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DEMOCRAT FOR CONGRESS

Matt Miller on Israel's security –
and on how Jewish values inform his worldview and work

I. A Grandfather's Legacy – and Lesson

I learned about Israel from my grandfather. Milton Petrie, my mother's father, was a pioneer in specialty store retailing. He grew up poor, and through grit and moxy turned a small stake from some gambling winnings in the 1920s into a chain of women's clothing stores that at its peak decades later spanned 1400 stores. He was part of that generation of American Jews – born in 1902, and dying in 1994 – whose worldview was transformed in mid-life by the fact of the Holocaust.

My grandfather (r.) with Moshe Dayan

When I was growing up, my grandfather always talked about Israel and its importance. He had not served in World War II, but knew families who had suffered terribly, and in his mind the horrific acts of the Nazis, and the world's indifference in the face of this horror, made the need for a Jewish state, for a safe place for Jews in a hostile world, one of the driving priorities of his life. He was always giving me Jewish gifts—a specially made Bible, a book of Torah commentary, a volume on Jerusalem. Only later did I understand that he was passing on things that had been given to him when he was honored for various philanthropic works related to Israel and other Jewish causes. Shimon Peres and Menacham Begin attended events in New York where he was honored. I was proud, and a little awed. My grandfather even had a bulldog he named "Begin" (and when little Begin developed a medical problem and had to have one eye stitched shut, the family jokingly took to calling him "Dayan.")

While my grandfather was devoted to Israel and a passionate Jew, he was not always observant. I worked for him after graduating from law school, from 1986 to 1988 — which, if you do the math, means he was running his business well into his 80s. Each year when Yom Kippur approached he'd call me in apologetically. "I can't help myself," he'd say. "I work on Yom Kippur, but you shouldn't. Go to synagogue."

One of the chief lessons my grandfather impressed on our family is something that's uncomfortable for my generation of American Jews to think about at this remove from the Holocaust. Even though we feel secure in a society that values diversity and allows Jews the freedom to worship and pursue our God-given potential, the Holocaust proved that you could never be entirely sure that even a beacon of civilization – like the nation of Beethoven, Goethe and Kant had been -- wouldn't turn against Jews as a people. The message was plain: Jews everywhere needed a safe, secure state of their own…just in case. Israel was a reservoir of Jewish values and civilization – and a place which all Jews knew they could call home if, God forbid, the scourge of murderous anti-Semitism empowered by devastating technology emerged once more.

My grandfather (l.) with Golda Meir

In short, I learned from my grandfather that a commitment to Israel is an inexorable part of being a Jew. To me, the phrases "never forget" and "never again" go hand in hand with an unwavering commitment to Israel's security and flourishing.

My wife Jody and I meeting with Teddy Kollek

In 1995 I had the chance to deepen this connection firsthand when my then-fiancee Jody and I spent 8 days in Israel shortly before we were married (we had both left the Clinton White House and hadn't yet started new jobs, so it was the perfect time for a trip; I always tell people you know we're Democrats because we went on our honeymoon before the wedding…). I still have vivid impressions from that trip nearly twenty years later. The rigorous security on El Al that unexpectedly filled me with pride. The way our first day reminded me of a passage in Phillip Roth where he talks about how different it

feels being in a country where everyone – the taxi driver, the bus boy, the dry cleaner, as well as the doctor and the lawyer -- is Jewish! We went to Masada, the Dead Sea, the Western Wall, and the Golan Heights. We shopped for art in Safed, strolled markets in Jerusalem, walked the beach in Tel Aviv.

Because of my grandfather's philanthropy in Israel, we had the chance to meet with Teddy Kollek, Ehud Olmert (then mayor of Jerusalem), and other leaders in business, law and government. I was struck by the vitality and complexity of Israeli society, and the passion Israelis exuded for what they had built, and were still building. I was also struck by how incredibly small the country was, and how vulnerable it seemed. At the end of our visit to Yad Vashem, when we emerged from the record of unspeakable evil to that room with the single flame, I suddenly wept.

I don't have the means my grandfather had (nearly all of his fortune went to charity), and so can never hope to emulate his record of philanthropy. But his passion for Israel, for its flourishing and security, is a critical part of my worldview. This commitment informs the policies I believe are vital for anyone who takes their Judaism seriously, and who understands Israel's special role in the moral imagination and in world affairs.

II. My Commitment to Israel

This bred-in-the-bone commitment leads me to hold three core principles on U.S. policy towards Israel that would inform my actions:

(1) Israel faces an existential threat from hostile neighbors, and its security is paramount. This threat can never be assumed away, downplayed, or forgotten. It is a fact. The overriding goal of US policy must be to guarantee Israel's security in the face of this threat, and to help assure that Israel (and America as her closest ally) can deter or defeat any foe.

(2) To achieve any lasting peace, Israel must reach agreements with its neighbors. The best way the United States can foster such progress is through a bedrock commitment within which Israel can feel secure in any challenging choices or adjustments it may ultimately consider. Constructive criticism from American leaders is best given privately, as befits close friends with common interests and shared values. The United States should also look for opportunities to incentivize Israel's regional neighbors to play constructive roles in the process; however, solutions cannot be imposed by third parties. Peace will ultimately be achieved through direct, bi-lateral negotiations resulting in a two-state solution permitting Israel to live in peace and security as a Jewish state. Unilateral efforts by the Palestinians to achieve statehood through dealings with international bodies only serve to impede true progress. As a member of Congress,

I intend to make re-invigorating the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process a priority by engaging the many Middle East stakeholders in this effort and challenging them to vigorously pursue a path toward a lasting peace.

(3) **The turmoil across the Arab world today in the wake of the "Arab Spring" should only redouble America's commitment to Israel.** As neighboring Arab governments have strengthened their grip and frustrated their people's hopes for better lives, the potential for a new era of scapegoating and anti-Semitism has risen. In this volatile context, the United States must redouble its commitment to Israel to assure its safety and flourishing. Israel's vitality in a dangerous neighborhood remains the best advertisement for the possibilities for democracy in the region.

As a result of these principles, I would support and advance the following policies as a U.S. congressman. (These are offered as examples to illustrate how I think about these questions, and are not meant to be a full catalogue of current issues). In all these cases, I see my role as being *not merely a vote for Israel, but an advocate championing Israel's cause* in the Congress and beyond. This is vital at a time when there are only 21 Jewish House members, many of them nearing the end of their careers.

Prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

The recent framework struck by President Obama and Secretary Kerry may yet prove a step in a positive direction, but I am deeply skeptical, and doubt Iran's intentions. After all, the same leaders at the helm of the regime today were the ones who boasted only a few years ago that their strategy was to "spin the West, and spin the centrifuges." Iran's recent testing of long-range ballistic missiles and President Rouhani's insistence that the country has no plans to destroy a single centrifuge make it virtually impossible to take other Iranian assurances seriously. To make diplomatic carrots and sticks work effectively, Congress should pass new sanctions to be activated if the Iranians fail to agree to an acceptable final version of the deal. The Senate's Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act, which does this, deserves swift passage.

We should have no illusions. Iran came to the table only because years of sanctions imposed a severe toll on its economy. We need to seize on Iran's vulnerability as an opportunity to end its nuclear weapons ambition entirely. An Iranian nuclear weapon is simply unacceptable; talk of "containing" a nuclear-armed Iran is folly. We need to make clear that grave consequences would follow any attempted crossing of the nuclear weapons line.

Bolster Israel's missile defense system.

The Pentagon says the Iron Dome is an "invaluable component of Israeli missile defense." In 2012, the system saved countless Israeli lives by intercepting hundreds of rockets dur-

ing attacks from Gaza. American aid to this program, recently bolstered by a $429 million re-investment, has been crucial for the program's success. I support U.S. investment in this critical program.

The Iron Dome is also a tool with which Israel can strengthen ties with its only two Arab allies. Jordan and Egypt share Israel's concerns about the Iranian nuclear program and the turmoil in Syria. The U.S. has proposed that Israel include these two countries in the Iron Dome program, and I support Israel's exploration of this idea. Joining forces here could lay the groundwork for a broader coalition against Middle Eastern troublemakers.

Oppose the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (B.D.S.) movement

I condemn the unjust Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS) campaign being conducted on the basis of thinly-veiled bigotry and bias against Israel. This strategy cannot be allowed to succeed. I join many current members of Congress, American university leaders and even Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in denouncing this effort to delegitimize Israel. This campaign, and the prospect of other unwarranted economic reprisals against Israel, are harmful to the economies of the United States and our allies, and only undermine efforts to reach a lasting, negotiated peace between Israel and its neighbors.

Recognize Israel as an investment that benefits the entire world.

The security benefits of support for Israel are clear. But the economic case for America's commitment is equally compelling. Israel's tech industry is experiencing a boom. Because Israel invests heavily in technology, it boasts the globe's highest per capita presence of high-tech engineers and startups. Israeli inventions are benefiting California directly: in February, Prime Minister Netanyahu visited the Golden State and agreed to export Israel's groundbreaking water conservation technology here to help handle the current drought. Israel's Negev region is producing the world's leading cybersecurity systems. At AIPAC's 2014 policy conference, an Israeli innovation showcase wowed attendees with groundbreaking technology across fields from non-invasive brain mapping to a smart camera that tells the vision-impaired what objects they are approaching. When it comes to innovation, Israel punches way above its weight. America and the world benefit from Israeli ingenuity.

Honor the Aid Commitment We've Made to Israel

The Memorandum of Understanding signed between the United States and Israel in 2007 is a crucial component of Israeli security. The $30 billion we've pledged to provide in foreign aid over ten years has allowed the Israeli military to take advantage of new security technologies and achieve a significant edge over regional rivals. Israel faces rockets from Hamas, a turbulent

and potentially nuclear Iran, rising Hezbollah in Lebanon, and growing movements to delegitimize Israel. Israeli aid is one of the few issues that Republicans and Democrats generally agree on, and I applaud this bipartisanship.

No fiscal challenges the United States faces could ever justify shortchanging Israel's security or failing to pass the annual Foreign Aid Bill. Take it from someone who served as a senior advisor in Bill Clinton's White House budget office: aid to Israel repays itself many times over in terms of the security and economic benefits Americans receive. $3 billion a year is also pocket change in a $4 trillion budget. I view the 2007 MOU as a floor, not a ceiling. It is non negotiable.

Special Partnership

The special relationship between Israel and the United States derives from a common quest for liberty, self-government and justice. Founding fathers like John Adams and John Quincy Adams praised Jews' aspiration for a free, independent nation. Lincoln called it a "noble dream and one shared by many Americans." That legacy of respect and empathy lives on today. I enthusiastically support Congress' recent designation of Israel as a "major strategic partner" of the United States. This status reflects our two nations' shared values and mutual interests, and the importance of working toward joint foreign policy and security goals at a dangerous time in the Middle East. Israel follows the traditions of Western democratic government, and helps promote these values in a region that sorely needs them.

III. Beyond Israel – How Jewish values inform my worldview and work

Beyond my commitment to Israel, being Jewish profoundly shapes my values and the way I think about public policy, and helps explain why I'm seeking elected office. Understanding my Jewish background and experience may give my neighbors a better feel for my priorities and character.

I was raised in a Reform temple in the New York suburbs of Rye Town, New York and Greenwich, Connecticut. I attended Sunday school and Hebrew school at Rye Community Synagogue, where I was bar mitzvahed in 1974. I was confirmed at the same temple two years later.

My friends and I basically did what was expected of us in this regard; in my case, at least, I didn't fully appreciate the richness of my Jewish heritage until I was in my 30s. I did, however, feel deeply culturally Jewish. The great thing Rabbi Robert Rothman did at our Sunday school was to make the last half hour each week a short version of the weekend service. We came to memorize all the prayers and tunes until they became literally a part of us -- to the point where if the chanting doesn't sound the same today as it did between 11:30 and 12 noon at Rye Commu-

nity Synagogue in the early 1970s, it still feels jarring. Perhaps you know the feeling: in the shul where you settle with your family as an adult, if the way the Sh'ma is done, or Sim Shalom, or the V'ahavta, is different, there's a part of you that feels as if something is off. There's something nice about that.

I have little Hebrew to show for those years of Wednesday afternoons being carpooled to temple. (If I was hit by a car in Jerusalem and someone rushed up and asked me how I was, I would still answer reflexively, "Ha kol b'seder" – "Everything's okay!" – even if I were expiring in the street.) But one thing I took away from my early Jewish education has always inspired me. It's the idea of *tikkun olam*, the notion that at the heart of Jewishness is the obligation to improve the world. I was lucky to have good role models – my mother Marianne taught at Head Start when I was younger; my father Tim, a businessman and entrepreneur, served on the board of our local hospital. The fact that I've spent so much time devoted to public policy over the years -- via my books, my *Washington Post* column, my government service at the White House and the Federal Communications Commission, and through a radio show that tries to promote a more constructive civic conversation on the challenges we face -- is my attempt to use whatever gifts I've been given to honor this Jewish ideal. (My longtime radio partner Robert Scheer and I have noted that in the old days, Jewish boys like us who liked to read, write, argue and tell people what they should think about the world would have become rabbis; today a lot of us become columnists and pundits…)

It was only when I went through a divorce in my early 30s that I began to appreciate the full richness of our Jewish heritage. It was a painful time. I felt disoriented and lost. As people do at such crossroads, I searched for solace, and wisdom. I started reading Abraham Joshua Heschel. Remarkable books like *God in Search of Man*, and *The Sabbath: It's Meaning for Modern Man*. I realized then the truth of something people say when you're growing up: that even if you don't embrace the full panoply of Jewish intellectual and spiritual life when you're young, it's always there for you if you've been brought up in it. It's a resource when you're ready. (This is why Jewish continuity is so important).

"Our goal," Heschel writes, "should be to live life in *radical amazement*...to get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed." Heschel talks about the centrality of mystery, wonder and awe as the proper response to the astonishing fact of our existence.

It had never occurred to me that the concepts of amazement and awe were at the heart of the Jewish outlook. Yet this was deeply in synch with (and gave wonderfully articulate form to) my own intuitions, surely because of my Jewish upbringing.

Heschel also argues that the central question of life is not what we ask of God*, but what God asks of us*. (Don't get nervous – I'm not about to say I heard voices telling me to run for Henry Waxman's seat…) That's where tikkun olam comes in. We're asked to do what we can to improve things. We should be outraged by injustice.

This sentiment has underpinned my two books, "The 2% Solution" and "The Tyranny of Dead Ideas." It particularly informs the importance I place (hardly original to me) on the outsized role that luck plays in life, and what that should mean for public policy. By "luck" I mean the "pre-birth lottery" – our inherited wealth, health, brains, talents, race, looks, family qualities and more. If we're honest, we know these things do much to determine our fate in life. Yet they are aspects of our lives for which we can neither take credit nor be blamed. I believe the overriding power of the pre-birth lottery obliges all of us to think about what it means to be serious about equal opportunity, and about what a minimally decent life should be in a wealthy nation like the United States. Our goal should be to assure that everyone has a chance to reach their God-given potential, and to enjoy some measure of security in an insecure world. There are policies that flow from this -- basic health security for all; great schools, especially for poor children; a decent reward for work; retirement with dignity; the preservation of the environment for those who follow us. But everything starts with these values.

There's a direct line between the Jewish values I've learned from my family, and in later years from a deeper engagement with our faith's literature, and my goals as a candidate. These values inspire my critique of today's Republican party and even my own Democratic party – because it's not enough to pay lip service to "equal opportunity," "upward mobility," and "economic security." We have to offer ideas that actually stand a chance of advancing these ideals. We can do better.

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Jody and I have raised our daughter, Amelia, in this same tradition. Each year when we attend High Holy Day services at Kehillat Israel (and savor Cantor Chayim Frenkel's operatic voice), Jody wears a brown silk ribbonette suit her mother Lynn knit by hand nearly sixty years ago. When Amelia had her bat mitzvah at KI a few years ago, my father in law, Hank Greenstone, was also called to the Torah at age 83– because in the Virginia town where he grew up, boys weren't routinely bar mitzvahed. (Hank has been a model of an involved Jewish life himself -- for 18 years he was national executive director of the Jewish fraternity Phi Epsilon Pi, which at one point had 50,000 members; he served on the board of his Philadelphia temple Rodeph Shalom, the oldest Ashkenazi synagogue in the Western Hemisphere; and was chairman of the Jewish Education Loan Fund for several years.)

Amelia had been concerned before she sat down with Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben to dis-

cuss her speech that one thing would pose a problem. She felt she had to clear the air. So when she went in, the first thing she said was, "I just have to let you know, I'm not sure I believe in God."

And Rabbi Reuben said immediately, "Me neither."

It was a wonderful, disarming response that put Amelia at ease, and captured what makes me so proud of our tradition. We have an amazing legacy of debate, open-mindedness and inquiry about the meaning of life and about the right way to live – it's been the essence of the Jewish conversation for thousands of years. I told Amelia as we stood before the congregation after she read from the Torah that day that what sealed the deal for me when it comes to the God question was watching her being born. ("What was I thinking?" I remember saying to myself at 3 am at UCLA hospital. "Of course it's a miracle!")

The program note I wrote for friends and family at her service ended this way:

"It's fair to ask whether a 13-year-old can really appreciate the idea of a bat mitzvah as a spiritual coming of age. Matt recalls his bar mitzvah as being mostly about the gifts, the party and the girls. (Indeed, Matt claims he wasn't ready for a mature spiritual experience until he was well into his 30s, but that's another story…) Amelia herself has expressed a few metaphysical qualms along the way. And there's little doubt that some of what accompanies the modern bat mitzvah, especially on the west side of Los Angeles, gets a bit out of hand.

"And yet—if you look past the DJ and the montage and the decorations, the transmission of the enduring values of Jewish civilization is at the heart of this milestone and celebration. Amelia takes her place today in a line of ritual and belonging, of mystery and awe, of faith and doubt that began ages ago, and which will continue long after all of us in this sanctuary are gone. It will be for Amelia to decide how to make use of this rich legacy in her own life. For now, from the shtetl to the Palisades, the tradition continues."

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Please forgive the long essay. I hope it gives some insight into my values and character, how they shape my commitment to Israel, and also inform the goals and ideals I would pursue as your representative in Congress.