The Stephen Wise Free Synagogue recently held a conference which was called “Re-Charging Reform Judaism.” It was organized primarily due to initiative of the synagogue’s chief Rabbi - Rabbi Ammiel Hirsh. The conference convened clergy, educators and lay leaders in order to begin to address the challenges facing the North American Reform Movement. Some of the concerns included the growing distance between North American Liberal Jews and Israel, prioritizing and funding Reform Jewish education and more.

At the opening of the conference Rabbi Hirsh said,” I fear that we are losing the soul of the reform movement…sooner or later we will have to attend to the growing fissures in the movement.” Then he continued," Otherwise, the rifts that emerged between the anti-peoplehood, anti-Zionist Reform Jews of the first half of the 20th century, and the Zionists who were committed to Jewish particularism, will reopen with devastating consequences for 21st-century Reform synagogues.”

During the event, Hirsh voiced the thoughts that were on the minds of many of us who were present. He courageously addressed the very issue that has unfortunately been a taboo discussion in the Reform movement as he spoke of the growing number of newly ordained rabbis who not only don’t support Israel, but who are strongly vocal against it. The question regarding this ominous trend is whether the sentiment is based on the popular anti-Israeli attitude among today’s young people, or is it a part of a bigger ideology that is embedded in the curriculum of the Hebrew Union College (HUC)?

I personally met an HUC student who was in his first year at HUC in Israel. During our conversation, he declared that Israel is an apartheid country.

Friends, time and time again, I have been saying from this bima that, while it is acceptable to criticize Israel when it is deserved, it is NOT acceptable to join the chorus of anti-Israel individuals and organizations who demonize the country without acknowledging its unique and vulnerable situation in the Middle East.

Last week I had an opportunity to participate in the AIPAC summit. I was honored to be one of twelve rabbis, and the only female rabbi, invited to this conference. The remainder of the 480 participants represented major donors and supporters of AIPAC.

On the first day we heard from a variety of high-profile speakers, including the United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken as well as New Jersey Senator Bob Menendez. Both spoke passionately about their support for Israel. There were also various sessions during which the speakers briefed us on such critical issues as Iran’s nuclear capacity and its increasing threat to Israel we talked about the as well as pointing to the growing interest from some Arab countries in joining the Abraham’s Accords in order to normalize their relationships with Israel.

In addition to these discussions, we were also briefed for our lobbying sessions with Congressional representatives and Senators on $3.3 billion in Israel aid, $500 million for missile defense, support of overall foreign aid, and the US-Israel Warfare Act which are key topics facing our legislators along with the Iran issue, Israel Visa Waiver Program, and the celebration of 75 Years of US-Israel relationship.

I was in two sessions led by Congressman Tom Kean Jr. and Congresswoman Mikie Sherrill where our group lobbying efforts with them were very successful and they both agreed to vote and sign all of the above.

Some may question the new tactic that AIPAC has been engaging in by financially supporting the candidates of the House of Representatives and the Senate. Critics say is not an acceptable approach. Their concern is that, although some of the officials elected in this way will be supportive of Israel, they may be not representative of all our core values. That’s a fair perspective. But with a growing anti-Israel sentiment in the House, the task of AIPAC is now to ensure votes for Israel today and for many years to come. To accomplish this, they need to financially support the campaigns of pro-Israel candidates.

Now, you may ask, what is the connection between my reference to the young generation of rabbis who don’t care about Israel and don’t make it their priority to speak on behalf of Israel from the pulpit and the role of AIPAC?

I am connecting these two concepts to demonstrate how hard it is becoming for Jews from North America who support Israel and who believethat we need to continue to prioritize the advocacy for Israel. These Jews are finding that the task of defending Israel is getting more and more difficult. Those who are outspoken on the topic often find themselves being accused of having conservative views. But we need to recognize this and work to ensure that support for Israel MUST be bipartisan! Regardless of our political stance as Republicans or Democrats, conservatives or orthodox or liberals, we share the common denominator of all being Jewish. And as Jews, we need the State of Israel to not only survive, but thrive.

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In this week’s Torah portion Shelach Lecha, twelve spies are sent by Moses to the Land of Israel to see if it is safe to enter. Ten out of the twelve spies return describing a land which is inhabited by giants (Nefilim) and other mighty people who will certainly harm and kill the Israelites if they dared to enter the land.

But Caleb and Joshua, on the other hand, courageously disagree and tell the Israelites that they should not be afraid but instead should be steadfast to their faith and go forward to enter the promised land.

The conflicting advice among the spies stirs up confusion. The Israelites give in to the fear spread by the first ten spies. As a result they are punished and do not enter the Land of Israel. Instead they wander in the desert for another forty years! Finally a new generation grows up and joins with Joshua and Caleb to fulfill God’s promise of returning them to the Land of milk and honey.

I feel that in a way we are going through a ‘reverse’ circumstance. The generation of American Jews who dreamed of a strong Jewish State are getting older and the new generation that has risen up has not personally experienced the horrors of anti-semitism as did previous generations. As such they do not have the same deep and enduring emotional attachment to Israel as a place where it is safe to be a Jew. This lack of experience is contributing to weakening the image of Israel among younger generations of Jews and non-Jews.

But we cannot let this happen. I am so thrilled that there has been an awakening in Reform movement as well. You and me - we need to mobilize our efforts and speak up for Israel. We are going to be the modern day Joshua’s and Caleb’s and together we will courageously support Israel even when it is not popular, so that we will never lose the greatest gift as Jews - Medinat Israel - the State of Israel.