



“MEET MY FRIEND”

This spring, I got to spend some time with a dear old friend. We have been in touch over the years, but we don't spend tons of time together. This year, we had ten days together. My Dad and Missy got to see her again and I got to introduce her to my kids. They thought she was great, which is good, because really she's more like family than just any old friend.

I hope you don't mind if I spend most of this sermon talking about her. Here's a picture of us.



Oh - do you know her too? And she's amazing right? Since you know her already, I won't go into all of her history. But I do want to talk about her a bit, because lately, I feel like she's getting a raw deal in the media and on college campuses, and in many otherwise open-minded, progressive communities too. Now I'm not going to stand up here and tell you that she's perfect.

But people who don't know her very well have made a judgment about her and that colors everything else they think about her. They talk as if she's pure evil, a country whose only reason to exist is to cause pain and suffering to Palestinians. And a lot of those people judging, even if they wouldn't say it this way, have pretty much decided that my friend, Israel doesn't even have the right exist.

At this moment in history, talking about Israel has gotten very complicated.

If we love Israel and talk about her in glowing terms, as if she's perfect then smart, thoughtful people reject what we've said because they know it simply is not the whole story. There are very serious issues with Israel's government policies today - regarding the Palestinians and internal issues. But if we talk about those very serious problems, some people tell us that we don't love her enough. And they say that we are giving fuel to Israel's enemies. So, people who are on neither extreme just don't have those conversations.

The problem is, if you and I don't talk about her, if we forget how great she is and how important to the Jewish people, even with her issues, then why would anybody else care? So, I want to re-introduce you to my friend. She's awesome.

My friend has been part of the family for, like, forever. This is Abraham:



well, he's a guy acting the part Abraham at the place we visited called Genesis Land. All the way back at the beginning of the Torah God says to Abraham "Lech Lecha - go to the place I will show you," That place - Israel.

Generations later when we were freed from slavery in Egypt we walked 40 years in the wilderness to get to her. I'm telling you, we Jews and Israel go way back! And the evidence is still there, just waiting to be dug up. Volunteering with an archaeological investigation we found pieces of pottery that date to the time of the Maccabees -

Amazing.



For 2000 years after we were expelled from Israel, our people have written poems, songs, and stories of longing about her - 2000 years - dreaming of a time when we would be able to live as a Jewish nation again, not a tiny minority scattered among often inhospitable others. In the 11th century, Judah HaLevi longed for Israel from his home in Spain saying, "My heart is in the East and I am at the edge of the West. Then how can I taste what I eat, how can I enjoy it?" We have ached for this friend for as long as we have been a people. We are family in the deepest sense.

Since Judah haLevi brought it up - my friend makes great food - from the standard falafel and shwarma to my new favorite shakshuka:



Farmers markets may be a new fad over here



but Israel has had them forever.



Amazing fresh fruit and vegetables grown with the drip irrigation system Israel created and shared with the world, a system that protects the earth's resources while producing food. In Israel, food, the land, the people all connected and interdependent, concepts we're beginning to put into practice in our country too.

True friends take pride in each other's accomplishments, so let me brag about my friend a little. Only Silicon Valley holds more high tech companies and startups than Israel and think about that - the US has 40 times as many people! Israel's population is only 1/1000 of the world's but in only 68 years she has produced 12 Nobel prize winners, has the most museums and produces the most scientific papers per capita in the world.

Last week someone told me they have to swallow a pill with a camera in it to track their digestive disease.



That pill was invented in Israel. So was much of what makes your home computer and your cell phone possible, and voicemail. The older folks in the room will remember AOL's instant messenger - my friend Israel made that too.

My friend is awesome because in addition to being smart and scrappy, she also cares about others and devotes real resources to helping. Contrary to what some say, I don't believe that being successful in business is all it takes to be great. When there's a crisis outside of Israel, she is among the first to send people, equipment, and assistance. In recent years when a terrible earthquake struck Nepal



when severe flooding hit Serbia and Bosnia, even here in America, when fires burned out of control this year in Washington State and Louisiana struggled under massive floods, my friend sent help.

My friend also has a great sense of humor - check out this guy we saw on Purim in Jerusalem.



If I were only to talk about her talents and accomplishments, you smart people would stop listening because you know as well as I do that there are big problems too. So, as George Washington says in the musical Hamilton, "Can I be real a second, for just a millisecond?"



Not just him, though. Israel is the world's leader in medical clowning.



I do not agree with the settlements and I do not agree with the occupation of the Palestinians. It is wrong and it corrupts our Jewish soul. As Shimon Peres, alav hashalom, Israel's brilliant statesman and general who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994 said this: "Israel is not just a territorial homeland; it is a permanent moral commitment. The Jewish people have never sought to dominate another people..."

Great empires that once dominated the Jewish people have disappeared from history; yet we survive. What force has sustained us? We have placed morality above physical might. The key to Israel's permanence remains the moral judgment of its leaders, for that is the highest degree of wisdom." If a friend goes down that wrong path in life, do we not love her enough to tell her?

Since 2004, Israel's Dream Doctor Program has been training and setting professional standards for therapeutic clowning that are internationally recognized.

At the same time - I do not see much evidence that the Palestinians are looking for peace either. And I do believe that Israel has the absolute right to defend herself against terrorism and attacks. I do not pretend to know how to get to a negotiated peace and I do not put all the responsibility on Israel but I have cared about her for so long that I have to tell her when I think she is wrong. And the occupation is wrong.

But we know that it is not all laughs for my friend Israel.



And the way that the ultra-Orthodox have gained a strangle hold over religious life in Israel is also wrong. My friend is actually very diverse - there are Israeli Jews who are Orthodox, who are Reform, who are secular; there are Israeli Christians and Israeli

Muslims. There is a vibrant feminist community and many men who are part of it. But today in Israel, like in much of the world, the most repressive and narrow voices are the ones that scream the loudest and get heard. And the voices of pluralism, tolerance, and respect for diversity often get drowned out.

This struggle takes shape today at Judaism's holiest site, the Kotel or Western Wall, where the Ultra-Orthodox continue to stand in the way of what the Israeli government has legally affirmed - that Jewish women should be able to pray and read from Torah at our holiest place, groups of men and women praying together if they wish. A bit farther to the right of what you can see in this picture is a part of the wall that's not considered a synagogue as the main part is. This Spring my family stood together, male and female, to say a prayer. That spot, I'm told, has since been occupied by the Ultra-Orthodox and now, just six months later, we would be harassed if we tried to pray there.

I'm so proud of the URJ - our Reform movement for taking up this fight. It is symbolic and it is important for the soul of Israel, for my friend's soul. I know you'll hear more in the coming year about the campaign for Equality at Israel's Holiest Site.

So, yes, my friend has problems and I am deeply saddened by some of the choices she has made. And yes, as someone who has known her and loved her for such a long time it is my responsibility, our responsibility as Jews around the world, to push her toward right, moral, just choices as our tradition demands.

But she's also an absolutely incredible country - in real ways helping humanity advance faster and more boldly than most other countries in the world. She needs to make some changes and we who love her need to insist on them - for her sake and ours. But, let's not for a moment believe that her existence is anything short of a miracle. She is Beautiful,



Strong



Ancient and Modern



And she is Family



Shana Tova.