

Shana Tova. Boker tov.

During the summer, I studied at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Israel and I spend a significant amount of my free time advocating on behalf of the state of Israel, and I was recently invited onto AIPAC's National Council leadership team. So, this morning I am going to speak about the relationship between North American Jewry and the state of Israel.

Before I do, I want to share three personal statements with all of you.

#1 I am a proud Zionist and a former delegate of the World Zionist Congress, who is grateful that the state of Israel exists.

#2 While I do not live in Israel, I am a New York based Canadian rabbi who thinks about the state of Israel multiple times, every single day, and I see Israel in all of its complexities and flaws, both from afar and up close, as I have visited Israel nearly 20 times.

#3 I am someone, who in spite of those flaws and because of those flaws recommit myself in 5778 to #1, to being a proud Zionist.

Let me explain these three statements through the lens of three different 50 year time periods.

Two periods have passed and we are just entering the third.

The first period began on November 2nd, 1917 when the Balfour Declaration was drafted, which undeniably led to the establishment of the State of Israel. Lord Balfour included two key lines in his famous declaration.

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people

.....it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine

While aliyah from Europe had already begun in the late 1800s, this Declaration was what really cemented the reality of a national homeland for the Jewish People in British Mandated Palestine.

Like childhood, so much during this 50 year period was new for us, observing from afar as the state was being built.

1917 through 1967 was a fascinating and barely precedented time for the Jewish people. While we experienced the terror of the Shoah, less than 5 years later the state of Israel was born. People fought with their lives, their money and their savvy to create this

Jewish homeland. It became a place where Shabbat (and not Sunday) was the day of rest, a country of Hebrew speakers and a place for ultra Orthodox and happily secular people, and everyone in between to thrive and flourish, as Jews. And they did--in cities, towns, villages, moshavim, and of course kibbutzim. Everything was dusty--but new.

Everything was new and great for us who watched from afar.

Childhood typically leads to adolescence. What happens in adolescence? Tweens and teenagers do a lot of great things, but they also miss the mark a lot. Adolescents are often into cliques and small groups. Best friendships and romances begin and end. Hard questions are asked.

And in many regards, a lot of those things began to happen in the North American Jewish community after Israel captured East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza during the Six Day War. Our second period that began in 1967 and ends today, can be described as the North American Jewish community's adolescence vis a vis Israel.

For many, the victory and aftermath of the '67 war started a golden age of Zionism in the United States. It was as if Israel became the Honor Roll student. Some of you might still look at Israel in that lens. In many ways I do. But as a self-identified progressive, it can be difficult.

Over the last 50 years, North American Jewry offered strong political and philanthropic support for Israel. American Jews lobbied and helped ensure that Iron Dome and David's Sling were funded. Nearly 300 000 young Jewish Americans have been on birthright Israel, initially funded solely by philanthropists.

For many, the second period ushered in a reishit tzmichat geulateinu, the messianic era as we watched in awe as cities grew, exports skyrocketed and Israel became a start up nation.

At the same time there has been a pivot in a not so small segment of the North American Jewish community. There are Jews for whom their relationship with Israel over the last 50 years is very difficult, as if they are parents dealing with their own challenging teenager. I don't know the exact reason why, and I can't pinpoint when, but somehow, at some time during the last 50 years, Israel stopped being the little David to its surrounding Goliaths. And not just for the media, but for some in the American Jewish community too.

With my two and a half year old, when she does the wrong thing, I ask her to say sorry. Eventually she does, I kiss her all over and we move on.

It doesn't work that way as we get older.

During the last 50 years some of Israel's actions were not swept to the side followed by the words "I'm sorry."

Maybe it was because of the Lebanon War?

Maybe it was because American Jews began to assimilate more and simply stopped caring so much about their connection to Jews on the other side of the planet?

Maybe it was because Baruch Goldstein massacred 29 Palestinians in Hebron and left 125 injured.

Maybe the final straw was when Ariel Sharon went up to the Temple Mount in the year 2000.

Maybe some Jews turned their backs on Israel in the final year of this 50 year period when the IDF medic Elor Azaria was found guilty of manslaughter for killing an incapacitated Palestinian attacker in Hebron in March 2016.

It is hard for many American Jews to stay neutral and all loving toward Israel when these sorts of things happen. If you look for these sorts of things, then you can find them, all the time.

And so right now, at the dawn of our third 50 year period, the American Jewish community is stuck, somewhere between loyalty between our Jewish and Zionist values and our universal values. Many people brush this conflict and tension aside and ignore it. People say it is a generational thing. Or, they stick with their own opinion and know the other person is wrong. But if as North American Jews we look at Israel in the binary, it will diminish the complexity of where we are now. We will remain in an adolescent relationship with Israel and that is not healthy.

As we leave adolescence and enter adulthood, or, our next 50 year period, we have to figure out how to celebrate a growing Jewish democratic Israel while settlements grow, Occupation remains and the two state solution often seems like a pipe dream. These are all adult issues. These things can't be figured out in the playground or during study hall.

We know adult relationships are complicated. They take a lot of work.

One hundred years ago Lord Balfour wrote "...nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."

That is not the reality on the ground.

If you have been to Israel, you have seen checkpoints. You know about the disparity of resources which have led to horrid propaganda in the Palestinian press and educational systems. The security wall, which we point out when taking out communal trips is doing a really good job keeping the bad guys out, but at the same time it is harming the vitality of the good guys on the other side. And there **are** good people on the other side. And it is easy to understand why they are angry.

We have a history of caring about the children of Ishmael, especially this time of year as we read yesterday about his mother Hagar, and the ill treatment she experienced by Abraham.

Israel, a place I love with my entire being is not perfect. Not its citizens and not its government.

The place where she is most at fault is the military Occupation. This summer, while studying at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, Dr. Tal Becker reminded us that the word "occupation" is loaded with significance for the Jewish people, more than any other word in the contemporary Jewish conversation.

The very use of the word carries with it assumptions and connotations that differ depending on the person using it. We need to have adult conversations about this. We will only grow if we listen to people who think differently than we do.

Regardless of the position we may take on the question of "occupation", the presence of both Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank is a reality that does not appear to be changing any time soon, and to which morally serious people cannot be indifferent.

There is a need to create a new paradigm vis a vis Israel, as we enter our next 50 years together. We will only benefit, if we leave our adolescence behind. What we have now is toxic. For a great many Jews this new 50 year period that began in June has been a time of muted celebration with louder undercurrents of disquiet. For some there is a complete alienation from the state of Israel¹. That frightens me.

Today on Rosh Hashanah, let's pledge to enter a new 50 year period together as adults and do our best to minimize divisions with our neighbors, families, friends. We are in 5778, not high school.

We find ourselves with some who only see what Israel does wrong and those who only see the green Negev, the start up nation and the teams that were sent to Florida and Houston in the last month.

¹ Samuel G Freedman *Because He Can: Why Netanyahu Has Abandoned the American Jews*, Forward, Sept 2017

As adults, we need to see both and that takes works and commitment. Disengaging with someone because you disagree with them is childish. Walking away in a huff does not benefit anyone.

Allow yourself to dream with me for a few minutes as I offer a most adult concept to engage with Israel over the next fifty years. And that concept is love. Not hearts scribbled with crayons or puppy love, but adult love.

According to the scholar Dr Elana Stein Hain, the biblical understanding of Ahava is not love. It means appreciate or be loyal to.

If you have experienced a long term relationship, romantic or familial, you know that loyalty is part of love.

Following this logic, if we want there to be a future relationship between Israel and the Diaspora, we need to be in love with Israel and we need to love each other when we talk about Israel. One of the most famous biblical passages with the word Ahava is

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ

“Love your neighbor as yourself”(Leviticus 19.)

Going forward, standing idly by or talking slanderous about other Jews who feel differently about Israel than we do is not an option. We need to engage in real dialogue with each other.

Dialogue is often daunting. I know. A lot of Progressive groups I normally affiliate with are taking a stand against Israel. At times it is tough to reconcile. In spite of that, I remain an Ohevet Zion, a loyal Zionist who is grateful and in awe that the state of Israel has existed throughout my lifetime. And I can't wait to get back to Israel in April for her 70th birthday party, with some of you.

I think about Israel every single day and I see Israel in all of her layered complexities.

Today on Rosh Hashanah 5778, I recommit myself to the Zionist entity. I urge you all to commit as well.

Things are not good, but that does not mean we can leave the conversation.

So who are we: a divided American Jewish community.

How did we get here: the transition from adolescence to adulthood is not always pretty.

Where are we going: I am a rabbi not a prophet, but unless we keep talking to each other here and put pressure on Israel from abroad, I can't offer any guarantees.

We need engagement and when the moment calls for it, we need tochecha (rebuking)

But here is the thing.

As Israel reaches her adulthood, after all she is nearly 70 years old, a time of maturity is called for by **us**, the North American Jewish community as well.

Children look at the world in black and white. For them, all is either good or bad. Adolescents don't always catch nuance.

If we are going to have a healthy relationship with the state of Israel then it is time to recognize that Israel is not all good or all bad, but a complex mix of both.

For the few of us that will be around, we will be in a much better place in 2067 if we start now.

May it be a year of better health and healing.

Ken Yehi Ratzon.

Shana tova.