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*Ha-Tikva*  
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Congregation Beth El, Berkeley  
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Far away from extended family and beloved homeland, pained by tragedy beyond imagination, long ago a Jewish soul sadly sang: “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion...” (Psalm 135). For years now, we have been on the edge for the news from Israel; while more recently, again, there have been months of relative quiet, just as we lower our guard comes the bulletin of another explosion or bombing—and we wait for the next tragedy to erupt. We are witnesses, it seems, to a time of continual tears and hardship for the nation of Israel and all its citizens, and for the Palestinian people as well.

It is conventional at this point to remark: “I really don’t know what to say...” and then to talk at great length; I do know what I would like to say to you and regret that I can only start the conversation; in these few minutes, we can only begin to touch, reflect on, and honor our deep connection and love for the ancient land, for the ingathered people and modern nation of Israel; and we must also find room to name the pain and discomfort and anger and disappointments which we carry, too; we need a place to safely bring all of those emotions and passions, which, for many of us, I believe, are all mixed up together. Our dialogue begins this morning, and I invite you to continue the conversation at a forum this afternoon facilitated by the Co-Chairs of our Israel Relations Committee.

We are not alone in carrying mixed feelings and confused emotions. Last year, many of you had the opportunity to spend a morning with Prof. Moshe Halbertal, a leading Israeli philosopher. Several years ago, when I had a fellowship to study in Jerusalem, Prof. Halbertal lectured us about the doctrine of *tahor neshek*, restraint in the use of arms, and how this doctrine is taught and honored by Israel’s army; my group spent a day at an army training base, and, in a series of informal conversations with young soldiers and officers, we were convinced that this is a core value of the Israeli military which is cherished and honored by its troops; more than one contrasted Israeli officers’ concern with minimizing civilian casualties, at great risk to their own soldiers, with the American military’s bombing campaigns being conducted at the time in Bosnia and Afghanistan. That very evening, the Israeli Air Force attacked the hiding place of a leading terrorist leader and the large bomb used killed at least nine children in the surrounding homes. We saw Prof. Halbertal the next day, who said, in great distress, “Obviously the government did not honor its own policy.” But as I spoke to other Israelis, I was struck by the range of responses I heard. One thoughtful Israeli leader, a leading feminist, a two time candidate for the Knesset from the Israeli left, a voice of conscience respected throughout Israel—and the mother of three children who ride the public buses to school every day—told me that in war, “You have to do what you have to do” and she would not condemn the government’s decision. Love and loyalty,

dissent and disappointment—these do not fall into neat categories, and we cannot assign ourselves and others to one-dimensional camps, parties, boxes or positions.

In his poem, “I, May I rest in peace,” Yehuda Amichai wrote: “I have lived out my life in wars of every kind: battles without and within, close combat, face-to-face, the faces always my own, my lover-face, my enemy face...”

We are afraid to talk about Israel. While not unique to Beth El, it is certainly true of our congregation. Rabbi Raj cautioned me that the two most difficult words for this congregation are “Israel” and “God.” We spoke about one last week and tonight let’s lift up the other! Fearful of offending, fearful of being misunderstood, fearful of admitting to our doubts and questions, fearful of being attacked for questioning and fearful of being challenged for supporting—as if these were mutually exclusive! The High Holidays are a time for *teshuvah*, turning and returning – I am asking you in this New Year to turn your thoughts and prayers to the land and people of our ancient homeland and, for those who have become distanced or cut-off from relationship with Israel, to return

In my own life, my connection to Israel has had periods of closeness and distance. My earliest memory of Israel, like many of my generation, is the Six Day War and appeals at the High Holidays to purchase Israel bonds. My parents were, like all of their friends, passionate supporters of a country they had never seen. I moved to Israel for a year of high school and spent the 1973 Yom Kippur war in a bomb shelter in a kibbutz near the front; I returned again to live in Jerusalem when I began rabbinical school. Then I drifted away. I grew tired of getting excited about a new peace initiative only to see it slowly fade from the news; I grew disenchanted as I came to realize that the heroic narrative of Israel’s founding and history which I had grown up on was incomplete and sometimes distorted; I became alienated from an organized American Jewish community which seemed, on the hand, excessively focused on Israel to the exclusion of other aspects of contemporary Jewish existence and needs, and, on the other, to have much less room for dissent or diversity than the Knesset or the opinion pages of every Israeli newspaper. While many of these challenges are still real, Israel, American Jewry and I have all moved from where we once were.

My own renewed relationship with Israel really began for me in 2001, when I was invited to become a Rabbinic Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, where, with a small group of rabbis from across North America and across the ideological spectrum, I returned every six months over a three year period, including month long stays each summer.

I am looking forward to renewing my connection during our congregational trip and I would like to take this moment to thank Lois and Gary Marcus and Bill Falik and Candy Cohen for their help in organizing our trip. While I am simultaneously delighted and regretful to announce that our trip is full, I invite you to join us in our preparation classes this Fall & Winter, to read our trip blog, to plan your own trip, or to step forward and help organize our next congregational one.

Every time I plan a trip to Israel, someone asks: Is this the right time? If not now, when? Through the course of many visits over the last thirty years, I have always been welcomed and made to feel like "a member of the family." While the question, “So, when are you moving

here?" is asked less now than it used to be, the message that "our door is always open to you" has never stopped. Family are the people where you can always show up and they will take you in.

Contrary to what we see in the press, both general and Jewish, even in the worst of times, Israel is not shut down or under siege. While thoroughly discouraged about the short-term future — as one Israeli friend put it, "There is a light. It's just that there is no tunnel" — few people believe that the existence of the state is in danger or that a second Holocaust is imminent. Most Israelis I meet roll their eyes at this overblown rhetoric.

Regardless of the daily security situation, millions of Israelis get up every morning, go to work, take their children to school and go to movies, cafes and stores. When I was in Jerusalem during the height of the intifada, I attended a wedding, a bat mitzvah and a party or two. The Emek Refaim neighborhood where I lived—the North Berkeley of Jerusalem—was bustling with people, traffic and increasingly upscale stores. This is not to say that things have not changed. The coffee shops and cafes are filled— but each has an armed guard at the door; in fact, so does every large store, synagogue, school, and place where people gather. What has become normative in the United States since 9/11 had already long been the Israeli reality; what one finds in Israel is not so different from what we experience going to public buildings in America. With familiarity and quiet, too, comes complacency; still some Israelis continue to avoid certain bus lines or, if they can, are not riding the buses at all. As an American visiting for a short time, I had the luxury of taking taxis or renting a car if I chose to do so. Yet each time I walked the streets of Jerusalem, saying "hello" to landmarks ancient and modern, I was reclaiming the city from those who would take it away.

Now I am not so naive as to tell you that there is no risk in traveling to Israel. All the same, I believe that it is impossible to visit Israel and, with appropriate planning, to not expose oneself to any more random danger than we are threatened with daily on the streets of Berkeley, Oakland or San Francisco—let alone any other foreign capital we might choose to visit. For what was 9/11 but the globalization of terror? I will just point out that we take all sorts of risks unthinkingly every single day; each time we drive a car, or more dangerously for myself, living in San Francisco, cross the street on foot. Just like flying in airplanes, gathering in large crowds or maintaining an open society, we choose to take risks in order to deny a victory to those who threaten us.

Now, my freedom to plan our congregational trip and to propose your consideration of such a journey is in marked contrast to the lives of so many Palestinians who do not have freedom of movement in their daily lives, do not have access to adequate roads, health, housing or public services and cannot get permission to travel abroad. While the daily circumstances of Palestinians lives is by no means entirely Israel's responsibility, the failings of one person or group do not excuse another's. We have *teshuvah* to do here as well; the heroic narrative of Israel's founding and early years is more varied and, in some respects, less pure than the version that most of us grew up on. The promise of Israel and the national aspirations of the Jewish people cannot be realized at the price of an enduring oppression of others. My Zionist vision encompasses and now demands justice and a home for the Palestinian people.

It used to be said: A Zionist is a person who takes money from one person to give to a second person to send a third person who then enables a fourth to move to the Land of Israel. Like many jokes, there is an element of truth here—this was surely my parents' Zionism—and there is also an element of self-deprecation. My visits to Israel in recent years renewed and reconfirmed my own Zionist commitment. I am not afraid to announce myself a Zionist. So while I realize that even many of you who would like to visit Israel may not be able to do so soon, there can be a *teshuvah*, a turning towards Israel in the heart. So I invite you to come out as a Zionist—as a supporter of Israel.

Zionism and the Zionist dream are under assault from within and without. In 1947, the United Nations approved the partition plan for Mandate Palestine; sixty years later, the legitimacy of the Jewish state is still up for discussion, at least in some circles. The Zionist idea is a simple one—the recognition of the Jewish people's right to live in their national homeland. Zionism derived its legitimacy from being an answer to an existential danger that threatened the Jewish people during the first half of the 20th century. As Hebrew University Political Science Professor and 2008 Israel Prize winner Zeev Sternhell has written: “It was not a historical right, but rather the necessity to save life that was the moral basis for the [founding of the modern state of Israel]. Therefore, the right of all people to ensure their existence by controlling their fate through establishing an independent political framework is what justified taking control of the territory that made it possible to establish the State of Israel.”<sup>1</sup>

We have come along way from the early Zionist propaganda which declared “a people without a land for a land without a people”—but the legitimate claims of the Palestinians for a homeland and sovereignty does not obviate the legitimacy of Israel's nationhood. Israel's original establishment was rooted in a decision of the United Nations and the urgent need for a refuge for the displaced victims of genocide; and however many grave faults there may be with the policies and actions of the government of the state, these do not serve to delegitimize the state itself. From Tiananmen Square to Chechnya to Darfur to Kent State, My Lai and Cambodia—let alone the earlier history of this country—governments have done reprehensible things; but however much we have condemned the actions of leaders, armies or governments, no one asks whether Russia, China, El Salvador, Chile or the United States of America “have the right to exist.”

My first responsibility, though, in the face of the continuing demonization of Zionists is to stand up and say, I am a Zionist. Increasingly and distressingly, anti-Zionism is thinly veiled anti-Semitism, in which vast power, sinister motives, and central conspiracy and control are disproportionately ascribed to a small group, as for example last week's anti-Semitic speech by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the United Nations General Assembly; in the face of such propaganda, we need to stand up and be counted.

With a free press, a representative democracy and 7 million opinionated citizens, Israel society engages in a vigorous and critical debate about its government, its national policies and its values. As members of a Berkeley congregation, we have a special commitment and understanding of the mitzvah and the civic duty of standing up to the highest authority and speaking out from a place of conscience. A public declaration of dissent is not subversion; it is patriotism and prophetic duty.

My faith in Israel, as a national homeland for the Jewish people and a democratic country committed to highest values of the Jewish religious tradition, has been strengthened, even as I have despaired at the continuing murderous terrorist violence and the apparent endorsement of it by so many Palestinians and their allies. There is no defensible statement anyone can make to justify the more than one thousand Qassam rockets which have been haphazardly aimed at the children and adults of Sderot over the past year, raining misery, trauma and death on its citizens. As a Jew, as lover of Israel as a caring citizen of the world, I also sometimes despair over the provocative, harmful and sometimes indefensible policies and actions of the government of Israel. As a Zionist, I mourn for all who have been lost; as a Zionist, I can disagree with policies and decisions of the Israeli government and simultaneously stand in solidarity with the people and nation of Israel.

It is out of love for Zion and Israel that I turn to another threat to Israel's security and safety. We have already spoken of the external threat by those who seek to either delegitimize Israel or demonize Zionism and Zionists. Another grave threat to Israel is the growth of messianic Jewish nationalism which worships rocks and land over peace and security. This Jewish religious-nationalist fanaticism leads to violence, both in metaphoric assault on the core values of Judaism and the state of Israel, and physical violence, invoking the Torah to justify the very kinds of terror and unlawful killing that we condemn wherever it takes place. Hebrew University Political Science Department Chairman Ze'ev Sternhell, whose work I have already quoted and earlier this year won Israel's highest honor, the Israel Prize, was the target of an assassination attempt by right-wing Jewish terrorists less than three weeks ago.

The ideology of messianic nationalism insists that it is the inalienable and divine right of Jews to settle anywhere within the historical borders of the Land of Israel. Theology in a multi-faith world is not an acceptable basis for statecraft; I have no doubt, were we to ask Native Americans what lands the Great Spirit had given them as their rightful inheritance for eternity, America would not want to listen to the answer. Historical claims, however deeply rooted, must yield to the historical present we live in.

For more than forty years, Israel has ruled over and occupied the land of 3.5 million Palestinians and occupied the land. What began in 1967 as a military campaign to secure Israel's borders has since been fetishized into a new idolatry. The greatest mitzvah in this perversion of Jewish values and teaching is *yishuv ha-aretz*, the settlement of the land. I encountered this doctrine first hand when I had a conversation with a Jewish resident of the West Bank. A former North American, we asked her about the balance between the mitzvot of *rodef shalom*— seeking peace, and settling the entire land, and she said that the *mitzvah* of settling the land is a greater value. Valuing land over life is this generation's idolatry.

Prof. Sternhell wrote in 2002:

*If settlement is not ended once and for all by an unequivocal political decision and in the framework of a comprehensive peace agreement, Jewish settlement in the territories is a process that will continue until the last [inch] of land in the West Bank is "redeemed," or until the last of the Arabs who refuses to accept the sentence of Jewish overlordship is thrown out. Thus, the war that has been imposed on us is an eternal war. Now, when settler leader[s] ...and the Islamic terror people, each of whom in his own way and for*

*his own reasons, is positing unreasonable or insane conditions for ending the war, only the sky, in the West Bank, is the limit.”<sup>2</sup>*

A tiny percentage of the Israeli populace and their supporters continue to hold the state of Israel hostage to their extreme views—consuming vast amounts of goodwill, security resources and the lives of young soldiers who defend their often illegal outposts. The West Bank settlements are not an integral part of Israel; a summer 2008 survey showed that 95% of Israeli citizens had either never been to a West Bank settlement outside the security fence or for the small percentage who had been once or twice, this was primarily in the context of military service.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the physical threat, the moral danger to the fiber and spirit of the nation of becoming a nation of occupiers—a threat named at the founding of Peace Now by 348 Israeli army reserve officers in 1978—continues to endanger the security of the country. In recent years, on the floor of the Knesset and in public debate, Israelis have begun to speak of “transfer” – the involuntary expulsion of Arabs from the territories so as to make these areas safer for Jews. Surely we, as a people, know ethnic cleansing when we see it, regardless of its name; and out of our values and our recent history, we cannot justify it for a moment. While many Israelis are repelled by this idea, it is a plausible solution if one subscribes to an imperialist world-view of Jewish superiority and God-given privileges to the exclusion of others. We call such a system of thought racism and its application—with two classes of citizens, one privileged and one not, one with freedom of movement and one without, one with access to benefits and services and one denied them—we call that apartheid. Zionism is neither a racist ideology nor an imperialist movement and Israel is not an apartheid state. On an individual and on a political and communal level, there has certainly been discrimination in Israel and unequal treatment throughout Israel’s history—and a long history of court rulings, public demonstrations and private resolve in support of Israel living up to its promises and core values. But let us speak the truth: Israel is inevitably headed towards a permanent colonialism until and unless it disentangles itself from its occupier status.

Now Israel is not alone; you cannot make peace if there is no one on the other side of the table. While negotiations await, the murder of Israeli civilians must stop, and the Israeli government can and must take all necessary steps to protect its citizenry. But the Palestinians’ willingness to trust Israel and to take the risks necessary for peace—to turn away from the absolutist rhetoric of Hamas, to remain open to a two-state solution —the chances for peace, the opportunity for a new generation of realistic and trustworthy leaders, the room to heal from the wounds of war and violence and loss—all these would be consistently enhanced by any indication by Israel of its preparedness to pull its settlers out of the territories; but, in fact, every Israeli Prime Minister from Golda Meir through, until last week at least, Ehud Olmert, has expanded and encouraged the expansion of Israeli settlement activity. *Ha-aretz* reported last month that there are more than one thousand new buildings under construction in Jewish settlements in the West Bank and that the rate of construction in the West Bank nearly doubled in the last year.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, the Israeli government makes continual proclamations of its intentions to stop illegal expansion in the West Bank and the founding of indefensible and unneeded outposts. The vast majority of Israeli citizens expect an eventual Israeli withdrawal from the territories; for the alternative can only be the destruction of Israel, from without or from within. Interim Prime Minister Ehud Olmert himself, in an erev Rosh Hashanah interview with the Israeli daily *Yediot Ahronot*, called for the return of virtually the entire West Bank, saying, “We have to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, the meaning of which is that in practice

we will withdraw from almost all the territories, if not all the territories” in exchange for peace and painfully admitted that he has been wrong for most of the last thirty-five years.<sup>5</sup>

Will Israel’s next Prime Minister and its leaders show the political and moral courage to begin? What is my responsibility as a *chibat tzion* and *ohev Yisrael*, a beloved of Zion and a lover of the people of Israel? I ask: have I been an enabler of these policies which I believe have injured the cause I believe in? Has our silence given tacit encouragement?

The Israeli national anthem is *Ha-tikvah*: The Hope. I began with a verse from the psalms, a psalm of exile and pain and loss; that has been so much of our people’s experience. In traditional practice, Psalm 135, “By the waters of Babylon” is recited daily while, on Shabbat and festivals, it is customary to recite Psalm 126: a psalm of hope and restoration. Through the centuries, each Shabbat, a song of hope was sung at the Shabbat table: “*Shir Ha-ma’a lot*. A song of ascents; When The Eternal restores the fortunes of Zion – we see it as in a dream—our mouths shall be filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy... Restore our return, like watercourses surging in the Negev. ...”

Even in the darkest hours, the Jew sings a song of hope. My hero, Vaclav Havel, once wrote from deep behind prison walls: “Hope, in the deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good.” I find precisely this hope in the words of Israel’s Declaration of Independence, which announced that this new nation...

*Will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture ...*

On this Yom Kippur I ask you to join me by turning hearts and prayers towards Jerusalem; listen to these words of hope, the title of a poem by Naftali Herz Imber, and later Israel’s national anthem:

As long as deep in the heart,  
The soul of a Jew yearns,  
And forward to the East  
To Zion, an eye looks  
*Ode lo avdah tikvateinu*, Our hope will not be lost...  
Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> “Zionism or colonialism?” Ze'ev Sternhell, *Ha-aretz*, June 28, 2002.  
<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=180995>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication from Lara Friedman, Director of Policy and Government Relations Americans for Peace Now; discussing “Survey Conducted Amongst Israeli Public on Frequency of visits to West Bank Settlements – July 2008” which can be found at Peace Now’s website:  
<http://www.peacenow.org.il/site/en/peace.asp?pi=61&fld=188&docid=3327&pos=0>.

<sup>4</sup> “Peace Now: West Bank settlement construction nearly doubled this year”  
<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1015162.html>

<sup>5</sup> “Olmert Says Israel Should Pull Out of West Bank” (*New York Times*, September 29, 2008)  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/30/world/middleeast/30olmert.html?\\_r=1&ref=world&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/30/world/middleeast/30olmert.html?_r=1&ref=world&oref=slogin).