

Israel Connection

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Purim: A Holiday of Transformation



THINGS COULD NOT HAVE BEEN WORSE.

Haman's plans to exterminate the Jewish people appeared unstoppable. Esther's intervention seemed to have failed. Haman, exasperated by Mordecai's grating presence, constructed the gallows upon which he would hang Mordecai that very day.

And then, at seemingly the last moment, the unthinkable happened. The king replaced Haman with none other than his nemesis, Mordecai—the Jew. Esther's efforts to save the Jews finally bore fruit. The pursuer became the pursued. The victims became victors. An instant transformed the Jewish people from mourning and devastation to joy and celebration. *V'nahafoch hu*—everything turned upside-down.

The Purim story is not an unfamiliar one. Throughout history, our people's fate has taken sudden turns. Today too, we live at a time of increasing fluctuations: The situation in Gaza, conflicts throughout the world and economic strife.

Simultaneously, new leaders here in the United States and in Israel have been chosen to help cope with the challenges to America and to deal with dangerous, existential threats to the Jewish state.

Iran continues to make progress toward acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, according to the latest intelligence estimates. Hizballah builds its arsenal on Israel's northern border and its power within Lebanon. And Hamas terrorists threaten to re-arm and re-aim.

Just as Esther and Mordecai took action in the Purim story, we too must remember that unsteady times require our steady focus. Purim teaches that each of us must be aware, involved and ready to act—especially during historic moments of change. Unlike the heroes of Shushan, we are not being asked to risk our lives.

More simply, we need to be knowledgeable about the issues shaping our world and actively building relationships with our new leaders. We must ensure that they understand what is important to us and why.

In turn, we should get to know what matters to them and identify their core values. In this way, we can more effectively influence their opinions and thus American foreign policy toward Israel at this critical juncture and always.

Purim's heroes remind us: The friendships we foster today could very well be the key to a strong and safe tomorrow.

Why Israel's Defense Costs Are Rising

ISRAEL IS FEELING THE PRESSURE. The ongoing need to protect itself from threats on multiple fronts is forcing the Jewish state to spend more on defense.

Overall military spending in the Middle East has accelerated, fueled by windfall oil profits. In recent years, the growth rate of Saudi Arabia's military budget was almost six times that of Israel's, while Iran's rate of military spending grew 16 times more than the Jewish state's.

Sustaining a strong military is expensive. For example, the U.S. F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, which Israel is seeking to



F-35 Joint Strike Fighter

purchase in the next decade to maintain its superiority in the skies, may cost up to \$100 million each.

Israel also has to focus on marine threats from Hizballah and Hamas weapons smuggling. To address this and other such dangers, the Israeli Navy is seeking to purchase two U.S. Littoral Combat Ships, which will cost nearly \$400 million each.

Recognizing Israel's needs, the United States signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), providing the Jewish state with \$30 billion in security assistance over the next 10 years. America's leaders understand that security assistance is the best way to ensure Israel's qualitative military edge over its potential adversaries.

When Home is Within Range

HAMAS WORKED TIRELESSLY, with Iranian assistance, to improve its ability to attack Israel in recent years. They obtained rockets with a range of 25 miles—enough to reach Beersheba and Ashdod, home to Israel's largest port. Hamas successfully transitioned from solely a terrorist group to a more organized paramilitary organization. Dozens of Gazans traveled to training camps run by Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. Last December, Hamas decided to terminate the Egyptian-mediated *tahdiyah*, or period of calm, and escalated its bombardment of Israeli towns with rockets and mortars. Israel decided that after seven years, it could no longer tolerate attacks on its southern border and responded with military action.

Much has been reported and written about the decision, about the mission and about the outcome thus far. It would be easy for the world to forget about the men and women who endured Hamas' terror for so long.

This is the story of one Israeli who continues to live on the border, on the edge and possibly still...within range.



An Israeli mother and her sons in Kfar Aza try to shelter one another during a Hamas attack.

Her father tells the story from time to time. As a young Israeli soldier, fighting in the Yom Kippur War, he nearly lost his life in battle. Afterward, he made a promise to himself and his young family as an affirmation of faith and a pledge to the country he had nearly died for: He would move to the kibbutz his family established in 1957 and continue the pioneering spirit Israel was founded on.

Today, his daughter, Chen Abrahams, working mom, part-time student, and pioneer, continues her family's dream, living in Kibbutz Kfar Aza, a place she describes as "green, beautiful, and filled with nature." Chen's home is also situated less than two miles from Gaza, and has been a constant target of Hamas rockets and mortar fire.

Despite the barrage of attacks they endured since even before Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005 and the threat of future strikes, Chen has always been determined to live her life on the kibbutz. "I am an optimist," Chen says. "I couldn't live here if I wasn't an optimist. I feel there will be a solution one day. I am hopeful."

But she also admits life is hard. Two months ago, just before Israel went into Gaza, mortar shells landed almost simultaneously on either side of her house. Fortunately, nobody was home for what she says would have been an irreversible trauma for her nine-year-old son, Or. For the past three and a half years—a lifetime for a boy who is only in third grade—Or and his family have been on

high alert, running for shelter numerous times a day, nearly every day, when they heard a woman's voice on the public address system announce "*Tzeva Adom*"—Red Alert. They and approximately one million Israelis who were within the range of Hamas rockets knew they only had 15 seconds from the time of the warning to the time that one of Hamas' rockets landed.

Or's school was closed this year so that authorities could fortify the facility against attacks. His new school is more than 20 minutes away—an inconvenience



Israeli's take cover from Hamas rockets.

he and his parents are more than willing to endure since it means that he and his classmates are out of range from potential Hamas artillery fire.

Hamas was working steadily toward expanding its rocket range when Israel Defense Forces made the decision to weaken the terrorist group with air and ground forces. Since last summer, Hamas terrorists had fired at least 700 rockets and mortars into Israel—and more than 6,300 since Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005.

Throughout the past several years, and during Israel's recent operations in Gaza, Chen did her best to keep to her life's plan, pursuing a BA in politics and public administration at a local college, balancing her studies with work for a non-profit organization and raising her son.

"Everything in the States is very, very planned," she says. "Here, for me, everything is very, very fragile." Most days, her routine was interrupted by the sound of the alarm, or mortar shells. She let Or play outside when he could, but invariably would end up running to get him when she received a text from kib-

butz and army authorities alerting her and her neighbors to the high probability of more rocket fire. Most nights Or slept in bed with his parents. “Everywhere we go, we are still aware that we might have to run for cover so you look around you, you know all the places you could run to,” Chen says.

In addition to the constant damage to property, Kfar Aza and the surrounding towns suffered economic hardships over the years as more and more residents moved away and businesses closed. In the nearby city of Sderot, more than three-quarters of children exhibit signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and the town's bus stops were all converted into reinforced bomb shelters. Even playgrounds were transformed into makeshift shelters.

Children have grown up under the threat of Hamas rockets—kids play soccer games on smaller fields so they have enough time to run for cover in case of an attack, and families sleep in small bunkers, knowing that 15 seconds is not enough time to rouse everyone in the middle of the night.

Next month, Chen will observe *yahrtzeit* for a neighbor and dear friend who was killed by a Hamas rocket as he worked in his garden. “We remember



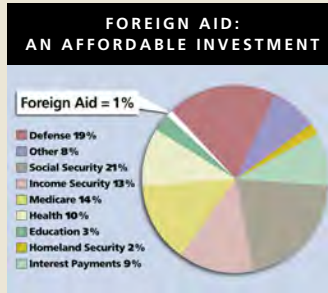
Hamas, with Iranian assistance, improved its ability to attack Israel.

and we stay on guard,” Chen says. She is thankful to the army for defending her and her fellow Israelis, but she knows that Hamas will not rest.

So why has the Abrahams family remained in Kfar Aza? “I ask myself that question too—many days,” Chen says. “I love this place. No way would we or should we have to leave.” She pauses, then adds, “This is my home. This is Israel.”

The Benefits of Foreign Aid

U.S. foreign assistance is little more than one percent of our federal budget. The funding works as an essential, cost-effective tool for promoting American interests abroad and supporting critical allies such as Israel. Here are just a few ways that foreign aid provides crucial benefits to the United States:



Promoting Democracy and Security Abroad

A healthy foreign affairs budget reflects America's commitment to humanitarian and democratic values across the world. By advancing economic development projects, promoting political stability and supporting efforts to curb the spread of nuclear weapons, foreign aid is an important tool in the fight against extremism and global terrorism.



Creating Jobs Across America

American law requires nearly all foreign aid to be spent on American-produced items, helping create jobs across the country and boosting U.S. exports. Statistics show that American workers who produce exports earn between 13 and 18 percent more than the national average. In Israel's case, more than 75 percent of its assistance is used to purchase military and security equipment built right here in the United States.



Developing Markets for American Businesses

Foreign aid serves a critical goal of opening overseas markets to U.S. businesses. Aid helps developing nations establish fair business codes, viable commercial banks and reasonable tax and tariff standards. This assistance helps create the necessary stable business environment and uniform standards for U.S. companies to operate.



Encouraging Cooperation from Our Allies

As the world's sole superpower, the United States plays an indispensable role, but we cannot afford to act alone. Through foreign assistance, the United States can demonstrate its willingness to lead, encouraging other nations to join our work and thus reducing our share of the burden.

Over the next several months, Congress and the president will confront many challenges, at home and abroad. During this time of great uncertainty and financial difficulty, it is crucial that we remind our leaders that American foreign aid plays a vital role around the world, in Israel and in the United States.

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The AIPAC Policy Conference: Join Us This Year

RABBI DAVID SETH KIRSCHNER was still making and taking phone calls from congregants just one hour before leaving for his synagogue's second trip to Israel in just six months. His passions are evident from his involvements and from taking a closer look inside the rabbi's study at Closter, New Jersey's Temple Emanuel.

Numerous books and photographs of Israel are included on his shelves, along with an invitation to this year's AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington, D.C., in May. Rabbi Kirschner understands the important connection between politics and Jewish tradition. Even when he speaks he often marries quotes from politicians he admires with famous Jewish leaders.

to show our support for a strong U.S.-Israel relationship as we get to know new members of Congress and a new Administration."

The sentiment is echoed throughout the country as rabbis and synagogue leaders encourage others to join them in Washington, D.C., at this historic time of transition. AIPAC Capitol Club member Emanuel Abrams is a member of Westwood Village Synagogue, an Orthodox congregation in Los Angeles. He has attended three Policy Conferences. Last year he recruited five friends to go with him to D.C. for what he calls, "one of the largest and most inspiring" gatherings of the pro-Israel community.



Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) also addressed the crowd of more than 7,000.

"We formed an Israel committee, increased the number of Israel trips we were offering and began exploring what else we could do to give congregants a meaningful way to help the Jewish state."

At the same time, Cooper began getting involved with AIPAC in Detroit and decided to attend the 2005 Policy Conference. "You simply can't go (to Policy Conference) without coming back fired up and wanting to share your experience with.... well, everyone," the president of the bustling congregation explains.

The most empowering experience took place the last day of the conference. "We were walking toward our lobbying appointments on Capitol Hill with thousands of people walking in front of us and behind us and to our side—all with the same singular purpose," Cooper recalls.

Throughout the nation, synagogue members are finding AIPAC's Policy Conference to be one of the best ways to reinvigorate their community's commitment to pro-Israel political activism.

"The need for action continues to grow," Rabbi Kirschner states. He prints out his boarding pass, grabs a suitcase and adds, "Unfortunately Israel doesn't live in a neighborhood that allows any of us to rest."

Join us at this year's AIPAC Policy Conference, May 3–5, 2009. E-mail us at: synagogue@aipac.org.



The AIPAC Policy Conference hosts numerous luminaries from both sides of the political aisle.

"The number one reason I went to the AIPAC Policy Conference last year is because I agree with the statement I heard...actually at an AIPAC event...when Mayor Cory Booker (of Newark, N.J.) said, 'Democracy is not a sideline sport,'" Rabbi Kirschner recalls. "We each have a role to play in keeping America and Israel strong and secure. We must, in the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel 'pray with our feet.'"

And that is exactly what he did last spring when he accompanied 16 members of his Conservative congregation to the AIPAC Policy Conference. He advertised the conference on the synagogue's web site and spoke frequently about the importance of AIPAC's work. This coming year, he hopes to expand the delegation to at least 40. "People understand that this year it is even more important

He and his wife are encouraging more of their fellow congregants to attend this year's conference. "None of us can afford to be timid about the importance of advocacy," Abrams says.

Gerson Cooper is the president of Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Michigan, among Reform Judaism's largest synagogues. "About five years ago, people felt we needed to put more emphasis on Israel," Cooper explains.

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