

**ROSH HASHANAH I**  
**5775**

This plastic paperweight was given to me in May, 1961 to commemorate Israel's bar mitzvah year of independence. The Jewish Federation organized a program at the JCC on Summit Road and invited all the Jewish kids who were born in 1948 to participate. I have kept it on my dresser all these years wherever I have lived. Its material value is not very much but its intrinsic value is priceless.

I have never breathed a breath or lived a moment without there being the State of Israel. My Jewish name is Yitzchak Menachem: Yitzchak for my maternal grandfather who came from Russia and Menachem meaning comfort because I was the first grandchild born after the establishment of Israel a few months before. My parents and grandparents saw Israel's establishment as a great source of comfort for the Jewish people after the Holocaust.

Once when traveling on I-70, we stopped for gas and behind the counter where we paid were a number of signs on the wall. One read: "Dirty dishes are a blessing." Indeed, they are. Dirty dishes mean we had food to eat. All of our concerns, worries and fears for Israel only exist because we have the State of Israel. If, G-d forbid, there was no Israel, we would not have to worry about Gaza, Hamas and the BDS movement.

Every Jew must have a personal relationship with Israel. Not every Jew agrees with this and not every Jew in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when modern Zionism began would have agreed. Our relationship to Israel is directly related to our Jewish identity. Recently, Prime Minister Netanyahu emphasized that Israel belongs not only to Israelis but to all the Jews in the world. For a Jew, Israel should not be somewhere you go once and check it off your list as you may do with Australia or Hawaii. I remember sitting around the kitchen table listening to the radio with my parents and grandparents during the 1956 Suez War—this was before wars were on television. I can still feel the concern and worry. Also, I can still feel the connectedness this childhood experience gave me. Whether Israel has personal meaning for a Jew or not is the same as whether a Jew chooses to allow Rosh HaShanah or Pesach seder have personal meaning or not.

It is our relationship to Israel, our unequivocal commitment to Israel's right to exist and our love for Israel that gives us as American Jews the right to defend Israel and constructively criticize Israel. I have said many times before, disagreeing and debating is not the problem. The problem is when we do so disrespectfully and self-righteously accusing, attacking and demeaning others.

Psalm 27 which we recite twice every day at this season concludes by telling us to be strong and courageous and have hope. Rabbi Naomi Levy teaches that it is hard to trust and have hope when we have been hurt, when we have known tragedy and pain. How much hurt, tragedy and pain have the Jewish people experienced? Yet, we pray that we will be strong enough to hope, be open and honest and courageous enough not to be cynical and not to hate.

Rabbi Elliott Dorf recently commented that “the world we live in can be a scary place and that these times in particular are most sobering.” Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin tells her child: “I am so glad that I was able to bring you into the world. Despite all the ugliness we know the world possesses, despite war and hatred, greed and poverty that spoil the planet and erode the spirit. Having hope and faith is what lets us say, ‘Dear child, it is still good.’” It is this value and perspective that has sustained us all of these centuries and characterizes the collective spirit of Israelis today. Hope must guide us now as we look toward the future.

Rabbi David Hartman taught that Israel is the Jewish people’s opportunity and obligation to take Jewish values and make them real. When we visited *Bina* in Tel Aviv in May, the Center for Jewish Identity, Hebrew Culture and Religious Pluralism, we were told that the question the staff asks everyday at *Bina* is “what kind of Jewish country do we want to be?” At *Yemin Orde* we were told that the core value at this extraordinary youth village is to teach every child that everything we do and say is important and that every human being has value. The children are taught to respect all people, be sensitive to other people’s feelings and to appreciate the pain of others.

At the *Yad b’Yad* school in Jerusalem we witnessed Israeli Jewish and Israeli Palestinian children growing up together where they learn each other’s language, learn about each other’s culture and religion and most of all learn about each other’s humanity. Their parents and families do the same. These are just three examples of hundreds of organizations and thousands of Israelis who have the strength and the courage to be hopeful and who are committed to creating a society built on Jewish values of thousands of years.

Leonard Fein, the founder of *Moment* magazine, who just recently passed away, wrote: “The heart of the matter is utterly straightforward; Jews have no more urgent interest than the energetic pursuit of their values. We can and should get together for holidays, prayer and simchas. But in the end, we have to stand for something. And Jews stand for a world repaired, a world healed and made whole.” Fein also wrote that there are two kinds of Jews. “There is the Jew who detests violence and believes that fighting is not the Jewish way. And there is the Jew who thinks we have been passive too long and victims for too long; we must be tuff and strong. And the trouble is most of us are both kinds of Jews.” He wrote this in 1982 after the first Lebanon war. There is yet a third kind of Jew: the Jew who is only one of these two Jews which is problematic as well.

In a recent conference call with over 200 Conservative rabbis, our own Rabbi Alan Lucas shared that someone asked him if he was sad when he learned of an innocent Palestinian civilian who was killed. Rabbi Lucas answered that he was. He then was asked if he was sadder when an Israeli was killed and he said he was. Why, he was asked. Rabbi Lucas explained that the Israeli was his family and to be sadder for a family member’s death in no way lessens his sadness for the Palestinian’s. Dov Waxman of Northeastern University points out that to express sympathy with Palestinian suffering is not in any way condemning Israel or condoning Hamas; it is simply an expression of our humanity as Jews and of our

Jewish values. Waxman stresses that our ardent desire to demonstrate our solidarity with Israel need not come at the expense of our humanitarian consciences. They are not mutually exclusive; as Jews, he writes: “It is not at all necessary that our support and love for Israel harden our hearts to the suffering of others.” This is why throughout the summer in many synagogues including our own we expressed our regret and remorse for all the innocent civilians killed and injured and included them in our prayers for comfort and healing in addition, of course, to our prayers for our Israeli brothers and sisters.

Ramban of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, based on a verse in Deuteronomy (8:17), taught that Moses told the Israelites that their military might comes from G-d and does not belong to them; therefore, they are to be modest and guard how they use it. The State of Israel’s efforts to make Jewish values real is why the IDF has as an operative principle of *taharat neshek*—the moral-ethical use of weapons. This is the core value behind what is called *Ruach Zahal*—the spirit of the Israeli Armed Forces. This is why the IDF takes such extraordinary measures to limit civilian casualties. We are taught in our Bible that we should spare no efforts in making peace with our enemies and never celebrate our enemies’ defeat. These are Jewish values of thousands of years that Israelis today endeavor and struggle to make real.

The empathy that these Jewish teachings and values promote is foundational to being a Jew. Dr. Helen Riess of Harvard writes: “Empathy requires the exquisite interplay of neural networks that enables us to perceive the emotions of others and take in the perspective, distress and pain of others. She goes on to point out that if human existence were simply the result of “survival of the fittest,” we would be wired solely to dominate others and not respond to their suffering. Judaism is predicated on empathy as Hillel, Rabbi Akiva and many other rabbis and teachers over centuries proclaimed that loving another as we love ourselves and not doing to others what we do not want done to us is the very *raison d’être* and definition of being a Jew.

Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen of Cambridge University wrote: “A critical part of our morality—so much of what makes us human—is the product of our compassion.” A congregant approached me last month at the kiddush luncheon after Shabbat services and asked what are we suppose to do with our feelings about Hamas, Palestinians and Arabs? I shared that I know one thing we cannot do: we cannot add more hate to the world; there is too much of it already. He replied that this was the same thing his wife told him that morning before he came to shul.

The author of “The Terrorist’s Son,” Zak Ebrahim, whose father was a terrorist who murdered Rabbi Meir Kahane and plotted the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, rejected his father and has embraced nonviolence as a way of life. He wrote: “There’s a reason that murderous hatred has to be taught—and not just taught, but forcibly implanted. It’s not a naturally occurring phenomenon. It is a lie. It is a lie told over and over again.”

Captain Dan Gordon of the IDF wrote about General Avigdor Kahalani’s visit to an artillery battalion on the Gaza border this summer. General Kahalani is one of Israel’s greatest war

heroes who stopped the Syrians from advancing into Israel during the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Retired, he chairs the Association for the Welfare of Israel's Soldiers. For the soldiers it was an opportunity to meet a living legend before entering battle; someone described as the closest thing Israel has to a General Patton or MacArthur. He spoke to the soldiers quietly so much so they had to lean forward to hear him.

This was his message: "We never taught you to hate. Not this army, not the Israel Defense Forces. We never taught you to hate. We never taught you that. Once you teach people to hate, they will find someone to hate. So we never taught you that. You know why you are here. It's not to hate anybody. It's to defend your people, your homes and your families. Each of you has to feel as if the fate of the whole people of Israel is on your shoulders. Each of you holds that fate in your hands. But it's not about hatred. Don't hate. Do what you need to do to defend your homes, your families and your people. But do not hate."

We need a vision of peace; without a vision nothing will ever be pursued yet alone made real. We cannot give up our hope for peace because once we do, we have been defeated. Once we do, we are no longer fulfilling the commandment to pursue peace. Psalm 42 ends by reminding us that our victory is our hope and faith and not having hope and faith is our defeat. After World War II and the Holocaust, one of the ships bringing so called illegal immigrants to British Palestine and a synagogue established by survivors in Argentina took the same name: "*Af Al Pi Lamrot HaKol*" which means: "Nevertheless, in spite of everything." Can you imagine, looking into the unknown future with eyes, hearts and minds that experienced the depths and darkness of hell and being able to give this name to your ship and your synagogue? In spite of everything "we believe with perfect faith that the messianic era will come and even though it is taking so, so long, in spite of this we believe." "*Af al pi, lamrot hakol.*"

I have faith in the future of our people and of Israel. Do I worry and pray? Every day! I am already planning our next congregational trip to Israel in June, 2016. This is not a marketing matter; it is a statement of confidence in and hope for the future. Make a commitment now to be on this trip and this will be a statement of your commitment to, support and affirmation of and love for Israel. On Rosh HaShanah when we commemorate the creation of the world and humankind, let us pray for peace and well being for the Jewish people, for Israel and the entire world. Let us not think about Israel only during crisis and about dying in Israel and being buried there. Let us think of living every day as Jews filled with a profound love for the visions and values of Judaism and for Israel. Let us never give up hope. "In spite of everything—*af al pi Lamrot hakol.*"

SHANAH TOVAH.