

My friends, this past Sunday through Tuesday was a very exciting and stimulating time for me. I was attending the American Israel Public Affairs Committee Policy Conference. I had heard that the AIPAC Policy Conference was an incredible experience, but as so often happens, the difference between hearing that and experiencing it was the difference between reading a menu and eating dinner. It has to be experienced to be appreciated. I would urge anyone who is interested in Israel-related issues to attend a Policy Conference. I think even those who disagree with AIPAC on policy would find it a very enriching and educational experience.

I speak to you as one of two of the most recognizable delegates to the Conference. Seated with Bob Schuckit, we were so close to the speakers on Monday night that we watched the speakers themselves, not the closed circuit image on the Jumbotron screens. It turns out that Bob and I were on the screen several times, but we did not know that until the next day. The person who told us said that Bob looked “engaged” and I looked “emotional.” As I waited for my plane back to Indiana to board, I told Arlene the Jumbotron story and a young woman next to me at the gate was nodding her head. She said that she recognized me the moment she saw me in the airport. At this time, I ask you to increase the amount of attention you are paying to me to a level commensurate with a rabbi of my public stature.

Thank you.

As powerful as the experience of listening to the Prime Minister speak only feet from us, if the Jumbotron guy said I looked emotional, I think he was referring to a time before the Prime Minister spoke. That's what I want to talk about tonight, when AIPAC made me cry.

Before I get to that, let me say something unrelated but very important. I was not in Washington in time for President Obama's speech to AIPAC, but I made sure to find out what happened. Remember, only three days before the President made a very controversial statement about holding talks based on what he called the 1967 borders. In fact, they were not borders at all, simply armistice lines, but by any name they are indefensible and AIPAC disagrees with the President as strongly as anyone can disagree. When the President walked out to address the Conference, before he uttered a word, he was welcomed with a standing ovation. That is called showing respect for the President of the United States. Unfortunately, the Prime Minister of Israel was not shown the same level of respect. Of course he was welcomed with a standing ovation, but a few people paid to attend the conference just so that they could heckle the Prime Minister during his speech. It was exactly what I was denouncing in my recent talk on disagreement with civility. AIPAC gets an A+—agree with him or not, President Obama is our president and he should be, and was, treated with the respect due the POTUS.

Back on point—part of the program leading up to the Prime Minister’s speech was a video about two soldiers, Staff Sergeant Brian Neuman, United States Army, retired, and Corporal Shahaf Segal, Golani Brigade, IDF, retired. Both had been severely wounded. Sgt. Neuman had lost his left arm in Iraq. He spoke of the challenges he faced and overcame. He spoke of his pride in losing a limb while trying to help give the citizens of Iraq a better life. Part of his incredibly moving story was his gratitude to Israel. The troop carrier he was in when he was injured was protected by special armored tiles invented and manufactured in Israel. Those tiles, he said, saved his life and the lives of who knows how many other American soldiers.

Next on the video was the Cpl. Segal. He was wounded on a mission to arrest terrorists. He spoke about his orders to leave civilians unharmed, which the IDF does do and does so at their own peril given that terrorists are non-uniformed combatants. A fellow soldier was shot, and Cpl. Segal turned to help his friend. The next thing he knew, he was flat on his back. A large caliber round had struck him in the hand and went all the way up his forearm, exiting at his elbow and pulverizing the bones in his forearm. Miraculously, surgery spared him the loss of the arm, but obviously his ability to use it was lost. Today, he works to regain use of the injured arm through therapy.

The video ended. It was very powerful, very moving, and very inspirational. But then something happened that put all reactions over the top. The two

young soldiers were backstage, and they were introduced to the room at that moment. They came out together to a standing ovation.

My friends, that ovation was enough to make you cry. It went on and on and on. The soldiers kept looking at each other, wondering what to do. They would wave, and the room went crazy. They stopped waving, but the ovation went on. They looked at each other in amazement. They tried to wave again, but when they finished, the cheering still did not stop. I turned to Bob and gestured that I was getting choked up, and he nodded back. I promise you that without exaggeration, there was at least three to four minutes of non-stop applause and cheering from the standing crowd. If that does not sound like much, it's because our sense of time tends to overestimate. It was the longest standing ovation I have ever heard. I was very choked up, and it was literally because of the AIPAC delegates, because of the raw emotion of 10,000 plus people standing and cheering for so long for two young, wounded heroes.

And then Cpl. Segal spoke one sentence, a sentence that was not part of his prepared remarks (we could read the teleprompter, so I know he was off text). This is the sentence that really hit me and put tears in my eyes. In beautiful, Israeli-accented English, he said in wonder, "Outside of Israel, there is nowhere in the world that a wounded Israeli soldier could get a welcome like that except in America."

He's right, and it made me cry with pride to be a citizen of the only country outside of Israel that would give him and his American fellow soldier such a welcome.

He's right, and it made me cry with joy to see how much this outpouring of love and support meant to both young heroes. The way America treated returning veterans of the Viet Nam war is a stain on our nation's history. It's being repeated now in Europe, where soldiers returning home are treated like pariahs.

He's right, and it makes my blood boil with fury that so much of the western world would sooner give that welcome to Abbas than to an Israeli soldier.

But not here. Not in the United States of America. Forget about the politics and the politicians for a moment and focus on the soldiers. No matter your feelings about the war, I do not think there is a single person here tonight who would not agree that the men and women on the ground risking their lives to improve the lives of others deserve limitless respect and undying gratitude. And the Israeli soldiers fighting to defend their homeland against those pledged to its destruction deserve the same from their countrymen, from their fellow Jews, and from all who believe that the right to liberty is given by God to all humanity.

My friends, I expected to go the Policy Conference and learn more than I knew when I got there, and that happened. I knew I would have the chance

to actively lobby for Israel on Capital Hill, and I did. It was a powerful experience in its own right. I did not expect, however, to be moved to tears, let alone consider that I would be on the Jumbotron with Bob, looking emotional in front of 10,000 delegates, but that happened too. And it all adds up to one thing. My first AIPAC Policy Conference will not be my last, and I am going to try to make sure that next year, as many of our members as possible come too. I'm sure you know it's important, but it's one thing to read the menu. I want you to see what it's like to actually have dinner.