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Oheb Shalom Congregation
June 5, 2010

I Stand With Israel

In the parasha from which we have just read, we encounter the story of the scouts who were sent by Moses to explore the Land of Israel in advance of the Israelites entering there. “Go up into the Negev and on the hills. See what kind of country it is. Are the people living there strong or weak, few or many? Is the country in which they live good or bad? Are the towns they live in like encampments or surrounded by walls? Is the land itself fertile or arid? Are there trees or not? And bring me back some fruit.”

The scouts came back with honest reports. They were impressed with the land, but terrified by the people who lived there. Only Joshua and Caleb presented a positive picture. The other ten refused to believe that the Israelites could conquer the land and they said so, loudly and publicly, terrifying the Israelites and making them long for Egypt.

The commentators ask, “How could 12 people visit the same place and come away with two opposite points of view? Didn’t they see the same thing?” And they answer, “They saw the same things. But the 10 scouts who gave a discouraging report could not bring themselves to believe that it was the destiny of the Jewish people to live in the land of Israel. The other two, Joshua and Caleb, believed in that destiny- they stood with Israel.”

To stand with Israel. Where does a person get that commitment to Israel? For some, it is transmitted from one generation to another, from parent to child. For others, it emanates out of

religious experience. Still others become Zionists after their first trip to Israel, whether as a child, teenager or adult. For some, Israel is at the very foundation of their Jewish identity.

I can't bottle up love for Israel and commitment to her safety and prosperity and administer it to people like an elixir. But I wish I could. Because right now, that's what Israel needs. It needs Diaspora Jews to stand with her, give her the benefit of the doubt, and offer encouragement as she steers her way through a very rough patch. We ought to stand with Israel as one stands with a family member who's going through a difficult time and shows love, empathy and loyalty. Our conversations and comments ought to reflect our love and solidarity with Israel, not an eagerness to point to her faults and stress her flaws. I read a lot of commentaries and analyses about the Gaza Flotilla this week, some of which presented information worth considering, but their bias against Israel and belligerent tone painfully overshadow any worthwhile perspective they may have offered.

That is not to say that we shouldn't be discussing or debating what's going on in Israel now or in the future. No doubt, that's exactly what's happening- and always happens- in Israel. Israeli society is quite diverse, and opinions about everything from relations with the Palestinians in the West Bank to the blockade of Gaza to the settlements to the separation barrier to the status of Israeli Arabs to religious pluralism- the list goes on- run a very wide spectrum. Ironically, there was an Israeli Arab Knesset member- Haneen Al-Zoubi, a Palestinian- who, precisely because she's an Israeli, had the freedom to choose to be onboard the Mavi Mamara, the lead ship in the flotilla that tried to run the blockade of Gaza, and then come to the rostrum of the Knesset the next day. Where else in the world could such a thing happen? I do wish that once in a while it could be pointed out in the media that public debate and criticism of the government are not only commonplace but one of the bedrock freedoms of Israeli society, an apparent rare luxury in the neighborhood in which the Israelis live.

We should discuss the decisions made by the Israeli government precisely because we care about Israel, and precisely because we ought to care that Palestinians are entitled to their own homeland. We should be informed and knowledgeable and conversant about the issues and dilemmas that Israel faces, for knowledge is the foundation of advocacy and genuine support.

As healthy and important as discussion and debate of Israel's policies may be, I am acutely aware that I don't live there- I've chosen to make my home in New Jersey. I don't live in Tel Aviv, which would be at the top of the list of targets of missiles from Iran or Syria or Hezbollah, a small army of terrorists living in Lebanon who have more missiles hidden under hospitals, schools and apartment buildings than most small countries. I don't live in Sderot, an Israeli town adjacent to Gaza, which almost daily is the target of rocket attacks by Hamas. My stake in the success of Israel's ability to deter those attacks is spiritual; Israelis who live there have a lot more at stake. So in all of our debating and discussing, let's be sure to temper our advice and counsel with a dose of reality about who's taking all the risks and who's 6,000 miles away from the places terrorists want to attack.

As we debate and discuss, let's also be aware of the painful double standard that is always in play when it comes to Israel. We can discuss whether or not the Gaza blockade is effective and whether or not it's causing the residents of Gaza suffering. Even if it is causing hardship, that hardship is far less than the impact on innocent Iranians that sanctions against Iran would no doubt cause, yet nobody sane is suggesting that we ought to forego pursuing those sanctions. We can discuss any of Israel's tactics or policies, but we ought to be troubled by the persistent double standard that seeks to punish and condemn Israel while overlooking the actions of other nations and governments. I am not taking the approach of "he did it, so it's okay." Rather, I'm asking that we recognize that international condemnation of Israel is almost never motivated by the pursuit of justice or fairness.

Finally, we need to be aware that Israel has very few friends in the world today. That's an incredible thing to consider, given the remarkable contributions that Israel has made toward advancing human civilization in so many areas. Yet, as the lead article in Thursday's edition of the Wall Street Journal showed, Israel is increasingly alienated from many nations. Scandinavian pension funds are divesting themselves from an Israeli defense company; "Israel Apartheid Week," normally backed by a few left-leaning Western groups, has now spread to 50 cities worldwide. And the Swedish Football Association has appealed to European soccer's governing body to cancel a match in Israel between the countries' under-21 squads. The so-called "BDS" movement- boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel- and a campaign to delegitimize Israel are gaining strategic significance and, by some warnings, could evolve into an existential threat to Israel.

Because I love Israel and want her to thrive, because Israel is my spiritual homeland and lies at the core of my Jewish identity, because Israel is going through a difficult time and is in need of support, I stand with Israel. I will discuss and question why the interception of the Gaza flotilla went so badly, as Israeli officials and citizens have already begun to do. But, like Joshua and Caleb from so many centuries ago, I will stand with Israel, and I hope you will too.