

My friends, during the time of the War Between the States, long political speeches were the norm. On November 19, 1863, Edward Everett delivered a two hour speech dedicating a cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. He was followed by someone invited as an afterthought, the President of the United States, who spoke for no more than three minutes. It is said that President Lincoln was told no one would ever care about or remember a three minute speech. Everett's speech is long forgotten. President Lincoln's became one of the most famous in our nation's history.

Two years ago this month, I stood on America's most famous stage, a stage whose first concert was conducted by none other than Tchaikovsky himself, the main stage of Carnegie Hall. Behind me was my son Evan with his tuba, and the rest of the Cypress Lake Wind Ensemble. My role was to narrate Aaron Copland's magnificent Lincoln Portrait, which concludes as follows:

*Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth president of these United States, is everlasting in the memory of his countrymen. For on the battleground at Gettysburg, this is what he said: He said: **“That from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion. That we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain. That this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.”***

In my opinion, the two greatest orators to occupy the Oval Office in my lifetime were President Kennedy and President Reagan. The following is a critique of neither man; it is simply a factual statement that applies to all modern presidents. They have speechwriters. President Kennedy had Theodore Sorenson, and President Reagan

had Peggy Noonan, but President Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address himself, on the train ride there.

President Lincoln chose his words with great care. “A new birth of freedom” recognized America’s first birth of freedom in 1776. The Emancipation Proclamation was a new birth of freedom in America.

My friends, this Monday and Tuesday nights, and indeed for the entire holiday of Pesach, we remember Israel’s first birth of freedom. I speak of the people Israel and their liberation from Egyptian bondage. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson favored a seal for the newly born United States of America that represented our Jewish birth of freedom, depicting the Israelite slaves crossing to the Red Sea to freedom. Tonight, I say to you that a new birth of freedom for Israel is long overdue.

I use Israel now in a slightly different context, referring not to *am Yisrael*, the nation of Israel, but to *medinat Yisrael*, the state of Israel. I would not be surprised if, upon hearing this, your response is that Israel did have a new birth of freedom, and it happened on May 14, 1948. I say no.

Yes, one of the most decent nations on Earth was born on May 14, 1948, and yes, the citizens of that nation, the State of Israel, enjoy a level of freedom equivalent to that which we Americans enjoy. It is not the citizens of Israel who are not free. It is the State of Israel itself.

Israel was born into a hostile world. Her neighbors immediately set out to destroy her. In an upset as stunning as that of the American Revolution, the fledgling state won her War of Independence. Unlike America, however, that fight for existence continues today. No other nation in the world must defend its very right to exist, and no other

nation in the world must defend herself against neighbors who would rather die with Israel than live in peace with Israel.

Israel is surrounded by nations that are sworn to destroy her. Jordan and Egypt are exceptions, but Egypt's status may well change in the near future. Unlike America and despite her obvious military prowess, Israel is not the most powerful nation in the world. Unlike America, Israel is not protected by our two greatest allies, the Atlantic and the Pacific. Unlike America, the future of the State of Israel is not yet secure.

Recently, the Reform and Conservative movements asked their rabbis to sign a letter urging Congress to continue supporting Israel. One of my dearest friends in the rabbinate—not a local rabbi—urged us not to sign it. I could not sign it quickly enough, and publicly urged my colleagues to do the same. Let me tell you why.

In his Inaugural Address, President Kennedy said the following:

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

Those words reflect who America is as a nation. Those words are true today, and Israel is our friend. If we do not support the survival and success of liberty in Israel, we will no longer be the same United States of America. And to those who favor appeasement of the Arab countries who deny Israel's very right to exist, I offer these words from that same speech: "those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside."

My friends, as we celebrate this week the first birth of freedom for the Jewish people, let us be mindful of the need for a new birth of freedom. Let Israel be free from the unique burden of justifying her own existence. Let her be free from the burden of harming civilians in order to protect her own people because her enemies purposely choose civilian institutions from which to fire their rockets and bombs. Let her be free to pursue more of the incredible technological advances that Israel has given to the world. And at our seder tables, let us pray, my friends, that like government of the people, by the people, and for the people, the State of Israel shall not perish from the earth.