



May 1, 2019

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

You probably have heard the story of a scorpion on the bank of a river who asked a frog to ferry him to the other side.

"Oh no," the frog said. "You would sting me."

"That's ridiculous," the scorpion replied, "because then I would drown."

Convinced, the frog took the scorpion on his back and began to swim the river. In midstream, the scorpion's lethal urge became too strong and he plunged his stinger into the frog's neck.

The sinking frog groaned, "Why, why?"

The scorpion gave his final shrug and replied, "This is the Middle East."

The story has been used by many veteran politicians, analysts, and strategists, to convey the sense that the Middle East behaves under a different logic than most western countries.

While I believe that the story of the frog and the scorpion could apply to other political complex situations, it certainly does apply to the Middle East, including Israel.

Those who were following the news before and after the last Israeli elections, and especially those who are not familiar with the "Israeli way" of doing politics, couldn't but marvel at the complex scenario of unusual alliances, grandiose promises, and calculating negotiations unfolding before our eyes in only a few days.

Prime Minister Netanyahu won another election and by this coming July he will become the longest sitting Prime Minister of Israel, surpassing all the combined terms of David Ben Gurion, whose party received only 5% of the Israeli vote in the current election.

For many Israelis and American Jews, the reelection of Benjamin Netanyahu is good news. They see in Prime Minister Netanyahu a symbol of a strong Israel, both militarily and economically. For many other Israelis and American Jews, the reelection of Benjamin Netanyahu is bad news. They see in Prime Minister Netanyahu a symbol of a divisive force, someone who has joined forces with political parties and individuals whom they perceive as racists in the best of the scenarios, and as really dangerous in the worst of them. They see in Prime Minister Netanyahu someone who has failed to understand, or even worse, has ignored, the importance that religious pluralism has for American Jewry.

The picture gets even more complex, when you throw into it President Trump and his almost unconditional support for Prime Minister Netanyahu and his policies. For many American Jews, for whom President Trump evokes strong feelings both of admiration and aversion, *the friend of my enemy is my enemy and the enemy of my enemy is my friend.*

I am not a political analyst and on some of these issues my own political views are not defined yet. So, why am I telling you all this?

The reason, and this is a reason over which I do have a strong opinion, is that I believe that the connection of non-Israeli Jews, and especially American Jews to Israel is not only crucial to the survival of Israel in the long term, but also to the long term survival of American Jewry.

I believe we must save American Jewry from the prevailing feeling of inconsequence when it comes to Israel. While I am deeply concerned by the growth of anti-Semitism and Anti-Israel feelings, both from the right and the left, my deepest concern is about the feeling of irrelevance, especially among young liberal American Jews, when it comes to Israel. Simply put: Israel is not an important part of their lives. In other words, they stopped caring.

We can try to understand what happened, what is the cause of this emotional detachment. However, we will do a better job, I believe, if we work together towards creating a connection where it doesn't exist, and rekindling the flame, where that connection existed in the past and is now flickering or extinct.

I would like to suggest two vital steps I believe Jewish organizations in America must take to reverse this feeling of irrelevance and disconnect, which, I repeat, I see as the greatest threat to the survival of Israel and American Jewry in the long term.

First, we need to facilitate to American Jews, including the members in our congregations, multiple ways to connect with the joy, beauty, and history of Israel, including its music, its food, its sports, its films, its dance, its nature, and its language. In other words, we need more parties and less conferences. Words and expressions like *BDS*, *Intifada*, *Hezbollah*, *Iron Dome*, *Iran*, *international politics*, and *existential threat*, are important, but they don't generate joy and connection. Israel should come alive on Synagogue walls, in Conversational Hebrew classes, in Israeli food cooking classes, Israeli film and music festivals, and in Israeli dances.

Second, and I know what I am going to say may not be unanimously popular - criticism of the policies of the State of Israel (including religious, social, and political policies), and of Israeli politicians (including Prime Minister Netanyahu), by American Jews, should be accepted and incorporated by umbrella Jewish organizations as a legitimate way of caring and connecting with Israel. The expression, *my country, right or wrong*, notwithstanding its moral implications, is one American liberal Jews will never embrace, neither when it comes to America nor to Israel, and if given the choice between "love Israel, right or wrong," or check out, they will check out. And this is a course of action, both Israel and American Jewry cannot afford.

Every single American Jew should hear loud and clear that as long as he or she believes that Israel is the State of the Jewish people, he or she has a place around the table and is welcome to the conversation. If American Jews are going to connect to Israel, they are going to connect on their terms, and American Jewish organizations must be ready to embrace them. This is something not only Reform and Conservative Judaism are understanding, but also Modern Orthodoxy, and umbrella Jewish organizations, like AIPAC, and the American Jewish Committee, among others.

To consent to a legitimate connection with Israel that allows criticism of its policies, while at the same time fighting those who negate the right of the Jewish people to the State of

Israel (including BDS), requires intelligence, creativity, bold leadership, perseverance, and love.

And yes, it is not an easy task, but I believe we shall prevail.