

Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel
Temple Micah
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ISRAEL AT SEVENTY

Dear Friends,

Sometime around the year 1900 or 1901 there was a group of Jews in Minsk or Pinsk—or perhaps it was Kiev or Odessa, or Krakow. I have forgotten where and it matters not. This particular group of Jews comprised the membership of a particular Zionist club. There were many such clubs scattered all across Europe in those days. This club, the one of which I speak, would meet every Saturday night after Shabbat ended. They would read the Bible—passages describing the land of Israel, they would read the Psalms—"If I forget thee o Jerusalem..", "Come let us ascend the mountain of God..", they would tell Zionist stories and sing Zionist songs—the songs that came back to Europe from the Yishuv – the name given to the new Zionist settlement. They would discuss the news that came to them ever so slowly over great distances about the fledgling Jewish communities being built in the land of Israel- Palestine, at what was still the dawn of the Zionist project. They would dream of how life would be when some day they too would leave Minsk or Pinsk or Krakow and join in the great adventure of return to the homeland. Occasionally, as these meetings went late into the night, a member of the group, the youngest member and newest would ask a simple question. If the land of Israel is the land of our dreams, if this is Jewish destiny—why do we stay here in Minsk? Why don't we leave and go join our brothers and sisters in the Yishuv?

This newest member would invariably be silenced by the group for in their hearts they all knew that it was easier to dream the dream and sing the songs than to go and do. The more you talk the talk can sometimes make it harder to walk the walk.

Now this group of which I speak was a somewhat unusual group. This group's members were all sons and daughters of what was once known as the Haskallah, the Jewish enlightenment. They had left the world of the intellectually self-contained Jewish ghetto behind and as such they had non-Jewish friends. On one

occasion, as their club met, they invited a particularly close non-Jewish friend to join them. This friend was there as they sang their songs, told their stories and dreamt of the land of Israel. As the night grew late and their club gathering drew to a close, a member of the group asked their non-Jewish friend what he thought.

The non-Jewish friend replied—oh your club is wonderful—you sing your songs of the land of Israel, you tell your stories. It was a very special evening.

Yes—not that—what do you think of us? What do you think of Jews?

Oh—I think you are wonderful, your sense of community—the way you care for each other and educate your children—almost everything about you is wonderful!

Now Jews can never fully accept a compliment—hearing a slight wavering note, the leader of the club asked--

Almost everything? Is there a problem?

Now with some hesitancy, the friend continued, Oh—I say almost everything because you Jews think you are better than the rest of us. You think you are special.

The leader responded—“You are correct—we do think we are better, we think we have a refined moral sensitivity. You see, we don’t use guns, we’re not hunters. Jews aren’t hunters.”

With that the non-Jew laughed. “Of course you’re not hunters -- none of you -- and there is a reason for that. Here in Czarist Russia, it is against the law for a Jew to own a gun. There is nothing special about you.”

There was an awkward silence for just a brief second and then--

The leader of the club turned to its members—especially the youngest and newest and said —“ All of you--Pack your bags—tomorrow we leave for the land of Israel—tomorrow—and there we will show that in a land and a country where we can own guns, we will never become hunters.”

This has always been my favorite Zionist story—always--forever—“in a land where we can own guns, we will not become hunters.”

For me, this story captures the Zionist dream in a nutshell because it not only conveys the ambitious Zionist project to establish a homeland, but it also captures the Zionist ideal of creating a place infused with what I will call the Jewish way of being in the world.

I told this story and spoke these words in 2014 when I titled my Rosh Hashannah remarks, *Israel: The Country I Love That does Not Love Me in Return*.

My love for Israel has not diminished one iota. My feeling is that neither has her love for me or what I represent increased.

My love remains un-reciprocated just as my letters to the prime minister remain unanswered.

I will therefore pause for a just moment to acknowledge that side of the cup which is half empty--(and I want you all to pause for a moment and consider that the very metaphor of cup is ours--biblical- was it not a psalmist of ancient Israel who wrote of a cup overflowing?)

By the half empty, I mean far more than rights for Reform Jews-or all non-Orthodox forms of Judaism and the struggles over the Western Wall.

I mean much, much more: The growth of the union between Orthodoxy and Nationalism.

The growth in a vehement ultra nationalism

The growth in an ultra-ultra –Orthodox brand of Judaism which is alien to the historical Jewish experience

The growth in certain forms of intolerance and prejudice

The growth in the boisterous ideology and violence of some of the settlers and what I will call the settler movement.

The growth in insensitivity toward minorities.

The efforts to control the Supreme Court.

The overly aggressive tactics in recent weeks on the Gaza border that have resulted in death.

Does this list feel familiar?

I say this evening--I love Israel even thru the pain of disappointment. I love Israel because of the heroes that are there very single day devoting their lives to a making Israel a better place.

We cannot walk away from Israel because victory in the struggle for the Israel we want feels remote or distant. As Jews, we cannot do that.

We are a people who measures time in the thousands of years. We are in year 5778 on our calendar. Israel is 70. We are a people who know better than anyone else in human history that the past is not the blue print for the future. If we walk away from Israel now, we abandon the field to those whose vision for Israel is a dark one. Zionism is not a fad--or a passing interest--or a trend. Zionism is the contemporary name for the project that God first uttered to Abraham-- go the land that I will show you. No matter how one might try it is impossible to wrench the soil of Israel out of the Jewish equation. The struggle for the soul of Israel is linked to the very DNA of our personal Judaism.

Yes, there are more challenges--because--it is those of us who choose to stand for a vital yet imperfect Zionism and who see in Israel a flawed democracy facing unprecedented security challenges, we have to recognize a growing drumbeat around us that sees only an "apartheid regime" founded upon "racism," "ethnic cleansing," and "colonialist imperialism." Zionism, anti-Israelists believe, can be neither defended nor corrected, both because the very idea of a Jewish state in that region depends on dispossession of others and because the concept of Jewish democracy is an offensive oxymoron. This voice casts Israel, and Zionism as altogether illegitimate. The problem isn't Israel's alleged "crimes," then, but its sinful *essence*. "A crime," wrote Hannah Arendt, "is met with punishment; a vice can only be exterminated.""

We must recognize and confront this threat as well.

Tonight however, I cannot not dwell on my disappointments, my frustration and what keeps me up at night.

The letters I write-- the letters I don't write.

My anger and disappointment at so many sides of the complicated story that is Israel.

But----

This evening we celebrate 70 --so this evening we look at the glass which is half full --and --to be sure--the positive side of the ledger is overflowing.

Just consider Israel to this point.

We could wax on and on about Start Up nation Israel, research Israel, high tech Israel, medical research Israel, science and technology Israel--all of this is there and spinning at an amazing rate.

The pioneers that made the deserts bloom have given way to generations of research scientists, engineers, computer magicians who have made Israel a Silicon Valley unto itself.

Modern Israel is more modern than you can really grasp.

But there is more--there is a Jewish story here as well--

I have said this so many times--The early Zionist visionary, Ahad Haam's dream of Israel as a cultural center of world Jewry has succeeded so far beyond any possible expectations. This so easily is overlooked by casual American visitors -- Just consider Israel's amazing contributions in this realm-- the Jewish museums in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, the manuscript collections in the National library, the place names of Israeli cities and towns--Beersheva--where Abraham settled, Jerusalem, the biblical city of David, Jaffa--the port city from which Jonah sought to escape God's call, Safed--the city of mystical renaissance in the middle ages-- But we can go on and on--Dan, Eilat, Shechem, Ein Gedi, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Beit Shearim--all great places of literally biblical connection--all places with thriving communities today and we are barely scratch the surface.

I love Israel for the street names--

Where else can you walk from RMBM Street to Hillel Street? Where else can you go from Menachem Mendel Seforim Street (where I like to stop to buy Walkers short bread cookies to the Carmel Market that has a great Humus Stand called Abulafia (the name of an early Jewish mystic).

There is more--just consider the national park system--those archaeology parks all over the country--consider anyone of them. Take my favorite-- go to Israel and go to Tzippori.

Chances are this is a place of which many of you have never heard. If you come with me on a Temple Micah trip to Israel, I will take you to Tzippori. Tzippori was

a major Jewish city under Roman rule in the period we call late antiquity. The archaeological excavations there go back as far as the Bronze Age and earlier. It was an established city by 1000 BCE and was a partially Jewish city under Hasmonean rule by the mid second century BCE. Two hundred years later it was a thriving center and after the defeat of the Bar Kochba revolt against Roman rule in 132 CE, Tziporri gained great prominence as a center for Jewish learning. The Sanhedrin convened in Tziporri, Rabbi Judah Ha Nasi lived in Tziporri and parts of the Mishnah were written there.

Go to Tziporri today and consider especially the mosaic floor of the ancient synagogue that archaeologists have excavated. The synagogue floor is filled with art scenes--biblical and other.

There is a scene showing the angels visiting Sarah. The next section shows the binding of Isaac. There is a large Zodiac with the names of the months written in Hebrew. What can only be considered a sun God sits in the middle, in his sun chariot. The last section shows two lions flanking a wreath, their paws resting on the head of an ox.

The mosaic floor also shows a temple, the bread, and the basket of first fruits from the Temple offering in Jerusalem. Also shown are a building facade, probably representing the Temple, incense shovels, shofars, and the seven-branched menorah from the Temple. Another section shows Aaron dressed in priestly robes preparing to offer sacrifices of oil, flour, a bull and a lamb.

In other words--there are human forms, scenes of a temple service in a post temple world and a sun God--doing exactly what?--a scene from Ezekiel--God in his chariot- an early scene from the Jewish mystical tradition?

What I am saying is--go to Israel today and the Jewish past is being unearthed revealing previously unbeknownst diversity and imagination.

When I bring Micah groups to Tziporri and we walk around the synagogue and look at the floor- I comment to them that here too prayed and gathered a community that was looking to preserve the past as it struggled to engage an ever changing present. Here too was a community that was seeking to creatively forge a new understanding of Judaism. Here was a community looking to bring its past story of the Torah and weave it with the cultural aesthetic of its surrounding environment. Here was a Judaism that defied the Ten Commandments by putting

human forms and other icons in the synagogue. In other words--when we go to Israel and encounter our dazzling Jewish past, we are seeing that the project of creating what we call a contemporary Jewish life has been an ongoing adventure for over 2000 years. In other words-- ancient Tziporri had its own Liz Lermans !!!!!

Israel is a source and an inspiration for unlocking our own creative Jewish energies. It unlocks questions as it links us to the wealth of our inherited past. We go to Israel and are emboldened to push our own limits--at least I am. I see in those ancient stones a kind of roadmap and license for our own imaginations.

Israel -- the writers and poets, artists and galleries, the numbers of books published and book stores, the musical ensembles and singing groups, the dance companies, the street artists and art fairs-- Modern Israel's glory is seen in the creative outpouring of the Jewish soul-- that has reinvigorated Jewish life everywhere. The films coming from Israel are dazzling--the art scene in Tel Aviv-- unsurpassed, modern dance, theater, sculpture gardens--in Israel the Jewish soul is on fire.

And I have said this so many times-- the word secular as we understand it--cannot be used in Israel.

Walk down a busy street in Tel Aviv on a Friday evening and there are lit Shabbat candles on the bars on Dizengoff.

And the spark from this fire ignites our own American Jewish passions. How could it not? They are our cousins--they are ourselves. There can be no question that whatever and however you evaluate the quality and offerings of American Jewish life and culture in all of its forms, the influence of modern Israel is unmistakable and ever present.

It will continue. It will grow and it will continue to spark our Jewish life here--just as our vibrant American Jewish life will influence Israel. We are blessed to live in a remarkable moment in Jewish history with two vital centers of Jewish life. We should revel in this.

Israel at 70--we know full well that our Zionist work--like God's world is unfinished. The project thrives--and the blooming reaches our shores.

There is, as you know, a discotheque in Israel called “The Dolphinarium,” where almost exactly seventeen years ago a homicidal suicide killer detonated a bomb that killed 21 teenagers and wounded 120 others. Israel is also a place of loss--on both sides--suffering on both sides-We cannot forget that.

Outside the disco-now abandoned remade into a memorial--, to this day there is a hand-written sign that reads: ***Lo nafsik lirkod. Lo nafsik lashir.***

“We won’t stop dancing. We won’t stop singing.”

We won’t stop dreaming. We won’t stop hoping. We won't stop working for the Israel of our dreams.

We capture the essence of this dream at every Jewish wedding when we sing the messianic vision of Jeremiah over the raised cup.

This is the cup for Israel at 70

“od yishama– barei Yehuda- uvechutzot Yerushalayim- kol sasson, v’chol simcha- ...”

“May there yet be heard in the cities of Judea and the streets of Jerusalem the sound of rejoicing and celebration–--the shouts of children at joyful play.

This Shabbat we celebrate that beautiful half full cup for Israel at 70 and we praye this evening for many more until the cup is overflowing-!

Shabbat Shalom