

## The Four Panels of the Pro-Israel Tent

Rosh Hashana 5772/2011

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It was daybreak in the Promised Land. At first light we rolled out of bed and stumbled towards the kibbutz dining hall.

Mid March is the most breathtaking time of year in the Galilee. The air was crisp. The sun peered over the heights. All around was intoxication. You could get drunk on the perfume of springtime in Israel.

The virgin light exposed the gold of the land. Lilies of the valley carpeted the earth. The mountains dripped wine and the hills waved with grain. All around was luscious green. The trees of the forest sang “hallelujah.”

What a garden of delight, generous with its bounty of milk and honey. Beds of spice yielded fragrance. The almond flowers were in bloom. Above us eagles soared; and below us, fountains sprung from the earth.

The air is different here. Heaven and earth kiss in this corner of the world.

The seventy-six of us were on a mission. Five of our SWFS students were becoming *bnai mitzvah* that morning. Our destination was *Bar'am* – three miles from Lebanon. On the way we drove right along the border fence. We saw Hezbollah encampments so close that it seemed they could practically reach out and...shoot someone.

*Bar'am* was first settled by Jews two thousand five hundred years ago. Five hundred years before Christianity and a full millennium before Islam this northern Jewish community was already thriving. Scholars believe that Jews lived in *Bar'am* until, perhaps, as late as the 13<sup>th</sup> century; some two thousand years of uninterrupted Jewish presence.

About two centuries after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the people of *Bar'am* built a synagogue. That was our destination.

When we arrived we saw a sight we will never forget. It took our breath away; my knees buckled.

The synagogue walls were still standing. The ornately-decorated façade hints at the magnificence of what must have been. We even know who funded the synagogue. Below the eastern portal can still be read the inscription:

*Banahu Elazar bar Yodan*

*Elazar*, the son of *Yodan*, built this – referring either to the entire synagogue, or to the portal that bears his name.

We set up seventy-six chairs in the interior open space of the ancient sanctuary. Our five students chanted Torah at the precise spot where *Bar'am* villagers chanted Torah. If, for one miraculous moment, *Elazar bar Yodan* would have been resurrected and brought to his synagogue on that morning of our visit, he would have been able to join us in the service.

Our students chanted the same Torah portion of that week from the Book of Leviticus that he must have heard dozens of times. Our students chanted in Hebrew, the very language of our ancestors and our sacred texts. Some of the prayers we recited were identical.

*Elazar bar Yodan* would have certainly joined in the recitation of the *Shema*. He would have stood with us for the *Barechu* and faced south, as we did, towards Jerusalem.

I am for co-existence. I am for peace. To be a Jew is to believe in, and work for, peace. I am a progressive, so I believe that we can change and so can our enemies.

I am aware that others claimed this land. There is a Maronite church on the site of the *Bar'am* synagogue and there is a mosque nearby. I am aware that many have fought over this land, and that in the course of these struggles, wrongs have been committed by everyone, including us.

I am for compromise. I believe that a peaceful, de-militarized Palestinian state is in Israel's interest. We are not doing them a favor; we are saving ourselves.

I am for sharing the land, now settled by two distinct nations that do not wish to live together. They want a divorce – and, for the sake of the children - I am in favor of splitting the assets as amicably as possible.

Just don't tell me that we were never there. Last week at the United Nations president Abbas spoke of the Holy Land as the land of Palestine, the land of the ascension of the Prophet Muhammad and the birthplace of Jesus. He never mentioned, not even once, a thousand years of Jewish national existence. It was this Jewish presence that gave rise to Christianity and Islam in the first place!

We were there before history conceived you or even conceived of you. Don't tell me that we are usurpers. Our claims to this land are deeper than yours. Palestinians are only the newest of the newcomers who claimed this land. Don't tell me that Zionism is some post-colonial movement that stole the land from others.

Don't tell me that we are too sensitive about security. The only reason that all seventy-six of us were not slaughtered that day was because of the flower of our youth who guard the borders and patrol the skies.

We saw them. In the middle of the service, a jeep-full of soldiers, in full battle regalia, machine guns and combat helmets at the ready, drove up the hill and observed what we were doing.

I think they were there not only to ensure security; they were also curious about who were these foreigners praying at the *Bar'am* synagogue? When I told them, despite never having seen a Reform service, they drank up everything I described. We were kin, and these teenagers felt it deeply, powerfully and emotionally.

There is unlikely to be peace between Israel and the Palestinians or Israel and her enemies, this year, next year, or even the next decade. The struggle has been raging for 130 years. If it was easy to solve, it would have been solved long ago.

Since it has not been solved for 130 years, it is not likely to be solved in the 140<sup>th</sup> year. The revolutions sweeping the Arab world have made it even harder – at least in the short run.

We must insist that political leaders continue to try, and if they are successful we will support any reasonable compromise. But the prospects of near-term success are nearly zero.

And thus, the real question in the upcoming decade is not whether we can reach peace between Israelis and Palestinians. The real question is whether we can reach peace with ourselves. Will Israel increasingly become a source of contention, bitterness and alienation within the American Jewish community, or can we unite around basic principles and parameters?

I believe in a big pro-Israel tent. I am not eager to cast out of our tent swaths of the Jewish community; we are small enough as it is. Israel's predicament is precarious enough as it is. Our objective should be to have as many Jews as possible inside the pro-Israel tent, speaking out, rather than outside the tent, shouting in.

I, personally, am a Zionist. Rabbi Stephen Wise, who founded this congregation, was a Zionist: in fact, he was the leader of American Zionism during the years leading up to the creation of Israel. One of the principal reasons that the Free Synagogue was established by Stephen Wise in the first place was to promote Zionism in a Reform movement that was extreme in its anti-Zionist orthodoxies.

But I am not eager to quarrel with fellow Jews about definitions. If the word "Zion," is too much for some, a word used over 150 times in the Bible to describe the connection between the Jews and the Land of Israel - and they describe themselves as pro-"Israel," – a word used over 2,500 times in the Bible - that's good enough for me.

What are the principles that should unite us in the biggest pro-Israel tent possible? I suggest that we build a four-panel tent. Those tents are the sturdiest. Each panel represents a central principle of pro-Israel unity.

So come, build this tent with me.

First:

The first principle of the big pro-Israel tent, the first panel, is the basic recognition that Israel is important to us; that, as Jews, the Jewish state fills our thoughts and moves our emotions; that we

have a sense of obligation towards Israel; that we feel her pains, rejoice in her triumphs and mobilize for her protection.

There is growing alienation from Israel in the Jewish community. We see it especially in those who inhabit our world: liberals, progressives, Reform; academics, intellectuals, human rights advocates.

There is growing alienation from Israel among the Jewish youth. And we see it, especially, in our youth: educated, liberals, progressives, Reform.

It is not primarily because of this or that policy of the Israeli government. That might explain some alienation of some activists – but only at the margins. There are numerous studies that establish this.

Nor is it primarily because of this or that policy of American Jewish organizations – what some call the Jewish Establishment. That might explain some distancing on the part of some activists – but only at the margins. How many American Jews can even name a national Jewish leader from among the hundreds of Jewish organizations that exist in this country?

Anyone who has spent any time with liberal and progressive Jews – as I have – knows -without need to consult studies that establish this truth anyway - that identification with Israel tends to be in direct proportion to identification with Judaism. Identification with Israel is the consequence of Jewish identity, not its cause – especially for younger Jews.

American Jews identify with Israel if they identify with Judaism. If they do not feel strongly about Judaism, they tend not to have strong feelings about Israel.

What did we think? That year after year and decade after decade of assimilation would not eventually take its toll also on the state of the relationship between American Jews and Israel? That everything else about Jewish identity weakens and atrophies, but somehow, only the relationship with Israel stays strong?

What we are experiencing here at SWFS is occurring throughout the country: a fight to keep Jews affiliated, and a shift in the attachment of those who are affiliated from the communal arena to the personal sphere – a form of religious identity that is the norm in Christian America – where religion is considered primarily a personal affair between me and my Maker, and not a communal affair between me and my people.

We already went through a troubling phase in the Reform movement, during Rabbi Wise's time - when Reform and progressive Jews preferred the intellectual purity of political powerlessness to the messy reality of political power. We preferred the lofty universalism of enlightened philosophers to the earthy particularism of Zionist pioneers.

Immanuel Kant was the new prophet. Pure reason was the new god. America was the new Zion. Charleston was the new Jerusalem.

And it drove Rabbi Wise to distraction, and led him to create a new Reform seminary next door – at what is now the York Prep School. That is why our buildings look so similar. They were intended to be one vast pro-Israel tent, with our synagogue in the lead.

We should want to restore that vision, by the way.

Second:

The second principle that should unite us in the big pro-Israel tent – the second panel - is the principle that our commitment to Israel, while not uncritical, is unconditional: that we will remain attached to Israel and committed to her well being even if our political views are not embraced as official Israeli policy.

All of us who have cared about anything have found ourselves from time to time in the minority; whether it is about policies in this country, policies in Israel – or even synagogue policies. Being in the minority can never so disillusion us as to weaken the ties that bind.

To the contrary, it should encourage us to redouble our efforts; to get more involved, not less. If we oppose the policies of an elected American government, the proper course is not to move to Canada, but to join others who agree with us to promote change.

To those of you who find yourselves disagreeing with the current Israeli government on any specific policy issue, don't just take pot-shots at what some call the American Jewish Establishment. Argue and win your case; persuade people. Join those who agree with you and support organizations that reflect your views.

I would only caution that you should not expect dramatic results; the struggle has been raging for over a century. We are in it for the long term. And hence we cannot condition our support of Israel on whether our approach to peace-making becomes Israeli policy. Fight the good fight but stay in the tent.

And maintain a sense of reality. First, remember that you are in America and that, inevitably, you have less influence on Israeli policy than Israeli voters. That is the way it should be. Israeli voters have less influence on American policy than we do.

And second: Don't assume that you have all the answers that Israelis are too blind to see. Avoid the haughtiness of some in our community who are convinced that they have discovered the solution that Israelis are simply too thick or morally obtuse to perceive; that Israelis just don't see what you see: as if Israeli parents enjoy terrorists attacking school buses.

And I would remind you: Both progressive and conservative approaches have been tried in the past twenty years and they have both failed. On three different occasions since the year 2000, liberal Israeli prime ministers offered the Palestinians what have been called the Clinton Parameters and three times the Palestinians rejected them.

The latest rejection to Prime Minister Olmert's proposals came only three years ago – by the same cast of characters that are leading the Palestinians today. It should prompt observers to ask: "Do

the Palestinians, themselves, actually want a state; at least a state within the parameters of the possible, or are they only interested in political theatre at the United Nations?”

If there is to be peace, it cannot come through unilateral declarations. The parties, themselves, must agree. Peace cannot be imposed from the outside – not because it is not morally right – but because it will not work. Such an arrangement will collapse and lead to enormous bloodshed. The declaration of statehood at the UN will end up doing more harm than good.

There are reasons why the Palestinians have never – not once – accepted a two state offer – even by the most liberal Israeli governments: A Palestinian state will mean that they will end up – not with the 1947 borders – that they could have had if they had accepted the 1947 UN resolution - and they will not even end up with the 1967 borders – that they could have had if they accepted Israeli peace-making gestures after the Six Day War, a war of aggression launched by three Arabs armies to annihilate the Jewish state.

That’s how Israel ended up with the territories in the first place. The Arabs launched a war and lost. As legendary Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban once said: it was the first war in history where the victors sued for peace and the vanquished called for unconditional surrender.

To finalize an agreement the Palestinians will need to tell their people the truth that they have never told them: history does not stand still.

To finalize an agreement the Palestinians will need to tell their people the truth that they have never told them: they will not settle in Israel. The refugees and the descendants of the refugees will be settled only in the Palestinian state.

To finalize an agreement the Palestinians will need to tell their people the truth that they have never told them: a permanent agreement will resolve all claims against the State of Israel. At the moment of putting pen to paper, the war ends for all time.

These are the reasons that the Palestinians reject one accommodating Israeli government after another. It is not a few apartment complexes in East Jerusalem that will remain in Israel anyway if there ever is a peace agreement. Rather, the Palestinians do not wish to end the conflict – at least not at the terms available now.

I am not suggesting that Israel has been perfect: far from it. Israelis have also missed many opportunities. Furthermore, some of the settlements, purposely established in the midst of Palestinian villages, are arrogant, offensive and provocative; and some of the settlers are violent, intolerant and extreme.

We have, in the past, and will continue, in the future, to criticize them and hold them accountable. They do not speak for us. They represent an extreme form of Jewish religious nationalism that is utterly unacceptable to us. We abhor the vandalism of mosques and the intimidation of villagers.

But even if you think that Israel could have done more – it is a bit much to insist that the ongoing struggle is all Israel’s fault. “If only Israel would do more; give more, compromise more,

relinquish more.” Isn’t it also the case that we should look to the Palestinians and point out their intransigence? Isn’t that also our role as American Jews? If not us, then who?

Third:

The third principle that should unite us in the big pro-Israel tent – the third panel - is that we will never lend our hand to weakening Israel. We will never join Israel’s foes. We will never give them aid and comfort.

I believe in pluralism. I believe in healthy debate. I believe that the Jewish community is better served when it has the broadest possible representation. And even if I didn’t believe this: so what? Can anyone prevent Jews from talking and organizing?

But I have red lines. Not everything is acceptable to me. If Jews, in the name of Judaism, Jewish values and the Jewish community, advocate boycotting Israel; if they lobby for UN and international sanctions against Israel; if they propose divestments; if they pressure Congress to reduce foreign aid;

Then they are outside the pro-Israel tent and we must oppose them, irrespective of our political differences. First: because these views are marginal in the Jewish community. Second: because these views threaten the very existence of Israel. I draw the line at restricting Israel’s right or capacity to defend itself.

And third: these views are morally outrageous, especially if you express them in the name of the Jewish people. Not in my name.

Anti-democratic regimes are boycotted not democracies. Syria should be sanctioned, not Israel. Myanmar should be boycotted, not Israel. Divest from China if you care about human rights, not Israel.

Turkey has killed thousands of Kurds in the past five years and still occupies a third of Cyprus. Where are the flotillas anchoring in Ankara; where are the resolutions in the Security Council? Where is even a tenth of the outrage that is poured on Israel?

The idea of an international order might be good in theory. In practice, when it comes to Israel and the Middle East, the UN often resembles a den of iniquities producing a din of inequities.

What are they doing on their flotillas of futility? What is Alice Walker doing on a boat destined for Gaza? The Pulitzer-prize winning author of the Color Purple who grew up under Jim Crow has no qualms bestowing her moral standing on the anti-Semitic, anti-democratic, fundamentalist, terrorist, missile-lobbying, murderous, civil-rights hating, gay rights hating, women’s rights hating, minority rights hating Hamas regime: in the name of humanitarianism!

She wrote that she participated in the flotilla because of the children of Gaza. (Guardian, June 25, 2011)

I, too, care about the children of Gaza. They are hostage to an awful political culture and extreme religious fervor. If you care about the children of Gaza your primary address is Hamas. Did any of the faux fighters of the flotilla think of getting off the boat and marching in protest in front of Hamas government offices – to benefit the children of Gaza? And what of the children of Israel: are they less important to you?

They pose as heroes; they want us to think that they are courageous. They are cowards. They know that Israeli soldiers will not harm them on the open seas. At most they will get a menacing looking photo op.

Don't give us this faux courage. Show us real courage and protest the real culprit. And then you, who call yourselves human rights advocates, will earn our grudging respect – even if we disagree with you about your politics.

Alice Walker noted the killing of Schwerner and Goodman during the civil rights struggle as part of her motivation. She said that her participation in the flotilla helps pay off the debt owed to Jewish civil rights activists. .

Have they no shame? To suggest some kind of moral equivalence between the freedom riders of Mississippi and the freedom-haters of Gaza; that those who fire missiles at school buses are like those who rode peace buses and believed in non-violence?

And this is how you discharge your debt to the Jewish people! Thanks, but no thanks. I can think of many other ways for you to discharge your debt to our people.

Actually, you owe us nothing. We joined the civil rights struggle because we had no alternative: it was the right thing to do. Since the days of Moses we have always supported the legions of liberty and have always joined freedom's fight.

Have we progressives become so utterly confused that we can no longer distinguish between a democracy – even if you are critical of its flaws - and a fundamentalist Iranian-supported terrorist entity? How the mighty have fallen.

It is reflective of the mass confusion of our era when we allow a small democracy fighting for its life in the world's worst neighborhood to be savaged as if it were an anti-democratic dictatorship; savaged by forces that are themselves anti-democratic and who perversely appropriate the very language of human rights that we progressives developed over centuries of hard struggle.

I want us to be a fighting pro-Israel congregation. I want us to take the fight out of the pro-Israel tent and onto the streets and into the halls of power. Our Israel committee has already begun this work. During the summer they reached out to and lobbied numerous foreign consulates. I want us to lobby everyone and anyone who can help free Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier held illegally and brutally in a Hamas dungeon in Gaza now for five years.

Join us. Let us create an army of pro-Israel advocates who fight back. And let us fight back on the moral plane. This is our vocation. This is what we stand for: we are a synagogue and we stand for justice – including – but not limited to – justice for Jews.

Fourth:

And finally: The fourth principle of the big pro-Israel tent - the fourth panel - is the one that contains the door. The door is always open to those who are not in the tent. If you want, come in; it is unlocked. And even if you are unwilling to enter the pro-Israel tent, you are still part of our Jewish tent, and we will never leave you out in the cold.

Our synagogue is a tent of meeting for all Jews. You can agree with me, disagree with me, sort of agree with me; you can agree with our policies, disagree with our policies, or sort of agree with our policies. Whatever position you hold, chances are that there are many others here who agree with you.

We will never turn away Jews who seek to be part of this community. No synagogue should turn anyone away if they seek to be part of the Jewish people, no matter what they believe about Israel.

There were actually two synagogues built in *Bar'am*. That's how you know they were authentic Jews. You can't have only one synagogue in a Jewish community, no matter how small. Even the solitary Jew on a deserted island built two synagogues – the one he used and the one he never stepped foot in.

The second *Bar'am* synagogue was smaller than the main one. It did not survive the ravages of time. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century we didn't even know about it; it had been buried under layers of history.

In 1861 explorers stumbled upon a mound in *Bar'am*. They started digging. A French scholar named Earnest Renan, found, buried in the ground, the stone remains of a doorpost. It was from the entrance to a synagogue. When Renan examined the doorpost he saw Hebrew characters inscribed on the stone.

It was in Mishnaic Hebrew. This is what it said:

*[Yehi] shalom bamakom hazeh u'vechol mekomot Yisrael; Yosse Halevi ben Levi osseh hamashkof hazeh tavo beracha be'maasav shalom.*

“May there be peace in this place and in all places where Jews reside. Joseph the Levite, the son of Levi built this doorpost; may all his deeds be blessed. Shalom.”

Did Joseph the Levite, the son of Levi know *Elazar* the son of *Yodan*? They certainly knew each other if they lived at the same time.

And even if they did not live in the same era, they knew each other in the same sense: that despite any rivalry; despite the dynamics that led to the establishment of the second synagogue – they were united in their quest for Jewish meaning and their devotion to Jewish survival.

This is our test as well. Despite our disagreements are we united in our quest for Jewish meaning and in our devotion to Jewish survival?

*Elazar bar Yodan* and *Yosse Halevi ben Levi* – you have not been forgotten and your dedication has not been in vain. We have returned. We are having *bnai mitzvahs* in your synagogues. We are chanting Torah in the sanctuaries, just what you intended.

Our prayer is the same as that carved on the small synagogue some two thousand years ago: May all our deeds be blessed. May there be peace in the Promised Land and in all places where our people reside.

Shalom: Greetings to you from the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Shalom: The eternal dream: Peace.