

Philadelphia Chapter of ZOA Gala 2019 – 9/24/19 Guardian of Israel Award Acceptance Speech by Rabbi Hirsch

Good evening and thank you so much for this wonderful honor. I am humbled that I was even considered to receive this award and honestly I originally felt undeserving, but when Steve graciously asked me about accepting, he said one of the reasons he thought of me was because there were not many rabbis around he considered to be pro-Israel. I know that he has high standards and I take that as a great compliment! But I knew then that I had to stand up for Israel; I couldn't say no to that kind of request from Steve and ZOA, so here I am.

ZOA is a vitally important organization, particularly at this critical time for the state of Israel, when Israel is being attacked from all directions -- by enemies that want to destroy us by military means, as well as by political foes like the BDS movement and its army of supporters.

When I gave the benediction at the ZOA gala 2 years ago, I spoke about my grandmother and my step grandmother, both of whom survived Auschwitz along with my grandfather. My other 2 grandparents on my father's side left Poland before the war, but most of their families were wiped out in the Holocaust.

Growing up hearing them talk about the importance of Israel, and how they appreciated the freedoms granted to them in the United States (and Israel) after the war, made a tremendous impression on me about the vital importance of the survival and prosperity of the state of Israel, the United States, and the relationship between these two great countries. Without them, God forbid, my grandparents would basically have had nowhere to go. Four of them emigrated to America, where they found a place that welcomed Jews and gave them freedom of religion and economic opportunity. My step-grandmother found refuge in Israel, where she had the same freedoms and was able to witness and play a significant role in building the Jewish state.

I was also fortunate to spend 4 years studying in yeshiva in Jerusalem. One of my favorite anecdotes from those days related to a story about an experience I had while studying at Yeshivat HaKotel in the Old City of Jerusalem, where the Dean of the Overseas Program, Rabbi Aharon Bina, had a policy to give the American students a half day off each year on Thanksgiving. Two Israeli students complained to Rabbi Avigdor Nebentzal, the Chief Rabbi of the Old City at the time, and demanded he put an end to this practice.

So, Rabbi Nebentzal approached Rabbi Bina and asked him, "What is this Thanksgiving holiday all about?" Rabbi Bina explained that Thanksgiving is a day when Americans gather with family and friends to thank God for giving them America. After thinking about it for a few seconds, Rabbi Nebentzal replied, *Well, then, I think it would be fitting for the Israeli students to celebrate as well, because without America, Israel would not exist!*

I often tell this story to my congregants, because I think it aptly expresses the bond between the United States and Israel, and why we all need the ZOA to maintain and strengthen that connection. I believe it is particularly important to convey this message to the next generation, and I feel a personal responsibility to do so within my congregation, which is primarily comprised of Jewish young adults. They are exposed daily to the widespread anti-Israel sentiment that we encounter in Philadelphia, throughout the United States and the world, and it is imperative that we have ambassadors from the next generation who combat that negative influence.

Sadly, our younger Jewish generation does not always comprehend how important Israel is. They don't have that connection to the Holocaust that we in this room have, nor do they have the in-depth background to rebut the popular but terribly specious notion that someone can be anti-Israel without being antisemitic. They need to realize that for Jews in America, there is one issue which should take top priority in elections: **the candidate must be pro-Israel**. They need to acknowledge that when we stand by Israel, we support freedom and democracy, because Israel is surrounded by countries who persecute anyone who believes differently from them, including our Palestinian neighbors. And they need to learn that when the United Nations votes to single out Israel for condemnation, the nations of the world are turning a blind eye to the egregious violations of international law which take place around the globe, in order to paint Israel in a bad light.

And most of all, our younger generation needs the humility to realize that we cannot judge Israel for being vigilant about security, when we are blessed to make our homes in the safe haven of America, where our families are rarely exposed to the danger that is routine in Israeli life.

None of us would deny that we should be concerned over the recent increase in antisemitic acts here in the US, but at the same time, our country, the United States of America is still the greatest democracy that ever existed, and Jews live here with freedoms we never before had in our history. We must never take any of these things for granted.

Next week, we will celebrate Rosh Hashana, and the very next day, we will observe an obscure and somber day of fasting called Tzom Gedalia, the fast of Gedalia. The fast of Gedalia recalls an event that occurred after the 1st Jerusalem Temple had been set aflame by the Babylonians. We were given one last chance to save Israel and prevent our exile from the land, before, in the words of Maimonides, "the last ember (of hope) flickered out." We failed, and Tzom Gedalia commemorates this failure, which stemmed from the same inadequacy as Tisha B'Av, the collective Jewish day of mourning for the destruction of the Jerusalem and for our subsequent exiles from Israel. Our grave mistake was that we took the land of Israel and that ancient State of Israel for granted.

The Talmud tells us in Tractate Gitin 55b that the central problem regarding these failures was that we didn't take the words of King David seriously – "Ashrei Adam Mefached Tamid" "A successful person is continually concerned that they will lose that which is precious to them." Nothing should have been more precious to us than the land and the state of Israel, and nothing should be more precious to us now.

Back then, we took the security of Israel for granted. This lesson must continue to resonate with us today. We must appreciate the gift that is Israel, and never take for granted the significance of its relationship with its great ally, the United States of America.

May God bless the state of Israel, the United States of America, and the ZOA. And may we have a happy and sweet new year ahead -- a year in which we recommit ourselves to making Israel and their bond with the United States our top priority. Thank you very much.