

## Celebrating Israel's Sixty-fourth Birthday

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Imagine that you wake up one morning to hear disastrous news being broadcast around the whole world: a new flood is coming, and nothing can be done to prevent it. In three days, the waters will cover the entire earth.

The Dalai Lama immediately goes on television and urges everybody to become a Buddhist. That way, we will all be able to accept our fate calmly and enter into the life beyond in complete peace.

Pope Benedict the Sixteenth appears on another television station. He urges the whole world to convert to Christianity and accept Jesus, in order to save our immortal souls.

Meanwhile, on a third station, there is a broadcast from one of the two Chief Rabbis of Israel. He says, "Nu. Fellow Jews. Get to work. We have three days to learn to live under water."

This week Israel celebrated her 64<sup>th</sup> birthday. For most of those 64 years, Israel has figuratively been living under water. Yet she has been thriving. She has been living next to neighbors determined to destroy her. She has been living in a world where, in country after country, the chorus of criticism has been raised against her by those who question whether she has a right even to exist. Yet Israel has accomplished more in those 64 years than anyone had a right to expect when independence was declared in 1948.

So we are celebrating Israel's birthday. And there is so much to celebrate.

Militarily, Israel is in an excellent position.

There has been some speculation that Egypt, with its new military leadership, might abrogate its peace treaty with Israel. But Egyptian military leaders are realists. They will not doom themselves by attacking an overwhelmingly more powerful Israel.

Syria is in total disarray. It poses no threat to Israel now and for the foreseeable future.

The only real threat – and it is a serious one – is the Iranian quest for a nuclear weapon. I hope that Iran can be stopped by sanctions or, if necessary,

by military means. Even if Iran could indeed produce both a nuclear weapon and the means to launch it against Israel, chances are excellent that Israel's advanced missile defense shield would intercept any such missile. And even the obsessed ayatollahs must realize that Israel's response to such an attack would be overwhelming and would inevitably devastate Iran and decimate its population.

Israel also enjoys a robust and growing economy.

Israel's standard of living and its per capita Gross Domestic Product are on the level of most European countries. Moreover, its economy has been growing in recent years at an amazing pace. In 2011 Israel's economy grew at a rate of 4.8 percent. Israel has posted the fastest economic growth in the Western world both in 2010 and 2011. Moreover, it is the only country in the developed world that has seen increases in the level of investments in the real economy.

Israel continues to be a fount of accomplishment and innovation. Almost all major U.S. high-tech companies have established production and research facilities in Israel. They include Microsoft, Intel, Apple, Cisco, Oracle, and many others.

Warren Buffett recently paid \$4 billion for an 80 percent stake in an Israeli company. His investment is the largest he has ever made outside the United States and is the largest buy-out ever of an Israeli company.

Israel's economic success results in part from the extremely high level of education there. Of all the countries in the world, Israel has the highest ratio of university degrees to population and the second largest number of startup companies.

The World Economic Forum calls Israel one of the leading countries in the world in technological innovation. Just a few years ago Israel ranked first in the world for total expenditures on research and development and third for registered patents per capita. Israel also has the world's highest percentage of engineers and scientists.

Moreover, as a result of a recent discovery, Israel will soon end its reliance on foreign sources of energy; on the contrary, it will become an energy exporter.

Until recently energy had been the weak link in Israel's economy. Virtually all of its hydrocarbons have had to be imported. Most of its natural gas came from Egypt, a most unreliable supplier.

But late in 2010 we learned truly excellent news. Gigantic gas fields, containing trillions of cubic feet of natural gas, accompanied by a substantial amount of oil, were discovered off Israel's coast. These fields will begin to be

exploited as early as next year. This discovery will make Israel not only energy independent, but a major exporter. It will bring billions of dollars in yearly revenue.

So in these three areas the outlook for Israel is excellent. Its military position is strong. Its economy is in prime condition and growing vigorously. And it has now been blessed with an abundance of mineral wealth.

So we celebrate Israel on her birthday and recount her many accomplishments. At the same time, we must also acknowledge that the picture is not perfect. Two problems in particular are worrisome. Fortunately, there are solutions for both of them.

The first is the undeniable fact that young American Jews do not support Israel with the enthusiasm of their parents and grandparents. In a recent poll, only sixteen percent of non-Orthodox American Jews between the ages of 18 and 30 said that they felt close to Israel.

But there is a solution to that problem, and it's working. The solution is a program called Birthright Israel.

We want young Jews to feel a positive connection to Israel. Birthright Israel is making that happen.

This program offers the gift of a free, ten-day educational trip to Israel for Jewish adults between the ages of 18 and 26. The trip aims to strengthen the identity of the young people who participate.

Birthright Israel exists to build understanding, friendship and a lasting bond between its participants and the land and people of Israel. It hopes to achieve the solidarity of the Jewish people worldwide.

And it's working. The program began twelve years ago. In those twelve years, Birthright Israel has sent nearly 300,000 Jewish young adults to Israel. They come from 54 countries, all 50 U.S. states, and nearly 1,000 North American colleges and universities.

[ To learn more, click [HERE](#) ]

A Brandeis study of the program conducted two years ago came to the following five very positive conclusions:

1. Participants were 46 percent more likely to feel very much connected to Israel than their counterparts who applied but did not go. This positive effect was greatest among participants from relatively weaker Jewish backgrounds.
2. Participants were 28 percent more likely to report feeling very confident in their ability to explain Israel's current situation than their counterparts who did not go.

3. Participants were 51 percent more likely to marry a Jewish person, a benefit that applied consistently across the spectrum of Jewish educational experience.
4. Birthright's influence extended beyond participants to their spouses: Among respondents whose spouses were not raised by Jews, participants' spouses were more than four times as likely to have converted to Judaism as the spouses of nonparticipants.
5. Participants were 28 percent more likely to rate marrying a Jew as somewhat or very important.

I know that's a lot of data to try to comprehend when you hear it all at once. Bottom line: Birthright Israel is working.

Finally, we can't conclude our celebration of Israel without acknowledging the greatest problem it faces. Is there any way that peace can be achieved between Israel and the Palestinians? If that could happen, these decades of war would be at an end, to the great benefit of both Israel and the Palestinians.

This week I learned of a program that actually holds out hope for that result: peace with the Palestinians.

I imagine you think maybe your rabbi has gone nuts. "Achieve peace with the Palestinians?" Doesn't everybody realize that is impossible, or at least won't happen for decades, if ever?

Notice, however, I did not say "achieve a peace agreement with the Palestinians." I do think the chances of such an agreement are, sadly, so remote I don't expect to see such an agreement in this decade and maybe not in my lifetime.

But it may be possible to work toward achieving peace without having any agreement. One way to do that is through a plan called "Peace Without Partners."

This plan was the title and subject of a story in The New York Times this past Monday. The authors are leaders of a group called "Blue White Future." They acknowledge that attempts at negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian leadership have failed. It now seems highly unlikely that the two sides will return to negotiations any time soon. But the authors of Peace Without Partners argue that the status quo need not remain frozen.

Israel doesn't need to wait for a final-status deal with the Palestinians. What Israel needs is a radically new unilateral approach. This is the approach they offer. Israel should set the conditions for a territorial compromise based on the principle of two states for two peoples.

They propose that Israel take constructive steps to advance the reality of two states based on the 1967 borders, with land swaps — regardless of whether Palestinian leaders have agreed to accept it. Through a series of unilateral actions, gradual but tangible changes could begin to transform the situation.

Israel should first declare that it is willing to return to negotiations and that it has no claims of sovereignty on areas east of the existing security barrier. It should end all settlement construction east of that barrier and in Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem.

About 100,000 settlers live east of the barrier. Israel should create a plan to help to relocate them within Israel's recognized borders.

That plan would not take full effect before a peace agreement was in place. But their plan would allow settlers to prepare for the move and minimize economic disruption.

Israel should enact a voluntary evacuation, compensation and absorption law for the benefit of the 100,000 settlers who live east of the barrier. Under that law, those who wish could begin relocating before there is an agreement with the Palestinians.

According to a recent survey, nearly 30 percent of these 100,000 settlers would prefer to accept compensation and quickly relocate. They would move either within the Green Line or to adjacent residential areas that would likely become part of Israel in any land-swap agreement.

The leaders of Blue White Future hold regular meetings with settlers. They confirm that many settlers would move voluntarily if the government renounced its sovereign claims to the West Bank, because the settlers would see no future for themselves there.

Critics will object that this plan will fail as miserably as the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005. That withdrawal left settlers homeless. It allowed Hamas to move into the vacuum and launch rockets into Israel.

But we can learn from those mistakes. Under the Blue White proposal, the Israeli Army would remain in the West Bank until the conflict was officially resolved with a final-status agreement. And Israel would not physically force its citizens to leave until an agreement was reached. Instead, preparations for that departure would begin well before such an accord.

The authors recognize that a comprehensive peace agreement is unattainable right now. They advocate instead that Israel act unilaterally to establish facts on the ground by beginning to create a two-state reality in the absence of an accord. Imperfect as it is, this plan would reduce tensions and

build hope among both Israelis and Palestinians, so that they in turn would press their leaders to obtain a two-state solution.

Most important, as Israel celebrates 64 years of independence, this plan would let Israel take its destiny into its own hands and act in its own long-term national interest, without blaming the Palestinians for what they do or don't do.

[ For more information about Blue White Future, click [HERE](#) ]

Way back in 1967, the Beatles released a song that remained popular for decades. Its' called "When I'm Sixty-four." The chorus ends with the line "Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm sixty-four?"

Israel is now 64. We still need Israel. And we will still feed Israel, investing our support, our love, and our commitment to assure not only that she will survive, but that she will thrive.

And for this, let us say Amen.