

My friends, there is an old trick used by public speakers and broadcasters. The trick is to pretend that you are speaking to only one person, not a large audience. Today, it is no trick. Today, with hundreds of people in the synagogue, I am only going to speak to one, single person. I want to speak today on a topic of great importance. I would like to set the stage for this topic by sharing a few things.

The first is that I am part of an email listserve for Conservative rabbis. It was designed to be a forum to exchange ideas, ask questions and discuss issues. The only downside to it was that there were days when so many interesting things were posted that it was easy to spend way too much time reading them. Believe me when I tell you that if a pulpit rabbi has that much time to read emails, that is a rabbi with a staff of assistant rabbis, something I have never desired. *I want to be your rabbi, not send someone else to do it on my behalf.*

These days, it's no longer important. I can barely stand to look at Ravnet lately. It seems as if every other post is about the Presidential election. Our Friday night regulars know that I recently gave a talk about the art of civil disagreement, and that was not the first time I've addressed that topic from this pulpit. Boiled down to one sentence, my premise was the Talmud has disagreements on every page, but never does a rabbi holding one opinion disparage the character or intelligence of a rabbi holding a different opinion. Surely I was inspired to speak on civil disagreement by the courteous, respectful way my colleagues have shared their views on President Obama and Gov. Romney.

To quote one of my favorite classic TV characters, Private Gomer Pyle, "Surprise, surprise, surprise." I have been appalled at the words some of my colleagues have written to other rabbis—some, at all by any means, but some. I won't share a single

example, even anonymously, for to do so would be to demean the rabbinate by the conduct of a few people. Let us simply say that it makes clear that rabbis are nothing if not human and fallible. I will return to this story shortly, after I share another brief tale with you.

As you may know, Congressman Dan Burton is retiring from his seat as Representative of the Fifth Congressional District. No matter what you might think of him as a Congressman, there is a simple truth that cannot be denied, and that is that Congressman Burton was a consistent friend of the State of Israel.

Not long ago, I was contacted by one of the candidates running for his seat. You should only know how much I want to tell you who it was, but I cannot. That would be crossing a line, bringing partisan politics to the pulpit, something I will not do, and a subject I will return to shortly. I met with the candidate. I was not told in advance the subject of the meeting.

When we sat down in my study, we exchanged a few pleasantries and got down to business. The candidate did not ask for either my public support or my private support. The candidate did not ask how to get as many Jewish votes as possible. The candidate did not even ask what the candidate could do on behalf of the Jewish community if elected. The candidate had a question, and only one question: “What do you think is important for me to know about the State of Israel?” Then the candidate took notes until I ran out of things to say, and if you think back to yesterday’s sermon, that could be a pretty long time.

This leads us back to the conclusion of our first story. President Obama’s campaign organized a groups called Rabbis for Obama. I respectfully wrote to my colleagues

on our listserv, 700-800 of them, saying that I thought such a group was a bad idea. The creation of Rabbis for Obama prompted a colleague to announce he was organizing Rabbis for Romney. Knowing I had reacted negatively to Rabbis for Obama, he asked me to join Rabbis for Romney. At that point, I sent out a Tweet, one of those 140 maximum character messages I mentioned yesterday. Here is what I Tweeted:

I don't like the idea of a Rabbis For (any candidate) group. It's an abuse of a sacred title. Leave it out of politics.

I could get very emotional talking about the sanctity of the title Rabbi. I can't talk without fighting to control my emotions about what it means to me to carry the same title as my beloved Rabbi Howard Kahn, זכרנו צדיק לברכה. I think to use the title of Rabbi for partisan political reasons is to deface and defame it. I see it as a form of prostitution. I said so in another social media, Facebook. I soon I had a message from one of my cousins. He wrote:

I agree. A rabbi may be for Obama, but Rabbis for Obama is a no go. I am curious though, cousin. If in your opinion rabbis for Obama is unacceptable, then what about rabbis for a cause such as Israel?

And with that, my friends, we have come to the heart of the matter I want to talk about today. Are my beliefs about leaving the title Rabbi out of partisan politics consistent with my thoughts, and more importantly, my behavior regarding advocacy for Israel?

The short answer is what I wrote back to my cousin, modified slightly so as not to take a partisan stance on a political figure:

First of all, as an American Zionist I believe it is the obligation of every American Jew to advocate for Israel. I made clear to my current congregation that I would be a loud and proud voice for Israel, and that was something they wanted. The key difference between Israel advocacy and Rabbis for X is that support for Israel is non-partisan.

I do the vast majority of my advocacy through AIPAC. Forgive me if I'm telling you what you already know, but AIPAC was created before there was such a thing as a PAC. It is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. As a non-PAC, AIPAC does not rate nor endorse candidates, nor do they fund campaigns. AIPAC stands for a strong relationship between the US and Israel, because that is in the best interests of BOTH nations. AIPAC is completely non-partisan, and unlike an organization like J-Street or Jewish Voice for Peace, AIPAC believes that the policies of the State of Israel should be set by the democratically elected leaders of the State of Israel. So for example, my Israel advocacy would never include membership in a hypothetical Rabbis for Netanyahu, without regard to whether I favor him personally.

The first sentence of my response to my cousin is the core of what I want to say to you today. As your rabbi, today I share with you my belief that every one of us in this sanctuary has a *sacred obligation to advocate for Israel*.

You don't have to do it the way I do it, although I am completely comfortable endorsing AIPAC from the pulpit precisely because it is an non-partisan organization. Those of you who were here last year know that very well. My

sermon on the first day of Rosh Hashanah was devoted not simply to Israel, but specifically to AIPAC. A very dear friend of mine from rabbinical school is very active in Israel advocacy via another group. Sadly, he received a vile hate letter just before Rosh Hashanah. After calling him a series of terrible names, the writer said he actually prays my friend does not live to see another Rosh Hashanah. As disgusting as that is, it does speak to the extreme nature of this other group.

Although we completely disagree on what is best for Israel, I love him as a person. That can be hard, loving someone I know to be a sincere **אוהב ציון**—a lover of Israel, while at the same believing his thinking is wrong enough to be damaging to Israel. But I want to share with you a very powerful thought from Daniel Kutner, the Consul General of Israel to the Mid-Atlantic Region of the United States. As the Talmud says when it wants to indicate that what follows is of great importance, **תא שמע**—come learn:

I fear not the different opinions about Israel, but apathy.

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Do you understand? The Consul General, whose thinking is far more like mine than it is like my friend's, prefers misguided or incorrect advocacy to apathy, and I think I understand why. It is vitally important that Israel issues be on the political agenda in America. I suppose it is as Oscar Wilde once said, "There is only one thing worse than being talked about, and that is *not* being talked about."

And so, my friends, I have come to make the case that *you, individually*, share that sacred obligation to advocate for Israel.

Why is it so important that *you* advocate for Israel? After all, the US-Israel relationship is already strong. My friends, in Washington D.C., battles never stay won. There is always Congressional turnover. In Indiana alone, the retirement of Congressman Burton and the Gubernatorial campaign of Congressman Pence mean that two strong, pro-Israel votes are going to be replaced. Whomever gets those seats will get them for their positions on domestic issues, and they will know that full well. It is up to an educated and articulate pro-Israel community to make sure they understand the importance of the US-Israel relationship, not simply because it is good for Israel, but because it is good for the United States.

Why do *you* have to advocate for Israel? Because in addition to Congressional turnover, there are shifting demographics. Seventy years ago, the Jewish community was almost 4% of the population of the United States. Today, we are barely over 2%. To keep the same raw number of pro-Israel activists, we need a much higher percentage of our community to advocate for Israel. It can't be left to the next person. Israel needs *you*.

Why do *you* have to advocate for Israel? Because 40% of American Jews live in the Northeast, and the Northeast contains less than 20% of Americans. Almost half of America's Jews are part of less than one fifth of America's political constituencies. As Midwestern Jews, as Jewish Hoosiers, it is even more important to have a high percentage of us involved in Israel advocacy.

Why do *you* have to advocate for Israel? The New York Times has an answer. They took a survey that showed when Americans are asked about the most important issues facing the nation, 56% say the economy, 15% say the federal deficit, 14% say health care, 5% say illegal immigration, and 4% say abortion. No foreign

policy issue made the cut at all. I am certainly not suggesting the Israel is the number one issue on America's plate, but it is up to us to make sure that it stays on the plate at all.

Why do *you* have to advocate for Israel? Because there are so many voices coming from morally bankrupt individuals and organizations that try to delegitimize Israel and undermine her right to exist by branding Israel with labels more defamatory than those used for regimes like Iran and North Korea.

Why do *you* have to advocate for Israel? Because of organizations and countries who try to literally put an end to Israel by organizing economic boycotts, despite the fact that as a wholly decent democracy, the only one in the entire region, it is *only* in Israel that women, gay men, lesbians, and even Arab citizens enjoy full human rights. Why are these voices silent with regard to nations in which a woman can be raped and then executed for committing adultery?

That is *almost* my entire case for why *you* have to advocate for Israel. But today is Rosh Hashanah. Today is not a day for a rabbi to try to get his congregation to know more or do more or speak out more, not even for Israel, unless in the process I am also asking you to be a better person and a better Jew. That's what these עשרת ימי תשובה, these Ten Days of Repentance, are all about. So in the interests of being a better person and a better Jew, let me ask but one last time.

Why do *you* have to advocate for Israel? Take a ride over to Hooverwood and you'll see the answer. Go up to Anita Silverman and ask her what she is embroidering on the *tallis* she is making for Izzy's Bat Mitzvah and she'll tell you the answer. Look in the Talmud, in the Tractate Rosh Hashanah and you'll find it in

Rashi, or look in a Midrash on Leviticus, the *Sifra*, and you'll find it there, too. *It is the warp and weft of the fabric of Jewish existence.* כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה—all of Israel is responsible, one for another. As we sit here, blessed to be in America's newly crowned best city in which to live and with no threat of rocket fire from Illinois, Ohio, Kentucky, or Michigan, we cannot abdicate our responsibility to our fellow Jews, our brothers and sisters in the State of Israel.

That is my case. That is my case for why *you*—not the persons on either side of you, not your friend who has family in Israel, not your uncle who used to keep kosher, but *you* must advocate for Israel.

I hope you'll do so by supporting, and more importantly, taking part in AIPAC and AIPAC activities. There are flyers in the lobby inviting you to join me, other Shaarey Tefilla members, and the rest of our Indiana contingent at the AIPAC policy conference in March. I can promise you an unforgettable experience. Do you think you are well informed about Israel related issues? Wait and see how much more you'll know after Policy Conference. Would you like to hear top level speakers discussing issues related to Israel? How do the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Israel sound? And unless there is some unforeseen change, I'm not talking about seeing them on video via satellite. I'm talking about being in the same room with them and 13,000 other pro-Israel delegates. (It is a rather large room.) Whether your political home is on the left or on the right, there will be speakers and fellow delegates from your side of the aisle. In fact, AIPAC Policy Conference may be the only forum *in which there is no aisle*, only bipartisan support for a strong relationship between the US and Israel because it is in the best interests of both nations. And if you want to advocate for Israel, and I mean *truly advocate for Israel*, there is no experience on earth like being seated in

a room on Capital Hill, speaking directly to Senator Coats, to whomever our freshman Senator will be, and to your own Representative from Congress. Not only is that advocacy for Israel at the highest level, but it is positively spine-tingling as an American to be a cog in the machinery of our Republic. That's what happens at AIPAC Policy Conference.

If, for some reason, you think that you would rather lend your voice to J-Street or even Jewish Voice for Peace, I am going to take Consul General Kutner at his word and say that any sort of advocacy for Israel is better than apathy. If you take that route, as has my dear friend Rabbi Brant Rosen, I will know your heart is in the right place. I will believe that your thinking is wrong and that your actions are not helpful to Israel. I will think that in the final analysis, your actions outweigh your good intentions. But just as Rabbi Rosen and I could not disagree more over Israel but still love each other like brothers, I will still love you as your rabbi, and I will be proud that you are not apathetic. Like the Consul General, I will fear not different opinions about Israel, but I do loathe apathy. And I do hope that you will find a comfortable home as an advocate for Israel in the wide open, welcoming tent that is AIPAC.

My friends, I conclude my talk today by asking one final time: Why do *you* have to advocate for Israel? By now, you've heard enough of my answers. This final question will be answered by America's only Independent Senator and observant Jew, Senator Joe Lieberman:

The truth is that the ultimate guarantor of the U.S.-Israel relationship is each of you. It is you, the American people, who from every corner of our country and

every possible demographic definer, take the time to call on your elected leaders to stand with Israel.

By now, my friends, you know to whom I and Senator Lieberman were speaking. It was to *you*. Shanah tovah.