

The Eternal People

Seventy-five years ago this very night Rabbi Louis Newman, who served our congregation with great distinction for forty years, introduced a new rationale for the Kol Nidre prayer. Far from being a cold legalistic formula for the renunciation of vows, the Kol Nidre was, in Rabbi Newman's view, an urgent plea for forgiveness for Spanish Jews who had to publicly renounce their Judaism to avoid persecution or death, but very often found some secret location to publicly affirm their fidelity to Judaism and the Jewish people.

Historians continue to debate whether or not the Kol Nidre was originally written as a desperate plea for forgiveness. What is more than likely is that these ancestors feared that Judaism would end then and there under the brutal auspices of the Spanish Inquisition.

The *haftarah* for the second day of Rosh Hashanah concerns the prophet Jeremiah who graphically depicted the cream of Israelite society streaming out of Jerusalem exiled by the Babylonians two thousand years earlier. The matriarch, Rachel, who died in childbirth, is symbolically pictured standing and watching what she thought was to be our collective demise. The prophet Jeremiah observed this lamenting Rachel:

"Rachel is weeping for her children.

She refuses to be comforted for her children," fearing that these children could never return home.

Painful text.

And many of us carry in here an indelible picture of the few who staggered out of Hitler's death camps, barely able to stand, with nowhere to go and little hope. Their destiny was often further internment, for no country waited eagerly to welcome them just as they had not before the war. Did they think at that moment there was any chance for a viable Jewish future? Speaking for the children of survivors Elie Wiesel observed, "“You, in fact, were the enemy's obsession. In murdering living Jews he wished to prevent you from being born. He knew how vulnerable we Jews are with regard to our children.”"

Do we continue to be vulnerable? Unquestionably. Are we blessed beyond the wildest dreams of our ancestors? Also unquestionably. We live in the most blessed, most secure country Jews have ever lived in in our history. We live in an era in which we continue to celebrate the rebirth of the Jewish state. The late rabbi Milton Steinberg wrote poignantly about this miracle: "“If we could transport ourselves in imaginations back to the year 70 and stand where Israel stood then, after its' dreadful defeat to Rome— one-fifth of its numbers dead, another one-fifth sold into slavery, the land lost, the Temple lost, everything lost.”"

What odds would have been given for the survival of this people? Yet, *Am Yisrael Chai*, the Jewish people lives, the Jewish State has been reborn, and we are alive to participate in one of history's great miracles and you and I will help ensure that the Jewish people and faith shall live and the Jewish future is viable and strong.

And yet, many in our community resist the glass half-full scenario. Reminds me of the story of a monk who took a vow of silence. He was allowed to speak just three words at the end of each five years. At the end of his first five years he walked into his supervisor's room and said, "“Bed too hard.”"

Another five years passed in silence; again the monk entered the supervisor's room and said, "Food too cold."

Five more years and the monk uttered, "Room too small." At the end of twenty years of virtual silence the monk's rank is not elevated. The monk asked the supervisor, "Why no promotion?" To which the supervisor replied, "Because all you ever do is complain."

We Jews don't complain so much, we wring our hands. We read pew studies as if they are a sacred writ. Of course, we need not manufacture reasons to be insecure. Just recall the headline from *Atlantic Magazine*, April 2015 written by a fine reporter, Jeffrey Goldberg which read: Is It Time For The Jews To Leave Europe? His article concludes that there probably is no future in many of the countries that tried to terminate our existence some three score and fifteen years ago.

And we also know that Sunni and Shiite Arabs and the Iranians are united in one common goal: they want to wipe Israel and the Jewish people off the map altogether.

Isn't it ironic that the United States of America came into existence through armed insurrection while Israel came into existence by a resounding vote of the United Nations, a state born by international acclaim? But what difference do facts make to these foes? Today, Jews are outnumbered by the Arabs of the Middle East by sixty to one and by the worlds' Muslims two hundred to one. And yet Israel is the one country indicted by uprisings like the BDS Movement. Think of all the countries with the most outrageous politics and human rights violations. Yet, the only country they want to subject to boycott is Israel.

They make that judgement in spite of the fact there is absolutely no Palestinian entity ready and able to negotiate a peace that is at all viable, that respects Israel's security, in spite of the fact that Hamas, Hezbollah and ISIS are existential threats. There is no question in my mind, therefore, that BDS is worse than naïve and simplistic. It is at root and branch outright anti-Semitism.

Here's the remarkable thing: Gina and I were there in Israel during Israel's elections in March, visiting our daughter Maya who was studying at Tel Aviv University. Tel Aviv clearly does not speak for all Israel the same way that New York does not speak for the entire United States of America even though we should, because our perspective is always correct. What we heard in multiple conversations with these Israelis is that they craved a different present tense. They certainly did not foresee an end to the existential conflict, no relief from the imminent threat of terrorism and war and, no, they do not see any realistic two-state solution any time soon.

Still and all, so many want a government which reflects their values, reflects Jewish values. They wanted policies that reflected the best instincts of our Jewish heritage, that would help their friends and neighbors achieve opportunity.

We share their vision and their worry. Precisely because we love Israel, we have real concerns. We decry Muslim extremists as we should. We must also condemn Jewish extremists, those far right settlers who arrogantly think that their despicable actions are backed by the State. They shame us all and do not deserve the support of the government or the Jewish community anywhere.

Precisely because we love Israel, we must stand up for the equality of non-Orthodox Jews, for our own dignity, and not explain it away as the messy by-product of Israeli's chaotic parliamentary system. This system reeks of prejudice towards a huge percentage of world Jewry.

Israel desperately needs to address their social problems based on Jewish values. You and I interpret the commandment, "You shall not stand idle while your neighbor bleeds" to mean, for example, that we dare not stand by while our neighbors on the Upper West Side do not have enough food on their table. The number of families living on two dollar a day poverty in this country has more than doubled in the last twenty years, reaching a million and a half households in a survey done in early 2011. We refuse to turn away from the whimpers of hungry children in perhaps the most blessed city the world has ever known. We refuse to think that homelessness, which is at close to record levels in our city now, is someone else's problem, but we heed the call of the prophet Isaiah to bring the homeless poor into our own home as we have done for the past thirty-two years.

Yes, both Israel and America face daunting problems. But let's just take a step back for a moment. Seventy-five years ago as the Holocaust loomed, Jewish access, Jewish power was close to non-existent. It is not fair to say that American Jews did not try hard enough to help European brethren; we simply had little influence then and also were stymied by overwhelming anti-Semitism in this country. Forty-one percent of Americans in March 1938 thought that the Jews had too much power in the United States. In 1938!

Seventy-five years later the Prime Minister of Israel addresses an adoring joint session of Congress in an attempt to help shape U.S. foreign policy. Now, you know that in no way did I support the Prime Minister of Israel's speech under those circumstances. Yet, we all have to be amazed at the respect the prime minister of Israel received, the access that Jewish lobbying groups have to Congress. Even the fact that the American Jewish community profoundly disagrees with each other in public is a sign of our security in this great land. Jewish well-being no longer depends on our having a monolithic political position in these blessed United States of America.

Yet, as we all know, the Jewish community has rarely been so divided or outspoken on anything as we have been on the Iran Nuclear Deal. My position in this matter is known to you, but I will admit that I am not ready to hand out Nobel Peace Prizes to those negotiators. Let's all be open minded enough to realize that there are compelling arguments on both sides. For example, I certainly know that Russia's ability to deliver ballistic missiles after eight years is troubling to say the least. I, too, question how verifiable will this deal be. Will Iran use sanction relief for the crying needs of their own people or will they spend most of it to fortify Shiite positions among Hezbollah, and Hamas and prop a façade in humanitarian and political disaster that is Syria. Yet, with every lunatic, anti-Semitic epithet that comes out of the Ayatollah's mouth, I am grateful that a path to a nuclear bomb is being blocked for a long time to come.

Without this agreement, Russia would be able to sell those missiles to Iran almost immediately and probably would sell additional military hardware which would be in their economic interest. The entire population of Iran would be radicalized and would support the quick ramping-up of the nuclear program

which is an immediate existential threat to Israel and certainly would immediately stimulate the Sunni countries of the Middle East to do likewise. I shudder at the implications!

Remember that of all the candidates the Ayatollahs permitted to run in Iran, the most moderate won. There is in fact much pro-American yearning in the next generation, and they collectively plead with the world to help them dream, to help them undermine the doctrinal hold of this lunatic regime upon their lives.

With no guarantees to be sure, I choose to support those who desperately need Iran to focus more on the lives of their children than on the death of their enemies.

And let's not fret about the divisions in our community. The rhetoric on both sides has been way overblown. But just remember that for two thousand years the Jewish community has never been united on matters of deep import to our community and yet none of it has produced lasting fissures. In fact, our political allegiances have been more united than divided, because we have seen the absolute import of a political system that protects the rights and dignity of others. Let us also remember that while we may divide on some issues, Jew haters have always lump us together.

They don't care one whit about differences we obsess over. So on this Yom Kippur let us acknowledge sins of speech that have manifested in lack of respect for each other's heartfelt beliefs. Both sides love this country, both sides love Israel, and it is from that intense love these passions have exploded. Let us remember that when things get rough, we really do need each other, that all Israel is responsible, one for the other, and need to act accordingly as the New Year begins.

As I said on Rosh Hashanah, there is no politician or pundit who seems to have any idea how to address the abject chaos in those countries from which desperate human beings risk even their children's lives to seek safety. The refugee problem is and will be enormous. Tonight I offer no pat or pedantic solutions. Only this: Our grandparents, our people, were being crammed into trains and ghettos and ultimately butchered. Of course, this was Hitler, this was state-sponsored genocide and we must never attempt or sanction historic parallels with our own tragic nightmare. Yet, to this day we wonder where was the world? Where was everybody? Why did America turn ships filled with Jews away from our shores and consign so many to genocide? And why did so few Germans or Poles or Austrians give a damn?

Well, these refugees now want to know if the world gives a damn.

Thirty-six separate times in the Torah we are told, "You were strangers in the land of Egypt so remember the stranger in your midst."

The solutions here too, are daunting, including vetting people from Syria or Iraq and their possible relationship to terrorism, their attitude towards America and certainly towards Israel. A real concern.

But the Torah speaks unequivocally here. You once were there. Therefore, "Thou shall not stand idle while thy neighbor bleeds."

Not now! Not again!

For centuries we have worked together to use the values of Judaism to vastly improve the community in which we were blessed to live. We taught the world about the beauty of the Sabbath and the absolute need that all living creatures have to rest one day a week.

Throughout the ages we have heard the ringing cry of our Torah, *Tzedek Tzedek Tirodeph*, Justice, Justice, Shall Thou Pursue, and we have been the vanguard making sure that we protect the dignity of all people. As incredible changes in attitude sweep the country concerning the GLBTQ community, for example I am proud that Rodeph Sholom absolutely has been in the vanguard of leadership on this crucial social issue for the past twenty years.

Tzedek Tzedek Tirodeph. We hear those words as a clarion call to ensure that the well-being and equality of woman are protected. Headline today: one in four women experience sexual assault by force on campus. This is a shocking and intolerable fact.

Justice, Justice, Shall Thy Pursue also means that women of any color and economic status should not have to continually fight a war to gain access to basic healthcare, and their procreation can never be subjected to the terror of the State. You want irony? Those who seek to defund Planned Parenthood should realize that no organization has done more to reduce the number of abortions in this country and they do so through counseling and the distribution of birth control to all in need. These folk somehow do not make the connection between the availability of safe birth control and the dramatic reduction in teen pregnancy. Can we enroll them in high school health classes please? Planned Parenthood should be thanked by every political party for being there to help the poor and the

vulnerable. So, the desperate attempt to doctor video footage will ultimately fail, because gratified women will guarantee that result.

As we all know people of color also yearn for elemental justice. Twenty-five percent of all the world's prisoners are in U.S. jails. We have quadrupled the number of those incarcerated in the past thirty years, many from non-violent personal drug offenses and African Americans are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites. Sixty percent of people languishing in jails today have not been convicted of anything. They are innocent in the eyes of the law. Many are there simply because they cannot make bail. There has to be a better way than to deprive thousands and thousands of families their husbands, their fathers and sons in an effort to lock our problems of mental illness and drugs away, not wanting to spend the money or face our problems squarely and humanely.

There must come a day when African-American parents don't have to have the talk with their children about how to navigate in our unjust world. The Torah doesn't tell us to create a just world, that dream is far from us, we're told, *tirodeph from rodeph, justice, justice, you must pursue.*

This is who we are and who we must be. Close to four thousand years ago the Torah recorded God speaking to Abraham and saying "There are going to be many dark days ahead, but my covenant with the people Israel is an eternal one." I believe that we are here despite the many efforts to consign us to the dustbins of history because of that eternal promise. But we are also here because in generation after generation we have been dedicated to more than just our own survival. No matter how poorly we were treated, we insisted on uplifting others. To be a Jew, in Elie Wiesel's words, is not to try to make the world more Jewish, but to make the world more human.

The late Edmund Fleg wrote to his grandson, yet unborn, these words which have captured the essence of who we are and who we must endeavor to become:

“See this people,” Fleg writes, “twice exiled and surviving two dispersions, see it hunted throughout the world, yet see it bearing its truth and spreading it throughout the world in flames of light.”

Tell me if in this unique history you do not feel the eternal presence of a mind and a will guiding this people from its’ unhappy past to its’ triumphant future. As for me, my child, who has long sought for the evidence of God, I have found it in the existence of Israel.

I am Jew because born of Israel and having lost it I felt it revived in me more alive than I am myself.

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel demands no abdication of my mind.

I am a Jew because in all places where there are tears and suffering, the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew because in every age when the cry of despair is heard the Jew hopes.

I am a Jew because for Israel the world is not finished. We will complete it.

We who have heard the pained-soaked notes of Kol Nidre, we who have heard the ebulliently hopeful sound of the shofar must translate our history into a future of blessing, for all those in our orbit. Let us now hear the end of that haftarah from the prophet Jeremiah who speaks to tearful Rachel, watching our people descend into exile, "Refrain thy voice from weeping and thine eyes for tears. There is hope for thy future. Saith the Lord."

Our tradition.

Now, our mission.

Amen.