

Congressman Joe Kennedy Prepared Remarks

Yom Kippur

September 14, 2013

Thank you, Alan – for that kind introduction, for inviting me here today, and for your continued friendship.

Rabbi Gardenswartz and President Hills, thank you so much for welcoming me into your temple with open arms.

One good friend in the audience I have to recognize – our State Treasurer, Steve Grossman. Thank you for all of the support and counsel you've given me this past year.

To all of you in this room: it is an honor to join you here on this most holy day.

I know you are wrapping up your day of atonement and repentance, but if any of you feel like you haven't gotten your fill, please come see me afterwards.

Being a red-haired Irish Catholic, I'm essentially the poster child for pure, old fashioned guilt -- I'd be happy to share some tricks of the trade with you.

On a serious note, thank you: for allowing me to share in your services and be a part of your tradition.

For me, the connection to this faith and this community is deeply personal.

As a young reporter for the *Boston Post* in 1948, my grandfather, Robert Kennedy, traveled to the Middle East at just 22 years old. One month prior to Israel's declaration of independence, his experience in the region inspired a lifelong commitment to the country – to the “immensely proud and determined” Jewish people.

“It is already a truly great modern example of the birth of a nation with the primary ingredients of dignity and self-respect,” he wrote in a dispatch back to the States.

His summer there shaped a belief that he would carry with him all his life: that the United States and other “freedom-loving nations,” as he wrote, could not sit idly by in the quest for peace in the Middle East.

A simple concept – but today, one that somehow seems more relevant, more complicated, and more critical than ever before.

As Alan mentioned, I recently returned from my own trip to Israel. I was there for a week with my wife, Lauren, as well as a group of fellow members of Congress and their spouses and family members.

We had quite a crew. It was the largest Congressional delegation ever to visit Israel: 37 members from 18 states, 31 of them freshman. For over half, their first visit.

As someone accompanying their new bride, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, on her first visit to the holy land: it was particularly meaningful.

As a Catholic getting the chance to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Church of the Nativity and the Church of the Beatitudes: it was deeply spiritual.

And as part of a group that has the privilege – and the challenge – of helping set US foreign policy, especially as it relates to Israel and the Middle East, it was tremendously educational.

Given the timing -- on the eve of peace talks-- a large portion of our trip was spent in meetings with high-level officials:

- We spent over an hour and a half with Prime Minister Netanyahu, who spoke with passion about his desire for peace, candidly (and patiently!) answering question after question from our group.
- We were with President Shimon Peres who shared the deep wisdom of a lifetime public servant.
- We visited Ramallah to have lunch and a discussion with Dr. Saeb Erekat, a lead negotiator for the Palestinian Authority in their peace talks. He, along with PM Netanyahu, was effusive in his praise for Sec. Kerry, lauding his success in bringing both sides to the negotiating table.
- We had dinner with Yair Lapid, who gave us the perspective of someone new to Israeli politics. I wasn't sure there was a system out there that could make ours look simple, but hearing his story did it.
- And there were numerous other officials from civil society, the military, intelligence, and the policy world.

Our trip took us all across the country, from Jerusalem to Ramallah, Sderot and the Gaza Border to Galil and the border in Lebanon, Tel Aviv to Masada and the Jordan Border, Bethlehem to the Golan and the Syrian Border.

Each new stop, often just a few hours apart, underscored the unbelievable challenge in ensuring Israel's security.

- In **Jerusalem**: east and west, neighborhoods, and areas of consensus.
- In the **West Bank**: high ground, valleys, settlements and the view from Alfei Menashe and the Hadera-Gedera Rectangle.

- In **Jordan**: the only stable border, but a nation itself under immense pressure;
- In **Gaza**: the recent history of Hamas rule, Israeli withdrawal, rockets, Operation Cast Lead and a visit to an Iron Dome Battery.
- In **Lebanon**: looking out over a beautiful hamlet at sunset, only to learn of a maze of tunnels buried into the hillside so that Hizubullah can traffic weapons, including 80,000 missiles.
- In **Syria**: looking down on the UN base from the "Kissenger Overlook" and seeing a large Syrian flag waiving in the distance, announcing the loyalty of the town of Kunetra to the regime in Damascus, not even 50 miles away.
- And, of course, **Iran**, a threat far greater than any of the rest.

You could spend your life dedicated to solving any one of these challenges, but I've been told you don't want me to speak that long. So here are a few takeaways:

First, Israel is a very good friend in a very tough neighborhood.

That this tiny country of nearly eight million people, nestled in the midst of conflict and turmoil, continues to be an entrepreneurial hub and vibrant democracy: that's a miracle. But a miracle hard-earned, hard-fought, and hard-defended.

Second, she is facing threats that are real, close, and immediate. What is right now a foreign policy challenge for the United States is a question of survival and existence for our brothers and sisters in Israel.

That fact is particularly meaningful today, as we acknowledge the 40th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War – and pledge that our two countries will work together to ensure Israel is never again taken by surprise.

A moment from our trip that will always stick with Lauren and me was visiting the reinforced playground in Sderot where we played with children, 75% of whom suffer from PTSD. Only it's not "post-traumatic" because it's still ongoing.

And yet – my final takeaway: with everything their people face, Israel remains deeply committed to peace.

The most powerful moment of my trip happened during a dinner in Tel Aviv, where I met a young Israeli woman who had founded an organization that brought aid to areas in Syria where other international assistance had been unable to reach.

She had helped one community in particular for years, without disclosing much of who she was or where she came from.

One day, she finally let the commander know that she was Israeli. He was stunned and right then and there refused her help – calling her a sworn enemy –despite the lives she had saved and the selfless assistance she had given his people.

As you might have guessed, she was not one to be easily deterred. She took it to the community for a vote. If they said go – she would pack up. If they said stay – she would continue to serve. She is still there.

And nothing that better captures what Israel is for me than this young woman, who asked for nothing and risked everything. Who did not let labels like ‘enemy’ or ‘adversary’ deter her from giving help to those who needed it. Who met hatred with benevolence; conflict with character.

She was a small embodiment of the values that have bound Israel and the United States to each other for generations.

Those values mean more today than ever before.

From Egypt, to Libya, to Iraq and Syria – an increasingly interconnected world has made regional threats global.

Israel has lived with this reality for decades: navigating the impact of wars they didn't ask for and battles they didn't start.

But here in the United States, we are just starting to understand the uncertainty of a globe whose borders no longer constrain conflict.

Nothing crystallizes that challenge more than what has happened in Syria these last few weeks.

Today we woke up to news that a framework agreement has been reached between Russia and the United States, which would call for the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile by 2014.

This is heartening, but the process is far from over.

In the days and weeks ahead, the viability of this framework will be tested, and the United States will continue to weigh its best options in approaching this vicious conflict.

As the world watches – Iran, Al Qaeda, North Korea – the stakes require that we get this right.

First and foremost, we must exhaust diplomatic efforts. If there is a chance to avoid more aggression, force and bloodshed then we have a responsibility to do so.

Second, we should trust, but verify – approaching continued negotiations and the finalization of any agreement with both healthy skepticism and good faith.

Third, we cannot hide our strength. Like Israel, we are a country defined by the power we do not exert, the weapons we do not use. But the threat of force cannot be taken off the table.

It is this kind of foreign policy – a constantly-calibrated balance of diplomacy and proportional force – that guided Israel from 1948 through 67, Yom Kippur, Lebanon, Intifadas and Gaza. They are lessons of history our own country must carry today.

This recent trip was my second time visiting Israel, but I will never forget being able to accompany my wife on her maiden visit, as she breathed it in for the first time. I'm sure the look on a new visitor's face is a sight many of you have witnessed for yourselves.

As she took in the rough edges of rock of the Wailing Wall, with papers folded into every crack; one delicious breakfast after the next; the view looking down from Masada and looking out from the tops of the Golan; walking along a beach in Tel Aviv swamped with Arabs enjoying the waves; and conversations with entrepreneurs that make Israel a Start Up Nation. It is a kaleidoscopic nation that balances ancient and modern.

I am often asked for my impressions, and it is impossible to sum up it up in a word or phrase – or apparently even fifteen minutes, as I am now proving.

However, there is one phrase I've learned that I find myself coming back to time and again: "Tikkun Olam."

In a country that has every reason to pull away from those who need help – to become hard and isolated in the face of constant threats to its very existence – I found a people that lean in and embrace each other.

A vibrant generosity that weaves its way through civil society to ensure that those who are sick or poor or struggling get the help they need.

"No, this is the fast I desire," Isaiah tells us. "To unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke. To let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke.

“It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin.”

“Then shall your light burst through like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly; Your Vindicator shall march before you, the Presence of the Lord shall be your rear guard.”

It is this spirit – this *unyielding empathy* – that the Jewish people have relied on to live fully and freely; to not be limited or defined by fear but to embrace their land and her people.

It has been 60 years since my grandfather wrote back to Boston about a region on the precipice of “bitter war.”

There is a familiar photo from that time – of him, posing in front of the King David Hotel as David himself, with an imaginary slingshot in hand.

I like to think that picture shows what touched my Grandfather about Israel: the plight of the relentless underdog; the steely resolve of those who refuse to be intimidated by brutality and threats.

The understanding that goodness, gentleness, and compassion can be stronger and fiercer than any act of aggression or hate.

And the deep-held belief that the right to exist and a place to call home is not too much to ask.

Today – in the face of turmoil, uncertainty and unimaginable threats – it is those same principles; those simple truths that a scrappy young American journalist found so compelling six decades ago – that bind Israel and America to each other – and continue to light our way.

Thank you!