

The Party of the Perplexed
Rabbi David Booth at Kol Emeth, Rosh Hashanah 5772

I am here today to talk about forming a new Israel interest group and lobbying party. It is Rosh Hashanah, after all, a time of new beginnings and of hope in the Jewish world. It is a day when Jews have gathered together historically to pray for Jews in distress, and to yearn and hope for Israel. For 2000 years we hoped, imagined, dreamed of having our own place, our own state. Today we are blessed with a strong, secure state of Israel, but the need, the responsibility, to find ways of supporting Israel, remains as essentially a part of Rosh Hashanah as it has ever been. This year in particular is offering new possibilities, new hopes, but also new challenges and new fears.

I want to form a new group because we need a new way of learning and talking about Israel. Unlike many other groups, my new interest group welcomes card-carrying members of groups across the Jewish alphabet soup. Further, this new pro-Israel group welcomes friends and allies from the Jewish and non-Jewish world provided only that they care about Israel and want to see it thrive as a nation. We exclude only those groups intent on delegitimizing Israel or, who through their words or deeds, make it clear that they desire a world free of Israel and Israelis. Anyone urging divestment from Israel, or whose maps have no room for a country named Israel, is not welcome. Anyone who loves Israel is.

My party will be called the Nivuchim, the Perplexed. And this sermon, on Rosh Hashanah, on a day when we are particularly alerted through the liturgy and our presence together, of how vital Israel is, is a guide to the perplexed.

Maimonides over a thousand years ago wrote his Guide to the Perplexed. That book is the formative work of Jewish Philosophy because it venerates being perplexed as a key intellectual state. His book does not resolve the feeling of being perplexed, but rather shows how confusion, perplexity, is a key step to learning. Only once I realize I am perplexed can I learn, can I grow.

Let me tell you about my growing sense of being perplexed about Israel. This summer, I was blessed to spend 2 months in Israel. I had an amazing time leading a group of 33 through Israel. One experience: After an amazing day at the Palmach Museum in Tel Aviv, our group went to a park in Rechovot. We wanted to give the kids a chance to play, and I wanted to spend some time studying the Megillat HaAtzmaut, the Declaration of Independence for Israel. In this amazing document that deserves to be viewed a holy text of our people, Ben Gurion and the other writers call out to the Arab people. They say:

WE APPEAL - in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us now for months - to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the building of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions.

How amazing, as the State is being formed, as the Arab nations are massing to attack, that these heroes call for peace, call for equality, for a state shared with Arabs as full citizens. As we were reading these words, we were surrounded by their promise and by their emptiness. This park in Rechovot is a beautiful area for children to play. There are slides and swings and a big grassy area. There were secular Jewish Israelis in this park, a few people with Kippot, and Arab Israeli women with their heads covered. On the surface, this is what Ben Gurion dreamed of. Jews and Arabs together in a park, full and equal citizens. But I realized as I looked closer that there was something wrong. The Arabs and the Jews were each in their own areas. Even on the play equipment there was an invisible force field keeping them apart. It was separate but equal.

Later that summer, I had the chance to study at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and attended a Tiyyul, a study trip, they offered.

80 Rabbis on the program started our day with Danny Seidman, a center left expert on the population of Jerusalem. According to Danny, Jews and Arabs move very differently in the city right now. There are a few main arteries on which both Jews and Arabs drive, but the neighborhoods are almost entirely segregated. According to Danny, this means that the city could theoretically be divided into an Israeli and Palestinian city. However, there are efforts politically now to make this impossible. Building efforts are under way to circle Jerusalem with Jewish building. Such building divides a potential Palestinian state geographically in half. From there, we went to the tomb of Simon the Just, one of the early pre-Rabbinic figures. His tomb lies squarely in an Arab neighborhood called Sheikh Jarrah. Largely ignored by Jews until 1998, it is gradually becoming a major pilgrimage site. Why? To lay claim to land and to influence the way those populations are moving, making it ever harder to divide the city. It's a strong political message shaped by two key emotions: one, to say Jerusalem is the eternal indivisible capital of the Jewish state. We are here, and we intend to stay here without regard of Palestinian aspirations. Danny Seidman warned us that this urge is gradually turning the Palestinians away from a peace agreement because Israeli actions on the ground are sending a clear message that we intend to make it politically impossible to ever divide Jerusalem.

There is another message, emotion, though, that strengthens this coalition: we see the gunfire almost daily into Gilo, we see the regular bombings from Gaza into Sederot, and we intend to build and maintain a buffer around this amazing city. It is this second fear that I think has made the division of Jerusalem such a red line for so many Israelis.

From there, we went to Beit Aryeh, an Israeli city in the West Bank, to meet with retired Colonel Danny Tirza, the man responsible for designing and building the Security Fence. We met him at a beautiful scenic overlook. The view at this spot is amazing. It's just like 280 in between Millbrae and Burlingame, with its amazing view of the airport. You can see the runway at Ben Gurion airport quite clearly from this overlook. Tirza opened up his maps and explained the logic of the Security Barrier and why it

sometimes divides communities. His instructions were to hold the high points with strategic overlooks like this. His comment? One Palestinian with a shoulder missile can end Israeli tourism forever. Since the Palestinians have demonstrated over time their unwillingness or inability to stop these random acts of terror and violence, he told us, Israel intends to hold such high ground.

After these two perplexing experiences, both showing essential truths that contradict one another, we went to Rawabi, a proposed Palestinian city in between Ramallah and Shechem. We met with Al Masri, a Palestinian investor who has put together a massive fund to build a wealthy peaceful city. Al Masri uses Israeli companies and contractors to build Rawabi. He was clear with us that he wants peace, because he wants to build a real state that Palestinians can take pride in. This hopeful visit, though, ended on a perplexing note of its own. He claims that the Israeli settlers on the adjacent hilltop were dumping their sewage down the hill into Rawabi, and that they were on occasion taking violent action to stop the building. I have since researched his claim and been unable to document what he said. I checked with a number of sources, including Rabbis for Human Rights, and no one was aware of such instances. So does Al Masri want peace? Is he having awful experiences with settlers that no one is even noticing? Or did he make this up for his own political purposes, putting an entirely different cast on this visit?

And that's when I realized; the more I learn about Israel, the better I see the real picture of what's happening down on the ground, the more perplexed I become.

It echoed the way I felt last Friday as I listened to Abbas at the United Nations. He renounced violence. He called for talks with Israel based on the '67 borders. And he talked of the occupation of the last 63 years. Not since 1967 - since the founding of the state of Israel, implying the occupation includes Tel Aviv and Haifa. So - is he a sincere partner for peace, ready to take the risks that peace will require? Or something more dangerous? What are his people hearing as he speaks? A call to turn away from violence or a code that this is one more step to delegitimize Israel?

It's all Ben Gurion's fault. When he helped write the Megillat HaAtzmaut, he wrote something so eternal, so beautiful, that our efforts to fulfill its promise are challenging and messy. Listen:

ERETZ-ISRAEL [(Hebrew) - the Land of Israel, Palestine] was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.

Ben Gurion called it the Scroll of Independence. He meant it to stand next to our other sacred scrolls, to start a new era of Biblical history. He connects us to our past, and invokes the sacred calling of the Jewish people.

ACCORDINGLY WE, MEMBERS OF THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL, ... ARE HERE ASSEMBLED ON THE DAY OF THE TERMINATION OF THE BRITISH MANDATE OVER ERETZ-ISRAEL AND ... HEREBY DECLARE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A JEWISH STATE IN ERETZ-ISRAEL, TO BE KNOWN AS THE STATE OF ISRAEL.

It's that one sentence - declare the establishment of a Jewish state - that creates all the perplexity, all the challenges. If it is a Jewish state, then it is something different, other, than any other state in the world. The connection between peoplehood and religion, between faith and ethnicity, is invoked and becomes formative.

A Midrash: As God was preparing to give the Torah to Moses, the angels argued. They said: why would you give the beautiful and perfect gift of Torah to a human? They come from dust and return to dust. God, sitting in God's throne on high, called Moses forward and said: defend your gift. So Moses thought for a moment and then arose. Master of the Universe, how can you keep Torah here in Heaven where its words cannot even be fulfilled? What do the angels, who never eat, know of hunger? How can the forbidden animals ever mean anything to them? What do the angels, who lack sexual desire, know of passion? How can they understand the desires of the adulterer? How can the angels, who never tire, understand the meaning of Shabbat? And so the angels were silenced.

Torah means nothing when it is a platonic ideal, held on high outside the world. Torah means something when its words, its values and ideals, are brought into this world, when we through our efforts work to make this world a holy place.

For two thousand years we yearned for Israel. Now we are blessed with the reality. And the reality means taking the ideals of two thousand years and bringing them into the messiness of reality.

It was in 1924, 20 years or so into settlement of Israel, that the first Jewish burglar was arrested by a Jewish policeman. The Labor paper Davar called it a symptom of normalization. In an interview with the burglar, he claimed to a Jewish pioneer!!

For the perplexed among us, we cannot turn our back on Israel because the nation fails to be perfect. Quite the reverse. We turn towards Israel because there we see a people wrestling with all the challenges this world has and struggling to make real the values and ideals of our people. We sometimes see bigotry - like the guy in my cousin's barber shop who thinks Ethiopians aren't real Jews. Other times we see a country where the army has some of the most thoughtful and sophisticated ethical rules of engagement in the history of warfare. And where politicians sometimes are arrested for corruption. And where the Supreme Court regularly quotes Jewish sources and is steeped in rabbinic ethics.

This is a responsibility for those who are perplexed. We have to study those basic values about dignity of human life, about pursuing peace, even the ways in which war can be pursued. And sometimes that means speaking in the prophetic voice, and criticizing Israel when we feel our beloved land has gone astray. It means holding Israel

to a high moral standard, much greater than we would ask for other places or nations. Over the summer, Israel passed a law levying civil penalties against those who engage in boycotts against the settlers. Though I wouldn't participate in such a boycott, my American sensibilities scream at this abridgment of free speech. I argued with a few Israelis about this law and what an awful idea it was in the hopes of changing their opinion. Sometimes we are called upon to speak out when we feel Israel has missed the mark.

Other times those of us who are perplexed need to defend Israel. And Israel needs us as much as it ever has. This summer, my grandmother passed away. So I flew to Des Moines to officiate at her funeral. While there, my Dad found the one vegetarian restaurant in all of Iowa where I could eat and where my vegan aunt could eat. We walked into the restaurant and saw a big sign saying: Divest from Apartheid Israel.

Closer to home, last year longshoremen in Oakland refused to unload an Israeli ship for no reason other it being an Israeli ship. We cannot stand idly by while these organized international efforts to isolate and delegitimize Israel go on. We have to educate our family and friends, our non-Jewish neighbors and business associates, so that people see the reality of Israel and the perplexing time and place in which that country sits.

Most importantly though, those who are perplexed are willing to listen. When we were slaves to Pharaoh, Pharaoh's hatred and stubbornness infected the Jewish soul. We mirrored the same arrogance and stubbornness and lack of faith back to Moses and God. Just as abused children risk mirroring their parent's behavior, the ancient Israelites learned terrible things from Pharaoh. There are many actors, locally and internationally, who hate us and seek to delegitimize us. They shout us down at every opportunity and they refuse to listen. They are filled with anger. We risk mirroring their behavior when we yell and shout at one another, when we delegitimize this group or refuse to pay attention to anyone from that group. We are emulating our enemies when our response is angry and vitriolic and designed to silence the other.

Those who are perplexed, by contrast, know there is always more to learn. And so we are ready to listen even after we have formed conclusions. We are firm in our ideals and our passion for Israel, but always ready to admit that someone else may inspire us or help us learn. Shma Yisrael - Listen, Israel, is a sometimes forgotten commandment that those of us who are perplexed make an effort to fulfill.

We know that in Judaism there are arguments that are destructive, designed to hurt and damage. From such arguments we turn away decisively. There are times - like those who call for divestment from Israel - when there is nothing left to be said. But we also know that there are arguments rooted in serving God. I believe the argument between the prophets - those who feel called upon to be a moral voice for Israel and the Jewish people - and the defenders - those who want to protect Israel at all costs - is such an argument.

We need this new party, this new lobbying group. Because Israel really does need us, prophets and defenders both. The real danger to Israel right now from American Jews is lack of interest. If the American Jewish community loses interest in Israel, then Israel is REALLY in trouble. It's hard to talk about Israel at Kol Emeth. I am worried about who will be upset depending on which position I take. If we all retreat to our corners, it's a disaster. One of the key reasons younger people are becoming uninterested in Israel is because talking about it can be such a minefield. But we have to be able to talk; we have to have the courage to speak, but also to listen.

So it's time to start something new at Kol Emeth. The Party of the Perplexed, people who love Israel and are smart enough to know they don't have all the answers. A party willing to listen to one another, to learn from one another, and a party willing to disagree with another. A group of people who donate to Israeli causes, who look past the headlines to deep issues in Israeli society like those around economic issues or around religious pluralism. A party committed to regular travel to Israel, to go to a place at once foreign and also home. A party willing to love Israel and the Jewish people with their flaws as well as their strengths.

For 2000 years we have hoped. That hope still lives, the hope of a strong, secure Israel with a deep moral compass that influences all her actions. I want to invite us to rise now. To rise together, realizing that we have a multiplicity of opinion about Israel in this room, but that we all together are looking for ways to love Israel, to care for Israel, and to inspire others to share that love with us. So let's join together, the party of the perplexed, in singing Hatikva:

