Today is a very significant day on the Gregorian calendar. Sixty-two years ago today was the first full day of the existence of the State of Israel. The State was declared by Ben-Gurion on Friday, May 14, 1948. Hours later, Harry S. Truman, then President of the United States, acting against the advice of all of his closest counselors, made the United States the first country to recognize the State of Israel de jure.

Sixty-two years later there are growing concerns that the current President of the United States is weakening the traditionally strong ties between our country and the State of Israel. Those concerns are what lead me to make some critical comments about what I perceive to be a faulty and dangerous American policy vis-à-vis Israel.

I apologize in advance for speaking so frankly from the pulpit. Whatever my personal, political leanings may be, I have tried throughout my rabbinate not to speak politics from the pulpit. In this policy, I follow in the footsteps of my father, of blessed memory, who always said that KJ is not a Democratic synagogue nor a Republican synagogue; it is an American synagogue and politics have no place in the pulpit. I subscribe to that view. I make an exception today because I am concerned for Israel's safety and, perhaps, even for Israel's survival in an increasingly dangerous world where a firm alliance between Israel and America is more important than ever before, not just for Israel but for America as well.

Let me make one more preliminary comment. I fully expect that this pulpit address will elicit a great deal of criticism because I am going to be balanced in my approach. The result will be that people on the left will feel I am too critical of the President while people on the right will feel I am insufficiently critical. There is a very strong possibility that what I am about to say will satisfy absolutely no one. That is a very dangerous position for a rabbi. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter is reputed to have said that a rabbi with whom everybody agrees is not a rav, while a rabbi with whom nobody agrees is not a mensch. I worry about the loss of my status as a mensch.

Now to the issues.

Let me quote from a page one editorial in the current issue of Commentary by its editor John Podhoretz, under the title, “Mr. President, Your Animus Is Showing.” Podhoretz writes… “I have to confess that the reports of President Obama’s conduct toward Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during their deliberately unphotographed White House meeting in March… came as a cold shock to me. We still don’t know quite what happened, but it appears that the President came into the room with a list of unilateral demands, that he grew impatient with Netanyahu’s answers, and
that he left unceremoniously by claiming he was going to have dinner with his wife and kids but that he would ‘be around’ in case the Prime Minister ‘changed his tune’.

Reports about that meeting have created an impression that the President deliberately diminished the stature of Israel’s Prime Minister and that the Prime Minister was treated rudely with malice aforethought. I spoke last week with Ambassador Michael Oren. He told me that this report and others like it are pure fiction; that Mrs. Obama and the children were not even in the White House that night; that the meeting was a very long one with a very good exchange between the President and the Prime Minister; that it was the Prime Minister who asked for a recess so that he could consult with his advisers, and that the discussions, while they revealed real differences between the approaches of the United States and Israel, were respectful and substantive. There was no animus displayed by the President. An inaccurate report on the meeting appeared in Ha’aretz the next day and was taken as factual by the media in general. Something that never actually happened was described grotesquely. In fact, the Ambassador told me, he feels that something of a corner was turned and that the differences between the two countries were actually narrowing.

To its credit, the Administration has tried to counter the impression that a serious rift exists and that the President doesn’t really care about Israel. At an ADL Leadership Conference in Washington last week, Dan Shapiro, Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa at the National Security Council, stressed the very close ties between the United States and Israel and endeavored to dispel any impression that those ties were weakening. A similar approach was taken by Dennis Ross, the White House’s top Iran policy official, who also spoke at that conference. Over the past several weeks there have been two meetings of a group of rabbis from all of the denominations, called by Rahm Emanuel, in which the President’s Chief of Staff encouraged the rabbis to express their concerns about American policy toward Israel while he tried to reassure them that there is no rift between the two countries. Our own Rabbi Elie Weinstock was at both of those meetings at the White House. At the second meeting, this past Thursday, Dan Shapiro, Dennis Ross and James Jones, Chairman of the National Security Council, spoke to the 14 rabbis.

Finally, Elie Wiesel had a long private lunch with President Obama. It was a highly substantive discussion over a kosher meal. As Elie relayed it to me, there was no small talk. It was all about Jewish history, the central importance of Jerusalem and the problems surrounding the peace process. Elie told me quite clearly that his impression of the President is that Mr. Obama is not at all an enemy of Israel. A very good relationship between the two men was established which, hopefully, will be useful in the future. It should be noted that it was Elie Wiesel’s powerful open letter to the President on the Jerusalem housing units, that appeared in newspapers, which carried a great deal of weight inside the Administration and led to serious efforts to repair a perceived rift between the two governments.
As Rahm Emanuel put it candidly, if somewhat crudely, to the rabbis, we screwed up our relationship with American Jews for 14 months and we’re determined to repair it.

In fact, it is quite clear to people who are involved in discussions with the Administration that the atmosphere is improving. It should, however, be remembered that the real issue isn’t the atmosphere or what happened or didn’t happen at a meeting. The real issue is the policy of our government. It is that policy upon which we should focus and on which, I believe, we should be working together with AIPAC, together with our congressmen and senators and together with officials of the Administration. I would like to make three points about the policy issues.

One: It is undeniable that there has been a very significant shift in the thinking of the Obama Administration on how American strategic interests and Israel’s strategic interests coincide. For the last thirty years, since former President Carter left office, the Washington and Jerusalem strategic views have tended to run parallel, going in the same direction. It appears that it is the view of this Administration that the strategic views of the two countries are now diverging and there is an effort to create daylight or distance between the goals of the United States and Israel in the Middle East.

The goal of the United States, as articulated by Secretary of State Clinton in her address to the AIPAC Conference in March, is that while the road to Iran doesn’t run through Jerusalem, significant progress in the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians will help the United States navigate the treacherous waters of the Middle East. In order to make such progress Israel will have to make significant sacrifices. That, she said, is in Israel’s interest because demography is not on Israel’s side and military technology makes Israel much more vulnerable today than in the past and, therefore, the status quo is untenable and must be changed by a successful peace process.

The position of Israel is that it needs to survive and in order to survive it must have secure borders. Netanyahu has accepted a two state solution, the first time that a Likud leader has joined the national consensus in support of a Palestinian State. Netanyahu has suspended housing starts across the West Bank, including in settlement blocks near the border, slated to be part of Israel according to every peace plan. What Netanyahu has refused to do is to stop building in East Jerusalem in Ramat Shlomo, a community which houses 20,000 Jews and which is an integral part of the united city of Jerusalem.

This shift in policy on the part of the Obama Administration is simply wrong and we must demonstrate that it is wrong. Forcing a peace process on Israel will have little or no effect on America’s ability to navigate the turbulent waters of the Middle East. Oslo in 1993 didn’t have such an effect. The Barak Peace Plan in 2000 didn’t have such an effect. President Obama has to learn from history and we have to remind him of that history. A peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians has nothing to do with the issue of settlements. It has to do with the Arab refusal to allow the existence
of a Jewish State in the Middle East. Until the Arabs come to terms with Israel’s existence there can be no peace. We saw what happened as a result of Oslo. We saw what happened when Barak offered Arafat the whole package; Arafat started an intifada. We saw what happened when Israel withdrew from Gaza. All it produced was terror and rockets.

Peace is essential. The status quo is dangerous. But forcing peace on Israel is not the answer. It is a prescription for more terror; more rockets and much more devastation.

Second: There has been a seismic shift from the Bush policy articulated in June 2002 after the horrific results of the second intifada. Former President Bush called for the establishment of a Palestinian State only after a renunciation of terror, a change in the educational system which indoctrinates children with hatred for Israel and Jews, and the development of democratic institutions in the Palestinian controlled areas of the West Bank. Actually, that policy has been enunciated by the current Prime Minister of the PA, Mr. Salem Fayyad. It has yet to be embraced by President Abbas.

President Obama’s policy is the old formula – land for peace. That policy is simply wrong. If the Palestinians do not create conditions on the ground that are conducive to peace, all that will happen in a land for peace exchange is that rockets will rain on the center of the State of Israel. Jerusalem and Tel Aviv will be the new Sderot. No amount of talking by Secretary of State Clinton about demographic facts and technological threats will change this. The only hope for peace is if the Arabs actually want peace and are ready to live with Israel.

We now know that any land swap, without prior changes in the P.A. and Hamas, just leads to terror and rocketry. Former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s plan for a withdrawal from Gaza may or may not have ever had a chance to work. We now know, however, that it didn’t work. And the result of that knowledge is the disappearance of the Israeli left so that there is consensus in Israel that peace will come only when the conditions on the ground in the Arab sections of the West Bank are conducive for peace.

Three: The real threat in the Middle East is not being firmly confronted by the Obama Administration. The real threat is Iran. When Iran gets a nuclear bomb there will be no peace. Iran’s interest is in destabilizing the Middle East, not in the creation of peace. Iran is doing its evil work now with Hizbollah and Hamas. Imagine what it will do when Iran has nuclear weapons.

There is currently a policy in Washington to get the UN to invoke sanctions which will necessarily be weak. The thinking is that if at least we have UN approved sanctions the United States will then be able to create stronger sanctions itself. The problem is that all of this is going to take a lot of time and we don’t have time on our hands. Moreover, we can invoke sanctions ourselves, strong sanctions like not allowing refined petroleum to get into Iran. Sanctions such as these have been passed by both Houses
of Congress and are now in conference committees. Our own representative, Carolyn Maloney is actually taking leadership in this effort. A bill will be on the President’s desk within weeks. He should be urged to sign it. If Iran is to be stopped by sanctions now is the time. And the US can do it. Reviving proximity talks, which are an excuse for the Arabs not sitting down with the Israelis directly and trying to work out issues, will not stop Iran nor will it bring peace to the Holy Land.

A little over two years ago Barak Obama, then a candidate for the Presidency visited Sderot. He saw there the terrible damage caused by rockets and said something like this: if someone would shoot a rocket on my home while my children were sleeping at night, I would make sure that they could never do that again. When I had my moment with the President, on the day following the inauguration, I reminded him of that statement and I told him that we will always remember it. He nodded appreciatively.

The real question on my mind today is: does President Obama remember that statement and will he use it to guide his policy in the Middle East? Will our President take the position of sensitivity and nobility, setting policy like the man who took that pledge in Sderot? Will he recognize that a flimsy peace treaty in exchange for real land will lead only to the spreading of the havoc of Sderot all over the State of Israel? I pray to God that the real Barak Obama, as President of our country, will be the man who spoke powerfully in Sderot. I hope that all of us will have the strength and determination to remind him of that noble moment and make sure that the strategic interests of Israel and America continue to run in a parallel alignment.

King Solomon, in the Book of Proverbs stated: “Fortunate is the person who is always fearful.” May God grant that our country’s policies render our fears unwarranted.