

May 8, 2008

Shabbat Shalom!

Today is Israel Independence Day, Yom Ha-atzma-ut – Israel’s 60th birthday. My recent trip to Israel reminded me of one aspect of Israeli society that is, perhaps, the key to the state’s survival. My friends, relatives of the groom at the wedding I performed, and the doctors in the miyun (emergency room) at Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv all were forthright and honest about their opinions. They spoken openly about political figures, their positions on national policy, and, most importantly, their hope for peace. Conversations about politics in an Israeli café often move towards hot debate rather than polite discussion. The same people who might seem to be enemies or opponents in verbal discourse would likely admit, when they are finished speaking about the controversial topic at hand, that it is their willingness to engage each other, even to the point of “shouting” (that’s is what happens at some Israeli Knesset proceedings, if you have ever watched C-SPAN) that holds them together as a community and a country. It may look like some people and political parties could easily slip into civil war, but, in fact, they are more like a family, where they know they are connected to each other – and they depend on each other - in forging a positive future. There are some Israelis who leave for other countries, but most stay due to the love of a land, a nation and a people.

The Torah portion for this week, EMOR, begins with the word that means “speak.” Moses was charged to speak to the Israelites about the sacred times – holy days – which they would observe throughout the year. The command to “SPEAK” stands out as a guide for any community – to engage in truly honest conversation, to try to understand other people “where they are” even if you disagree with them, and, even when conflicts arise, to be committed to being a community that can sustain itself when members give the best they have to offer. That means welcoming newcomers, actively celebrating community milestones, and frequently participating in programming and productive partnerships. “SPEAK” is a beginning that can lead us to see all that is sacred in each other – that there is a touch of holiness in every person and every conversation.

Happy 60th birthday to Israel as it engages in a constant struggle for survival and the shaping of the country’s collective soul – and may their efforts inspire us to sustain the ties that bind us together.

**-- L'shalom,
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