“A Day Never To Forget”

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The childhood memory that probably shaped who I am more than any single event I can think of event happened 40 years tomorrow in 1973.

I was 12 years old at the time, and I think I only had two concerns back then: One was getting mom to take me down to the Albertsons Grocery Store so I could check the comic rack to see if I could find latest issue of Superman (Issue 271 was coming out that week and with it, the reappearance of super-villain Braniac). My other concern was watching the “Ya Gotta Believe” New York Mets make their second improbable run to the World Series.

Life was good.

But then came the morning of Yom Kippur 1973 (October 6th). I can guarantee you, my enthusiasm for going to shul was no greater than any other kid my age. In fact, since it was a Saturday, I was probably bitterly disappointed because that meant I couldn’t watch cartoons that morning. This was my typical Saturday morning: Bugs Bunny at 8:00, Yogi’s Gang at 8:30, Super friends at 9:00 AM.

That morning, I remember being woken up to the sound of the radio in my parent’s bedroom. It was louder than usual. I knocked and the look of concern on their faces as they both hovered around the small clock radio was something I would never forget. They had a concerned looked, concerned in a way I never saw my parents before. They were listening to reports that a coalition of Arab states- Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Jordan- had launched a surprise attack on Israeli positions. Israel had, indeed, been caught by complete surprise. Egyptian forces had advanced virtually unopposed through the Sinai Peninsula. Syria had made significant gains on the Golan Heights. Reports were that Israeli casualties were mounting. In fact, in that three week period of war, Israel lost nearly 3,000 men and women, almost 9,000 wounded. (Percentage wise, if that number was applied to recent operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, it would be the U.S. equivalent of losing 300,000 American soldiers.)

Today, historians view the war as a tactical victory for Israel. However, while after 3 days Israel had mobilized most of its forces and successfully halted the offensive, the war was a stunning and devastating psychological blow to Israelis and, by extension, American Jews. To Israelis, the trauma of the Yom Kippur way has shaped Israel’s defense calculus and to a great extent, its foreign policy even since. And for American Jews, there is now a feeling of helplessness and concern whenever Israel faces danger and an existential threat.

The Yom Kippur War and the image of my parents have been on my mind a lot lately. Because in 2010, after much cajoling on the part of Fred Pollock, Ted and Shelley Kanner, and Stephanie and David Abramowitz and our then new AIPAC Synagogue Initiative Director Josh Karsh, I finally relented and went to my first AIPAC Policy conference. It has been an incredible journey these past four years, from being in the Roosevelt Room of the White House meeting with top Presidential officials and have conversations with them regarding the Administration’s U.S./Israel relationship, to being at a joint session of Congress hearing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speak, to developing great friendships with our West Virginia Congressional delegation (now visiting their offices more often than I visit my beloved Hilton Head Island!), to speaking before 12,000 people in Washington about what we can to make a difference, to now preparing with Marilyn for a trip to Israel with Senator and Mrs. Joe Manchin.

Quite a journey.

And while this has been an incredible few years, my passion and concern for Israel, as the countless op-ed pieces I would write in the Charleston Gazette and before that letters to the editor in the Oregonian, can all be traced to that day I saw the look on my parent’s faces in 1973. I have never forgotten that image. I remember how scared I felt that day and I began to realize how important Israel was to my family and to my people.

And if my passion has grown even more of late, it is because I remember how things were for Israel just a few years ago in 2010 when I attended my first AIPAC Policy Conference in DC. I can tell you the world has changed dramatically in just four short years.

It feels like 1973.

In 2010, Hosni Mubarak was President of Egypt and Israel had with Egypt what was famously called the “peace border”, the greatest peace dividend of the 1978 Camp David Accords. Do you know how many Israeli troops were on the Sinai border in 2010? Zero. Do you know what was the Israeli military contingency plan for the Suez in the event of a war with Egypt? Trick question: they didn’t have one in 2010. Stability was the operative word when we looked at the Israeli-Egyptian border.

In 2010, Bashar Al Asad was firmly in place as leader of Syria. No friend of Israel, surely, but Syria was a country Israel that could effectively plan for and deter against. In fact in 2007, a suspected Syrian nuclear reactor was effectively taken out along the Euphrates River in northeastern Syria, an attack that embarrassed Asad and jolted his military. He was on notice and did not react because he knew what an Israeli counter response would look like. In 2010, no large scale war with Israel would be launched without Syria as one of main nations involved like she was in 1973. In 2010, Syria was of no significant concern to Israel. Again, stability on that border.

In 2010, Jordan was solid ally, a stabilizing force of good in the region and a partner with Israel and moderate Palestinians. King Abdullah was a true friend and someone the U.S. and Israel could turn to, work with, and find common interests. Stability.

In 2010, Iran was of serious concern but had a relatively small pile of nuclear material. We knew of just one nuclear facility in Natanse. Our policy toward Iran was that we wanted to engage with them in bilateral talks and there was still a good deal of question regarding their nuclear ambitions. Sanctions were effectively hurting their economy and the thinking was that this would cause them to negotiate and ultimately abandon their nuclear program.

Now, look at what has happened in just four years.

The Arab spring has forced us (the US and Israel) to completely rethink foreign policy and the military strategy we have created in the last 40 years. While the peace treaty with Egypt continues to exist and the Sinai remains a demilitarized zone, there is no longer a “peace border” along the Sinai, not after what we have witnesses these last few years.

For the first time in 40 years, Israel is now spending millions and committing troops to secure that border. The Gaza has always been a challenge but part of Israel’s security assurances were in knowing that the Egyptian military had a common interest in preventing Hamas from replenishing their missiles and that they would be instrumental in stopping the flow. That situation is vastly uncertain now; Egypt has its own concerns.

To Israel’s east, Jordan is staggering under the weight of refugees pouring in from Syria. King Abdullah still views Israel as a vital regional ally in the Middle East and is a good friend. There is full diplomatic, economic and cultural relations between the two countries. The Jordan/Israel relationship is the model for how a new Middle East could look. But if the Arab spring spreads to Jordan and there is growing concern that it will as her economy teeters, that relationship could change quickly and dramatically. Look no further than what has happened to Israel’s relationship with Turkey. Syria. What was once a quiet border has 7,000 Jihadists streaming over the border from Lebanon as well as members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Iran now brags that Syria is Iran’s border with Israel. Assad is maintaining control over a rump state but it is hard to imagine Syria ever reconstituting itself into a cohesive and stable nation. This will be, at best, a failed state, no matter who ultimately wins. And with the introduction of chemical weapons, Israelis have legitimate concern that those types of weapons could one day come not just from Syria, but that they will make their way into Lebanon and into the hands of Hezbollah.

Lebanon, despite assurances in 2009 from United Nations and her “observers”, Hezbollah has gone from having 20,000 rockets aimed at Israel’s northern towns and villages to 70,000 missiles.

And Iran. The primary reason Israel’s defense costs and concerns have increased dramatically is because of Iran. Iran’s raw uranium reserves now total over 4,400 tons. New nuclear facilities, including ones deep underground, have been confirmed. Inspectors from the I.A.E.A. are allowed in. Officials in this country and throughout the world acknowledge that despite our best efforts, despite unprecedented sanctions, the “break out” time required for Iran to produce a nuclear device has dramatically shortened from years to months. Just in the past 3 months, over 2000 centrifuges have been installed, enriching uranium 3 to 5 times faster. Military bases feared to be the sites of a weaponization program are off limits to inspectors. And the new moderate government of Iran who won their election in June saying they want to talk? They were sworn in in August, we are in September, and there are still no scheduled talks.

All this and I haven’t talked about the Israeli-Palestinian issue. The negotiations that are taking place in secret can, hopefully, prove fruitful but the challenge here is as great as ever. Not much has changed. And a failure to produce meaningful progress on this front could lead to the collapse of an already weakened Palestinian Authority, bringing unrest in the territories. We see what the Arab Spring has created so far in the region; what do you think will happen when that spreads to the West Bank?

If you are a Jew who believes in the importance of Israel to our physical, emotional and spiritual psyche, you cannot help but feel as concerned and as frightened as my parents were in 1973. We have no clue what to expect next week in that region, let alone this coming year.

But there is a big difference between 1973 and 2013. And that is my message for tonight.

In 1973, the war was fought by Israelis using primarily French armaments. Yes, the Nixon administration rushed an airlift of military hardware, but only when Israel had turned the battle in their favor. Our Defense Dept. and State Dept. both opposed supplying Israel with weapons. There was no close relationship between the U.S. and Israel like there is today. It is hard to believe that the strongest statement that President Nixon could muster during that war is “American stands by its friend and Israel is one of the U.S. friends.”

Today, with each successive president, most particularly Clinton, Bush and Obama, Israel is not “one” of the U.S. friends. Israel is one of our closest allies and considered a major strategic partner. Political leaders regularly refer to the “unbreakable and unshakable bond between the U.S. and Israel” and how it runs deeper than any treaty and grounded in shared values, principles and traditions. Today, the U.S. Israel friendship is one of the most multi-faceted and continuously strengthening relationships between any two countries in the world. In a time of great uncertainty on a level not seen since 1973, I don’t feel at all the same way as I did in 1973 because it is unbelievably comforting to know that the relationship between Israel and the U.S. is the closest it has ever been.

And there is a reason for that.

It is because I’ve been taught in four years we can do something. More than just watching the news. More than just wringing our hands. More than just sharing our concerns among ourselves. More than just forwarding articles to friends who are equally concerned. Today, there is nothing more important than developing relationships with our members of Congress and sharing our concerns for Israel with them. That has been the change these past 40 years. Picking up the phone and saying to our officials “I support Israel”. Writing e-mails thanking them for their vote. Reaching out to their aides. Giving them a heads up when a piece of important legislative that affects the U.S. Israel relationship is coming up. Visiting their offices in DC. Inviting them to speak in our communities and offering our opinions in a respectful and helpful manner. And thanking them and letting them know we appreciate all they do for all they do for the US/Israel friendship.

The same time it takes someone to read an op-ed piece and forward it to a like-minded friend, a person can reach out to a congressional office. And ask my daughter Zahava, who interned in Washington this summer, or anyone that has worked on the Hill, those e-mails, letters, visits, and calls are sledgehammers on our members of congress’ thinking. Ask a congressman or women this past week if the volume of letters and calls they received from constituents hasn’t figured into their thinking regarding U.S. involvement in Syria.

I was in Washington lobbying for the American-Israel relationship almost all this week. It was a serious time and there was a lot to discuss with our members of Congress. Three appointments went for over an hour. I went because I am deeply concerned about the challenges Israel faces today. I am also concerned about the introduction of chemical weapons, but unlike 1973, I didn’t go with a feeling of helplessness… or leave that way… because we can channel our concerns into action and there is nothing we can do as a community for the safety and security of Israel more than building relationships with our members of congress and their staff and speaking with them on the issues that concern Israel. Everyone in this room can do that. It starts with your first call, it continues with your first letter, and it deepens with your first trip to a congressional office.

Let me tell you, I have a very healthy ego (you have to be if you are a rabbi). And yes, ego plays a role for me in going to DC. I have to be honest: you do feel important. You feel like a macher. But trust me, this involvement in the US/Israel relationship is not about ego; it is about psyche. My very being was shaped by that moment in 1973, just like the generation before that was shaped by 1948. I remember as my dad explained what the Egyptian Army breaching Israeli defenses meant, what Syria almost breaking through Israel’s defense in the Golan meant, what the terrible military casualties meant. A United States who had little interest in helping Israel and only ordered a full scale strategic airlift operation to deliver weapons and supplies, only after Israel had finally gained the upper hand.

When I see the unrest in the Middle East today, like many of you, that feeling of concern, that “what will Israel do as things continue to deteriorate?” is still there but I now feel I have a way to change that. We have the ability to be proactive, to do something and that is to make sure that the U.S. always stands with Israel. That despite immigration reform, health care, jobs, energy, infrastructure and all the key issues that affect this country and that garnish the most attention, that the importance of U.S./Israel relationship remains strong, bi-partisan, and yes, uppermost in the minds of leaders who matter.

Only you and I can do that.

I leave you tonight with this. In the 1940’s a group of rabbis and Jewish leaders begged, pleaded to meet with FDR about helping the Jews of Europe. Reports were coming out on what was happening to Jews in Europe.

Roosevelt never met with them.

Flash forward to March 1948. Israel was not yet a state and Jewish leaders were again lobbying the president, this time to recognize the emerging Jewish nation. Truman, on advice from his State Department, was not budging. In fact George Marshall, his secretary of state, argued vociferously that we should not recognize a Jewish. It wasn’t in US national interests. We are dependent on Arab oil. This new country would not be able to defend herself. We would have to come to their rescue since Jews can’t fight. George Marshall even said to Truman, “you recognize this Jewish state, I won’t vote for you in November.” And upon counsel from his cabinet, Truman had no interest in recognizing a Jewish State. Indeed. How would a Jewish state advance our national interests?

The leader of the Zionist movement, Dr. Chaim Weizman, was desperately trying to get an audience with the President to make his case. No such meeting. Jewish leaders who also couldn’t see Truman found out about a business partner and old friend of Harry Truman, Eddie Jacobson, and approached him to lobby Truman for a meeting with Weizman. Truman had grown increasingly irritated by lobbying from Zionists leaders, had too much on his plate, and had issued instructions to his staff that he didn’t want to see any more Zionist spokesmen. Jacobson came to Truman and said to him “I have a hero. He is the greatest Jew alive. I’m talking about Chaim Weizman. He is an old man and very sick and he has traveled thousands of miles to see you, and now you’re putting him off. This isn’t like you, Harry.”

Truman met with Weizmann.

The U.S. was the first country to recognize Israel.

Forty years ago, I saw on my parent’s faces vulnerability and helplessness regarding Israel and her future. And with what is going on in that region today, from Hezbollah in the south to Hamas in the west, from chemical weapons in Syria to nuclear capability with Iran, many of us feel the same way.

But there is a difference between 1973 and 2013 and that is that we can all become Eddie Jacobsons. It takes time. It takes effort but it something you and I can do, every day. Israel’s security gains nothing from you reading the latest from Charles Krauthammer tomorrow and forwarding it to a friend. But through conversations and correspondence with our members of Congress, through developing relationship with people who can help us maintain the friendship, we can move mountains.

If the U.S. continues to remain Israel’s closest ally, it will be because of us. And if the US continues to stand together with the Jewish State of Israel, then there will be no 1973 again. We will always walk with a confidence knowing that Israel will weather any storm and crisis because her greatest friend in America.

May this be G-d’s will.

Amen