

This year, 5774, Plainview Jewish Center is going to Israel.

Let me repeat this very important message. This year, 5774, Plainview Jewish Center is going to Israel.

We have not gone to Israel as a congregation in a very long time—much too long. So we are pulling out all the stops. Cantor Wolk and I plan on leading the trip together next summer, supported by ITC tours and their team of professional guides who have put together a wonderful itinerary for our trip. We will spend ten days visiting some of Israel's most important historical sites and leading museums, sampling Israel's rich culture and arts, experiencing Israel's immense natural beauty, and celebrating Shabbat with Israel's Masorti (Conservative) Jews. We'll eat some great Israeli food and even get a little shopping in on the side. An optional four day extension will take us to the resort city of Eilat and to the ancient city of Petra, in neighboring Jordan. There will be activities specially designed for families with children; there will be parallel activities for adults without children. We want this to be an intergenerational trip that reflects the unique spirit of Plainview Jewish Center.

This trip will be an awesome experience; a once in a lifetime opportunity to visit Israel with our PJC religious leaders and friends. I hope many of you will join us.

Why are we doing an Israel trip this year? The simple answer is that we have not done a congregational Israel trip in a very long time. For a congregation like ours that has strong ties to Israel and a real commitment to supporting the Jewish State, we are long overdue for a visit.

The more complicated answer lies in the reality of our changing relationship to Israel. Last year, one of our most active congregants, someone I really like and respect, came up to me and asked in a rather agitated voice, “how come you never talk about Israel?” I answered that, in my experience, when most rabbis talk about Israel, they talk about Israeli politics. While I follow Israeli politics as closely as the next person, I don't have any special expertise or insight. There are dozens of sources of news and analysis more authoritative than me, readily available to anyone with an internet connection. What I know is Torah, and hopefully, how to make the teachings of our tradition relevant to our lives today. Besides, even if I presented the most astute and insightful thoughts on Israeli affairs, what impact would these thoughts have? None of us live in Israel or vote there. Talking Israeli politics from the bimah is like the tree falling in the forest. The proper setting for these discussions is

the kiddush table.

By and large, I still stand by my answer. I won't talk about Israel affairs from the bimah unless I think there is something we here in America can do to make a difference. But answering the original question made me think: "If we are not talking much about Israel from the bimah, and not raising funds for Israel as a congregation, what are we doing to keep Israel close to our hearts? What are we doing to show Israelis our solidarity and support?" I wasn't yet sure how to answer these questions, but I knew that they could not be ignored.

Over the last year and a half, I tried to address this question by bringing Israelis to our congregation to speak about what it means to live in Israel, apart from the politics. We hosted a delegation from Faces of Israel last year. This year we hosted an Israeli Masorti rabbi. I wrote and spoke more about issues that directly affect us in Israel, especially the battle over religious pluralism. From these experiences of a more direct and personal connection to Israel, of watching us interact with Israelis and become passionate about making a place for our kind of Judaism in Israel, I came to an important conclusion. There are many things we can do for Israel. But in the world we live in today; a world in which Israel is far different from the Israel we grew up with, the single most important thing we can do for Israel is to actually go and visit Israel. Again, the single most important thing we can do for Israel is to visit Israel.

Now let me tell you why.

I am old enough to remember the day, nearly forty years ago, when the very existence of Israel was in doubt. It was Yom Kippur 1973. Arab armies from Syria and Egypt launched a surprise attack. There was an air of palpable anxiety in our synagogue as we confronted the very real possibility that Israel would be destroyed. In the days that followed, the American Jewish community mounted a massive lobbying effort, which resulted in President Nixon committing to fully re-supply Israel's military. Once again, the American Jewish Community's forceful advocacy had played a key role in helping to ensure Israel's survival, just as they had in 1967 and in 1948.

The Yom Kippur War reinforced the sense that we American Jews had a vital role to play as advocates for Israel. We had to make sure that the United States stood by Israel no matter what. American support, American weaponry, American strategic cooperation was going to be crucial to Israel's ability to meet the threat posed by the hostile nations surrounding it. The key became an

intense and unrelenting campaign to lobby the President and our congressional representatives to support and defend not just Israel, but also the policies of the current Israeli government. AIPAC soon morphed into one of the most powerful lobbies in Washington. An entire generation came to see Israel advocacy as synonymous with Jewish identity.

About twenty years ago, things began to change, especially among younger Jews. For one thing, Israel no longer seemed so threatened. Israel had signed peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and a disengagement agreement with Syria. The framework for a peace agreement with the Palestinians had been created. Saddam Hussein and his SCUD missiles had been silenced by the United States. Israel was clearly the preeminent military power in the region. For some Jews, the need for strident advocacy had passed. Our role as protectors and sustainers of Israel was no longer so important. Israel's bond with the United States was secure. And Israel was much better able to take care of itself.

In addition, for many young Jews, the Israeli government's turn to the right made it harder for them to advocate for Israel—especially if advocacy meant defending policy decisions they did not agree with. While there are still many people who are passionate about Israel advocacy, most American Jews under 40 want nothing to do with it. Stripped of its urgency and increasingly politicized, advocacy has become a poor foundation for building a personal relationship with Israel, much less an entire Jewish identity.

To be sure, there are still areas where advocacy matters. We, the American Jewish community, have played an important role in highlighting the dangers of a nuclear Iran. This is one area where we will have to remain extremely vigilant, even in the wake of Iran's new moderation. We also need to keep a close eye on what is happening on college campuses and in the BDS movement. Anti-Israel activists in these settings often engage in rhetoric that is not just critical of Israel, but also questions the very legitimacy of the Jewish state—and sometimes verges on outright anti-Semitism. We need to take a new approach to educate college students and young adults about Israel. Supporting Israel does not mean agreeing with every policy of the Israeli government. It's okay to be critical of Israel. Israelis themselves engage in passionate debates about politics all the time. But whether we love the government in power or hate it, we need to support the right of Israel to exist, to be a Jewish homeland and refuge for persecuted and oppressed Jews from around the world.

Just as there was once a time when Israel needed us to be strong advocates to ensure its survival, so too there was a time when Israel really needed our financial support. I remember as a Hebrew School student being escorted into the main sanctuary of our small synagogue to watch films about Israel. These films, in black and white, portrayed hardy groups of pioneers wearing tembel hats working together to make the deserts bloom. The message we took from these films was clear: Israel is a poor struggling country. We need to support Israel's hard working pioneers by bringing in our quarters every week for tzedaka. Israel needed our financial support to grow and thrive.

In those days of course, Israel needed more than just our quarters. Israel needed big contributions from American Jews. Fueled by annual UJA and Federation campaigns, American Jews supplied as much as 25% of Israel's annual budget. Giving to Israel became another key way to express our Jewish identity. In fact, for some Jews, it was the only way.

But then, Israel's economy began to take off. When I first studied Israel in 1980, my fellow American students would wait eagerly for care packages from home containing cans of tuna fish, rolls of soft toilet paper and bottles of antiperspirant. When I last visited in 2005, I found a modern country with first world amenities and even a few conveniences we did not yet enjoy. In spite of the wars of attrition and constant threat of terror, Israel had become a first world economy, a high tech, start-up nation.

These days, less than 1% of Israel's budget comes from our contributions. There are many reasons to direct our charitable contributions to Israel these days; many important causes and projects we can support. But Israel doesn't need us to make sure it stays afloat anymore. Israelis have proven more than capable of taking care of themselves.

There was a time when Israel's security depended on our effective lobbying in Washington. There was a time when Israel's survival depended on our financial support. But times have changed. Yes, Israel still needs our advocacy sometimes. And Israel still benefits from our contributions. But what Israel needs most from us these days is our direct engagement; a personal relationship built not on lobbying or writing a check, but on shared experience. Israel doesn't need our voices or our wallets nearly as much as it needs our hearts and souls. And that's what we too need most of all; a connection to Israel that reaches down into our hearts and souls.

There is a yearning to return to Israel deep inside the heart of every Jew. I remember the

morning when I first arrived in Israel, on an El Al flight with several hundred other American students bound for a year of study at Hebrew University. We had spent the night doing what college students do on a long airplane flight, socializing, getting a little rowdy, and eventually dropping off to sleep. But when the airplane hit the runway, everyone sat up. The song Israeli pop song Halleluya, which had recently won the Eurovision prize, began playing on the loudspeaker. And amidst a round of applause from the passengers, hundreds of college students spontaneously broke into tears. We were not all ardent Zionists or campus activists. Few of us were planning on making aliyah. Plenty of us were not sure why we were even spending the year in Israel; other than for a chance to get far away from our parents and have an adventure. But just about everyone on that plane had a wellspring of love for Israel that was opened up wide when our plane touched the ground.

I am reminded of that amazing moment every year on Rosh HaShanah. During the Musaf service, we read ten biblical verses relating to *shofrot*, the shofar. There are three sets of verses, one from the Torah, one from the Writings and one from the prophets. The Torah verses remind us that God spoke to Israel at Mt. Sinai with the sound of the shofar. The verses from the Writings evoke the sounding of the shofar in the Temple in Jerusalem. But the verses from the prophets describe how the sound of the shofar will one day call all of us back to the land of Israel from wherever we are. We won't need to hear any words spoken or get any written instructions. The shofar will speak directly to our hearts and stir up the yearning for Israel that is deep inside every one of us.

There is something special about spending time in Israel; a feeling we can never imagine until we visit. As one of the members of Israel Trip Committee put it, "I've traveled to lots of different countries in my life. But Israel is the only place that I didn't feel like a foreigner. In Israel, I felt right at home." Even for us, Jews who live in a community where we make up the largest religious and ethnic group, being in Israel feels different. Israel is ours, even more than Plainview is ours. Israel runs on Jewish time, and on the Jewish calendar. Everywhere you go on Friday afternoon, people wish you a Shabbat Shalom. Our history in Plainview goes back a couple of generations. Our history in Israel stretches back for millennia—and we come across it everywhere we go. It's not just the walls of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. It's the synagogues built by the mystics in Tzefat, the last refuge of the Zealots on top of Matzada, the port Jonah sailed from in Yafo, and the city of Beer Sheva where we walk in the footsteps of Abraham and Sarah. Spending even ten days traveling around Israel connects

us to our history in a way that eight years of Hebrew school, or even thirteen years of day school, never could.

Not only does visiting Israel help strengthen our connection to the land and to our history; visiting Israel helps strengthen our connection to the people of Israel as well. The amazing thing about Israel is not just that almost everyone is Jews, but that Jews come in so many varieties. Here in Plainview, most of us come from Eastern Europe. Our families came to this country between 1880 and 1950. We know a little Yiddish, and we're particular about our gefilte fish. In Israel though, we meet Jews who come from all over the world; from Persia and Morocco, India and Ethiopia, Yemen and Azarbajan. And even when they push us in the line for the bus, or make us bargain to get a fair price on a souvenir, we feel a strong sense of connection. These are our people, our brothers and sisters. They share our history, they share our core beliefs; their destinies are bound up with ours. And often enough, if we scratch a little beneath the surface, we find Israelis who are warm and generous, who welcome us with enthusiasm and want to us to love Israel as much as they do. It's a rare Jewish visitor to Israel who does not come away feeling a stronger and deeper sense of connection to the people of Israel.

Visiting Israel is so important because it helps us forge a personal connection with Israel. Israel becomes more than just a cause we support or a charity to which we contribute. Israel becomes a part of us. And we become passionate about Israel. Passion, our own personal passion for Israel, is what Israel needs most from us. If we feel connected to Israel, if we care about Israel, we will find our own ways to keep the relationship vital. We will find our own ways to participate in the life of our homeland; our own ways to make a difference. And any way we choose will be good for us and good for Israel.

There is a reason why the American Jewish community has sunk so many millions of dollars into the Birthright program. We have taken thousands of young Jewish adults to Israel so that they could forge a personal connection; so that on some level, they would come to care for Israel. So far, the Birthright program has been amazing effective. Nearly half the participants describe their trip to Israel as a "life changing experience." Five to eight years later, participants are far more likely than their peers to say they feel very much connected to Israel and much better able to speak intelligently about the situation in Israel. Birthright has helped create an entirely new model for American Jews, a

model that values relationship and connection above all else.

We have designed our Plainview Jewish Center trip to Israel with this model in mind; as an opportunity for as many of us as possible to share the experience of visiting Israel together, as a community and a congregation. For those who will be visiting Israel for the first time, I promise you it will be a life changing experience. For those who have already visited, I promise that our trip will refuel and deepen your passion for Israel. After all, relationships work best when we spend time together.

As we move through the rest of our Rosh HaShanah service, we will once again be sounding the shofar I hope that this year, we will hear many voices in that shofar call: the voice of jubilation in being given the blessing of another new year, the voice of alarm warning us that the time to repent is at hand, the voice of generations of Jews, who, like Isaac, were willing to give their lives for the sake of God, Torah and Israel. But most of all, I hope that you will hear the voice that calls to all of us to return to the land of Israel, a voice that touches the deepest yearnings of our hearts.

May the New Year be a year of blessing for all of us—a year of happiness, health and peace. And may this New Year also be one in which many of us will be privileged to share together the unique blessing of visiting Israel.