

One of the debates that took place on the web yesterday and today was whether or not any or even some of my colleagues would be incorporating the untimely passing of Steve Jobs into their Yom Kippur sermons. Even some of you pondered if I personally would be mentioning it over Yom Kippur. I, like many, was caught off guard by the news of his passing, even though many of us knew it was a strong possibility given Mr. Job's recent health woes.

After learning of his death, in a Facebook post I commented how Mr. Job's passing was for Generation X like the passing of Walt Disney must have been for the Baby Boomers. The inventions that Steve Jobs either created or inspired have forever radically changed how we interact both with technology and with each other.

I distinctly remember my family's first computer, an Apple IIe, and how I fell in love with all things Apple. I then spent the majority of my life in the PC world, but because Steve created a culture where our technology is now more than a just a tool, it is also a lifestyle, I have for the most part, returned to Apple.

So it was with sadness that I read of Steve's death on my iPad, which has a strange beauty to it, if you think about it. However I should mention, I don't merely use my iPad to read eulogies, I also use it to watch YouTube clips, read the comics, and of course, do that most ubiquitous of all internet activities, share jokes.

One joke that recently came my way begins with that most common of settings, a bar. In it, a well-known anti-Semite walks into a bar and is about to order a drink when he sees a guy close by with a kipa, tzitzit, and peyos. He doesn't have to be an Einstein to know that this guy is Jewish. So he shouts over to the bartender so everyone can hear, "Drinks for everyone in here bartender, but not for that Jew over there."

Soon after the drinks have been handed out, he notices that the Jewish guy is smiling, and

waves to him, saying, “Thank you.”

This infuriates him and in a loud voice, he once again orders drinks for everyone except the Jew. But, as before, this does not seem to worry the Jewish guy who continues to smile, and again says, “Thank you.”

So the man says to the barman, “What’s the matter with that Jew?” I’ve ordered two rounds of drinks for everyone in the bar except him, and all he does is smile and thank me. Is he nuts?

“Nope,” replies the bartender. “He owns the place.”

We laugh because, as Jews, one of our favorite brands of humor comes from our ability to outwit our enemies. Joseph Telushkin in his book on Jewish Humor wrote, “As a rule, Jews have joked about anti-Semitism only when they were too weak to fight it. In the first half of this century when American Jewry was politically weak and more vulnerable to Jew-hatred, an enormous body of jokes ridiculing anti-Semites circulated.”

But as Telushkin goes on to argue, “Jokes like these are rarely told today by Jews, because the type of discrimination they describe generally has been eliminated. Jews can pretty much eat or live where they want and, except for a few exclusive clubs, swim and play golf wherever they want.”¹ Although I am not sure how many open country clubs would welcome me if they could see my golf game. But I digress.

I agree with Telushkin. Even for me, growing up the buckle of the Bible Belt in Texas, I experienced very little anti-Semitism. There was the occasional misunderstanding or misinformation, but rarely was there blatant anti-Semitism.

The only real incident that comes to mind is when I would almost get into fist-fights

¹ Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph, Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say about the Jews, New York: Quill, 1992, pgs 108-109.

during Marching Band Season. Now keep in mind, there are three religions in Texas: God, football, and marching band, and heaven help us when those three intersect. My musical career began with the violin when I was in elementary school, but because there was no orchestra in middle school, I switched to playing the clarinet, which I played through high school.

During my time in High School, I can proudly say I was in one of the best marching bands in the state and in the nation. We came in second at Bands of America Grand Nationals by 500ths of a point, but I'm not bitter about it ... much.

During those many Friday night football games, yes your rabbi spent most of his Shabbat evenings in high school at football games; I would inevitably run into a bit of trouble. On occasion I would almost get into fights with the saxophone section because I would refuse to rise for the prayer before the game. Keep in mind; this was in public school, yet the prayers were almost invariably in the name of someone else's religion.

So instead of standing, I would sit as a form of protest, which did not win me over too many friends from the saxophone section. Don't worry, these incidents did not turn me into an anti-Saxite. I just wish they would have left me and my little peaceful protest alone instead of trying to pick fights with me over it.

Unfortunately even in peaceful protests today like those taking place in New York City, there is always going to be improper blame placed upon entities who are not necessarily responsible or perhaps even have anything to do with the matter at hand. I mention this because I noticed in the supposed protest against large corporations and banks, I noticed a picture of someone who is holding up a sign blaming Israel for the world's problems today. And with all the vitriol out there today, it is hard not to think of current criticism towards Israel of not having at least some grounding in anti-Semitic traditions.

This is not to say Israel does not have its problems and challenges. Just recently an article circulated from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, though over the web, written by Ruth Eglash about a fight between a modern Orthodox girls school in Beit Shemesh and the more militant Haredi who also reside there.

According to the article², the opening of this school resulted in verbal assaults from the it's ultra-Orthodox neighbors. In response to this, a representative from the mostly American modern-orthodox movement was quoted as saying, It is "a microcosm, some say, of the larger religious-secular conflict in Israel. What is happening here is a microcosm of what could happen nationwide, and our unwillingness to yield before the violence and threats should serve as a model form the rest of the country." These are the words of Dov Lipman, who is now a leader of the Modern Orthodox Community in Jerusalem, but before then, resided in Maryland.

This battle not only rages in certain neighborhoods, but is now also being fought on buses. Some communities even now have gender-segregated buses, "which Israel's Supreme Court has ruled are illegal."³

Internal fighting aside, Israel also has a demographic challenge. As is illustrated in May 2009 when Michael Oren, Israel's ambassador to the United States, wrote an article in Commentary Magazine pointing out the issue of "Arab Demographic Threat" as one of "Seven Existential Threats" facing Israel. In the article, Ambassador Oren argued, "Even if the minimalist interpretation is largely correct, it cannot alter a situation in which Israeli Arabs currently constitute one-fifth of the country's population—one-quarter of the population under age 19—and in which the West Bank now contains at least 2 million Arabs. Israel, the Jewish State, is predicated on a decisive and stable Jewish majority of at least 70 percent. Any lower

² JTA.org "School battle escalates religious clash in Jerusalem suburb" 10-03-11.

³ JTA.org "School battle escalates religious clash in Jerusalem suburb" 10-03-11.

than that and Israel will have to decide between being a Jewish state and a democratic state. If it chooses democracy, then Israel as a Jewish state will cease to exist. If it remains officially Jewish, then the state will face an unprecedented level of international isolation, including sanctions, that might prove fatal".⁴

Then there are the external challenges. Israel continues to have real security issues as well. Not with standing the challenges it faces with Syria and a nuclear Iran, Israel is also facing cooling relations with Turkey and one of its peace partners, Egypt. Bret Stephens writing for the Wall Street Journal noted, "(Israel) is surrounded on all sides by enemies who are aggressively committed to its destruction ... Consider the month that Israel just had. (Last month) Turkey's prime minister announced that Turkish warships would escort future Gaza-bound flotillas, and thousands of hooligans stormed and nearly sacked the Israeli embassy in Cairo."⁵

Of course these only skim the surface. Many of these external issues are much more complex than we would initially believe. And there are even those who argue, that Israel bears far too much of the blame and the burden for its growing isolation. In his article for the New Republic Yossi Klein HaLevi wrote, with regards to Turkey, "Prime Minister Erdogan began dismantling the Israeli-Turkish alliance well before the flotilla incident, which he then seized as a pretext to sever ties with Israel: his goal is not to restore Israeli-Turkish relations but to bolster his image in the Muslim world as the leader who humiliated Israel."⁶

And then there is the Palestinian United Nations bid. This bid, which was inspired in part by the Arab Spring movement that has toppled dictators in Egypt and Libya, has emboldened Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas to go to the U.N. to seek a declaration of Statehood,

⁴ <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/viewarticle.cfm/seven-existential-threats-15124>

⁵ WSJ.com "Israel's Predicament" 09-13-2011.

⁶ The New Republic "No Apologies: Israel Isn't to Blame for Its Growing Isolation" by Yossi Klein HaLevi 09-19-2011.

which is currently under U.N. Security Council review. Though a threatened U.S. veto will most likely kill the bid. It is still a very powerful symbolic gesture that may speed up the peace efforts as some believe or may work to further undermine them as others believe.

There is also the problem that many of my generation and younger do not have the same connections to Israel. For example, for those who are of my generation, we have never known an Israel that was not strong. We have never known an Israel that was invaded by a foreign nation. Instead, we have only known Israel as an occupying force, a Goliath rather than a David, which tends to skew our view of the Holy Land in part because it is part of American tradition to root for the underdog, or at least the perceived underdog. Which means there is a generation of Jews growing up who feel more profoundly towards Palestinians than Israelis.

But this is not to say all hope is lost. Israel, as I have spoken about in the past, is at a crossroads. Israel is a firmly independent country with nearly half of all the world's Jews residing there. I firmly believe, despite some rhetoric, that the United States is fully committed to Israel as well. And why shouldn't it be? In an article from the New York Post, Arthur Herman writes, "The United States has always looked to Israel as a monument of democracy and stability in a region where there's been little of either; uncertainties in the wake of the Arab Spring only add to that value."⁷

He continues, "Still, the value of the Israeli military to American interests goes deeper. Its joint ventures with the U.S. military have been essential in developing such high-tech weaponry as missiles, drones and Tactical High Energy Laser Systems."⁸

"So who needs Israel? We do. Our military and defense industries and even our biggest

⁷ New York Post, "Why We Need Israel" by Arthur Herman 09-19-2011.

⁸ Ibid.

high-tech companies all depend on a strong and independent Israel.”⁹

There is other good news as well. In a debate from Penn State scholar Efram Inbar argued, “Israel’s strong vibrant economy is a result of wise economic policies—stressing market values and adapting to globalization. These policies, once a source of domestic discord, are no longer hotly debated as almost all Israelis agree that capitalism is the best way to create further wealth. A strong economy is, of course, important to the Israeli society’s ability to withstand the protracted conflict with its neighbors. Currently all economic indices indicate bright prospects despite continuous security problems.”¹⁰

Israel is still at a significant military advantage over its enemies and will be for the foreseeable future. Its economy also had its credit rating recently upgraded, which of course is in stark contrast to so many other economies out there today. But Israel still needs us as well.

So what can we do? The first thing to do is to stay informed. I do believe there is a general bias against Israel. Which means it is all the more important to seek out alternate sources of information. One of the great resources we have in the Reform world is ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America. Our congregation has an ARZA committee that has programs dedicated to disseminating information about what is actually transpiring in Israel.

You can also go their website or to haaretz.com or jpost.com for information as well. What you will find there is not only quite possibly a different narrative of events, but also that there is an ongoing heated discussion about the future of Israel. Israelis are not in agreement about many these issues, and so maybe from their insights we can find our voice as well. For if there is anything we can learn from them is that criticizing Israel’s policies does not have to make us anti-Israel. Just as criticizing American policies does not make us anti-American. But

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <http://www.polisci.upenn.edu/faculty/faculty-articles&papers/IsraelsFuture.pdf>

they do have to be informed criticisms, which sadly most criticisms of Israel are not.

You can also support Israel through the purchase Israeli bonds. You each received packets to fill out. Keep in mind, this is not a charitable donation, but instead an investment, with one of the better rates of return you are going to find out there. Plus they make for great gifts and could be used as great donations to your congregation as well.

And of course you can travel to Israel. What better way to get a sense of what is actually going on the ground. With this in mind, Har Sinai Congregation, in conjunction with our ARZA committee will be taking a congregational trip to Israel in the Spring of 2012. We will be visiting many historical and religious sites as well as receive presentations on the issues facing Israel today. If you are interested, we have links to the trip on the HSC website or you can speak to David Carp or myself for further information.

The reality is, I believe, the time is coming when there will be a Palestinian State. Israel's greatest threat from without is a nuclear Iran, to which Israel is most likely going to develop a policy of deterrence since there does not appear at this time to be a viable way to stop Iran's nuclear ambitions. Israel is also going to have to grapple with the religious extremism creeping into its society, the tide of which is very difficult to hold back without a constitution.

But all of these issues can be overcome. It is a beautiful country with much to celebrate. It is also the only Jewish homeland in the world, a place created out of refuge, but now is a place to celebrate all aspects of Jewish life. Besides Israel has, in my opinion, the best falafel anywhere. And if you don't believe me, join us on our congregational trip, and find out for yourself.

On Yom Kippur we ask this of Adonai our God: May this year not only be a year of growth for us. May this year not only be a year hopefully filled with blessings for us. May it

also be a year of peace and prosperity for us, the United States, for Israel, and for the world entire. May we also grow in our wisdom and understanding of our people's ancient and modern homeland. And may our connections to Israel deepen and strengthen. For may we all find blessing in our continued ties to Israel. Amen

G'mar Chatimah Tova