Rosh Hashana 5775 (Day 2)

Rabbi Victor Urecki

Congregation B’nai Jacob

Charleston, West Virginia

“The Sermon With A Warning Label”

 This is the first sermon I know that actually comes with a listener warning. That warning is this:

 *What you are about to hear about Israel may deeply offend some of you. Adult language about Israel, her society and policies follow which may be too intense for supporters of the Jewish State. Listener discretion is advised.*

I ask those who do find it offensive to please remain in your seats until the second portion of the sermon.

Here goes.

I have issues with Israel and I am telling you this because we are family and friends. I am deeply disturbed by the rise of religious fanaticism that is unchecked and continues to erode the unity of that country. When I was in Israel, I spoke to people and covering the spectrum, they are unanimous in their outraged for the ultra-religious; how many of them won’t serve in the army; how they live off government entitlements; how they look with disdain at anyone who is not observant; how they make life difficult for the majority of Israelis; how they control Jewish life, from the corrupt ways they manage the dietary laws in the State to who they consider to be Jewish and who is allowed to marry.

 These are the same folks that throw chairs and debris when Jewish women come to pray at the Western Wall and who throw rocks at those who enter their neighborhood immodestly. And they get away with all this because the government seems beholden to them and powerless to stop them.

 And I am deeply bothered by settlement activity. Just this month, land in the disputed territories was appropriated by the Israeli government in reaction for the three boys who were kidnapped and murdered. Like many others, this bothers me. Settlements are a constant impediment that makes the ability to ever reach an agreement harder. I am not naïve. I have now been to Israel. I saw settlements and I understand where the great majority of them are situated. Over 80% are in areas that have already been agreed will be in areas Israel will appropriate for security needs in return for “land swaps.’’ I get that. I also get that, often, these announcements are politically motivated to appeal to a base. Just like in any democracy, there is a political angle to things. And these announcements often go nowhere. Just like in this country, a project is announced, goes public, gets discussed, certain groups challenge the site based on a whole range of reasons (from environmental to neighborhood concerns), and the land gets tied up in court for months, if not years. Just like America. But the timing of these announcements often embroils the region and upset our allies. That bothers me.

 Speaking of allies, while I don’t care much about the feelings of our allies in Europe, I do care about the U.S./Israel relationship and, frankly, it is irksome at times how the Israeli government treats her friend, the U.S. This has nothing to do with President versus Prime Minister; this is Israeli leadership and how they sometime forget that they are the junior partner. America stands solidly with Israel: financial, militarily and emotionally. When the world turns her back on the Jewish State, America stands shoulder to shoulder with her. During the latest Gaza conflict, it was the US, partnering with Israel, that made Iron Dome a reality, a missile defense system that saving hundreds, if not thousands of Israelis. This is an extraordinary friendship that I cannot express in words. That relationship means a lot to me as a Jew and as a citizen of this country.

 Yet, sometimes, Israel does things that embarrass her good friend in the world arena. It could be in the form of a settlement announcement at the worst possible moment, caught spying, or simply blindsiding us and we find out about it after the fact. I can say this because I have now heard off the record and from democrats and republicans in Washington how they “just don’t get how Israel could do that to her friend”; and you know, I agree. Friends don’t do that, especially one as close as Israel is to this country.

 And you know, it also bothers me that Israel is not more proactive for peace. I know all about overtures Israel has made in the past: unprecedented settlement freezes, easing of security restrictions, prisoner releases, removal of checkpoints. I know all that. But as an American, I also know that Israel has dragged its feet on moves that successive administrations have pleaded with Israel to do to help strengthen the moderate forces in the region. There have been times when Israel could have done things that may have made direct talks possible but their refusal doomed them to failure before they began.

 And I also am frightened and disturbed by the growing discrimination problems that Arab faces in Israel. Not in the disputed territories; in Israel proper. Arabs in Israel have more freedom and economic opportunity in Israel than any place in the Middle East and I say that without hesitation and challenge anyone to disagree. But Arabs also face discrimination as a minority in Israel and that is not right. It is a problem, it is a growing problem and this bothers me.

 I don’t mean to offend, but these are some issues that disturb me regarding Israel.

End of part one. Thanks for staying so far.

Now, for those who enjoyed the first part and found nothing troubling with my sermon so far, hang on. I ask that you now to remain in your seat for the second part which may be offensive to you. The second part also comes with this warning:

*Adult language about Israel, her society and policies follow which may be too intense for critics of the Jewish State. Listener discretion is advised.*

 Here is part two.

 I care more for Israel now and I want to advocate for Israel more than ever. And if you were one who resonated to any of the things I mentioned earlier and have grown distant to Israel in recent years as a result, felt uncomfortable standing up for her during the Gaza conflict, I find that more troubling. I find that more upsetting and I suggest you do what I do and I say this with complete respect:

 Put your big boy pants on.

 Put your big girl panties on.

 And grow up.

 Israel is a country like any other democratic country. It has cultural clashes, political dynamics, religious tension, and unbelievable geo-political challenges; and it has flaws like any other country. It is also not Disneyland and doesn’t live in region called the Magic Kingdom.

 It is, however, the singular Jewish homeland.

 Israel is national homeland of the Jewish people. It is the only place in the world where Jews control their own destiny and are not a minority. Where we are not guests. Where we can practice or not practice but where a majority of the society understands the cultural beats of our people. Where Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur doesn’t have to be explained to neighbors. Where Jewish history is not a footnote but context to existence. Where history is not lived but written. Where our values, our religion, and our history are alive and proudly celebrated.

 I am sorry, but Israel doesn’t have to justify its existence to anyone.

 I am getting so tired of hearing: “I can’t support Israel anymore.” What does that even mean? How anyone Jews say that? How can anyone have a problem with supporting and vociferously so the right of a people, our people, to self-determination in our ancestral homeland? Every people deserves a homeland but us? Every people deserve the right to live in safety and security but us? How can you not want to advocate for a Jewish State, a Jewish state capable of determining its fate and destiny? How can one have angst supporting Zionism, the only democratic nationalistic movement of the 20th century that succeeded. Let me repeat that: the ***only*** democratic nationalistic movement of the 20th century that succeeded.

You have a problem supporting Israel? You have a problem supporting the most liberal western country in the Middle East, a shining democratic oasis surrounded by 22 countries who are, let us say, “human rights challenged”, whose populations overwhelms Israelis by nearly 30 to 1 and do not even acknowledge her very existence.

 You have a problem with a society that is producing some of the most technologically advanced medical, computer and scientific breakthroughs not just in the Middle East but in the world. And for the world. The only nation on the planet that has more trees than when it was created, that Arab LGBT’s flee to for safety, that allows more freedom for Arabs than any other place in the Middle East. Who does more good for more people and under the most difficult circumstances than any country on the planet.

 You have a problem supporting Israel? The more I see what is wrong with the Middle East, the more I see what is right about Israel. Israel has problems but it is not the problem in the Middle East.

Israel is the solution.

 Let me be honest. I started my talk this morning that way for a reason. Because I grow impatient with those who say: You know, you can criticize Israel and still be pro-Israel.” As if to say that those of us who take an active role and advocate for a strong U.S./Israel relationship blindly support Israel. That is such an over simplification of our views and an incredible shirking of responsibility on the part of that person. Just as being pro-israel doesn’t mean you can’t criticize, criticizing Israel does not mean you are exempt from helping Israel.

 That is just a convenient excuse.

 I never tell anyone to suppress their views on Israeli policy. Never have. Never will. And nor do I. And nor does anyone in the pro-Israel movement or at least no one that matters. Do you think, for example, AIPAC is an echo chamber, where we all sit in rapt awe of everything Israel does, and where any disagreements on what is happening on the ground are silenced? The only people who say that are those who have never attended a single Policy Conference, a breakout session or a program like the one we have next week.

The beginning of this month, I was with almost 300 reform, conservative, and orthodox rabbis at the annual AIPAC Rabbinic Symposium. Do you think there was no questioning of settlements, peace overtures or lack thereof, the problems with the ultra orthodox or Israel’s response during the Gaza conflict? Be serious.

 I have no issue with criticism but I do have a problem with criticism without support and I have a problem with those who talk about being pro-Israel but who do nothing. Who do not advocate, who don’t support Federated or Hadassah, who do not help us lobby in Washington, who do not attend pro-Israel programs and who do not become activists. In light of all we witnessed this summer with anti-Semitism throughout Europe, people calling for the eradication of Israel and Zionists, how can anyone sit on the hands and have a problem supporting the freest, most democratic country in the Middle East? How can you not be a proud Zionist and want to support the only democratic nationalist movement of the 20th century that succeeded?

 I have no difficulty whatsoever advocating for a state created by Jews, and which is thriving today as an economic, scientific, military and technological juggernaut; the center of a vibrant intellectual and religious culture; the homeland of an extraordinarily resilient people – us.

 Israel is a flawed nation just like any other nation, but Israel is amazing. As Charles Krauthammer once said: Israel is the only nation on earth that inhabits the same land, bears the same name, speaks the same language, and worships the same G-d that it did 3000 years ago.”

 Miraculous.

 Why would I not want to support that? Why would I not want that country to have closest of relationships with the greatest democracy, the most remarkable country on earth, the United States? Why would I not want to defend her against the pernicious boycott divestiture and sanction movement? Why would I not want to see to it that Israel has the qualitative military edge it needs to protect herself? Why would I want Israel to face the existential threat of a nuclear Iran alone? Why would I not want to attend the AIPAC Policy Conference this March and help get that message to our elected leaders?

 Why, for heaven’s sake, would I have any angst in supporting our Jewish state?

 Israel is not a utopia, it is not always right, and it is not always smart. But it is a Jewish State and I believe in the right of my people to have a state and I want to further educate myself and others in a calm, rational, and passionate way. Next to G-d and Torah, there is nothing more important than understanding and supporting Israel.

 The world is not a utopia either; it is filled with dangerous players and there is little to indicate that we can somehow create a “transformative ending” for the Middle East. It is going to take time, it is going to take patience, and things are not going to change by adopting the attitude of “if only.” You know what “if only” is? If only Israel removed settlements; if only Israel removed the barrier fence; if only Israel negotiated with Hamas; if only Israel didn’t always defend her citizens.

Dream on.

The core issues: land, Jerusalem, refugees, security, a contiguous Palestine will be resolved not by a policy of “if only’’ but when the reality of a Jewish State living in peace and security is finally acknowledged by the Arab world and, as we saw this summer, by the world

 Until then, I will shake my head at certain Israeli domestic policies, sigh at settlement activity that I can explain but I get tired of doing because I feel they cause more international problems than they are worth, and I will bite my lip when Israel seems to make decisions or statements that force us to work hard to narrow the space between the U.S. and Israel.

 But you know, I get over it real quick. This is not a real tough problem for me. As I said, I have no angst and no less zeal for Israel today. If you do, I feel bad for you because I get it. We have a Jewish State, a remarkable Jewish State, and if we don’t realize what a miracle we are witnessing each day with her existence, then we do not deserve to witness other miracles this year.

 Am Yisrael Chai. The People of Israel live!

 Amen