

# Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-MD)

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**Representative Steny Hoyer (D-MD):** Thank you, Chairman Friedman, President Victor, President-elect Rosenberg -- Rosey, good to be with you.

A hope so simple and so humble that nearly every people took it for granted -- that we may be a nation like all other nations. So many thousands of years ago, the Old Testament tells us the Jewish people asked simply for that, at the foundation of their first state. It was carried through the years of exile. It was sheltered in the ghettos and in the holds of immigrant ships. It was with Herzl in Vienna, and with Ben-Gurion in the Negev. It is in the skyscrapers of Tel Aviv, and yes, in the bunkers of Sderot. And it is here today.

Through the exile years, the hope was forged a little stronger, each time home turned to hell, that one day -- one day -- the Jews would make history once more as a nation; that the Jewish people could at least be, in the words of David Ben-Gurion, an independent people in its own land. That hope changed the world, because the state that grew in the desert -- the state where Jews sought out precious, normal life -- was marked by the memory of persecutions and pogroms and public hate. Those wounds could've hardened over into scars, but they turned into something miraculous; a sharpened empathy for the oppressed and dispossessed, of every land and every blood. "Love the stranger," the lesson goes, "for you were a stranger."

In a sea of despotism, Israel is called to the rule of law. In a sea of repression, it is called to pluralism. In a sea of hate, it is called *Tohar HaNeshek* -- purity of arms. There is no higher standard. Does Israel fall short of it? Do we? Undoubtedly. But as Abba Eban wrote, and I quote, "Israeli's can face mankind in a posture of confidence. They can say, 'We have not disappointed all of your hopes.'"

Across the gulf of history and space and language, America looks to Israel and sees a friendship resting on something stronger than arms, more precious than oil. It rests on the ideals that come down to us from Amos and Micah and Isaiah. Those ideals and the bond they inspire are unbreakable. And so President Truman, who chose to recognize a new ally and a new partner a mere 11 minutes after it was established in 1948, said that Israel, and I quote, "has a glorious future before it. Not just another sovereign nation, but as an embodiment of the great ideals of our civilization."

So often men and women of prophetic insight have called us to honor those ideals -- love of the stranger, equality in the eye of god. So often -- so very often -- they have been Jews. They were the rabbis who marched beside Dr. King. They were the labor organizers who risked their lives for workers' dignity. And they were the Newport synagogue leaders who wrote to President

George Washington in the first year of our constitution, praising a nation, and I quote, which "to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance, deeming everyone -- of whatever nation, tongue, or language -- equal parts."

We have not always lived that out, but we have done it more than most. And the American people, more than any other, has spoken out for Israel's equal place among the nations. When the world has lost sight of that truth, America, time and time again, has reminded it. That's what you do. That's what we do. Today, we remind the world again.

No one doubts that this is a dark time in Israel's history, a time not simply of threats to its existence, but of threats to something less tangible, though no less critical, ideological threats that turn the decisions of a sovereign nation into the responsibility of all Jews, and threats to a life free from fear. That is the intent -- that is the intent of Iran's dangerous pursuit of nuclear weapons, weapons which could do irreparable harm, even without being used.

They would strike a fear into the mind of every Israeli that would surpass the cold war's darkest days, a fear deepened by President Ahmadinejad's threats of destruction. We've heard that before, and we ignored it to our peril. Who in Tel Aviv could live without that fear at the back of their thoughts, every hour? For this reason alone, and many, many more, Congress and the Obama administration are committed to keeping nuclear weapons out of Iranian hands.

And like you, I am hopeful that President Obama's comprehensive approach of engagement, economic pressure, and cooperation with allies can and will accomplish that goal. But even at this moment, to quote the reporter Bradley Burston -- and I quote, "A house may be destroyed, children's nerves shot to shreds, perhaps for life. These barely averted catastrophes, literally thousands of them, have become the central fact of Israeli life. That, and a sickness and fever over the nearness of true disaster."

The cause, the human rockets -- the Hamas rockets -- that still rain down on southern Israel. America must make it clear that every single one of them is a war crime. We must stand behind Israel's legitimate efforts to win its freedom from fear, and we must give our strong support to the only means of guaranteeing that freedom, a two-state solution -- security first, two states second. But to be realized -- but to be realized, that goal must be shared by Palestinians.

The Palestinians, too, have a dream of sovereign state. Israel understands that. But until the Palestinian people and their leaders extend the same understanding, until they recognize Israel as a Jewish state, until they foreswear violence, until they begin to raise children who are free from hate, peace will not be realized. May that day come soon. May the Palestinians' dreams, which has too often been of Jewish expungement, change to a dream for their children -- a dream of peace.

There is another threat to Israel that you and I have the power to confront. We saw it on placards in London that read, "Stop the Gaza Holocaust." We saw it in the protesters in Sweden who chanted, "Khaybar, Khaybar." As most of you know, Khaybar, being the site of an ancient battle at which Jews were killed, stripped of their possessions, and expelled from their homes. Around the world, critics of Israel are reaching for the ancient language, and the all-too-present language

of anti-Semitism. And of all the world's anti-Semitic outbursts, it is painful above all else when the actions of Jews are compared to their Nazi murderers, a slur that is intended, in the words of Howard Jacobson, and I quote, "to wound Jews in their most anguished history."

What we have seen in the world's streets, and in events in the theatres, its media, its schools, is not criticism, it is hate. It endangers Jews, and it poisons civil society everywhere, and it puts all of us at risk. And it eats away at Israel's dream of being a nation -- a nation like all other nations. You and I must speak out against, and reason again, and denounce the hate that would turn Israel from a sovereign nation into the metaphysical stand-in for all Jews everywhere. It is a nation; a special nation, to be sure. But it is a nation.

There is only one honorable way to regard Israel: as a unique, distinctive place with its own history and politics and culture. But we can do more. We can remind the world why Israel came to be and why, in this troubled new century, it remains indispensable. We see Israel in its glory and in its reality; in its extraordinary strengths and its shortcomings. We see that it need not be idealized to be greatly admired for its courage, its faith, its refuge, its humanity. And we pledge ourselves to sustain and support it among the family of free nations.

Why Israel? Why Israel? Because Israel is a story of a people seizing responsibility for itself, for its history, and its destiny. That lesson of responsibility is one of the most powerful Jewish truths. It is repeated every spring, as family's retell the story of Passover, young boys and young girls hear how their people were saved by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and then they opened their homes to welcome the prophet Elijah, who for hundreds of generations and millions of homes, has never been at the door.

The lesson is clear. The responsibility to act for good in this world lies with the people inside that room, with all of us here, in our own hands -- in this room, in that capital, in this country. And so to the question where was God in the Jewish people's darkest hour? Where was God at Auschwitz? Rabbi Irving Greenberg gave this heartbreaking answer. "God was there -- starving, broken, humiliated, gassed, and burned alive, sharing the infinite pain as only an infinite capacity for pain can share it." Why Israel? Because there was no miracle to save them. Because miracles come in part from our own hands, from our hands, from our own labor, our own commitment, our own strength. Israel, this man-made miracle, is that truth made concrete.

Perhaps you've been to Yad Vashem. Perhaps you have read on its walls these words of responsibility and reproach, words from an anonymous victim of the killing camps. "All of us dying here, amidst the icy, arctic indifference of the nations, forgotten by the world and life." And in the children's memorial, you see starkly, tragically, the horrific consequences of that neglect.

And then, you walk out into the dry air. The light stings your tear-filled eyes. And from that great height, you see the Jerusalem plateau, the hills and the great green pine forest, and the city spread out beneath you. And you think, "This is the land that keeps their names alive. This is the land they saw in their dreams. This is the land," as Truman said, "That embodies the great ideals of our civilization. This is the land we must and will protect and preserve." Thank you very much.