

Yom Kippur Morning
September 30, 2017 – 10 Tishre 5778

This coming year, we will be celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel. Our Shabbaton programs will reflect various aspects of Israel's culture and history. Our Lifetime Learning Adult Education programming will feature guest speakers representing different perspectives of the political challenges Israel faces. We will offer a monthly film series beginning in November, highlighting Israeli films – past and present. We will bring in Israeli music and arts specialists. And in April, we will celebrate Israel at 70 together as a congregation as we contemplate what it means “*L’Hiyot Am Chofshi B’Artzeinu* -- to be a free people in our own land” – with learning, music, dance, and of course – food.

This morning it is my intention to speak to you about the blessings and challenges of Israel. I came across a new book recently by Bernard-Henri Levy entitled The Genius of Judaism, translated from the French by Stephen B. Kennedy. Levy is a philosopher, journalist, activist, and filmmaker. He is the cofounder of the antiracist group SOS Racisme, and has served on diplomatic missions for the French government... His book is described by Haim Korsia, the Chief Rabbi of France, as “important because it gives us the hope of continuing a struggle that many would have abandoned.” It is precisely in his Jewishness that Lévy locates the inspiration for his progressive politics. The genius of Judaism... is for Lévy “a certain idea of man and God, of history and power,” which inspires his thinking and his actions.

As I read his book, I was struck by many things, and taken by his reflections on the State of Israel, his reasons for defending it, and why it is a litmus test for Jews and non-Jews alike. And so, let us explore Israel's blessings and her challenges through the eyes (and the pen... or laptop) of Bernard-Henry Levy.

These days it seems like at every turn we are called upon to defend Israel. The BDS movement (calling for boycotting Israel, divesting from its businesses, and imposing sanctions) rears its head on college campuses and in church denominations. Levy writes that "It is so tiresome to have to defend Israel. [It is] so distressing to have to present the same evidence over and over." However, we cannot say that Israel is irreproachable... We cannot stand idly by without expressing criticism.

Levy asserts that Israel stands "in the face of a systematic campaign of delegitimization that has no parallel on the world political scene." How can one not respond by proclaiming her virtues? Levy offers three examples.

His first... and I quote:

"It is well known among political scholars that a democracy is not built in a day but rather is reached at the end of a long road and after severe labor pains. Hesitations, reversals, and convulsions are, alas, more frequent than progress, as evidenced by Iraq, Libya, and Hungary – still struggling toward complete democracy.

And yet there is an exception... Consider the Jews from Libya, from Iraq, from the Soviet Union. And before them... the Holocaust survivors who disembarked at Jaffa, Haifa, or Tel Aviv. Many – as deprived, impoverished, and humiliated as one can imagine – arriving after a crossing on ships of fortune not very different from those that land on the Greek island of Kos or on Italy’s Lampedusa today. Half dead from hunger and thirst, their ships boarded and inspected while at sea, threatened with shelling, sometimes sent as far back as Germany, parked in floating jails or in holding facilities in Cyprus monitored not by Nazis, but by British airmen... They somehow summon the energy to make a social contract! And a society emerges... [the State of Israel] – a democracy is created... A republic is born overnight.” Levy’s sense of timing just might be a tad overexaggerated; but when you take a step back and consider just how quickly the State of Israel came into place, with its democratic presence in the midst of its non-democratic neighbors, it can indeed seem like it happened overnight.

A second example.

Democracies can face the problem of the mix of people from which they are made. Here in America, we were founded under *E pluribus unum* – Out of the many – one... Yet. How many obstacles have been met along the way? Levy cites our history with civil rights. A civil war to dismantle the institution of slavery, with over 600,000 casualties. Urban riots. Ku Klux Klan. Black Power. Attica Prison riots. Civil Rights Amendment. Race riots in Ferguson and Baltimore. Immigration reform. Lack of immigration reform. The wound continues to remain open and victory elusive.

Israel is no different in its struggle with multiethnicity, and yet, Levy exclaims, Israel has worked hard to find a solution to the problem – not perfect, but better than some others. He writes:

“I know a society composed of Americans and Europeans, Russians and Ethiopians, Jewish and Muslim Arabs, and among the latter – the Muslim Arabs – citizens who embrace the great national story, as well as citizens who contest it. I know a society – Israel, again – where citizens of Arab origin may openly advocate the disappearance of the state that guarantees them a life that three-quarters of them (according to polls) would not trade at any price for life in a neighboring Arab country.

And, Levy continues, I know that this same society is structured in such a way that the members of the minority in question enjoy (with the exception of obligatory military service) all of the civil rights accorded to every other Israeli citizen; that they are represented in the Knesset in proportions unheard of in any Western democracy... [Incidentally, there have been Israeli Arab members of the Knesset ever since the first Knesset elections in 1949. Currently there are seventeen Israeli Arabs who are members of the 120-member Knesset.] Arabic is [an] official second language of the country. And... Israeli Arabs produced one of the five justices on Israel’s Supreme Court – Justice Salim Joubran.” [By way of introduction: Justice Joubran was born in 1947 and completed law studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1968. Admitted to the Israel Bar in 1970, he worked in private legal practice until being appointed Judge of the Haifa

Magistrates Court in 1982. In 1993, he was appointed Judge of the Haifa District Court and, in 2004, he was appointed a permanent Justice of the Supreme Court of Israel. Chairperson of the Central Elections Committee to the 20th Knesset, Justice Joubran is also a founding member of "Beit Kedem"- the Jewish-Arab Centre in Akko, he was a Board Member of the Jewish-Arab Centre "Beit Hagefen" in Haifa, and is a Member of the Board of Trustees at the University of Haifa.]

And Levy's third example.

"In all the world's democracies, war brings to the fore a state of emergency or the suspension of rules and rights...

Israel, despite a lifetime spent under a state of siege, has somehow managed to remain faithful to its founding democratic principles...

There is not a newspaper in the world that treats the government more harshly than do the newspapers of Tel Aviv...

There is not a hospital or a university in Israel that, in the darkest hours of the two intifadas or during the wars in Lebanon or Gaza, yielded to the apartheid temptation and ceased treating Jewish and non-Jewish Israelis equally...

Hospitals today, in the Golan Heights and elsewhere, are treating and saving the lives of hundreds of Syrian refugees in flight from the ravages of their country.

Israel's army, not without its rogue soldiers, strives to remain faithful to its military ethic of protecting its own soldiers while also minimizing the number of civilian casualties on the enemy side...

Debates on this subject rage in the Israeli press. The lapses, when they are known, are always investigated by the military police and, when borne out, are met with serious consequences..."

None of this exonerates Israel for violations of the rules that it has set for itself. The violations, Israelis have indeed acknowledged, are way too many.

I think that Levy would agree with Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman when he recently wrote: "Hillel taught us, 'What is hateful to you, do not do unto others; that is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary.'" A Jewish home does not attempt to garner political favor through populist aggression against the other. It does not view xenophobia as a strength but as a sign of weakness. It does not build its collective identity on fear and victimhood, but rather on values and principles. It does not look at the moral failures of other leaders as either a paradigm for emulation or permission to do the same. A Jewish home is committed to living up to our responsibility to build within our home a space worthy of our Covenant with God."

A republic seemingly born overnight, soon to be seventy years old, continues to monitor itself in maintaining civil rights for all its citizens, and to

maintain its democratic principles. Is it a perfect system? No, not by any means. But the underpinnings of social justice are there to inform the system. It can seem – and is – an overwhelming task, but there are those who continue to strive day after day to speak up for and work to support the civil rights of all Israel's citizens.

Levy asks, rhetorically, “Where does the Jewish state, dreamed by Theodore Herzl and realized by David Ben-Gurion, stand today?” And he answers:

“This state was born from the love of an obscure [newspaper reporter] for a suffering people of which he knew little. [Herzl's perseverance was based on his strong feeling that *“Im tirtzu, ayn lo Aggadah – If you will it, it is no dream.”*] It was [named] with the name given to that people by poets and psalmists... It was built by those who, while they were reinventing Hebrew, gave themselves Hebrew names inspired by splendid figures from the Bible... and brought to this arid country the power of their lyricism, their knowledge, their spiritual and bookish competence... These [men and women did not give up, but persevered and] gave birth to an unprecedented phenomenon – that of a revived land, a blooming dessert, a miracle of rationality and hope under the stars... This state has not reneged on its contract and has not, despite its flaws and errors, lost all the inspiration of its pioneers.

In a world so profoundly disenchanted, the Israelis have managed to survive. They have had and continue to have a vitality and passion both practical

and fanciful – achievements that give Israel a dimension that escapes many contemporaries...”

Just as failure had not been an option in 1948, it is not an option now. Israel continues to be the embodiment of a rich conversation, still unfolding. It was a grand idea that has become a reality; a reality filled with blessings... and not without its challenges.

On this Yom Kippur day, we offer our prayer for the State of Israel:

Avinu, Avinu Sheh-ba'shamayim, Tzur mishelo v'go'alo - Rock and champion of Israel, please bless the state of Israel, first fruit of the flourishing of the fruit of our redemption. Guard it in the abundance of Your love. Spread over it the shelter of Your peace. Send forth your light and truth to those who lead and judge it, and to those who hold elective office. Establish in them, through Your presence, wise counsel, that they might walk in the way of justice, freedom and integrity. Strengthen the hands of those who guard our holy land. Let them inherit salvation and life.

And give peace to the land, and perpetual joy to its inhabitants. Appoint for a blessing all our kindred of the house of Israel in all the lands of their dispersion. Plant in their hearts a love of Zion. And for all our people everywhere, may God be with them, and may they have the opportunity to go up to the land.

O God, cause Your spirit's influence to emanate upon all dwellers of our holy land. Remove from their midst hatred and enmity, jealousy and wickedness. Plant in their hearts love and kinship, peace and friendship. And soon fulfill the vision of your prophet: "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Let them no longer learn ways of war."

And let us say: Amen.