just give Israel bad press.

Much of the conversation we could have about this Flotilla incident and the ensuing crisis could focus on Israel and media coverage. Israel continues to lose the mainstream media war, but now with advent of Facebook and Twitter, Israel is losing the unconventional media battle as well. Everyone has a voice now, you can find a video on Youtube or a message on Facebook and everyone spends their time tweeting and blogging about what was said or recorded. Making our voices heard is critical here. We, as American Jews have such a powerful voice collectively. Even though we make up 1 percent of the nation’s population the world’s eye seems to focus on what Jews have to say, so we need to start talking and tweeting with more fervor than ever before.

Just last week I received a message saying there was a poll on CNN’s website asking whether or not Israel should face censure over the Flotilla incident. I decided that even

though the poll probably meant nothing, I needed to vote and make my voice heard. When I voted no, thankfully 51% of the people had agreed with me. I don't know what the final tally was but hopefully it remained the same. So if we're going to stand up and make our voices heard, we need the tools to know what to say.

When I heard Jacob Dayan speak last week at the Federation building I was moved by number of his comments but one stayed with me. First, with each and every condemnation that reaches the airwaves, we must realize that Israel is the only country in the world in which there are millions and millions of people who believe that it does not have the right to exist and that these actions are part of a larger campaign to delegitimize Israel. How would we feel if the United States was the target of the world's ire and that people challenged our very right to be a free people in our land? No one questions whether nations like North Korea, or China, or Iran or Yemen, have the right to exist. These countries take hostile actions more often than not, some harbor terrorists, yet only when Israeli commandos board a ship and their actions result in 9 deaths does the world cry out. Where was the world when suicide bombers would blow themselves up weekly during the second intifada? Where was Britain then, where was France then? Where was the world when North Korea sunk a South Korean ship in March? Where was the world when Russian soldiers invaded Chechnya? These actions do not get the same response.

In response to this very question, Rabbi Daniel Gordis wrote to a friend who challenged him about being faced with the challenge of defending Israel, "There's only one country anywhere on the planet about which there's a conversation about whether it has a right to exist. Do you ever think about why that is? What, the fate of the Palestinians is worse than that of aborigines in Australia? Or people in the Congo, or Rwanda? Why all the attention on Israel? Do you really not get it? You think that New Zealand just coincidentally decided this week to make kosher slaughtering illegal? You think it's really about humanitarian commitments?"¹

Could Israel have changed the nature of its response and apologized for the tragic loss of civilian deaths and excessive force? Absolutely. In last week's LA Times Yehzekal Dror, an Israeli academic responded to this question by saying, "But to understand the difficulty, look at the U.N. decisions and the automatic majority against Israel. Look at the decision after the recent conference to reduce nuclear proliferation. Israel is singled out and

¹ Danielgordis.org/2010/05/31/facebook-meets-the-flotilla/

not Iran. [It's part] of the long history of the Jewish people. This has a deep impact on the collective memory. It results in a defensive attitude and a feeling that others, not the U.S., but many others are against us.”²

Here is our first challenge, how do we enter into conversation about Israel when we don't necessarily agree with its actions but deep down we know that our love for Israel must continue to remain strong? It is the very notion that there are so many who call Israel's existence into question that should ignite a fire, forget a spark, the burning embers inside our hearts and our souls should flare up and call on us to say, we are Jews, and as Jews we have a collective responsibility to respond when our Jewish brothers and sisters around the world are threatened. When Jews in Ethiopia, Russia and South America were threatened, we responded in an effort with Israel to rescue them from their treacherous situations. Now, like before, it is Israel that is being threatened. As the largest Jewish community in the world, we American Jews have to unite in support of Israel. Whether that is through rallies, or letters or video messages, let it be heard that we love Israel, and that we will support its people.

But rabbi, how can I do that when I disagree with Israel's actions? The answer to this question is simple in words but not in thought or deed. We have to separate what the government does or the military does from our understanding of our homeland. It is the same for us. Think about our history in the United States. When we disagreed with the Vietnam War, millions of people stood in protest against the government, but not for one second did we falter in support of the United States of America. It is not about the leaders who lead or shape policy, it is about the symbol and the emotions we feel when we hear the words God Bless America or the Star Spangled Banner. Not for one second would our support for the United States of America waver, even if we whole heartedly disagreed with whatever actions might have been taken. Those same emotions are true of Hatikvah, or Yerushalayim Shel Zahav, or the prayer for the state of Israel that appears in our prayer book. The emotions inside our souls remind us why we have to act. Some people here on this Shabbat might remember what the world was like before Israel existed.

We may not agree on certain things when it comes to Israel, but every one of us can agree that Israel needs to exist, that this little country is so sacred and so special to our history as people, without it our identities would be lost. If that were to happen the words

² <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-israel-dror-qa-20100603,0,3075670.story>

of Psalm 137 would not be a memory they would be real. “By the rivers of Babylon, we sat, sat and wept as we thought of Zion. There on the poplars we hung up our lyres, for our captors asked us there for songs, our tormentors, for amusement: “Sing us one of the songs of Zion.” How can we sing a song of Adonai on alien soil? If I forget you, O Jerusalem let my right hand wither; let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour.” We cannot let these words come again. Israel is too precious, too holy, and too sacred for us to lose.

The question so many of us have asked is will we see peace in Israel in our lifetime? We have been hesitant to ask if Israel will cease to exist in our lifetime. This is a scary thought that is further emphasized by Helen Thomas’ atrocious remarks. It would be a tragedy beyond our wildest imagination to come to know a world with Israel as our homeland.

It makes us remember that there is a second issue at hand here; building a lasting peace that will enable Israel and her citizens to endure forever on a land that has sacred to our people’s history and identity for thousands of years. If there was ever a Prime Minister that could reach out to the rest of the world and build a respect for Israel it would be Netanyahu. His understanding of the West, his fluency with English and his family history of reaching out to those in need are part of the formula that could make Bibi the right person for this most challenging task. His ideology and his beliefs have built another formula that just may be doing the opposite. His defiance to take appropriate actions leaves us scratching our heads. We long for the days of yester year and of Israeli leaders of the past who had more wisdom and discernment to know right from wrong. What would Yitzhak Rabin say today if he could have a voice? Perhaps it is the words of Victor Friedman as quoted by New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman that can help be the voice of reason. Victor Friedman is an Education professor in Zikron Yaacov, he wrote the following last week, “It’s time we started using our wits. If we used even a tiny fraction of the brain-power and resources we put into ‘defense’ into finding a way forward in terms of living with the Palestinians, we would have solved the problem long ago. The strategic situation has never been more opportune — the Arabs are scared of the Iranians, the Saudi peace plan is

still on the table, and the Palestinians are beginning to act rationally. But we lack the leadership to help us make a real change.”³

Or perhaps it is the words of Rabbi Donniel Hartman that will resonate with us, “It is time for all those of decency to declare, “Enough.” It is time to begin a new conversation, one in which legitimate acts of self defense on Israel's part are no longer labeled automatically as acts of aggression and war crimes. Nor should attempts to better the plight of Palestinians, including those affiliated with Hamas, be labeled by definition as anti-Israeli and political. People of decency can disagree. Decent people can make mistakes. It is only, however, if we recognize that decency can be found on both sides that a different future will become possible.”⁴

What we need is a different future. What we need is a different path. What we must remember is that peace is possible, we can know peace. Peace is in everyone’s best interest. Israelis can come to live a life without fear; Palestinians can come to know a life without poverty and terror. Violence does not have to be the answer. Armageddon can be avoided and the world can come to truly know and understand that there is good on both sides.

The great Israeli writer Amos Oz understood this when he wrote recently of a different future, “Israel’s siege of the Gaza Strip and the violent interception of civilian vessels carrying humanitarian aid there are the rank products of this mantra that what can’t be done by force can be done with even greater force. This view originates in the mistaken assumption that Hamas’s control of Gaza can be ended by force of arms or, in more general terms, that the Palestinian problem can be crushed instead of solved. But Hamas is not just a terrorist organization. Hamas is an idea, a desperate and fanatical idea that grew out of the desolation and frustration of many Palestinians. No idea has ever been defeated by force...To defeat an idea, you have to offer a better idea, a more attractive and acceptable one.

“Thus, the only way for Israel to edge out Hamas would be to quickly reach an agreement with the Palestinians on the establishment of an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as defined by the 1967 borders, with its capital in East Jerusalem. Israel has to sign a peace agreement with President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah government in the West Bank — and by doing so, reduce the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to a conflict

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/02/opinion/02friedman.html>

⁴ http://www.hartman.org.il/Opinion_C_View_Eng.asp?Article_Id=497

between Israel and the Gaza Strip. That latter conflict, in turn, can be resolved only by negotiating with Hamas or, more reasonably, by the integration of Fatah with Hamas.”⁵

The issues surrounding the Flotilla and the organization that supported it are so complex and they stir us to our core, our emotions, our values and our ethics have been challenged. I pray that as a Jewish people we can unite with passion for our homeland whose existence is challenged every day. I pray that all the world’s leaders can have the wisdom to forge a new path to understanding. And each I day I pray that Israel will one day know peace with its neighbors. Kein y’hi ratzon.

⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/02/opinion/02oz.html?scp=2&sq=Amos%20Oz&st=cse>