

The recent Jewish community survey in Grand Rapids showed that here, like elsewhere in the country, there is a gradual decline in support for, connection with, and belief in the importance of Israel from the older generation to the middle generation to the younger generation. Given the centrality of Israel as the religious center of Judaism, the growing disconnect between North American Jews and Israel is cause for concern.

Language, money, and religion are a few factors which divide North America Jewry from Israel.

Many of us don't speak Hebrew well enough to feel comfortable with our Siddur, our Torah, or ordering a coffee in a café in Jerusalem. It's difficult to feel like our cousins overseas are our real family when we don't share a language.

Travel to Israel is expensive, and whenever I urge you to make travel to Israel a priority, I have in mind that such a trip is beyond the financial means of a certain percentage of our community. I would love to be able to offer to buy a plane ticket for anyone who wants to go to Israel, but does not have the financial means to afford the trip.

The money issue is compounded when we consider that for many Jews, money in the form of Tzedakah is the most visible sign of the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora. We give and give, and Israel takes and takes. What do we get back for our money? On one level, we get a state whose official institutions deny our basic expression of Judaism.

In addition to the Ministry of Religion's hostility towards non-Orthodox institutions, the fact is that even Israeli non-Orthodox Judaism functions in a very different way than American counterparts. Several years ago I visited Kol Haneshama, a Reform Congregation in Jerusalem. Behind me were sitting two older ladies, who spent a great deal of the service complaining that they didn't like the service because they thought they were going to a Reform Temple and the service felt to them like an Orthodox service, not at all like the Reform service at the Temple in New York. The problem, of course, was that the service was in Hebrew!

Behind these factors is a larger issue. We are privileged to live in a world in which most of *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel, is controlled by a political entity known as *Medinat Yisrael*, the State of Israel. Early in its existence there was no real difference between *Eretz Yisrael* and *Medinat Yisrael*. The state was seen by all but a very few fringe Jews as the *reisheet semihat ge'ulateinu*, the beginning of the flowering of the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy that the Jews would someday once again thrive in the land of Israel.

As Israel grew more established, moved into middle age, it became more and more apparent that it is a political state with a government and laws; better than most other nations around the world, but by no means a perfect place. It has become increasingly difficult for some to wholeheartedly support the State of Israel with all of its blemishes. If the State of Israel is the *reisheet semihat ge'ulateinu*, how can it be so flawed?

Those over 60 who grew up with a world without a State of Israel have the strongest connection. They never again want to live in a world without a State of Israel. Those between 40 and 60, who have no memory of a world without Israel tend to take its existence for granted. They can't imagine living in a world without Israel. Those under 40 have only known a post-1967 Israel, an Israel thrust into the role of occupying power. Some begin to wonder whether a State of Israel is a necessary part of the Jewish world.

Our standard answer to them is that Israel has always been the center of the Jewish world. How dare you imagine a world without it? Israel is our heart and soul - without it, we would fade away and die.

This answer, as powerful as it is for those who cannot imagine a world without Israel, is unconvincing to those who can.

The basic problem is the lack of recognition that there are two aspects of Israel - Land and State. The Land is sacred, but the State is not; the State is blemished, but our claim on the Land is strong and pure.

Our claim on *Eretz Yisrael* comes from the Bible. Our covenant with God is inextricably linked with the land. Our ancestors lived there, and continued to live in the land from Biblical times to the present. Our liturgy expresses a two millennia-long yearning to return to the land. The land is the source of Jewish spirituality.

Medinat Yisrael is a secular State with a mostly secular government. It was created in 1948 to manage the infrastructure of *Eretz Yisrael* -- *the economy, education, social services, and so on. It is in need of Tzedakah funds* to support immigration, social services, and economic development.

It will not always be the case that Israel relies on the diaspora for financial support. Israel is becoming increasingly wealthy, and has tremendous potential to be a world leader in technological and medical innovation. Fifty, seventy-five years from now, money will be flowing the other way, as Israel will be supporting diaspora communities.

Despite the fact that Israel is the most important source of Jewish life today, many, including me, would argue that a strong diaspora is and will always be critical to Israel's survival. Jews who live among majorities of ethical people of other religious traditions learn from them, and this enriches Judaism. The diaspora has contributed to the growth of types of Judaism and Jewish creativity that couldn't have been born in Israel.

The quality of the connection between the diaspora and Israel is important both to Israel and to the diaspora Jewish communities. When those of us from the outside come to visit Israel, our visits should incorporate both Israel's - the Land and the State. Trips to Israel which focus on one to the exclusion of the other are flawed.

You are visiting *Medinat Yisrael* without seeing *Eretz Yisrael*:

- When you don't connect the places you are seeing and the roads you are traveling to the Torah and Tanakh;
- When you don't have Shabbat - when you don't go to shul and instead go out of your squeeze in an extra tour;
- When you search out the treif restaurants, when kosher ones are so plentiful.

You are seeing *Eretz Yisrael* without visiting *Medinat Yisrael*:

- When you see only the Jewish settlements, institutions, and people;
- When you visit only the Biblical sites, ignoring modern institutions;
- When you don't experience any of the sites related to the history of *Medinat Yisrael*.

If you visit *Eretz Yisrael* without *Medinat Yisrael*:

- You are likely to idealize the flaws or not see them at all;
- You are likely not to see the difficulties of the non-Jewish communities within Israel;
- You lose sight of the fact that *Eretz Yisrael* is a Messianic land and we need to live in the political reality of a not yet messianic world.

If you visit *Medinat Yisrael* without *Eretz Yisrael*:

- You are likely to see only the flaws without understanding the higher symbolic and religious meaning of the Land;
- You are a tourist peering into a foreign culture rather than a Jew visiting your ancestral homeland.

It is the land of Israel that is sacred. It is the land of Israel that is indeed our heart and soul. However, the only way that we can preserve the land of Israel is to support the State of Israel. For example: for over a year, the Arab Waqf in charge of the Temple Mount has been doing renovations which are destroying priceless and irreplaceable artifacts very likely dating back to the first Temple period. Artifacts of our presence in the Land are being destroyed. Were there no state, it is likely that even more of our historic sites would be desecrated, and unlikely that Jews would be able to freely access and preserve our sacred history and places.

We need to strengthen and re-link the State and the messianic idea of the Land in a way that makes sense for non-Orthodox Jews.

The element of the messianic era most closely tied to the Land is *kibbutz galuyot*, the ingathering of the exiles - that all Jews will return to *Eretz Yisrael*. Even in a pre-messianic world, aliyah is, if not a full mitzvah, at least a commendable and desirable act. The question of how we as diaspora Jews support aliyah and understand *kibbutz galuyot* is linked to the question of how to encourage and deepen connection to the Land and the State.

The flattening of the earth should change our understanding the messianic era. In a totally flat world, in a messianic sense, we will be less American and more citizens of a global world who happen to reside in North America. If we lived in a truly messianic world, there ought to be no difference whether we lived in one part or another part of the world. If there were no national conflicts, indeed no meaningful borders, and people of all religions treated each other with absolute love and respect, and all people could worship freely at any point on the globe -- wouldn't that feel as if the messianic City of Jerusalem had expanded to encompass the entire world? Wouldn't the whole world be Israel, a city/land of God? In such a context, Jews anywhere could reasonably claim that they were living in Israel.

In recognition of the State of Israel being the *reishet semihat ge'ulateinu*, the beginning of the flowering of the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy, I imagine a Birthright Israel program in which any Jew living anywhere in the world could claim our birthright - Israeli citizenship and an Israeli passport. Israeli citizens are subject to army service or national service. It's only fair that anyone who hold citizenship accepts some kind of obligation. If a passport were offered to me on the condition that I visit Israel once every 2-3 years and participate in some kind of program or national service, I think I would accept. I think a good number of people would see this as a way to participate in the building of both the Land and the State of Israel in a way that allows them to develop a positive relationship with Israel.

It's easy for me to suggest a new kind of Birthright Israel program to strengthen ties between Israel and the Diaspora. I think it will happen someday, although not because of anything I do or say. For you, in the present day, I want to suggest some two concrete and immediate ways that you can nurture a relationship with Israel.

First, if you can, visit Israel regularly. Start with this year, the 60th anniversary of the birth of the State.

Second, keeping in mind the distinction between *Eretz* and *Medinah*, but also that it is the State that supports the Jewish presence in the Land, get involved with some organization or project that benefits Israel: JNF, Federation, AIPAC, even Peace Now, as long as you do something positive. In other words, if you disagree with the policies of the Israeli government, don't just protest - do something positive to support something in the State that you can support.

I will conclude with a prayer by my colleague, Rabbi Jeremy Milgrom:

Sovereign of the Universe, accept in lovingkindness and with favor our prayers for the State of Israel, her government and all who dwell within her boundaries and under her authority. On the 60th anniversary of her founding, reopen our eyes and our hearts to the wonder of Israel and strengthen our faith in Your power to work redemption in every human soul. Grant us also the fortitude to keep ever before us those ideals to which Israel dedicated herself in her Declaration of Independence, so that we may be true partners with the people of Israel in working toward her vision.

Grant those entrusted with guiding Israel's destiny the courage, wisdom and strength to do Your Will. Guide them in the paths of peace and give them the insight to see Your Image in every human being. Be with those charged with Israel's safety and defend them from all harm. May they have the strength to protect their country and the spiritual fortitude never to abuse the power placed in their hands.

Spread Your blessings over the Land. May justice and human rights abound for all her inhabitants. Guide them "To do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God,"¹ and "May justice well up like water, righteousness like a mighty stream."² Implant mutual respect in every heart, and may all realize that, "We were not brought into this world for conflict and dissension, nor for hatred, jealousy, harassment or bloodshed. Rather, we were brought into this world in order to recognize You and bless your name" (R. Nahman of Bratzlav). Spread over Israel and all the world Your shelter of peace, and may the vision of Your prophet soon be fulfilled: "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4).

So may it be Your Will that all inhabitants of the earth will say of the State of Israel, "It is very good,"³ for she will have become a blessing to the entire world and a "Light unto the nations."

¹ Micah 6:8

² Amos 5:24

³ Genesis 1:31