

## “This is Not a Hobby”

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Charleston, West Virginia  
First Day Roshanah 2011/5772

Anyone who knows me or spends as much as five minutes with me discovers I have a hobby, a pretty all-consuming hobby: Comic Books. I have been reading and collecting comics for almost 45 years, have thousands upon thousands of books, an entire room devoted to my love of what we like to call “graphic novels” or “illustrative American literature”. I bring comics to the office every day and when I have a free moment I will make a cup of coffee and read a comic. I even brought a comic book into the Roosevelt Room of the White House last year! It is on display in my comic book room with the words “This comic book visited the White House with me in May 2010”.

Yes, it is obsessive; it is overwhelming and all consuming of my free time. And my parents who never threw them out and Marilyn who never threw **me** out, deserve a lot of credit for putting up with me and this part of my life.

A few days ago, someone came up to me after my 6<sup>th</sup> trip to Washington, D.C. in a little over a year, all to study the issues in the Middle East, prepare to

go to Congress or the White House on behalf of Israel and the American-Israel friendship. That person, a strong supporter of Israel and very pleased knowing his rabbi is so involved said to me: “Man, this has become quite a new hobby for you.”

No.

Comic Books are my hobby.

What I doing now as an advocate for the American- Israel relationship is a *passion*.

Being involved with deepening the American-Israel relationship, reaching out in friendship to our members of Congress (whether Republican or Democrat), learning and developing skills on how to effectively communicate, learn about the issues affecting Israel and our relationship in a non-partisan way, and seeking out programs for the community to broaden and create more understanding of the challenges Israel faces is not a hobby. It is a passion, it is a joy, and it gives me a personal feeling that I am doing something of absolute vital importance for the survival of the Jewish State. In fact, short of actually making aliyah, working on behalf of the American-Israel friendship is the most important thing you and I can do as Jews living in the Diaspora.

I choose this morning to speak about this because as much as I love to talk about matter of the

spirit, as much as I love speaking about G-d and Torah, life and human relationships, we need to continue to grow our presence as a committed Zionist congregation. This is a critical time in the Middle East and for the future of the Jewish state. My intention is not to stir controversy this morning but, hopefully, to get you talking around the holiday table this afternoon about Israel, not to create tension but get more involved not in this passion.

We have in our shul and in our community, a large and broad range of support for Israel, and that is a great thing. But many of us still fall into the left-right, democrat/ republican, Likud/ Labor/ Kadima, settlements/ peace process, Obama/Anyone BUT Obama world. But if we want to really help Israel be safe and secure, if we want to truly maintain the unbreakable and unshakeable friendship between the Jewish state and the United States, we have got to move beyond party loyalty, philosophies, and ideologies. If we want to do good for Israel at a critical time in her history, we need to be learning about the real issues and how we can make a difference, learning how to effectively reach out to those in Washington who make a difference, creating the kind of positive energy that sees to it that a Jewish state, our spiritual and ancestral remains safe and secure.

Today is not about politics and it is not about a hobby. I love supporting Israel; her existence trumps any and all other considerations for me. Supporting

Israel is the bright double yellow line in my life. It focuses me on which lane I need to be in. And I keep a safe driving distance away from ideological and political considerations.

I have to clarify this before moving on for those who may continue to be under the wrong impression. Support for Israel somehow is misunderstood to mean one must support everything her government does. I have been told: “how can you be so passionate when there are aspects of the Israel geopolitical approach, and day to day governance that you don’t support?”

And that’s true. I don’t hide my concerns nor the difficulties I have with Israeli policies. I don’t fully agree with the current government of Israel and how they have approached the Middle East peace process. I don’t agree with Israel regarding settlement activity; I view them as creating a negative environment toward finding a solution and a challenging and vexing problem for Israeli society in general. That’s my opinion and I also fully appreciate that my views are considered naïve to other strong supporters of Israel. So be it.

But what everyone needs to take a step back and understand is that those issues do not factor in the slightest when it comes to enthusiastically supporting the fundamental importance of a Jewish state. And if a person on either side of the debate can’t see

beyond that, I believe they are blinded by politics or ideology.

Look, I am not politically in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's camp. If I was a citizen of Israel, I'll be honest, he would probably not be my first choice. I love his gift for communication, especially to an American audience, but I don't see eye to eye with him or his party on the best way to move forward in Israel's quest for peace.

However, the biggest thrill for me this year was hearing him speak at the AIPAC Policy Conference Banquet. One of the biggest thrills of ***my entire life*** was being in the House chamber for a joint session of Congress and hearing him speak this May. I still pause with joy and emotion when I think of that day. I was in the same room, twice in less than then 24 hours with Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of the State of Israel! What a blessing!

You see, that's why I am speaking about this to you today. I feel the need to get this message out because we are at a crossroads in the Middle East. Israel will need to have a friend stand by her and that is the United States and we have a huge role to play in that. What is playing out in the United Nations with the unilateral declaration of Palestinian Statehood, what is happening in Egypt, in Turkey, in Gaza, in Lebanon, in Syria and yes, especially Iran is of such importance and urgency. And you and I, supporters of

the existence of a Jewish state, need to put politics and philosophies aside when it comes to Israel. We are not about Israeli politics. We are not about deciding the contours of a Jewish state, but about preserving the existence of one. We are and as a congregation must continue to grow as supporters of the State of Israel. And that holds regardless of who is prime minister and the direction of Israel's politics at any given moment.

To help Israel, governed center-right or center-left, we need to ensure she has supporters like the United States. She needs allies when under attack and she needs friends when pursuing peace. And it brings me joy to help solidify that friendship between this Democracy and the only democracy in that part of the world, Israel. And with the way things are developing in the world, and way the "Arab Spring" is evolving into a very uncertain "Middle East Summer", we need more in our community to help strengthen that friendship for what may lie ahead.

I have never been to Israel. I know. I need to go. But the fact is, I am connected to Israel; as Jews, we all are deeply connected to Israel, whether we live there or even if we never step foot there. We have a relationship with Israel, a rich and enduring relationship with our ancestral and spiritual homeland. For Jews, Israel is on our minds and in our actions every single day of our lives. Virtually every page of our siddurim (prayer books) reference Israel and

Jerusalem and has done so for hundreds upon hundreds of years. We are reminded of Israel at every Jewish wedding when we break a glass (that commemorates the destruction of the Holy Temple), at the end of the High Holidays when we sound the shofar and say “Next Year in Jerusalem” and when we close the seder on Pesach with “Next Year in Jerusalem”.

Israel is front and center of Jewish existence.

And that special connection means we transcend politics. It is not about who is Prime Minister or who is right about the direction of that country’s future. It is about making sure Israel continues to survive in a very dangerous and hostile neighborhood.

And it doesn’t matter who is in power in Washington, democrats or republicans, not when it comes to Israel. We have friends who support Israel on both sides of the political aisle, whether we agree with them on other issues or not. And for that to continue, they need to hear our gratitude and understand our passion.

My passion has led me to come to you today because this is a critical time. We need the relationship with America and Israel to be stronger than ever because the world is not becoming a friendlier place for a Jewish state, not with Iran, not with a Arab world enroiled, not with an economic

crisis that benefits no country but can hurt Israel at a time when her security needs are about to dramatically increase. I stand before you today because we need to expand the tent of those who understand the importance of a safe and secure Jewish state, broaden that support and narrow the emotional rancor that seems to permeate our body politic today. This is about passion, not politics; it is about partnership, not partisanship.

I have heard: “Boy, rabbi, you have really gotten political!”

No, sir, I have not.

I have no party loyalties when it comes to Israel. I worked my tail off to create a positive experience for Representative Nick Joe Rahall (D) and I am going to work my tail off to when Congressman David McKinley (R) comes for a visit next month and make his trip just as memorable. I have a blank sheet on this pulpit when it comes to political issues of the day. This is not a bully pulpit for a political agenda. It doesn't matter to me when I am in Washington what Senators Joe Manchin and Jay Rockefeller, Representatives Shelley Moore Capito, Nick Joe Rahall and David McKinley feel about the deficit, the jobs bill, taxes, healthcare, medicare, social security, or climate change. When I go to Washington, I am there to communicate my concern and passion for Israel, quietly and respectfully discuss ideas with



those who can make a difference. And at all times, I am there to strengthen America's relationship to the Jewish state. I don't see any other political issues. Privately, I am as political as anyone else, maybe more so, but not with Israel.

This is **not** political. It is about love for a land that we, as Jews, are connected to spiritual, emotionally and historically.

Thankfully, I am in a congregation that has always felt that way and is encouraging me and I am now encouraging you to join me. I say this from the bottom of my heart. For the first time in my life, I feel I am doing something meaningful for my connection to Zionism and Israel. Short of actually living in Israel, being a part of strengthening the American-Israel friendship is the most important thing that I, that **we** can do. And believe me, I know about doing "things". You think writing letters to the local newspaper criticizing a particular editorial about Israel helps Israel? I've been there, done that. You think writing op-ed pieces defending Israel does the trick? I've been riding that horse for twenty years. You think forwarding a wonderful op-ed from some brilliant pundit to your friends does it? You *really* think so? Get real! Such actions convince no one. They accomplish nothing. It is all part of an "echo chamber", preaching to the choir. They change no one's mind.

But going to Washington, meeting with our congressional leaders, attending programs that are designed to deepen our understanding – now, *that* helps us create a pro-Israel environment. Being committed to bringing people to our shul to a “meet and greet” with our congresswoman Shelley Moore Capito and letting her talk about Israel and treating her with respect and kindness does. That is how our passion for Israel is channeled and it is the greatest way, the absolute greatest way to make a difference and feel the emotional connection to Israel.

I take nothing away from Hadassah, the JNF, or the Jewish Federation of North America. They are great organizations, absolutely essential, and they deserve our support and generosity. To paraphrase the words of Prime Minister Netanyahu to our President, to be a part of their good work for Jews around the world and Israel is a badge of honor. Did you know that National Federated raises over 300 million dollars for Israel? That is a staggering number for such a small Jewish population and I am proud to be a participant in their endeavors. And so should you.

But you know, I am now even prouder to be part of a group of dedicated people who close any space, narrow any gap, between the friendship of our two countries, who go to Washington each year and make the case for Israel’s security needs in Congress. We rationally and calmly works behind ensure that Israel

maintains its qualitative military edge in a very unstable and dangerous world. I am proud to be part of people who raise 3.075 **billion** dollars in direct foreign assistance to Israel. That is what we do for Israel.

That is channeled passion and that is what a lot of you are looking for and would love to be a part of. Join us this year.

Folks, there are a lot of important issues in the world today, and they represent legitimate concerns of both the left and the right in this country. And good people on both sides can and should argue for their causes. And G-d bless them but this synagogue is not the address for that type of advocacy. But this shul is the singular place where the issue of Israel is always front and center and it transcends partisan politics.

We are not about settlements, the peace process, or which candidates are better for Israel. We are about Zionism, the right of self-determination for Jews. Sadly, that fight is never over. We are a Zionist community committed to the dream of self-determination for our people. We have a right to argue about policy but we don't have a right to walk away. We walk together in support for the friendship between this country and our Jewish homeland. And I ask you this year, as good as last year was, to do more this year and join those of us who support, who

raise awareness, and who reach out to those who matter in a quiet but very effective manner.

This is going to be a deeply intense and emotionally draining political year. It is not going to be divisive here. We are not about candidates, policy or parties. We are about learning and listening to people who know about the issues, explaining the issues of the Middle East to those in power, encouraging those who support Israel to continue to do so, offering those who are seeking office a chance to begin to flesh out their views on Israel and the Middle East, and for those who haven't been as supportive as we may have wanted but desire to dialogue, we will be the people who are here with an extended arms in friendship.

This is no hobby. This is a passion of mine and I hope you will join us. We have guests coming who will knock your socks off and show you what real Middle East discourse is all about. Wait until you hear Gaith al-Omari (Executive Director of the American Task Force on Palestine) in dialogue with Jonathan Schanzer (Vice President of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies) in December. And wait until you go to Policy Conference with us in March!

This is not a hobby. This is who I am as a Jew and this is my hope for the New Year. I pray it will be yours.

Amen

