

**Rosh Hashanah 5775**  
**September 25, 2015**  
**“I love Israel”**  
**Rabbi Alan B. Lucas**

I love Israel  
 No qualifications  
 No if ands or buts...  
 I love Israel.

I considered a number of ways to begin my comments today:  
 I am frustrated with Israel...  
 I am angry over the recent events in Israel  
 I am depressed when I think of what confronts Israel

I could have begun my comments to you on this most sacred of days with any or all of these – and they would have been equally true, but I chose to begin with a clear and unequivocal expression of love and commitment – why?

Because I don't think we American Jews need encouragement in our anger, our frustration or our anxiety when it comes to the events of these last few months in the Middle East – I have seen ample expression of all of the above. But, I am concerned about your love.

*Sing:* “Do you love me?”  
 “Do I what?”

“You heard me – American Jews... “Do you love me?”  
 Do I love you? For 65 years I raised money for you, bought your Bonds, planted your trees, for 65 years I've prayed for you, worked for you, visited you, organized for you, marched for you, politicked, I've UJA'd and AIPACed and JNF'd for you!

“I know, I know but still “Do you love me?”  
 “Do I love you?”

It's a good question Golda. What does it mean to love Israel? In 2014 what does it mean to love anyone or anything *b'chol levavecha, b'chol nafshecha, u'vechol meodecha* -- “with all of our heart, with all of our soul and with all of our might.”

So I wanted to make it crystal clear at the very outset of these High Holy Days that when it comes to Israel: *sing) “I love you!* Do you? I hope so.

Once upon a time—not so very long ago – everyone loved Israel. Not so today. Today there are Jews who don't love Israel, there are rabbis who don't love Israel! There are a lot of people in the world who seem to hate Israel, and everything she represents. There are protests against Israel. There are votes in the UN against Israel. There are boycotts against Israeli products and Israeli scholars.

In 2014 loving Israel is now an act of identity and solidarity. It has never been more important and never been more challenging.

As many of you know I recently returned with six other members of our congregation from a hastily organized Solidarity Mission to Israel. When we went, the missiles were still flying. It was a quick trip – three days, two nights. When I explained to some people that I would be two nights in Israel and two nights on the plane – some people asked what on earth would compel me to take such a trip? And it forced me to ask myself why in fact I was doing this. To express my solidarity with Israelis; to let them know they were not alone? Yes, of course. To be briefed by experts and to learn firsthand as much as I could learn – yes. To meet with Israelis to hear directly and try and understand what they were going through – yes and yes. But, ultimately it was something much more, as compelling as these reasons were. I sent a tweet, as I was sitting at JFK waiting to board my El Al Flight to Tel Aviv – and it said: “Three days in Israel – because I can, because I want to, because I need to!”

I went to Israel because *I* wanted to be there, because I *needed* to be there. When you are in love that is what you do. When the one whom you love is in danger and alone in the world, you go to them, to be with them. Did you feel that pull; that need to be there this summer? If yes, then you will understand everything I am about to say. If not, we really need to talk.

Sixty-four soldiers were killed in the recent activities that have been called Operation Protective Edge, three of them were *Chayalim Bodedim* – “Lone Soldiers”. Lone Soldiers are young men or women who make *aliyah* without their parents. The Israeli army is like no other. It is such a small country that everyone goes home for Shabbat, the entire army. Not during war – but the rest of the time, they do. Have you heard of an army where every soldier has a cell phone and calls their parents when they are heading into battle? Young men and women come home for Shabbat to the love of their families, a home cooked meal, a chance to have their laundry done. It is such a strange and wonderful arrangement but these lone soldiers are at a serious disadvantage. So, Israel does whatever it can to give them families, to help them navigate their new country, their new language. And it is very sad when one of these *chayalim bodedim* die – for here too the *absence* of family is keenly felt.

Jordan Bensemhoun, 22 years old who had immigrated from his native Lyon in France when he was 16, and now served in the elite Golani infantry brigade, was killed in action in Gaza on Sunday July 22. He was killed when the vehicle he was travelling in was hit by an anti-tank missile. His parents flew in from France for his funeral that was to be held in Ashkelon, his adoptive hometown in Israel. Because Ashkelon is close to Gaza and well within the rage of the Hamas rockets, the Army asked that only those who knew Jordan attend the funeral – for security reasons they did not want a large gathering. They were not overly concerned, after all, he was a *Chayal Boded* - he had no family, few friends – how many people would come anyway?

6,000 people showed up for Jordan Bensemhoun’s funeral! Overwhelmed by this outpouring of love his mother asked, “all these people know my son?” “Yes,” replied the army representative, “we all know your son.”

Love means feeling that connection, that sense of family, that special bond.

Here is the hardest question I got this summer: One of our young people challenged me saying, “Rabbi, is the death of a young Israeli soldier any more tragic than the death of a Palestinian child?” Oy, what a wonderful, precious, terrible question that is. I paused, looked

into her eyes trying to judge the depth of the sincerity that had motivated that question – was it asked in frustration? In anger? In love? It was hard for me to tell. Finally in good rabbinic fashion I answered: “No, and yes.” “No, there is absolutely no difference between the death of a young Israeli and a young Palestinian – they are equally tragic. And yes, there is a difference, for you see – the one is my son and although equal in tragedy – I feel the pain so much more.” “But he is *not* your son!” this young person protested – and I could only respond sadly, “*That* my dear is where we disagree.”

A hasid runs up to his rebbe and proclaims, “Oh rabbi, how I love you!” The rabbi pauses, looks up from his studies, and asks his student – “You love me?” “Oh yes, more than anything, more than life itself!” “Well then,” the rabbi asks, “what hurts me? Where am I in pain?” “How would I possibly know what hurts you?” the puzzled hasid asks. Returning to his studies, the rebbe dismisses his student by saying, “If you do not know what hurts me, you cannot possibly love me.”

When we were in Israel, we met with Rachel Frankel, the mother of Naftali Frankel. Naftali was one of the three boys who was kidnapped and murdered while they were on their way home from yeshiva in early June. You may have read that Israel killed the two Hamas members from Hevron who had abducted and murdered these boys, on Tuesday. For all of us on the trip, our meeting with Rachel was clearly one of the most memorable moments. She is a remarkable woman – to be able to reach out to us in the midst of her suffering and pain – it was hard to fathom. She told us how the news reports first came that her son was kidnapped, “we all prayed for their safe return,” she said, “we just wanted them back in our home, in their bed. We just wanted to hug them again.” Then came the news that they were dead, the funeral, “those 18 days,” she said, “they were filled with the darkest hours but there were also amazing hours.” she added. “We discovered our family, our friends, our community our country, our people. I spoke to people all over the world - in Capetown, in Katmandu, in Australia. There were delegations from all over North America, Europe. People from all over were saying these are not just your boys, these are our children. A soldier who was involved in the search wrote to me saying, “we started out looking for your son and in the process we found ourselves...” Sometimes I ask myself, was this just an illusion? I have this image, “ Rachel went on to say, “ I have this image of a person walking in the dark and its raining and they are stumbling and they are trying to figure out their way. They don’t see anything and then all of a sudden there is lightning and in the lightning they see the reality of their surroundings. I realized it was no illusion – what we saw in the brief bright flash of light was ourselves. “Someone called our home,” she said, “and they told us that in America they are considered a non-affiliated Jew. But I want you to know I am affiliated – I feel your pain and I feel connected to you!”

The tragedy of their loss created a nation united in love. For one brief moment everyone felt her pain. In a country where people argue and debate anything and everything there was a unanimity of love that bound the entire nation into one in their sense of loss and mourning for her son and the other two boys Gilad Shaar and Ayal Yifrah. There is total darkness and then there is a flash of light, a brightness that is everywhere. Sadly, it does not last very long. The world once again is cloaked in darkness, it does not seem to have changed anything but the clarity of what you saw, in that instant – it remains. “All the love we felt during that one brief moment gave so many of us the ability to see what is possible, it enables us to continue to navigate in the darkness that persists.”

In Evanston, Illinois, a rabbi quit his position over his pro-Palestinian activism. Although a rabbi of his congregation for more than 17 years he has increasingly become vocal in his criticism of Israel. He is founder and co-chair of the rabbinic council of the Jewish Voice for Peace a group that promotes boycotts of Israel and even supports the BDS Movement (Boycott, Divest, Sanction) against Israel – a group the Anti-Defamation League called one of the top 10 anti-Semitic groups in America. Ultimately Rabbi Rosen stepped down from his pulpit as he felt he was becoming a divisive force in the life of his synagogue due to his harsh views on Israel.

Do you think he was right to step down? Do you think that it is possible to be a rabbi and be anti-Israel? “Whoa, Rabbi, not so fast – that is an awfully big jump. Are you saying that if you are critical of Israel’s policies you are anti-Israel?” Of course not. But JVP and Rabbi Rosen go way beyond critical. I read all of his postings over the last few years and I was hard pressed to find one nice word about Israel or one harsh word about her enemies. Here is the critical distinction that every Jew has to learn how to make in 2014: between constructive and destructive criticism.

How can we tell one from the other – very simple: (*sing*) “Do you love me?”

Allow me to introduce you to the most dangerous three-letter word in the English language: “But” – B-U-T but!

Some defend Rabbi Rosen and say he is not completely anti-Israel - -look he did condemn Hamas rocket attacks. Here is the actual quote: “We condemn Hamas rocket attacks, **BUT** and then follows with a long list of criticisms of Israel ...”

Whenever someone inserts a “but” in any conversation alarms should instantly go off in your head. “But,” essentially invalidates whatever was said before it, what comes before it was merely a placeholder. “Yes, Shirley is nice, but I don’t like the way she treats her friends, she is two-faced and disloyal...” Do you think she really believes Shirley is nice? Or is her intention to focus on the negative stuff?

When Rabbi Rosen condemns Hamas rocket attacks but...and then goes on to criticize Israel – it is clear that the point of the sentence is the criticism that follows – like Shakespeare’s Antony – he comes to bury Israel, not to praise her.

And too often we are just as guilty of this language trickery. Too many of us who do love Israel can play this game as well. Many of us were quick to condemn the terrible, awful murder of Muhammad Abu Khdeir – the little Palestinian boy who was tortured and burned in an act of hatred and revenge by Israeli zealots – we acknowledged the terrible tragedy it represented – “but,” we said, “of course Palestinians do not condemn these acts the way we do!” If you find yourself speaking like this you are just as guilty, using “but” to sweep away whatever legitimate self-criticism you had allowed yourself. This was bad, you acknowledged, but, they are worse. No! We – and they must learn to speak unequivocally.

A Jew kills an innocent Palestinian child? This was an act that deserved our unqualified condemnation – no ifs, no ands – and certainly no buts – to use it as an opportunity to prove that we are nonetheless better or they are somehow guiltier – diminishes the power of what needs and demands our condemnation.

As Rabbi David Wolpe points out, “When we beat our chests on Yom Kippur, we do not say before God, “But the man in the seat next to me is far worse.” That is not contrition; it is self-justification disguised as repentance. Jews did this. Blind hatred did this. We should look inside, and be ashamed – period.

So how do we distinguish between legitimate even necessary criticism which is an essential element of any healthy and democratic society and illegitimate criticism from those who ultimately seek, not to better us, but to destroy us, or at the very least to delegitimize us?

Allow me at this juncture to say a word to our college students who are here today. Your challenge is especially difficult. My heart goes out to you as you try and navigate the debates and discussions on your campuses. Everywhere you turn you are met with voices critical of Israel and her policies. Never has it been lonelier to be a lover of Israel on almost any American college campus.

For many of our young people they look at us, *the older generation* and feel we are too uncritical in our acceptance of policies and actions that they feel are deserving of criticism. To be a college student today too often means to be caught betwixt and between – between a Jewish community that in their eyes can see no wrong in anything Israel does, and a liberal college world that seems to see no right in anything Israel does and even has begun to challenge her very right to exist. To be a college student in 2014 means not to be sure where to turn or what to think.

They know that Israel can't be as bad as her critics claim but they also wonder if she can be as good as her defenders insist. They hear too many of us say “They all hate us! They are all anti-Semites!” And they know that they *all* do *not* hate us and all of them are *not* anti-Semites.

The problem is that many of them are anti-Semitic, and much too much of the criticism is not intended to be constructive and the challenge that confronts each and every one of our young people today is how to develop the fine art of distinguishing between the two. If some rabbi's haven't figured this out what do we expect from our children?

So here is where I want to try and help. I want to try and help our college students, I want to try and help our young people, I want to try and help you – each and every one of us. My answer is both simple and not so simple. How does one distinguish between constructive and destructive criticism? How does one distinguish between friend and foe? How does one navigate the challenging world that is the current political landscape?

Simply put – (*sing*) Do you love me?

If I know you love me – then any criticism that follows – right or wrong – is legitimate, is discussable, is acceptable, as it emanates from a desire to help. But if I suspect, or believe or know that you don't love me, that in fact you are not committed to my welfare or worse that you seek my destruction, then your criticism – even when it may be justified is not helpful and will fall on deaf ears.

When I saw all those demonstrations that took place in Europe this summer – the hatred and anti-Semitism that spewed forth; when I see much of the stuff that passes for protest on too

many college campuses, I am not moved so much to consider their concern because I don't feel a shred of love or concern for me as a Jew, or for Israel.

I am reminded of the ancient Prophet Bilaam. Do you remember him? He was the non-Jewish prophet who was hired by King Balak to curse the Jewish people and each time he opened his mouth to do what he was paid to do – to the great frustration of his employer – out came words of blessing in place of the curses. One of the most famous of his utterances: “*Ma Tovu*” are the first words of prayer we recite every time we enter a synagogue, but it is another part of his “blessing” that resonates with me today. Some 3,500 years ago Bilam also observed that we Jews were a nation destined to dwell alone -- *am levadad yishkon*.

I have always been uncomfortable with that “blessing.” I never liked it. A nation destined to dwell alone was to me a curse and not a blessing. Alone is not a good place to be - not for nations or individuals.

Too often in our long history we have been destined to play the role of the nation that dwells alone. We Jews are, and always have been, the canaries in the coalmine – the fate of our small but proud people is a harbinger of the fate of the larger world. That is why the protests against Israel in Europe and on the college campuses do not tell me much about Israel and its values but they reveal a lot about those who are protesting and their values. As Natan Scharansky said to our group when we met with him in Israel. “People ask me if there is a future for Jews in Europe – I think there is a more important question,” he said, “is there a future for Europe in Europe...” What Europe is really wrestling with is not the future of Jews or even the policies of Israel but the future of western civilization and will those values survive?

Don't you find it a bit strange when liberals protest on behalf of countries and governments that are anti-women, anti-gay, anti-freedom of religion, anti-freedom of press? And that the only country in the entire Middle East where every religion is protected where women, minorities and gays enjoy full and complete equality, where the free press is vital and vibrant and democracy flourishes – that country is the focus of their hatred.

We have arrived at a very important moment in the history of Western Civilization and my concern is not for the future of the Jewish people – we will survive – that is what we Jews do best. The more pressing question is will Europe and America and the values for which they stand – will they survive? Study your history – whenever Jews have been forced to leave – whether it was Spain in 1492 or Germany in 1942 – it marked the end of much more than the Jewish presence in those countries. When Jews are no longer welcome the cause of liberty and justice is not far behind.

But, the world will do what the world will do -- as your rabbi, I have little influence on world events, but I still hope that I have some influence on what you – my Jews will do. And if we are once again destined to be a nation that dwells alone – at least, my dear sweet fellow Jews – *shevet achim gam yachad* - at least let **us** dwell together, united – caring and concerned for each other. Let us stand together. Let us love one another and let *us* love Israel!

*(Sing)* Do you love me? I hope you still do. And to my precious college students - I hope you can find it in your hearts to love Israel – now more than ever we need your love.

If that Hasidic rabbi was right – if love means feeling your pain – for those of us who love Israel it has been a summer filled with pain and worry and concern. We watched as people we love – our friends, and relatives added a new expression to their already over burdened lexicon of war – *Tzeva Adom, Red Alert*. Some 95% of Israel was exposed to Hamas' missiles. Thanks to America, Israel's one true friend in the world – and good old Jewish ingenuity – Israel developed Iron Dome.

You ask me why miracles don't happen any more like they did in the Bible? I tell you that Iron Dome was as miraculous as the splitting of the Red Sea! When the history of this period is written they will speak of the time when 3,500 Hamas missiles rained down on our land and they were protected by a miracle called Iron Dome.

But the Talmud teaches, *ein somchim al haneys* – “One does not depend on miracles – so in addition to Iron Dome, Israel developed *Tzeva Adom*, a remarkable system of alerts – that combined with a network of shelters – safe rooms in every apartment, protected our people. But until it was over we were not sure that it would all work – it was a long, a difficult and painful summer.

It was hardest on the old people and on the children. In the areas closest to Gaza – Ashkelon, Ashdod, Beersheva –they had 32 seconds from alert to impact. 32 seconds from the time the radar detected the launch and notified the people – to take cover- just in case Iron Dome did not take out the incoming missile.

In Jerusalem, when we were there, we had 60 seconds – a lifetime compared to our friends in the south, time to grab a robe, put on your glasses and head for the shelter. But, as one who spoke to us in Ashkelon said – “32 seconds! My 92-year old mother can't do anything in 32 seconds.” So as we sat at the dinner table and the sirens went off – what do you do? Run for the shelter and leave mom sitting at the dinner table? “So we all looked at each other – stayed in our seats and hoped for the best.” *Am levadad yishkon? Shevet achim gam yachad* -A people destined to dwell alone – at least let us dwell together.

In many of these southern communities they had to cancel all of their summer programs for children. There was no way they could provide a program with the guarantee that they could get the kids to safety in 32 seconds. The beaches were deserted – no way to get from the water to safety in such a short time. What did your 5 year old learn this summer? Here is what the president of the shul in Ashkelon's grandson learned: They were together one night when the siren's went off – his 5 year old grandson took his hand and said, “Saba, don't panic, but we do have to move quickly to the shelter..” This is what a 5 year old learned in Israel this summer -- *Am levadad yishkon? Shevet achim gam yachad!* A people alone in the world but united with each other, caring for each other.

Did Israel make all the right choices in fighting the war this summer? I don't know. But I do know they don't need my help in calibrating their moral compass. The mistakes that were made will be amply aired, prosecuted and debated in a democratic society that is relentless in its pursuit of moral excellence. Can we at least acknowledge that the decisions they were forced to confront were morally impossible?

How do you fight a war against terror when the terrorists take a whole people hostage and hide bombs and rocket launchers in schools, hospitals and mosques?

*(Sing)* Do you love me? This summer we who love Israel, we felt her pain – did you? I hope you did. Because it is hard for me to remember a moment in my lifetime when we Jews, we who love Israel, felt so very alone. The world seemed to feel sympathy only for the suffering of the Palestinians and no sympathy at all for the dilemmas that confronted Israel.

My favorite cartoon from the summer was the one that pictured a conference table – on one side was Netanyahu, on the other was Hamas holding a sign that said – “kill all the Jews” and in the middle sat Secretary of State John Kerry and the caption has Kerry saying to Netanyahu: “Can’t you at least meet them half way?”

To all those people the world over from my beloved New York Times, to the protestors in Europe, to the members of the UN and the list goes on and on – to each and every one of them who demand that if Israel would only be a bit more reasonable in meeting the demands of the Palestinians, then all of this hatred and all of this bloodshed could be avoided. Ask any and all of them one single question, “What if this reasonable path they believe Israel should embark on - like allowing Hamas free reign in Gaza, or a Palestinian State with the right of return or on and on in the list of what others deem so reasonable – what if the net result of these compromises and concessions means that Israel will cease to exist as the National Homeland of the Jewish people?” If they respond - look peace requires risks and that is a risk I am willing to take.

You have then reached the crux of the matter. Israel is now expected to risk its very existence – and friends this is not a risk I am willing to take, it is not a risk Israel is willing to take and it is not a risk that any other nation in the world would be expected to take.

Oh, I’m sorry – did I raise my voice? You see that’s what happens when you love – when you care so deeply.

Look, I don’t expect or demand love from my enemies. I don’t even blame them for hating me – after all they are my enemy. I’m not especially fond of them either. But I do expect those who claim to be my friend, to love me and never has the love and support of each and every Jew been more important, - the sense of isolation was so terribly difficult – don’t turn away from us now. College kids, we need your love.

Not one high schooler cancelled or left any of our Conservative Movement Programs in Israel this summer – not from USY Israel Pilgrimage, not from Ramah Israel Seminar, not from Nativ, not from the Conservative Yeshiva– not one. Some 700-800 teenagers – not one! How it hurt me to hear though that 30-40% of college students cancelled out on planned Birthright trips. Now more then ever – we need you to show us the love. We need every Jew: *Am levadad Yishkon* for if we are destined to dwell alone – we must at least *shevet achim gam yahchad* - - we must know that we can depend on each other for love and support.

Friends – I am trying to teach you something that is much bigger than Middle-East politics. Human beings can exist for weeks without food, days without water – but without love – life as we know it is not possible.

I fear some tough times are coming, that we are once again a nation destined to dwell alone. The next few years, I fear will be a challenge for Israel and for Jews. Here in America we will



fare better than most, thanks to the values of this great nation and large numbers of well meaning non-Jews who will stand up for what is right and fair. But, we will still have our share of challenges to confront, even here in America; such is the nature of the times in which we now find ourselves. Certainly beyond these shores Jews can no longer depend on the kindness of strangers but I hope and I pray we can still depend on our kindness and love for each other.

*Hiney Ma Tov and Ma Naim – Shevet Achim Gam Yachad*  
*How wonderful! How beautiful – the sight of Jews together – united in our love for Israel! Can we count on you? I hope so.*

*(Sing) Do you love me!*

I hope you will unambiguously and unapologetically be willing to stand up and say – “I love Israel!”

Continue to generously support those organizations that tirelessly work for the welfare of Israel and the Jewish people – UJA, Bonds for Israel, JNF – this shul!

Join me at AIPAC in March. The United States remains Israel’s one true friend. And a strong, organized American Jewish community is a vital ingredient in maintaining that support. Now more than ever we must be informed and organized. I hope you will join me in Washington DC on March 1-3, 2015.

Study with me. I will be teaching a course this fall entitled: Engaging Israel: Foundations for a New Relationship. Through video lectures from some of the leading scholars and thinkers in contemporary Israel we will study and explore together about the meaning Israel can have in our lives. Classes will be held on Sunday mornings and begin October 19. There are flyers and posters available in the lobby.

And finally – go to Israel – let them know they are not a nation that dwells alone – that at least we, their fellow Jews, we stand with them, we feel their pain – we understand the difficult choices they are called upon to make – we still love you!

I am leading a TBS trip to Israel from June 21 - July 1, 2015 – flyers with details available. We will experience Israel, enjoy Israel, and celebrate the miracle that is Israel. The trip is limited to the first 49 who send in a form and a refundable deposit. After we reach 49, we will create a waiting list. So if I hear you talking during the rest of Services, I’ll know you are discussing whether you want to join us.

I hope you will. And if not our trip, find some time to go on another one, or by yourself. Every Jew should feel the love and experience the privilege to walk the streets of a vital and vibrant Jewish state – filled with challenges and problems – yes but also filled with life and vitality.

I shared a heavy message with you today - but let us never forget – not for a second that we are a fortunate and blessed generation – what your ancestors would have given for the privilege to wrestle with the challenges and problems of a Jewish state!

*(Sing) Do you love me?*

Why should I be the only one doing the singing: *Hiney Ma Tov and Ma Naim – Shevet Achim  
Gam Yachad*

*How wonderful! How beautiful – the sight of Jews together – united in our love for Israel!*