In 1964, Rabbi Isaiah Zelvin founded Stephen S. Wise Temple, which has become one of the largest Jewish congregations in the world with one of the best Jewish education programs from infancy through high school graduation and beyond. Dedicating his life to Jewish education, Rabbi Zelvin 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 and Israel Bonds for his service 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 around the world.

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

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 give me 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 a try." It took me a couple of years to pay back.

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

IZ: First, I saw a very dangerous Israel, because even Jerusalem was separated by barbed wire. One day, I was walking with my son on the road and someone said to me, "Hey, there's a bomb that's about to go off, it might be the Arab people who will shoot you if you see them." I saw an Arab that was struggling. I worked on a bomb, and I said, ‘Hey, if I'm going to negotiate with you, then I'm going to talk to you like that was like. And, I really wanted to know why I was cut off. Why was I excluded? So I went in 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 where I opened a school. They told me that they wanted me to go to the west coast to start a West Coast branch of the college. It was the only one who had a Jewish college – I came out and started the Hebrew University College here. And, I was recently honored with the annual Award of Service at the Hebrew University College.

Wise: How do you know 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

Wise: What do you think is the biggest change facing Israel today?

IZ: Temple security question. It would like to negotiate with the Arab people, but the Arab people are too scared. 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 Arab means something different. Peace to Arabs is the gradual dismantlement of Israel. There are no moderates. There's only one, the "worstest.

Wise: Why should the congregation support Israel Bonds?

IZ: Throughout these years, Israel Bonds have meant different things, but this year it's most relevant because it's going to be used to rehabilitate the people who have been displaced by the miseries. I want the Jewish people to be involved in what is happening. If we don't do that, we are going to lose what we have been given through Hashem—a terrorist organization and we, and I would like Israel Bonds to do the same. Every time you give your money, because Bonds are not a gift, they are an investment. So if the government lends people money to rehabilitate themselves, they will pay it back, over the years, and they will repay the people's investment, and not 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 refund, if you are 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 90th birthday, and I took 85 people. At the time, I promised that at my next birthday, I would take 90 people. But Israel needs tourists, so I'd like to go this time, 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. As it is, 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. To take them to meet with people who are like me, middle-aged 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 on the Orthodox, because of the political system. You need the Orthodox, but you need a majority government. When you have to make coalitions with minority parties, one of the parties is always the Orthodox Party. And as a result, the Orthodox control sensitive fam- ilies, and what they've done over marriage, and adoption, and their views are outdat- ed. In that sense, the government yields to them even though it doesn't agree. Because I've known all the Prime Ministers and each one says, "we're estranged 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 the modern day Israel.

IZ: I don't think it is going to happen in my lifetime, even though support at all the groups that vote for change, I even had the outstanding proponent for civil mar- riages as a guest here one Friday night. And, in our auditorium we had two thou- sand people come and listen to the programs. The Prime Minister at the time was Ariel Sharon, and he wanted it (civil marriages), but he couldn't do it because he did the deal, the Orthodox would demand him and his majority would fall. But he was in favor of it. (Bshuda) Olmert, is in favor of it. (Yi- dach) Raven in favor of it. All of them were here at Stephen S. Wise. And, I would discuss it with them every time I walked with a me a thousand percent, yet they didn't do anything about it. Imagine when the Prime Minister of a government can't get his program across because of the political infighting.

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 so many important institutions. An interesting sidelining, it benefitted the overall state of Israel far beyond. I saw who the big contributors were until I made the Israel Bonds appeal. When I found out who the big buyers of Bonds were, I went to them for donations to our building, and the congregation, and the government, and the state. And they said, the state of Israel. What I pitched was that every person who is over thirteen should buy a bond. A bond is a_Mitzvah Bond for $100, and you cannot say that you have become a Bar Mitzvah and then not perform a mitzvah. That's why I think we had so many bond buyers.

Rabbi Zelvin with former Israel Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin

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To read more of Rabbi Zelvin’s interview and his views about God, prayer, and building a Reform congregation, log on to www.Wisel.A.org.