

Sam Donaldson, interviewing PM Ehud Barak, asked him to evaluate the situation in Israel. Prime Minister Barak answered by quoting an classic joke that has applied to the State of Israel for all of its 66 years:

“If I have to summarize the situation in one word, good. If I have to summarize the situation in two words, not good.”

The question of whether the situation in Israel is good or not good is a political question worth exploring, but in my remarks today I want to focus on Israel as one of the five levels of spiritual nourishment that I spoke about yesterday, that of the Haya-soul, which represents a national spirituality or a spirituality focused on peoplehood.

This is the spirituality that asks us to orient our sanctuaries and our bodies towards Jerusalem as the primary direction of prayer. This is the spirituality that suggests that the land of Israel is more sacred than any other piece of planet earth; that Jerusalem is the holiest city in Israel; that the Temple Mount is the most sacred spot in Jerusalem; that the site of the Temple itself, the courtyard of the Temple, the inner court, the outer room, the holy of holy's in which sat the Ark of the covenant, represent the ascending levels of sanctity leading up to the space between the wings of the cherubs carved into the lid of the ark, the spot where God's presence manifested.

The spiritual path of Judaism asserts that it is not only a religious practice but also a religious people as well with a language and a land. The spirituality of Judaism is not only about doing mitzvot - it is also about belonging to a people, about Jewish nationalism. One might question the role of modern nationalism in an ancient tradition. One might ask how does support for the modern state of Israel connect with a desire to experience Judaism according to the vision of the Torah?

The spirituality of the Haya-soul suggests that the our Torah is meant to be a blueprint for a real society in which the government of a Jewish country blends Jewish moral values, pluralism, and democracy. This is the spiritual level that teaches that the fullest expression of a Jewish life can never be realized in Grand Rapids, MI; in New York, Los Angeles, or the mythic shtetl of Eastern Europe; but only in the land of Israel.

Much of the Jewish community cannot imagine a world without a State of Israel - we have grown up with Israel. For a moment, however, let's try to envision such a world, as the author Michael Chabon did in “The Yiddish Policeman's Union.” He imagined and wrote about a world in which the United States opened up part of Alaska for the resettlement of Jews in pre-WWII Europe. Among the features of the world he imagined was that the Israel lost the War of Independence.

Let's for a moment imagine a different alternative history. Let's imagine that the UN partition plan that created Israel never happened. The British, when they left the area that they took from the Ottoman Empire in WWI, would have left an Arab government in charge. There were about 600,000 Jews living in our 1948 Mandate era Palestine. However, many of them came in as refugees from Europe. If Britain was not moving towards a partition plan, many fewer would have been motivated to enter Palestine, legally or not. Much of the early growth of the State of Israel came from the resettlement of Jews from Arab lands - Iraq, Iran, Morocco, Libya, Syria, Egypt. Had Israel not been established as a Jewish State, that never would have happened. The Jewish population of Arab Palestine would have been continued to be a minority.

Now, in this alternative history, let's fast forward to today. What would a no-Israel Middle East look like for Jews? There is no reason to think that the forces that gave rise to fundamentalist Islam and the Islamic State would be different in our alternative world than in our contemporary

world. There is no reason to think that the attack on the World Trade Center and the resulting response by the United States would have been averted by a world without Israel.

In our alternative world, we would have millions of Jews living in Arab countries which would slowly and gradually be increasingly restrictive of Jewish practice. It's not hard to imagine what that would be like. Look what the Middle East is like for Christians and other non-Moslems today in our world.

Entire Christian communities that have lived in peace for centuries are being ravaged. The terrorist group Boko Haram has kidnapped and killed hundreds of Christians this year. Half a million Christian Arabs have been driven out of Syria during the three-plus years of civil war there. Christians have been persecuted and killed in countries from Lebanon to Sudan.

200,000 Christian Aramaeans fled their ancestral homeland around Nineveh in Iraq, having already escaped Mosul. Followers of the ancient Yazidi religion are facing starvation, exile, and death at the hands of Sunni Muslim militants purging Iraq of non-Moslems.

If there were no Israel, what would have happened to the millions of Middle Eastern Jews over the past 66 years? How many would have lost their lives? Remember the Taliban in the mid-1990's, destroying thousand year old Hindu statues in Afghanistan? How much Judaism would have disappeared as synagogues would have been destroyed, their Jewish communities scattered? In the late 70's and 80's, a million Soviet Jews (including many non-Jewish family members) emigrated to Israel. The Ethiopian Jewish community escaped famine and poverty in Israel. None of this would have been possible without an Israel. Given that the United States hasn't opened its borders to millions of starving Africans, it is unlikely that it would have opened its borders to millions of displaced and persecuted Jews in a world without Israel.

What else would be different in a world without an Israel? Advancements in technology and medicine that have come out of Israel would probably still have happened eventually, but there is an advantage when a large number of highly motivated people are concentrated together in a small economy. In addition, many of the achievements attributed to Israelis have been aided by the fact that so many Israelis live in and contribute to technology centers and universities around the world. How many lives would have been lost or adversely affected if the medical advances would have been delayed by 5, 10, or 20 years?

So without Israel, it's reasonable to imagine that the world Jewish population would be smaller than it is today, and at least some of the technological advancements would have been delayed. The Middle East would still be a place of turmoil, and the fundamentalist Islamic State might very well stretch from Turkey to Pakistan, moving ever closer to Europe and India. Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Bahai, Sikh, and Buddhist communities will have experienced ever growing threats to their existence. So - is the world better or worse with Israel? My contention is that the world is clearly better because of the existence of the State of Israel.

Judaism, unlike the Christian society in which we live, is not a religion defined by a set of beliefs but rather a tribal nation. Israel is critical to our self identity because a nation needs a land. Even during the centuries when we didn't have control over the land of Israel, we created Midrash which imagined that the land is the glue that ties us together.

Midrash Tehillim on Ps. 122:3, "Jerusalem built up, a city knit together," [יְרוּשָׁלַם הַבְּנוּיָה כְּעִיר] [שֶׁחִבְרָהּ לָהּ יְהוָה] describes Jerusalem as "A city which can make all Jews come together in unity, not just on one particular day, but permanently.

Midrash Mikhilta on Exodus 20:6, describing God as one who "extends love to the thousandth generation to those who love God and keep God's commandments," [וַעֲשֵׂה חֶסֶד לְאֲלֵפִים לְאַהֲבֵי וְלֹשְׁמֵרֵי] [מִצְוֹתַי] comments that this in particular refers to those who risk their lives to live in Israel.

I want to take you back to the five levels of soul that I spoke about yesterday, and imagine a broad, inclusive spirituality that speaks to the national Haya-soul of all Jews, inviting them to participate in the national life of Israel. Perhaps you might gravitate towards Israeli wine to drink on erev Shabbat, when you make Kiddush on Friday night. Perhaps you might gravitate towards Israeli artists on the walls of your home. Perhaps you might participate in the Israel rallies and have conversations with friends about the history and importance of Israel as a Jewish homeland. Perhaps you give to the Jewish Federation and/or to the Masorti Conservative movement in Israel or other Israeli Tzedakah organizations. Perhaps you have made it a point to join Mercaz, the Zionist arm of the Masorti-Conservative movement, and voted in past World Zionist Congress elections, happening again in 2015. Perhaps you might make it a point to learn some modern Israeli Hebrew or watch Israeli movies or read Israeli authors or listen to Israeli music. Perhaps instead of considering retirement in Florida, you dream of spending the winter months in Israel, or even making aliyah and living in Israel full-time.

The point is that your Haya-soul ought to compel you to participate, in some way, in the national life of the people of Israel. David ben Gurion said, "In Israel if you don't believe in miracles, you're not a realist." National spirituality teaches you to believe in the miracle of Jewish survival.

Israel is the secret of Jewish survival. There has never been a time in our history that we haven't either lived in a Jewish controlled land of Israel or dreamed of living in a Jewish Israel. Without a nationalist aspect to the Jewish soul, Judaism would long ago have faded away under the crushing weight of anti-Semitism or apathy. The small community alone is not enough to sustain the Jewish vision - we need something larger than the synagogue but more particularly Jewish than the vision of universal religion, something between the Neshama and the Yehida, to use the language of the five souls that each of us possesses. We need the Haya, the ever living nationalistic soul of the Jewish people.

Ari Shavit concludes his book "My Promised Land" with the following:

The Jewish state does not resemble any other nation. What this nation has to offer is not security or well-being or peace of mind. What it has to offer is the intensity of life on the edge. The adrenaline rush of living dangerously, living lustfully, living to the extreme. If a Vesuvius-like volcano were to erupt tonight and end our Pompeii, this is what it will petrify: a living people.

Thank God, Judaism is a living religion and Israel is a living, vibrant country. The existential threats are real, but Jews have weathered existential threats for 3000 years and outlasted all of the Pharaohs and Nebuchenezers and Hamans and Tituses and Hitlers who tried to destroy us. We can summarize the ever-living nature of this nationalistic aspect of the Jewish soul in five words carved in graffiti on the first century triumphal arch in Rome, erected by Titus to celebrate the sacking of Jerusalem in the year 70 - Am Yisrael Chai L'olam Va-ed! Two thousand years after the Roman empire celebrated its victory, their monuments lie in ruins and the Nation of Israel Lives, forever and ever! Amen.