

Zionism Outside of Israel  
*Shabbat Pinchas 5775*

July 10, 2015

Rabbi Barry Block

Moses was the ultimate Zionist. He loved the land and people of Israel so dearly that he devoted forty years -- body, mind, and spirit -- to uniting our people with that land. Still, as Nan read tonight, Moses would never personally reach the Promised Land. The greatest Jew who ever walked this Earth never set foot in the Land of Israel.

I don't recommend that, and neither did Moses. This summer, as we read from the Book of Numbers, we come across a couple of tribes that wished to settle on the east side of the Jordan River. Moses didn't like their plan one bit. Sure, they had found fertile pasture land and a good place to build homes for their families, but they hadn't been wandering forty years to achieve diaspora.

To the contrary, though, God tells Moses not to object. The tribes who wish to live outside the Land of Israel do have an obligation to those who plan to fulfill the promise. Before they may build their homes and plant their fields east of the Jordan, they must fight among the whole people of Israel to conquer the Land. Then, they may cross back to the other side of the river, dwelling as Israelites outside the Land.

Never, at any time in Jewish history, has the entire people of Israel lived in the Land of Israel. From ancient Babylon to medieval Spain to modern America, to name only the highest lights, Judaism and our people have thrived outside the land.

Never, at any time in Jewish history, has Israel been without Jews. Whether under the Persians, the Greeks or the Romans, Crusaders or Ottomans, Jews have always dwelt in the land.

Wherever we have lived, we have always called the Land of Israel holy.

Mordecai Kaplan taught that "the relationship of Diaspora Jewry to that of Israel is like the relationship of heat to the flame that produces it. Without the flame," he continued, "there could be no heat." Kaplan, who lived in New York, nevertheless argued that diaspora Jewry has an ongoing obligation to feed the flame that is the Jewish State.

For many Jews, the requirement is clear. Viewing Israel primarily as a necessary refuge --a haven for Jews, whenever and wherever anti-Semitism may rear its ugly head with violence, expulsion, and murder -- these Jews see our role as offering political and financial support. What could be more important than the United States' assuring Israel's continued military advantage in a hostile world?

When Israel absorbs immigrants from lands of oppression, such as the former Soviet Union, as it continues to do, we share the responsibility to shoulder the financial burden of resettlement and absorption.

We do have an obligation, as Rabbi Kaplan taught, to keep Israel alive.

Still, I wonder, if Kaplan were alive today, would he argue that political and financial support are all that American Jews have to offer Israel? Would he even use his flame and heat metaphor to describe the Israel-Diaspora relationship? Or would he, like the contemporary Canadian Reform Rabbi Larry Englander, suggest that "there are many flames of Jewish life throughout the world, each kindling and sustaining each other?"

Yes, Israel does continue to inspire global Jewish life.

When we take the Torah from the Ark, we proclaim, *ki mi-tzion teitzei Torah*, "Torah comes forth from Zion." And it does, literally. Jerusalem is the creative center of Jewish learning.

Perhaps more importantly, no moment in Jewish history did more to raise Jewish self-esteem than victory in the War of Independence and the Six Day War. No longer would the Jew be depicted as the weakling, as a sheep that could be led to slaughter.

Even with its difficulties in our own day, Israel often continues to inspire. Early Zionists drained swamps and made the desert bloom. "Start-Up Nation" is the source of 21st Century technologies that advance medicine and agriculture, information and communication, improving human life around the world.

Still, there is much we can do to light up the Jewish world -- and specifically, to brighten Israel -- from abroad.

Events of the last week have reminded us, as if we needed the reminder, of Israel's imperfections. David Azoulay, a member of Knesset from the ultra-Orthodox Shas party who sits in the Cabinet as Minister of Religious Affairs, proclaimed that Reform Jews aren't Jews at all. In the days that followed, clarification was required: You see, even for the most stringently Orthodox, the child of a Jewish mother is a Jew, no matter what synagogue that Jew attends, if any at all. Azoulay's explanation brought the coldest of comfort. Well of course, he said, even a Jew who sins is a Jew. He went on to hurl vile epithets, denigrating all Jews who don't practice ultra-Orthodox Judaism.

Azoulay's outburst came only days after a guard at Jerusalem's Western Wall, Judaism's holiest shrine, had expelled a woman for the crime of wearing a *kipah*. Ultra-Orthodox Jews ascribe a terrible sin to a woman wearing what they

regard as men's ritual garb. The ultra-Orthodox rabbi of the Western Wall actually apologized, acknowledging that the rules permit women to approach the Wall wearing a *kipah*. Still, this same rabbi is the one who has forbidden women access to any Torah scroll at Judaism's holiest site. He has his henchmen search women's bags for Torah scrolls, prayer shawls and *tefillin*, the boxes with biblical texts that traditional Jews "bind as a sign upon [their] hands and for frontlets between [their] eyes."

Zionists outside of Israel have called for the Religious Affairs Minister's dismissal. We have repeatedly demanded women's rights to worship and read from the Torah at the Western Wall.

Yes, many within Israel make the same arguments. In this case, though, the plea from abroad is stronger. We in North America can be a light to the nation of Israel, as we model cooperation and mutual respect among Jews of diverse religious observance. We in the United States can warm the hearts of Israelis by demonstrating that Judaism, indeed all of religious life, is strengthened to the greatest vibrancy when the government does not regulate religion, establishing none as official state religious practice.

Recent weeks have also reminded us, and should remind Israelis, that the loyalty of all Jews is critical to Israel's well-being. Israel today is threatened by a global drive to delegitimize the very idea of a Jewish State. A coordinated campaign of boycotts, divestment, and sanctions -- BDS, for short -- libelously suggests that Jews lack true historical rootedness in Israel, that Jesus was a Palestinian, and the like. Last year, the Presbyterian Church (USA) bought into the lie. Late this June, the United Church of Christ joined the cause. The next week, though, the Episcopal House of Bishops defeated a similar move, and the Mennonite Church tabled the matter.

Reform and Conservative Jews, who share so many values and who have a long history of common cause with these mainline Protestant churches, are the only Jews who can persuade this segment of the Christian community to continue its historic support for the Jewish State. We who have demonstrated that we share their concern for the well-being of the Palestinian people -- alongside our insistence on a strong, secure Israel -- are the only Jews who can combat the pernicious BDS movement in America.

In the political arena, polls increasingly show that Democrats -- the rank and file, I mean, not the office holders -- are significantly less likely than

Republicans to see themselves as pro-Israel. Once upon a time, way back in 2013, there was no partisan divide over Israel. We needn't wonder how so much has changed in such a short time. Democrats who have championed the two-state solution were understandably dismayed by an Israeli Prime Minister who baldly took sides in the American political divide, denigrated the voting rights of Israeli Arabs on Election Day, and temporarily if tellingly dismissed the idea of a Palestinian State during his campaign.

American Jews across the political divide are the only ones who can come together, forcefully speaking truth to Israeli power: American Jews, who are Republicans and Democrats, equally support a strong, secure Israel. Israel's leaders must not permit Israel to become a wedge issue in American politics. We, American Jews, who disagree mightily among ourselves in the U.S. political sphere, must bear the torch of bipartisan pro-Israel unity from 50 states to Washington to Jerusalem and back again.

After Moses died, the Children of Israel crossed the Jordan River under the leadership of Joshua -- all of them, together, to vouchsafe a secure future in the Land -- before two of their tribes crossed back to settle outside Israel's borders. As our ancestors were there for one another across the Jordan River, let Israelis

and American Jews care for one another today across the Atlantic Ocean. May we all be true Zionists, bringing light to Israel, together.

Amen.