

Li'Fi Dati ("As I See It")

On Passover and the 65th Birthday of Israel

Dear Friends,

The journey celebrated and re-awakened by Passover observance is, in the language of the Haggadah, "from bondage to freedom, from anguish to joy, from darkness to great light, and from servitude to redemption." In our 3500 year history, few events have shown this transformation as powerfully as the rebirth of a sovereign Jewish commonwealth in Israel in 1948.

Shortly after Passover, on April 15 and 16, we will celebrate Yom Ha'atz'maut, the 65th anniversary of the founding of the modern state of Israel. In these short 65 years, the people of Israel with the help of G-d have accomplished miracles. Israel is a strong, self-reliant democracy. While way too many Israelis live in poverty, the general standard of living is on par with the world's developed countries. Israel has one of the five strongest armies on this planet and an innovative, world-leading hi-tech sector. Millions of persecuted and distraught Jews, from Europe after the Shoah, from Arab countries, and from the former Soviet Union, have led dignified and productive lives in Israel. In only one century, Hebrew has been revived as a rich, modern literary and popular language.

We still have many challenges to face, and one of the most difficult is the growing detachment of Diaspora Jews from Israel. Sociologists Steven Cohen and Ari Kelman, in a recent, now infamous survey of American Jews, found that over half of those age 35 and younger would not regard the loss of Israel as a Jewish state as a personal tragedy.

Jewish leaders offer various reasons for this growing distance: Jewish organizations mandated to cement Israel-Diaspora relations are inefficient; the media is biased against Israel: policies of the Israeli government, especially towards the Palestinians, are seen as immoral and alienating; Israel is regarded as a political problem, not a spiritual opportunity by young, searching American Jews; Zionist education in Synagogues and Jewish Schools is unimaginative, etc.

An explanation which I favor is the generational one: American Jews of the World War II and Baby Boomer generations understand Israel as a politically necessary and unambiguously moral response to the existential threat of Nazi, Arab, and Communist Soviet anti-Semitism. Jews in Israel had to develop effective armed forces and a strong civil society to meet threats, and Jews in the Diaspora had to provide emotional, financial and political support. Our mission was clear!

For Jews who are fifty and under (that is most Jews alive today!), the existence of Israel is much less critical and heroic. Robbie Gringras, a British-born Israeli educator and artist, has written that for these people, "Israel is as much a given as walking on the moon....Further than this, we are working with a generation of students whose gut connections with Israel are very different than our own. My generation grew up with still-fresh images of the Six Day War, with the moral clarity of the Yom Kippur War (only bad guys attack on a fast day), with the heroics of Entebbe, and the hope of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem. These were the unmediated 'myths' that I received growing up, but later generations have had to contend with the ambivalence of Sabra and Chatila, two Intifadas, two Iraq wars, the assassination of Rabin, suicide bombers and house demolitions. Their mythic connections to Israel are

ambivalent, non-existent, or negative." (from "Hugging and Wrestling: Alternative Paradigms for the Diaspora-Israel Relationship," Robbie Gringras, Makom: The Israel Engagement Network, page 2)

In the late 1960s, Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, Zichrono Livracha, of blessed memory, a brilliant Rabbi, historian, and Zionist leader, said prophetically (and ironically) that he had a nightmare: What if Russia let all the Jews go, Israel found oil off the coast of Ashkelon solving its financial needs, and every anti-Semite in the world dropped dead? What then, would all the Jews do?

This vision has not exactly materialized, but now, in fact, every sizable Jewish community in the world which had experienced violent anti-Semitism has gone to Israel or is free to do so; Israel's economy is ranked with those of first-world nations; and anti-Semitism, at least in the West, has greatly abated. As a result, then, our mythic assumptions (heroic, virtuous, vulnerable Israel as a haven for Jews from hateful societies), and our practical demands (developing powerful Jewish organizations for economic and political support) have diminished in importance.

The challenge today is to recreate myths and rebuild practical relationships which can join American and Israeli Jews in an inspired, collective mission. Toward these ends, in 2003, Alan Hoffman, now Director-General and CEO of the Jewish Agency and formerly head of its Education Department, convened a small group of Jewish thinkers to explore the place of Israel in contemporary American Jewish life. Participants agreed that American Jews, even in their leadership tier, had little connection with contemporary Israeli culture and ignorance and/or discomfort about Israeli politics. Further, apart from financial and political support, American Jews are unable to integrate Israel into their own personal sense of Jewishness. "In essence, American Jews today appear to be much more closely connected to the Israel of *myth* than the Israel of *reality*." ("The Philosophers' Retreat," by Jonathan Boyd and Esti Moskovitz-Kalman, Makom: The Israel Engagement Network, page 4)

Today we need a new understanding of Israel which is rooted in the realities of Jewish experience both in America and in Israel. It will not do for the minority who are actively involved to berate or lament the masses of indifferent American Jews for their "lack of commitment to Israel." We need a large-scale, well-organized project to re-acquaint and bring together the hearts and minds of Jews in America and in Israel. Together, we need to recommit ourselves to the mission of deepening and enriching Jewish civilization in today's global, hyper-connected world.

I am very proud of the work that our Kehilla, the Kane Street Synagogue, had done toward this new understanding. We are now in the tenth year of our Brooklyn Israel Film Festival, which brings us gems that, again to quote Robbie Gringras on Israel's film industry, "present Israel's complexities and problems as riches, rather than 'casualties.'" On the Shabbat before Yom Ha'atz'ma'ut, we invite an Israeli expert to speak about significant cultural trends affecting modern Israelis in their day-to-day existence. Rabbi Reuven Greenvald, a KSS member, Jewish Agency official, and cutting-edge Israel educator, will lead a four-part Beit Midrash class, Tuesday evenings, April 16 - May 7, on "The meaning of Israel in our Contemporary Jewish Lives."

This week is Passover. The Exodus and the desert experience which followed taught that sacred covenants are risky, creative enterprises which take generations to fashion. History has forced us to bid farewell to the mythic assumptions which governed the Diaspora understanding of Israel in the past century. We need now to join together all Jews-leftists and rightists, spiritual and cultural, traditional and secular, philosophical and practical-and create a new, engaging paradigm for this century. It will help us to remember that the

desert period of fear and uncertainty was also enlightening and creative, and set the moral stage for a free Jewish commonwealth in Israel. Thirty-two hundred years later, we are still one people with a collective mission.

The ideal Jewish commitments have always been defined in terms of love: Ahavat Hashem, the love of G-d, Ahavat Torah, the love of Torah and Ahavat Yisrael, the love of Israel. Let us together find a Makom, a place for Israel, not just on the shores of the Mediterranean but in the hearts and minds of Jews around the world.

Rabbi Weintraub

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