

From Rabbi Weber

Imagine a country's leader: He is right-wing. He appeals to his citizens' fears of being overrun by their neighbors. He rattles his sword at every opportunity. He faces possible indictment in the very near future on charges of fraud, money laundering and bribing people to keep quiet. And he has made a conscious decision to reach out to avowed racists to strengthen his base.

Quick poll: How many of you knew I was referring to Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel?

Back in the '60s, those of us who were opposed to the war in Vietnam were told, "America: Love it or leave it." Our response was equally bumper-sticker-worthy: "America: Love it and fix it." That is how I feel about Israel today. I love the land, the country and the people of Israel, and right now it really, really needs fixing.

As I write this in early March, Prime Minister Netanyahu has just expanded his political coalition to include *Otzma Yehudit*, a radical, far-right party which publicly calls for (most) Arabs to be "encouraged" to leave Israel, for Israel to reclaim all of the territory won in the Six-Day War, and for anyone who does not support Israel and its government to be made unwelcome in the country. This party is the descendant of Meir Kahane and the *Kach* party of years ago; the only political party ever to be expelled from the Knesset for racism. Now it is back, and Netanyahu has offered them full participation in his government if they support him for Prime Minister in the April elections.

How bad is it? The American Jewish Committee said, "The views of *Otzma Yehudit* are reprehensible. They do not reflect the core values that are the very foundation of the State of Israel." And AIPAC, which never comments on internal Israeli politics, made clear that this was a line in the sand saying that it "has a long-standing policy not to meet with members of the racist and reprehensible party." And Israeli author Moshe Shamir said Netanyahu might have managed to destroy "the last vestiges of the greater Jewish community's esteem for official Israel."

All true, but it's not too late to make this right. In early April, Israelis will go to the polls to select a new government: Knesset members and a Prime Minister. We have seen Israel re-elect Bibi over and over again, believing that only he can protect Israel from the enemies on its borders. Now, Israelis face a new decision: Do they want to re-elect a man who has just opened the gates to enemies that come from within? We will know very soon, and a lot rides on the outcome of this election.

I don't ever give up on the United States, and I don't ever give up on Israel. I lived through the civil rights struggle, through Vietnam and Watergate, through the time of the "Moral Majority" and the rise of the "alt-right." In each situation, I worked on behalf of the forces that were trying to bring honesty, morality and an optimistic vision of the future back to the center. When it comes to Israel, how can I do less?

At our *seders* this year, we will once again pledge, "*Next year in Jerusalem.*" If recent events make you feel less inclined to fulfill that pledge, I hope you will reconsider. It's not like we have lots of Jewish states to choose from, so we should think long and hard before giving up on the one we have. That is why I fight as passionately against the Boycott, Divest and Sanction (BDS) movement as I will fight against *Otzma Yehudit*.

Maybe it will help us to remember another important Jewish saying at Pesach this year: "*Od lo avda tikvatenu*" - "Our hope is *not yet lost* to be a free people in our own land. Yes, even the words of *Hatikva* understand that Israel is not finished - not completed, but also not lost. We Jews, in Israel and here in the United States, can make our voices heard and make our opinions count because Israel is *Artzenu* - our Land.

I'm not giving up without a fight. How about you?

Shira joins me in wishing you a sweet, healthy and kosher *Pesach*. Next year in Jerusalem, with pride in our Land and honor for our People!