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Dear Israel at Age 70,

"Yom huledet sameach!" You, of course, know yourself in all your diversity, vibrancy, complexity, and cultural richness. You know yourself from the inside out. But outsiders see you through so many different lenses--and often don't really know you beyond headlines and maybe an occasional tour. When Hal came to visit me, while I lived in Jerusalem in 1995-96, he was already more than a half-century old. Yet he had never before visited you, and would not ever have, except for me. He was completely "blown away" by your physical beauty, peacefulness and dynamism. He couldn't believe that he was actually stopping our rented car to pick up soldiers with rifles on their way home for Pesach. So, I wish above all for more of us American Jews, especially young ones, to know you better and feel more connected.

I am trying to catch up with how much you've changed from the time I first lived with you as a teenage kibbutznik in 1970. I've visited my family and friends on your soil many times since then, and even lived for nine months in your spiritual capital, Jerusalem. Every trip shows growth and change.

I've always been inspired by the character and determination of your Zionist founders. I have always believed in your existential value, as our people's guarantor of "Never again!"

But I also see you as the embodiment of our people's right of self-determination--not only political, but also cultural. Today, apart from Hasidic enclaves, you--Israel--are the one Jewish culture in the world that lives its life in a Jewish language. The creation and evolution of modern Hebrew in your majority-Jewish State has spawned a new and unique Jewish culture--named "Israeli." Who knows how your culture will develop, but one thing is certain--as long as you exist as a State, some sort of Judaism and Jewish culture will survive in this world.

This, too, gives me pride and joy: the fact that you are a democracy, you have amazing ethnic diversity, freedom of the press, a robust judiciary, a strong citizen military-- and you still have many Jewish and Arab citizens committed to standing up for human and minority rights and social justice both in Israel and in the occupied territories. Most of all, in my view the majority of your Jewish citizens still have a moral compass, based on Jewish values, regardless of political point of view. This is really something to be proud of in this world.

Today is not the time for criticism on my part, but of gratitude for the miracle that is the creation of the State of Israel. Hazak hazak--may you go from strength to strength.

Janet,

Cantor Janet Leuchter

A vibrant egalitarian Conservative Jewish community in Westchester County,
embracing our traditions while actively participating in our changing world.