

“In the Shadow of War: Israel Needs Our Support”

Sermon: Rosh Hashanah Morning 5767

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In most years, the question would be fairly straight forward: “Rabbi, did you have a good summer?” To be honest, this year, every time I am asked, I experience a wave of conflicting emotions. On the most personal of levels, I am happy to say that Emily, the kids, and I had a really good summer. Some quality time together as a family at home. A really enjoyable vacation in northern Vermont. A couple of weeks on staff at Camp Eisner - the Reform Movement’s overnight camp in the Berkshires. And a rhythm of summer-life that is just slower and more relaxed. Yet, at the same time, as we all know, this summer was also a time of war in Israel. This summer we watched as thousands of katyusha rockets rained down on the cities and towns of northern Israel – including Haifa, Israel’s third largest city. We daily learned of Israeli soldiers in their late teens and twenties who had been killed in combat. We read in our newspapers and watched on televisions as hundreds of thousands of Israelis were forced to either live in bomb shelters or to flee their homes for the safety of the south. We daily mourned the loss of every innocent life – whether Israeli or Lebanese – and cried in anger and utter frustration at an enemy who not only sought to start a war with Israel – but did not hesitate to use Lebanon’s own men, women, and children as human shields during that war!

As Israel is such a small country, the war – in many ways – was personal for her entire population. The web of relationships amongst Israelis is very closely knit – oftentimes, with only one degree of separation separating one person - be it a friend or a family member - from another. People know each other. Similarly, because just about everyone – by necessity – has to serve in the army during his or her lifetime, the experiences of the soldiers were far from abstract. Rabbi Edgar Nof, Rabbi of the Reform congregation in Haifa sent the following note to some friends in America: “...Although Israel is bombed, wounded, and hurting, I am writing to you all. ...You should know that every e-mail you write, every phone call and every letter we receive is the most important that we get. In the north of Israel, people are confused and afraid.”

How hard it was to read those words.....how much more difficult, of course, to have to write them.

Back here at Beth Shalom - who amongst us would have imagined last spring – when our congregation first embraced the idea of dedicating the coming year to a mitzvah theme of helping the homeless that we would find ourselves needing to focus our attention on our own people’s NATIONAL home? On this Rosh Hashanah morning – as each of us is called upon to consider the most important relationships in our lives – this year, the sound of the shofar reminds us that we must also reaffirm the strength of our relationship with Israel – extending our help and supporting her in whatever ways we are able.

Though, thankfully, the war itself has ended, its repercussions continue to linger: Hezbollah – a proxy of Syria and Iran - remains an increasingly powerful military and political force in Lebanon despite the promises made through the United Nations – three IDF soldiers: Gilad Shalit, Eldad Regev, and Ehud Goldwasser – remain in captivity –

and our prayers during these Holy Days - are with them and their families – and serious questions remain about both Israel’s recovery efforts and the direction that the Middle East will take from here.

How many steps backwards – it seems - have we taken from those more-promising days of just a few years ago. How optimistic we were when, during his inaugural address to the Israeli Knesset – then Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin – of blessed memory – shared his own pragmatic realization with the Palestinian people when he said: We have been fated to live together on the same patch of land....We lead our lives with you, beside you, and against you....You will not get everything you want.....neither will we.”

Back then, most serious observers of the region’s political landscape believed that peace was on the horizon – that a better life would gradually be nurtured for all peoples in Israel and beyond. We were encouraged as the Palestine Liberation Organization willingly renounced terrorism, recognized Israel’s existence, and began negotiations with the Israeli government.

Today, however, Hamas stands as the elected national leadership of the Palestinian people. And despite the severe economic pressure that the West has placed upon them – they – and other extremist groups and governments in the region - continue to refuse to recognize Israel – to disavow acts of terrorism – and refuse to show a genuine willingness to abide by previous agreements made between Israel and previous Palestinian leadership.

Part of what is striking to many is that this latest war in Israel’s history was fought for age-old reasons: to engage an enemy who openly threatens the very existence of the Jewish state. Clear to Israel and to her supporters is the fact the Israel-Lebanon war was incited by the killing and the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers who were stationed within Israel’s internationally recognized borders. Clear to Israel and her supporters is the fact that Hezbollah and Hamas – despite Israel’s withdrawal six years ago from Southern Lebanon and more recently from Gaza – chose to turn away from peace on both of these borders – choosing instead to launch rockets at nearby Israeli cities their citizens. Clear to Israel and her supporters is the fact that Hezbollah and its supporters are far less – IF AT ALL concerned about the establishment of a viable national home for the Palestinian people than they are about denying a national home for the Jewish people!

This challenging of Israel’s legitimacy as a nation, again, is not new. Israel’s enemies have used it to inspire military action against the small Jewish state since her very beginnings. But what is surprising is that in recent years, this political perspective – one which questions Israel’s very right to exist - has become more commonly heard in Western intellectual circles.

In an article published just last year in “Foreign Policy Magazine” – for example - author and political commentator Josef Joffe wrote of his belief that the root of the troubles in the Middle East lies NOT in Israel’s behavior, but rather in her very existence. Similarly in a work by British writer A.N. Wilson, he stated his view that Israel simply should not

be afforded the right to exist. And just a couple of years ago, British historian, author and professor Tony Judt sparked tremendous controversy when he wrote in the “New York Review of Books” his belief that Israel itself is – quote: an “anachronism” and that there is, in fact no place in the world today for a “Jewish state.”

Personally, as a rabbi, on more than one occasion, I have even been approached by individuals – some of whom were Jewish - people innocently looking for a greater measure of understanding of the conflict in the Middle East – people wanting to know why, exactly do the Jewish people deserve to have a home of their own --- what makes Israel’s claim to this particular plot of land so compelling? – and why exactly is Israel worthy of our support?

I struggle to think of any other nation in the world today that lives under the shadow of such scrutiny.

Back in 1948, during Israel’s War of Independence, there was a popular joke that went something like this: “Two Jewish soldiers are sitting in their foxhole as enemy bullets whistle over head. Realizing that they are running out of ammunition, one soldier turns to the other and says, ‘You know....if the British had to give us a country that wasn’t their own, why couldn’t they have given us Switzerland?’”

Indeed, students of Israel’s history can tell us that such an idea – the creation of an independent Jewish state in a place other than Middle East – was actually seriously considered by many. Feeling that a Jewish state needed - first-and-foremost – to be a haven for Jews living in a world of rising anti-Semitism, there were even some early Zionists, Theodore Herzl amongst them, who supported the notion of creating a Jewish homeland in what is now Uganda or even Kenya.

However, other visionaries and leaders who helped shape the Zionist dream understood that while any newly formed Jewish state would sadly....but necessarily be a haven for persecuted Jews everywhere.....such a state would also need to be a place that the Jewish people could call “home.” With this in mind, they stated that the only place appropriate would be the historic land of Israel – the place towards which Jews have always turned their hearts and directed their prayers --- and, in fact, have lived, for 4,000 years.

In some of the earliest chapters of the Torah we read that G-d called upon a man whose name would become Abraham, telling him: “Lech l’cha....” --- “Go forth --- take your wife Sarah, your family - those that you love and those that will follow you - and journey to a special place that I, G-d, will show you.” What unfolds before us, then, is the sacred story of *Avraham Avinu*...and *Sarah Imanu*....Abraham our father and Sarah our mother – the very first wandering Jews.

Throughout Torah text that follows – we follow the Jewish people’s journey - from one generation to the next – as they make their way towards their G-d-promised homeland. We learn – both from Torah and from the Rabbis who were inspired by its words – that Abraham – being a wanderer-in-search-of-a-home himself – was uniquely sensitive to

those who were in need of shelter and safety. In the one Biblical passage, Abraham and Sarah rush to help three strangers who were making their way in the wilderness. And, in fact, in one midrash, we are taught that on at least one occasion Abraham rose up from his tent so that he could literally build homes along the roadside for those who were in need. It is for this reason – by the way - that our congregational initiative to help the homeless has been named after Abraham. (*Note: 2006-2007 Temple Beth Shalom is engaged in a congregational *mitzvah* theme entitled: “The Abraham Project”)

In following the Jewish people’s journey home, we read about how they moved from slavery in Egypt to redemption at the hands of Moses and G-d – to forty years of traveling through the wilderness --- and finally to their arrival at the border of their Promised Land.

And if we stop and think about Jewish history from that moment on: from the time the Israelites entered the Land under Joshua’s leadership – up until the present day - the fact of the matter is that the Jewish people have consistently lived through cycles of time during which they were either living freely in the land, living in the land under foreign rule, or living, in large part, in exile from that land – yet always yearned to come back home.

Indeed, as noted scholar, teacher, and author, Rabbi Larry Hoffman has taught: this enduring cycle of wandering and coming home represents the quintessential paradigm of Jewish history.

As our people’s way of personally experiencing this lesson, traditionally, every year at Passover time we re-affirm our connection to this legacy of journey and arrival – a legacy that links us directly to Israel. At the seder table, we declare from the Hagaddah: “My father was a wandering Aramaen.” This Aramaen, in fact, was none other than Abraham himself. Then, throughout the seder we recall our story - the story of the Jewish people. Finally, concluding the seder with the words: “*L’Shanah HaBa’ah B’Yerushalayim.*” - “Next Year in Jerusalem” --- a prayerful expression of our hope that one day we – and our people - will come to live in safety and in peace in the only land we have ever called home.

Yet regardless of where Jews have lived - from our very beginnings - this land called Israel has always held a sacred place in our collective soul. The prophet Zechariah was the first to call this land “holy land.” Our rabbis taught that the Land of Israel is the spiritual center of the earth. And even just breathing the air in Israel, they believed, would somehow make a person more wise. To physically move to Israel, in our tradition, is to make *aliyah* – literally, ‘to ascend....spiritually.’ And 19th century Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook wrote that human redemption is ultimately linked to the Jewish people’s return to their land.

Indeed, even amongst those who experience Israel today, there is an awareness that there is something remarkable about this place where Israelis have created a vibrant and diverse Israeli culture and lifestyle – where our people continues to literally make the

desert bloom – where the rhythm of Jewish time is celebrated – where sacred voices of our shared history echo still - where Jews who have faced persecution in countries around the world have found a safe and welcome haven – and where Israelis and her neighbors continue to struggle to create a national home that is truly a ‘light unto the nations.’

Now this is not to say that we are obligated – by definition - to agree with every policy decision of the Israeli government – any more than, say, we, as Americans, are obligated to agree with every policy decision of our own American government. On the contrary – as people who care deeply about Israel – it is our right and our responsibility to raise our voices in both agreement AND dissent when we believe that doing so will help to positively and productively shape our Jewish home.

(Pause)

One might find it hard to believe that a family would choose to have a Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony during a war. Yet, this past summer, in Haifa’s Reform congregation, there were a few. At one particular service, the mother of the Bar Mitzvah boy ascended the bima to speak to her son. She said:

‘Not everyone celebrates his Bar Mitzvah at a time which is so meaningful for our country. When your children and your grandchildren ask you where you celebrated your Bar Mitzvah you can always tell them that there were sirens in the background and katyusha rockets...landing nearby.’

She continued, ‘The three weeks leading up to the Jewish holiday of Tisha B’Av mark the period when - 2,000 years ago - the walls of Jerusalem fell after the Roman siege and the Temple itself was destroyed. During these days -at this time, our enemies also want us to leave our land - our home. But, my son, we are confident – confident that given how strong Israel is they will not be able to defeat us.’

On this Rosh Hashanah morning it is our most sincere prayer that – with our help – this mother’s words will, yet, be true. Friends, in the year ahead, let us renew our commitment to helping Israel. Let us in 5767 commit ourselves to learning more about Israel’s past and present so that we might be able to more thoughtfully participate in envisioning her future. Let us each find our own individual – meaningful ways of reaching out to and supporting this land that is ours. And – though our Abraham Project – let us be inspired by Israel’s vitality – and follow in the footsteps of Abraham by helping those who still yearn for a safe place to call their home.

Yihyu L’Ratzon....Dear G-d, give us the insight and strength to do all that we are able – so that soon there may be spread over us.....over Israel.....and over all peoples.....a Sukkat Shalom.....a true shelter of peace.

Amen.

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