**Making our Voices Heard in Israel**

**Rabbi Michael Siegel**

**Mishpatim - 27 Shevat 5783**

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My first trip to Israel was in 1976. I was just entering Rabbinical School and was attending a preparatory summer program in Israel. Of course, we flew El Al, the National Carrier of the State of Israel. It was on that plane that I first heard a uniquely Israeli expression that is offered when hearing a question that is either too naïve to answer, or one whose answer would be beyond you and as a result you had no right to ask it in the first place. The response is not so much a word or phrase but the sound of clicking your tongue to the roof of your mouth. (Clicking sound) I remember asking if I could put my carry-on items in an over the head compartment other than the one above my seat as that one was already full. The flight attendant looked at me and simply said: (Clicking sound). Which immediately made me feel that I was a fool to ask the question and had perhaps violated national security. The plane had not even left the United States and I was already deeply entrenched in Israeli culture.

That was my first encounter with the dreaded (Clicking sound), but certainly not my last. In Israel I would hear that sound when asking someone if I was going the right way and was not, (Clicking sound) or ordering something on the menu that was not available, (Clicking sound) or asking a question that was not worthy of the teacher’s attention. (Clicking sound)

What I learned over the years is that the sound (Clicking sound) is more than a wordless response to questions deemed unworthy, but rather, it represents an entire philosophy of how many Israelis approach Jews from the Diaspora. It is a response to questions that some believe that we do not have a right to ask because we have not chosen to live in Israel:

* Because we do not send our kids to the IDF
* Because we do not pay taxes
* Because do not vote in the election
* Because our lives are not in danger when we stand at a bus stop

As a result, (Clicking sound) you do not have a right to question how the State of Israel handles certain matters!

Here, I agree with the idea that when it comes to issues related to Israeli security: the opinions of Jews living in Chicago or London, Johannesburg or Moscow, should be offered with humility, if at all. Who am I to comment on how Israel responds to Iran, Hezbollah, or other threats to the health and safety of its residents? But there are limits to the (Clicking sound).

When it comes to matters that impact the Zionist fabric of Medinat Yisrael, or our relationship with the Jewish State such as how Jews practice Judaism differently than the Orthodox, or when the views of certain governmental ministers are so abhorrent that members of the United States Congress - many of who have been longtime supporters - refuse to meet with them, along with the leaders of major Jewish Federations, **silence is no longer a viable option**.

Our Rabbis taught, *Shtika k’hoda:* “Silence is tantamount to agreement.” When we remain silent at a time when a response is called for, our wordlessness speaks for us and, like it or not, is regarded as implied consent.

At this moment, legislation is being railroaded through the Knesset that will radically change the power of the Supreme Court in Israel. That will cede power to the members of the Knesset to overturn the rulings of that court with a simple majority and change how judges are chosen in a way that would favor the ruling coalition. In a country without a constitution, these changes are tantamount to taking down the guard rails and have a far-reaching impact on the people of Israel, the future of Zionism, and its relationship with world Jewry.

None of this is to suggest that there has not been judicial overreach in Israel or that the country would not benefit from a review of the laws regarding the Supreme Court. But when nearly 200,000 Israelis marched in protest just this past weekend; when 75,000 Israelis protested in front of the Knesset as the legislation was going through its first reading; when the President of Israel, Buzi Herzog, went on national television to call for a national discussion on the issues at hand, only to be offered lip service by the Prime Minister and those rushing the legislation forward; shall Jews living in Chicago not raise our voices with theirs?

There is proposed legislation that would ban egalitarian, mixed-gender prayer at the section of the holy site where it is now allowed, criminalize the activity of the Women of the Wall prayer rights group, and ban visitors from wearing attire deemed immodest. While it was tabled last Thursday, there is no question that it will come up again. Do we, as non-Orthodox Jews, not have a voice in that?

There is discussion regarding changing the parameters of the law of return. Shall we not raise our voices in protest?

Leaders from around the world are reacting negatively to the new government led by Benjamin Netanyahu, including the United States.

Businesses in Israel are beginning to move their money out of the country. Major industries are questioning whether to invest in Israel not because of BDS but because its democratic principles are being questioned. When people like Alan Dershowitz say that if he was in Israel he would be marching in protest, or the likes of Danny Gordis, Matti Friedman, and Yossi Klein Halevi are taking out full page ads asking American Jewry to speak out, shall we be silent?

Let it be said: the power of the Israeli (Clicking sound) which has so long produced the silence of the American Jewish community is precisely what Prime Minister Netanyahu and his ministers are hoping for.

I began by sharing with you the first time I heard (Clicking sound); now I will tell you when I stopped being silenced by it.

Five years ago, the Consul General asked me if Anshe Emet would host Ambassador Ron Dermer. We agreed, and he came to the synagogue after visiting Wrigley Field and throwing out the first pitch. At the time of our conversation, the agreement regarding non-Orthodox Jews and the Kotel was being rescinded. When I asked him about it, his response was this: “Rabbi, I’ll tell you what to do to address the problem. Have 500,000 Conservative and Reform Jews make Aliyah. Have them go to the polls and vote for a party that will support the legislation.”

In other words, (Clicking sound), who are you to even ask the question? No responsibility on Israel’s part to see Israel as the place where all Jews can be welcome, or to pray comfortably at our people’s holiest site. Needless to say, the conversation that ensued was heated. It is one thing to be insulted in Israel, or on an El Al flight, but it is quite another to be disrespected in one’s synagogue which has a long history of standing proudly with Israel.

This past Tuesday, we marked the 10th *Yahrzeit* of one of my most admired teachers, Rabbi David Hartman. The Torah that I learned from him helped to shape the way that I look at Jewish texts and understand the State of Israel through a religious lens. In his book *A Living Covenant*, Rabbi Hartman argues that at Mount Sinai, God gave the responsibility of the covenant to the Jewish people.

Going forward, there would be no more miracles. Instead, Israel would have to be the nation that God believed it to be. At Sinai, God turned the reins of destiny over to the Jewish people. It is for us, the people of Israel, to challenge the covenant; to allow the Torah to grow, to speak to our lives. Our success or failure would be measured by the type of society that we build in the land of Israel: not on our economic achievements, but our moral ones.

This is why, for Hartman, the Torah reading that follows *Yitro* is *Mishpatim*. Our first law code: not the lofty laws of Sinai, but the laws of the everyday messiness of life. The laws of *Mishpatim* rangefrom oxen goring to kidnapping to ritual. For Hartman, Judaism is the process of taking the laws down from Sinai and realizing their spirit and holiness in every aspect of our lives.

Rabbi Hartman taught that the Jewish state in Zion with its empowerment over all aspects of society is the modern version of the portion of *Mishpatim*. Since 1948, we have been testing our people’s capability of fulfilling the desert vision of Sinai in the real world; to guide a modern democratic Torah-inspired state with concerns both for human rights and for security; for democracy and for Jewish identity. Like any country, Israel is messy. That is a fact of life. The question is whether we can create a sense of *Kedusha* in the modern state; if we can imbue this country with the spirit of Sinai. A State that represents all Jews because it embodies the values of our Torah. Because all of us are descendants of Abraham and Sarah who were promised a land; because all of us stood at Sinai together; we are all part of an eternal covenant. As a result, the modern State of Israel is not the property of Israelis; rather, it is the vital project of the Jewish People.

Rabbi Hartman believed, as I do, that our people’s return to Eretz Yisrael is an opportunity that binds all Jews together in this covenantal moment, and all of us, both inside and outside Israel, have a responsibility to make this a reality. All of us share an obligation to appreciate the historical and spiritual power and meaning of our people’s return to Israel. When it comes to issues regarding Israel’s security, we in America need to respect the fact that Israel will make its own choices. But when it comes to the Project of Israel, the return of the Jewish people to its homeland, and the manner in which that State represents the values of our Torah and moral tradition, no one has a right to silence Jews around the world. Those in governmental positions can click their tongues all they want, but we have a stake in the land of Israel, and no one has the right to say otherwise.

If you feel as I do, I urge you to use your voices to write to Michael Herzog, the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, or Buzi Herzog, the President of the State of Israel, people who have the ear of the Prime Minister. Express your opinion, your concern, your outrage. If you care about the future of the State of Israel and the relationship between Israelis and the Jews of the Diaspora, this is the time to speak.

As our Rabbis said so long ago, *Shtika k’hoda’a*: “Silence is tantamount to agreement”. Let our voices be heard.