

Here are some stories about Israel you may have missed in the American media:

- Over the last year or more, about 2,000 Syrian refugees, mostly children, were whisked across the border with Israel in the early morning to receive medical treatment in Ramat HaGolan and slipped back home after dark. Israel is also a staging area for Israeli and other international aid groups getting humanitarian supplies to Syrian villages along the border. Truckloads of food, flour, baby formula, shoes, fuel, construction materials, antibiotics and a few vehicles and mules have been moved from Israel to the Syrians on the border. Israel coordinates this effort with Syrian doctors, the United Nations, and the Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees, an organization based in New York. (It is not germane to this talk but the Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees is headed by a Jewish woman who is the daughter of Holocaust survivors.) Israel certainly has strategic interests in this effort but its

concern is also humanitarian. Many of the supplies are donated by Israeli non-governmental organizations. Shadi Martini, a Syrian living in the U.S., is the director of humanitarian relief for the Multifaith Alliance. When he learned of the Israeli involvement in the relief effort, he said, "It was a very big shock to me. Syrians were brought up to fear Israelis as the devil who wants to kill us and take our land." But, Mr. Martini has now visited Israel five times. He said this: "It has struck a chord with a lot of Syrians. This is supposed to be our enemy," he said. Another Syrian, Avud Dondachi, a refugee living in London, opened a website on which he thanks the Israelis for all they have done.

- On another front, Israel sent a delegation to Greece to provide drugs and medical care at a refugee camp for Syrians there.
- There is more: the Social Work school of Ben Gurion University sends social work students and supervisors to Ethiopia every year to coordinate a health education program to combat tropical diseases and AIDS.

That these stories are not reported in the general media does not necessarily imply an anti-Israel bias. The media reports what is bloody or sensational. These efforts happen quietly and don't sell newspapers.

But these stories are important, not only for the general public to know but also for our own community. Because so many Jews see the stories about conflict and not the stories about great humanitarian acts, their view of Israel becomes skewed. They question their relationship with the Jewish State and its role in their Jewish lives.

I attended the AIPAC – American Israel Public Affairs Committee-Rabbinic Symposium in Washington at the end of August. The Symposium brings together rabbis of all denominations to hear speakers and participate in workshops on a range of subjects, from issues of security to social, political, economic and cultural life in Israel. The leaders of AIPAC are worried. The goal of AIPAC is to represent the

interests of Israel to all levels of the American government, and to foster a strong relationship between the two countries. The founders and primary supporters of AIPAC are American Jews. If the relationship between American Jews and Israel is challenged then AIPAC is threatened and the vital relationship between Israel the United States is threatened.

For people of my generation, the relationship between our community and Israel was assumed: I learned Zionist pioneer songs in Hebrew school; blue boxes were everywhere; we brought dimes to Hebrew school each week – each dime buying a leaf on a tree; 18 dimes buying a whole tree. **The assumption underlying this activity was that there was mutual benefit to the relationship: Israel needed American Jews for financial and political support; American Jews needed Israel to help us maintain Jewish allegiance and pride.** “If you’re worried about your kid being Jewish, just send them to Israel

for a year. They may come back Orthodox; they may stay there. But at least they'll be Jewish.”

These assumptions – the underpinning of AIPAC - worked for a long time. But the relationship has changed from both sides.

- Israel has a strong economy and does not need our financial support in the same way. I must make a caveat to that statement: there are superb Israeli organizations that do excellent work: Yad Lakashish, the sheltered workshop for the poor elderly that supplies our gift shop; JNF builds infrastructure and supports education efforts and Israeli border towns; there are amazing Israeli programs for disabled children; and this list is very long. But it can be difficult to take pride in Israel's start-up culture and make the case for financial support at the same time.

- And American Jews have become more inward focused, concerned more with personal spirituality than with the world Jewish community.

Another challenge to the relationship has come from our very different religious styles, specifically the recent decision not to honor the Kotel Agreement, and putting all conversion into the hands of the ultra-Orthodox - which threatens most Jews-by-choice who might consider Aliyah, including Jews from the Former Soviet Union. Let me tell you about the Kotel Agreement.

- The Kotel is under the supervision of an ultra-Orthodox rabbi. As you look at the Wall from the plaza, the far-left section is the men's section; to the right of that is the women's section; and then, to the right of that, there is a small section called "Robinson's Arch," named after an archaeologist who discovered the remnants of an ancient arch there. Robinson's Arch is an area where Conservative and

Reform Jews can pray with men and women together and can have non-Orthodox ceremonies there. One of our members had a bat mitzvah there a few years ago. The Kotel Agreement was to greatly expand Robinson's Arch, make the entrance more clearly marked, and put the governance of that area into the hands of the Conservative and Reform Movements and the Jewish Agency. That agreement was negotiated and agreed to between the movements, the Agency and the government. Until a few months ago when the government said that it was putting implementation of the agreement on hold indefinitely.

I read two opinions after that happened, both written by Conservative rabbis. Danny Gordis has lived in Jerusalem for 20+ years and heads a right-of-center think tank. He was furious and suggested that American Jews should boycott Israel. David Wolpe is a congregational rabbi in Los Angeles who said that we

should not boycott Israel. Instead we should actively support those organizations who stand for religious equality in Israel, like Women of the Wall. I reject Rabbi Gordis' approach and strongly endorse Rabbi Wolpe's.

I believe we are one Jewish people. What happens to one Jew on the other side of the world affects all of us. I think the fates of the American Jewish community and the Israeli Jewish community are inseparable. The achievements of Israel, the vibrancy of its culture DOES give us pride in being Jewish. It still IS a place where we send our kids to give them a Jewish immersion experience. And Israel DOES need American Jewish support – political support, tourist dollars, and as a model of a different kind of Jewish vibrancy. **The assumptions of the relationship still hold.**

The messiah has not come yet. Israel is not a perfect state and we cannot expect it to be so. There are decisions of Israeli gov-

ernments with which I strongly disagree. But the flowering of our people and our culture is real. Not just the economic vitality and medical achievements; not just the music and dance and art and food; but also, the great humanitarian deeds; the organizations like Yad Lakashish; the units of the IDF that created special programs for soldiers with autism or physical disabilities; the combination of grit and creativity that seems to underpin all Israeli life. We cannot let those policy issues, which may bother us a lot, overshadow the great achievements that come out of the Jewish State.

The relationship needs work. Here's what we're going to do at Temple Judea.

- We are going to follow Rabbi Wolpe's advice: we will bring in a speaker, at least once per year, on the issue of the Conservative and Reform Movements in Israel.

- I have been in touch with the American-Israel Cultural Foundation, a group that sponsors starving Israeli musicians and artists to bring their work to America. We will bring a program of Israeli musicians – they’ll be classical or jazz – to Temple Judea this year.
- I will lead a Temple Judea and Fort Myers delegation to this year’s AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington. If you want to learn about anything Israeli, if you want to hear about Israel from every perspective, then come with me to Policy Conference March 4 – 6. If you think AIPAC only represents one political orientation, you’ll learn otherwise at Policy Conference.
- Temple Judea is going to Israel in May 2019. This is the trip I’ve always wanted to lead. I call it “Back Roads and Out of the Way Places in Israel.” It’s a trip for people who have been 2, 3, 4 times or more and want to see the places and

meet the people that you don't encounter on a first-timer's trip. You'll get information on that trip in a week or two.

- And, of course, we have Zohar. Zohar Ben Hamu is our very own sh'lichah, our emissary from the Jewish Agency for Israel. Zohar, who has been in the States for one month and already learned about evacuating during a hurricane, is working with our children and teenagers, meeting our families, connecting with Israelis in Lee County, and reaching out to the Jewish student group at FGCU. Zohar is here to build an immediate connection between our children and families and Israel and she is already hard at work. (Tomorrow afternoon, at 4:30 during the break, we will have an open conversation with Zohar about her desire to become a sh'lichah and her vision for her work in our congregation.)

All healthy relationships take work; so too does the relationship between American Jews and Israel. We're going to do that work

at Temple Judea. For Israel's sake and ours, it's important to do that work now.