

House Majority Leader Eric Cantor at AIPAC Policy Conference 2011

Transcript As Prepared For Delivery

It's great to be here. I'm really honored to be able to address you at the afternoon plenary of AIPAC's policy conference, the biggest ever.

As I look out, I see 10,000 people, young and old, who have come to Washington from around the country - not for personal enrichment or gain, not out of concern for your industries or businesses, but out of deep affection for a fellow democracy, Israel. We are all here because we know that America is at its best when it stands with allies that share our values.

Like many of you, I am the descendant of immigrants to America.

My grandparents came to this country nearly a century ago from Russia. They passed through New York harbor and the statue of liberty on the way to a better, freer life.

My grandmother was widowed at a young age. And she eventually made her home in a predominately African American section of Richmond, Virginia. She raised my father and my uncle in a tiny apartment above a grocery store that she owned.

Through hard work, perseverance and faith - the very values on which America is built - she lifted herself up into the middle class, and even sent her two children to college.

But never did she dare to dream that her grandson would someday be a Member of Congress, much less the Majority Leader of the U.S. House.

When I grew up, my parents were among the few Jews actively involved in local politics. From them, I learned the value of community involvement in shaping our future.

One of my most vivid memories as a child came on that fateful Yom Kippur Day in 1973. I was just 10 years old. I remember standing on the steps in front of the synagogue after services let out. I heard grown-ups around me talking about Israel being attacked on the holiest day of the calendar. I heard them recall what it was like to live as a Jew before Israel came into being. They feared that those days might return.

That experience was etched into my memory. It was only years later that I truly understood the critical role America can play in coming to the aid of a fellow democracy.

Visitors to our country often ask, "Why is it that America and Israel are so close?"

There are many answers to this question.

Yes, Israel is a critical pillar of U.S. national security.

Yes, Israel fights on the front line against radical Islam.

And yes, a strong Israel provides a more stable and hospitable Middle East for U.S. interests.

Our strategic ties to Israel are important. But there's something much deeper that binds our two nations. There's something that Americans identify with on a gut level - something I see every time Steny Hoyer and I take Members to Israel.

When Members of Congress stand on the shores of the Sea of Galilee; when we listen to the words of the Sermon on the Mount; and when we walk the Stations of the Cross, the names and places that people read about in their Sunday school studies come alive right before their eyes.

It is emotional. It is profound. And to our Christian brethren among us, we salute you and appreciate your solidarity and support.

Israel cherishes the values we do. Israel represents the triumph of the human spirit over impossible odds. Israel represents a fierce dedication to saving and improving life for all.

Israel's spirit lives through its people.

In 1942, a boy was slipped by his parents off a train bound for the gas chambers of Auschwitz. By a stroke of luck, a Catholic woman in a nearby Polish village took him in and hid him in her cupboard. After the war was finally over, that boy immigrated to Israel to begin a new life.

Today, his son, Dr. Ofer Merin, heads up the now-famous medical field hospital that travels the world in the wake of natural disasters.

Just three days after the earthquake in Haiti last year, Dr. Merin was there helping save lives. And this year, his unit treated the wounded in remote areas hardest hit by Japan's deadly tsunami.

No question, Israel joins America in leading the way to save lives and help feed the world.

Yet today the two-thousand-year-old dream of the state of Israel is in jeopardy. There is no other nation on earth so routinely denied its right to exist and threatened with destruction.

Recent developments in the region have moved Iran out of the headlines, but it is undeniable: the specter of a nuclear Iran looms larger than ever.

We must never take our eye off Iran. And that's why Congress will soon pass the bipartisan Iran Threat Reduction Act, making it official U.S. policy to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons capability.

Plain and simple, if you do business with Iran, you cannot do business with America.

Meanwhile, during this Arab Spring, we all hope that freedom will take a leap forward in the Middle East. And we will do everything we can to support institutions of democracy and civil society.

Yet the truth is, there is much uncertainty.

However, there is one thing for certain: America must do everything in its power to keep Israel strong and secure.

The longstanding anti-Israel, anti-Semitic vitriol persists. But the world must no longer turn a deaf ear. It's time for America to lead.

To the emerging governments of the Middle East, America must clearly state:

It is not okay to vilify Israel.

It is not okay to demonize Jews.

And it's time to stop scapegoating Israel.

Nearly 7,000 miles away, Israel fights the same war we do. We share a common enemy in Iran and its terrorist proxies who seek nuclear weapons.

So, my message to you this afternoon is this: If Israel goes, we all go.

In order for us to win this great struggle, we must have the courage to see the world not as we wish it to be, but as it truly is.

It is not morally equivalent when the offenses of terrorists are equated with the defenses of Israel.

The following story illustrates Israel's dilemma.

A Palestinian woman from Gaza arrives at Soroka Hospital in Beersheba for lifesaving skin treatment for burns over half her body. After the conclusion of her extensive treatment, the woman is invited back for follow-up visits to the outpatient clinic. One day she is caught at the border crossing wearing a suicide belt. Her intention? To blow herself up at the same clinic that saved her life.

What kind of culture leads one to do that?

Sadly, it is a culture infused with resentment and hatred.

It is this culture that underlies the Palestinians' and the broader Arab world's refusal to accept Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state.

This is the root of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. It is not about the '67 lines.

And until Israel's enemies come to terms with this reality, a true peace will be impossible.\

And the reality, as we say in Hebrew, is "Ahm Yisrael Chai: The people of Israel live. And what they want is to live in peace.

If the Palestinians want to live in peace in a state of their own, they must demonstrate that they are worthy of a state.

To Mr. Abbas, I say:

Stop the incitement in your media and your schools.

Stop naming public squares and athletic teams after suicide bombers.

And come to the negotiating table when you have prepared your people to forego hatred and renounce terrorism - and Israel will embrace you.

Until that day, there can be no peace with Hamas. Peace at any price isn't peace; it's surrender.

All of us here today are heirs to a rich tradition of Zionism that has its roots in America's founding.

The colonists, including Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, saw themselves as a New Israel crossing to the Promised Land.

I have the great privilege of holding James Madison's seat in the Congress. He spent a year at Princeton learning to speak Hebrew.

Like many others, John Adams marveled at the prospect of "a hundred thousand Israelites" returning to the Land of Israel and creating an "independent nation" in their ancestral and religious homeland.

One hundred ninety years later, Adams's vision has been realized. Never before in the history of mankind have a people, forcibly removed from their land for thousands of years, returned - just as the Bible promised.

In this time of extraordinary challenge for Israel and for America, we simply cannot afford to become complacent. We must rise to the challenge before us and shape history.

Israel deserves America's friendship in reality - not just in rhetoric. Words and promises come and go.

Only deeds count.

There is a time for talk; but now is the time for action.

There is a time for dreaming; but now is the time for doing.

There is a time for following; but now is the time to lead--from the front.

For the survival of Israel, for the security of America and peace of the world, now is that time and right here is the place to begin.