

Israel - (Edited from Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon 2015)

Lately it seems that no matter what Israel does anti-Israel sentiment is getting worse and Israel is becoming increasingly more isolated on the world scene. The BDS movement (Boycott, Divestment, Sanction) has worked hard to convince the world that Israel is an apartheid state and should be treated accordingly and this idea is becoming more accepted in world opinion.

Israel is certainly not perfect, but it does a lot right and frankly a lot more right on balance than most of us could claim as individuals, and significantly more than the nations that criticize it. No person or nation is perfect but Israel has much to be proud of and much that we should be shouting from the rooftops to counter those who would only see its flaws. Sadly many in America, who are well meaning and have no specific animosity towards Israel, are finding themselves disturbed by what is presented to them about Israel. They are swayed by anti-Israel rhetoric and are beginning to feel that Israel does not reflect their modern Western values.

The BDS movement and others work hard to ensure that what we see about Israel is focused on the bad, on the images of downtrodden Palestinians and powerful Israeli soldiers in tanks. These images rarely reflect the reality of the situation and certainly do not reflect the massive culpability of the Arab world and the Palestinian leadership in putting and keeping Palestinians in such situation. Nor do these images reflect all the many positives that make Israel what it is and that should make it so the world, and not only Jews, should be proud of Israel.

So what is the positive that we are sadly seeing so little of? One aspect is the astounding way in which Israel has been at the vanguard of innovation and creativity in the business and tech world. Everything from your USB flash drive, to drip irrigation, to software that can predict pandemics, machines that can help people to walk, and even drugs that might one day cure certain forms of cancer have, all been developed in Israel. If, as one Israeli business advocate suggests, we put "Israel Inside" on every product made in Israel or made possible by Israeli ingenuity, like with IBM products, people would be astounded and humbled by the extent to which Israel has contributed to the good of the world in its innovation and creativity.

And with respect to those who feel Israel does not reflect their modern western values, one has to wonder what Israel people are looking at. Is it the Israel in which Arab Israelis and Jewish Israelis alike have equal right and in which Arabs serve as members of the parliament and on the Supreme Court, and actively participate in every aspect of Israeli society?

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Is it the Israel in which women are equal members of the armed forces and always have been?

Is it the country with one of the freest presses in the world, never mind the Middle East? Is it the country that sends doctors and aid workers to aid after every natural disaster around the world? Is it the country whose innovation helps so many people live their lives better all around the world?

Is it the country whose army, despite being provoked at all turns maintains a level ethic and accountability that no other country on the face of the planet, including our own, would be able to live up to or would even try?

That Israel is the Israel described by Hassan Hussainam, an Egyptian Arab and recent valedictorian of Tel Aviv university. Hussainam grew up in a country in which he was told Israel was his eternal enemy despite the peace between the two countries. In giving his graduation speech he explained:

“On my very first day here at the university, I saw men in kippas, women in headscarfs and hijabs. I saw soldiers walking peacefully among crowds of lively students. I learned there were people of every kind in the university, and the university had a place for all of them—Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druze, Bedouins, and even international students ...How fascinating is it to be in a city where you can go to a beach in central Tel Aviv and see a Muslim woman, a couple of gays kissing, and a Hasid sharing the same small space? Where else can you find a Christian Arab whose apartment is decorated with posters of Mao and Lenin? Where else can you see a Bedouin IDF soldier reading the Qur’an on the train during Ramadan?”

This is the Israel I wish we saw more, an Israel of tolerance, equality, and compassion that is at the forefront of helping those in need around the world even as much of that world continues to look vilify it.

As American Jews and supporters of Israel we must continue to connect with and give to Israel. We should certainly give generously in monetary terms, but perhaps even more importantly, give emotionally, politically and spiritually. We should visit Israel, learn about its culture and politics, rejoice in its achievements, engage with its people, recognize how much we share, and be forthright and proud in our defense of Israel and its right not only to exist but to thrive.