

Sermon For Yom Kippur Afternoon
October 9, 2008 – 10 Tishri, 5769
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

It was just thirty-five years ago. On the 10th day of Tishri, 5734 – October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria launched massive attacks simultaneously on Israel's northern and southern borders. The Israeli army, caught off guard and initially overwhelmed, took staggering losses as buses drove from synagogue to synagogue to mobilize Israel's army.

In the initial onslaught, it appeared as if Israel might not only lose its strategic advantage in the Golan Heights, but might lose the north of Israel itself. On the evening of October 8, Colonel Avigdor Janos, who commanded Israel's seventh armored brigade, realized that just six tanks stood between the enemy and northern Israel. On the southern front, it looked even worse – the full force of the 600,000 troops of the Egyptian army were let loose on newly minted soldiers and reservists, since many others had gone home for Yom Kippur.

As the war progressed, through the extraordinary valor and bravery of Israel's army, navy, and air force, the tide was repelled, and eventually, the Israel Defense Forces were just miles away from both Damascus and Cairo. The Syrians and the Egyptians were routed and defeated, and Israel again secure.

I've often tried to imagine what it must have been like to serve in that ferocious fight. I've tried to imagine the valor and courage of the men and women who led the counter attack that drove the Syrians and Egyptians, with their superior fire-power and technology, into a crushing defeat. It's hard. Like so much of Israel, its people and its history, it's hard for me to imagine myself as part of it.

In the intervening years, Israel has forged peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, absorbed the immigration of a million Soviet immigrants, rescued thousands of Ethiopian Jews and resettled them. Israel has transformed its economy from a socialist model based mainly on agriculture and tourism, to a capitalist model based mainly on high tech research and development.

The list of achievements for a developing country is staggering: Israel has the second highest number of new books of any country in the world per capita, Israeli scientists developed the first ingestible video camera, so small it fits inside a pill, used to view the small intestine from the inside to help in cancer and digestive diagnosis, Israel developed drip irrigation technology that allows plants to bloom in the desert, the cell phone was developed by Motorola in Israel, Intel developed its MMX Chip technology in Israel, Voice Mail technology was invented in Israel, and recently the Weizman institute developed technology to capture greenhouse emissions from coal-fired plants at a minimal decrease in efficiency, and is selling that technology to the Chinese.

How can you not get caught up in that dream? Well, pretty easily it seems.

Steven Cohen, a noted sociologist and researcher at the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, and Ari Kelman of the University of California, Davis, recently produced a study called BEYOND DISTANCING. Among Jews aged 65+, nearly 40 percent said they feel very emotionally attached to Israel, compared with less than 20 percent of those aged 35-49. Of those surveyed under age 35, only 60 percent said caring about Israel is an important part of being a Jew. When asked if they agree with the statement, "Israel's destruction would be a personal tragedy," not even fifty percent agreed.

For fifty percent of Jews under age 35, the destruction of Israel would not be a personal tragedy. How can that be?

It's become more challenging to build a relationship with Israel for younger Jews. For those born since that awful Yom Kippur day 35 years ago, the place of Israel in American Jewish consciousness has changed.

Israel's ongoing struggle with the Palestinians, in which Israel is too often grotesquely portrayed as the oppressor and aggressor, has caused some to question their affinity for Israel. Israel's insistence on marginalizing non-orthodox Jews and Judaism makes it feel, for Jews like us, that maybe we're not really welcome. Our growing sense that Judaism is more about our private spirituality than about our connection to the larger Jewish community makes it seem like Israel is a luxury – it's nice to have, but not a necessity.

The Jewish people need to overcome these alienating notions. I am proud that Temple Beth El was invited to participate in an extraordinary venture called Beit Knesset Yisrael. This initiative is led by a partnership between the Jewish Agency for Israel and ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America. We, along with four other synagogues around the country, are engaging in a two year program to study the role Israel plays in synagogue life, and how the synagogue can best be used as an agent for helping American Jews feel more connected to Israel.

You may remember last March when you were asked to complete an on-line survey about our congregation and the place of Israel in our community. We had responses from nearly 350 people, the highest of all the participating congregations. The good news is that by and large our congregation beats the averages that Dr. Cohen mentions. The bad news is that we have a long way to go. For example, more than forty percent of us believe Israel is a dangerous place to visit, despite the fact that the most dangerous part of a trip to Israel is the drive down I95 to the airport. While many of us feel there is a good chance that we will encounter Israel in a class, sermon, or synagogue program, most feel there is limited or no opportunity to actually debate and discuss.

This last summer, along with three other members of our team, I had the privilege of spending a week in Israel. Unlike most other trips, where I spend most of my time in Jerusalem, or touring the country, this time we spent most of our time in Haifa – a city in which most Jews are just like us. And what we discovered there was amazing.

Unlike in Jerusalem, loaded with history and religiosity, Haifa is regular Israel. And day after day, we met regular Israelis who, in the midst of leading regular lives, struggle with the same spiritual questions as do we.

I had the privilege of spending an evening with a young man named Yoni. Yoni is 25, maybe 26, and is just like any other young man. He worked as a security guard on a Federation mission last year, and Carlos Romero, who was on that trip and part of our leadership team, introduced us. We spent the evening having a beer with his friends, talking about his girlfriend for whom he was planning a romantic birthday dinner, thinking about how he could make money importing cars to Israel, wondering how someone like me could really be a rabbi. Sound familiar?

I had lunch with a man named Ophir, who runs a high-tech software company, who had never cared about religion before, but happened on a Reform congregation in Haifa when his son was becoming Bar Mitzvah and loved how he could finally be part of a place that synthesized the modern world in which he lived with the Jewish tradition that always fascinated him. Sound familiar?

I had dinner with a man named Yehuda, who owns a real-estate company, who had grown up orthodox, and had run away from that world, but never knew he could be Jewish any other way before a friend brought him to services in a Reform congregation one Friday night. Sound familiar?

What we learned is that for most Israelis, the struggles that consume our lives are the very same struggles that consume theirs. They worry about their kids' education, they wonder what they will be when they grow up, they feel blessed for the economic prosperity they feel surprised to enjoy, and wonder how to make it last and grow. They want their lives to have meaning and purpose, they want their homes to be safe and secure, they want their hearts to be filled with love and peace.

They are us. We are them. We may speak a different language day-to-day, but the language of our hearts is the same. We may live thousands of miles apart, but we are still one people.

Israel needs to be more than just our biblical Jewish playground. Israel needs to be more than just a living museum of ancient Jewish history. Israel needs to be more than just the country we need to save from catastrophe.

Israel needs to be like our cousins' house – a place we visit often, a place where the people, even if we might not choose all of them to be our friends, are family nonetheless. And like any family, we need to work at building our relationship. We need to build connections so that we are there for each other in difficult times, like we were for Israel 35 years ago, and in wonderful times, like this past year's celebration of Israel's 60th anniversary.

The best way to understand Israel and to build a relationship with Israel, is quite simply, go to Israel. I am so looking forward to our congregation's trip this coming June. Together we will have an extraordinary experience, connecting with Israel's ancient history and modern people, and future dreams.

We need to invest in Israel. We need to become members of ARZA, we need to contribute to the Federation and the UJA, we need to buy trees and help build reservoirs with JNF, and we need to buy Israel bonds. As our markets become shaky, and we wonder where to find a more secure investment, the State of Israel bonds remain a safe and productive way to help our portfolios and to invest in the future of the state of Israel. Please take out your bond cards that you were given when you came in this afternoon. Choose an invest that is right for you, and is right for the State of Israel. May this coming year be one in which our congregation builds stronger bonds to Israel, and may this Yom Kippur be one in which all our people, here, in Israel, and around the world, may celebrate the New Year in security and peace.