

MAN OF THE YEAR

In 1964, Rabbi Isaiah Zeldin founded Stephen S. Wise Temple, which has become one of the largest Jewish congregations in the world with one of the best Jewish educational systems from infancy through high school graduation and beyond. Dedicated his life to Jewish education, Rabbi Zeldin established the four Temple Schools and was the Founding Dean of the Los Angeles branch of the Hebrew Union College. On November 2, he will be honored as Man of the Year by the State of Israel Bonds for his commitment to Israel and the Jewish people. And, this issue of @wise honors him for all he has given, and continues to give to Stephen S. Wise Temple and Schools and Jewish people across the world.



Rabbi Zeldin recently sat down with @wise to discuss modern day Israel, God and prayer, Jewish education, and State of Israel Bonds.

Israel and Modern Day Politics

@wise: What did you see the first time you went to Israel?

IZ: I went to Israel the first time right after the War of Independence. I went with, what was then, my two-year-old son who I carried on my back. And we stayed in Israel for the entire summer. I had just graduated from rabbinic school and I had no money. I went to the bank and the banker looked at me and he said, "Well, what collateral will you put up for the bank lending you the money?" I said, "The only collateral I have is my self and my integrity, and I'll pay it back." So, the bank president, who was a friend of mine, looked at me and said, "I never lend money this way, but I'll give it to you." It took me a couple of years to pay back.

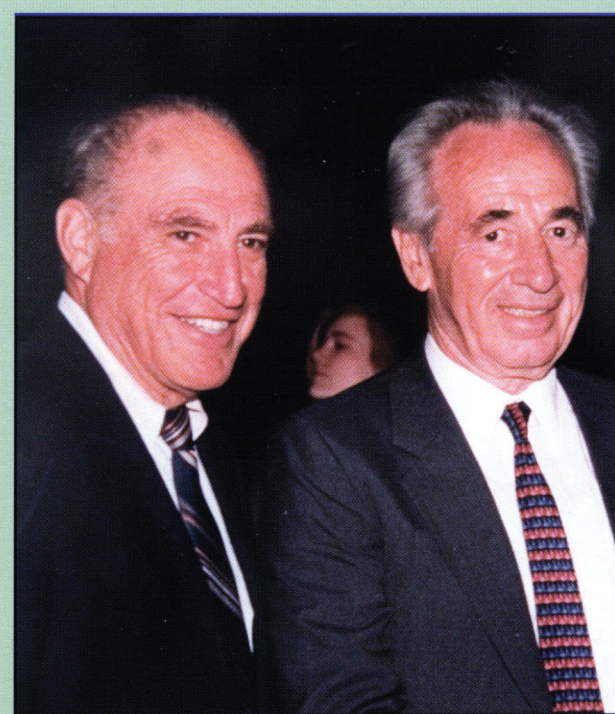
@wise: What did you see that first time?

IZ: First, I saw a very dangerous Israel, because even Jerusalem was separated by barriers. One day, I was walking with

my son on the road and somebody said to me, "Don't walk there, because the Arabs will shoot you if they see you." I saw an Israel that was struggling. I worked on a kibbutz for a while, just to see what that was like. And, I really wanted to know whether I could settle there, and I came to the conclusion that Israel doesn't need another rabbi. America needs a rabbi more than Israel. So, we came back to New York, because I had a part-time job at the Hebrew Union College as the assistant dean, but I eventually came out to California. When they told me that they wanted me to go to the west coast to start a West Coast branch of the college – I was the only one who had college experience – I came out and started the Hebrew Union College here. And, I was recently honored for 50 years of service at the Hebrew Union College.

@wise: How do you think Israel has changed from that first trip you took?

IZ: It has become a little more dysfunctional, politically. What was set up originally as an ideal political system turned out to be a disaster. When you have a



Rabbi Zeldin with former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres

parliamentary government, it's impossible to get one or two parties to be the majority, because there are about 13 political parties. So to form a government you have to make compromises, and no genuine program can be funneled through. I belong to a number of committees in Israel or emanating from Israel, trying to change the political system.

Also, each individual neighborhood does not have a representative, and as a result, there is no accountability. If someone, for example, living in Haifa has an issue, there's nobody to go to because if you voted for Labour, or Halchud, or the Likud you don't have a representative. Whereas here in the United States, you go to your congressman, you go to your senator, you have somebody to talk to.

Also, people make unfortunate compromises, which they have to do under that kind of a political system. So, what was originally an ideal system, turned out to be a drag on the political program in Israel. That's one of the terrible changes that I've seen.

But the building systems, the building projects, the educational system in Israel, are among the best. And, the amount of people, for example, involved in technology. Or the fact that when the Russian Jews came over to Israel, Israelis are now probably 20 percent Russian, every little small town has a symphony orchestra now. There is a joke, that if a Russian immigrant came out without carrying a violin case it was because he was a pianist.

@wise: Do you see the Jews as a unified people?

IZ: I see the Jews as a unified people

– that what happens to any Jew any place in the world, affects every Jew every place in the world.

@wise: What do you think is the biggest challenge facing Israel now.

IZ: The security question. It would like to negotiate with the Arabs, even before Arafat died. Supposedly Fatah was more moderate compared to Hamas. But, he was not moderate. He spoke moderately when he spoke in English. When he spoke in Arabic, he was a terrorist. So its biggest challenge is how to form a country with hostile neighbors, which there will always be.

@wise: Do you think there will ever be peace in the Middle East?

IZ: I don't even pray for it anymore for the simple reason that Israel doesn't need peace, it needs security. Because peace to the Arabs means something different. Peace to Arabs means the gradual dismemberment of Israel. There are no moderates. There's only the worst, and the "worstest."

@wise: Why should the congregation support Israel Bonds?

IZ: Throughout the years, Israel Bonds has meant different things, but this year it's most relevant because the Bonds will be used to rehabilitate the people who have been displaced by the missiles. I want the Jewish people to match what Iran gives the people in Lebanon who have been displaced. From what I understand, Iran gives through Hezbollah—a terrorist organization—each family \$12,000, and I would like Israel Bonds to do the same.

Except to lend it to people, because Bonds are not a gift, they're an investment. So if the government lends people money to rehabilitate themselves, they'll pay it back over the years and they will repay the people's investments on the bonds. It is a much healthier system than a give-away system where people are not accountable. When you invest government money and you have to rebuild, then you're much more careful with how you spend the money, and then you become independent. It's like the welfare system, which I oppose. I

think the welfare system ought to be about rehabilitation. Teach people how to earn a living rather than having them live off the dole.

@wise: How many times have you been to Israel?

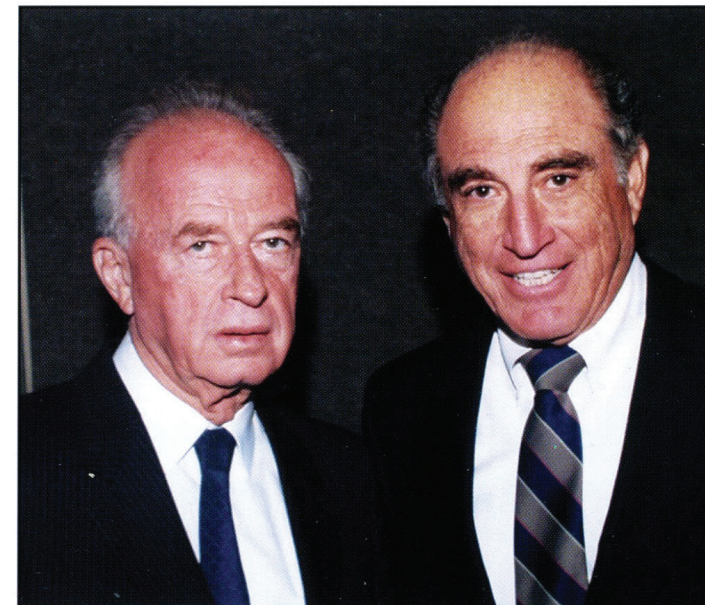
IZ: I've been there 20 times already. And the chances are that in April, I'll go the 21st time. The last time I was there was for my 85th birthday, and I took 85 people. At the time, I promised that at my 90th birthday I would take 90 people. But Israel needs tourists, so I'd like to go this year, which will be my 87th year, and take 87 people.

@wise: You could make it a yearly thing.

IZ: And up the number? It'll only remind me how old I am.

@wise: When you take people to Israel, do you try to take people who've never been before?

IZ: Most of the time it's half and half. This time I'd like to take people who have been there before. Rather than a touring visit, which is always included anyway, I'd like to make it a people to people visit. I'll take them to meet with people who are like minded—people who want religion in Israel, a reformed type of religion, a modern religion. One of the problems that Israel has is that it is too heavily weighted in favor of the Orthodox because of the political system. You need the Orthodox group to form a majority government. When you have to make coalitions with minority parties, one of the parties is always an Orthodox party. And as a result, the Orthodox control sensitive family issues, such as over marriage, divorce, and adoption, and their views are outdated. And, the government yields to them, even though it doesn't agree. Because



Rabbi Zeldin with former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin

I've known all the Prime Ministers and each one says, "we're strangled by them." But, they can't do anything about it. If you want their votes on the economy and on political issues, you vote with them on religion and personal issues.

@wise: That's a tough struggle to bring them around to a modern day Israel.

IZ: I don't think it is going to happen in my days, even though I support all the groups that vote for change. I even had the outstanding proponent for civil marriages as a guest here one Friday night. And, in our auditorium we had two thousand people here listening to him and his programs. The Prime Minister at the time was (Ariel) Sharon, and he wanted it (civil marriages), but he couldn't do it because if he did, the Orthodox would desert him and his majority would fail. But he was in favor of it. (Ehud) Olmert, is in favor of it. (Yitzhak) Rabin was in favor of it. All of them were here at Stephen S. Wise. And, I would discuss it with them and they agreed with me a thousand percent, yet they couldn't do anything about it. Imagine when the Prime Minister of a government can't get his program across because of the political infighting.

Supporting Israel with Sound Investments

@wise: Israel Bonds is honoring you as "Man of the Year". What does that mean to you?

IZ: For the holy days I was the pitch man for Israel Bonds. This congregation has supported Israel Bonds from its very inception. An interesting sideline, it benefited the congregation. In the beginning, I never saw who the big contributors were until I made the Israel Bonds appeal. When I found out who the large buyers of Bonds were, I went to them for donations to our building program. So, ultimately it benefited the congregation, although I didn't do it for those reasons.

What I pitched was that every person who is over thirteen should buy a bond. There's a Mitzvah Bond for \$100, and you cannot say that I have become a Bar Mitzvah and then not perform a mitzvah. That's why I think we had so many bond buyers.

To read more of Rabbi Zeldin's interview and his views about God, prayer, and building a Reform congregation, log on to www.WiseLA.org.

