

Rabbi Brad Bloom

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon - 2013

Many of you know a few weeks ago I attended a conference specifically for Rabbis sponsored by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in Washington, D.C. on the current challenges Israel faces in a tumultuous Middle East especially in regards to newly revived US sponsored peace negotiations with the Palestine Authority. The first morning of the conference I left my hotel room, entered the elevator and a young lady walked in with me. I noticed immediately that she was wearing a tee shirt and it had Hebrew letters around it. I didn't have the time to figure out what the words were, but, I did say to her almost amusingly, "I see you have a lot of Hebrew letters on your tee shirt?" She looked at me and responded, "Yes, I represent an organization and we have forty kids staying in the hotel from Israel."

I replied, "Cool, is your group touring America?" She responded, "Yes but not exactly the way you think, our kids have all lost a parent in terrorist attacks."

The elevator opened and I had to catch a cab to the conference. With no time to talk further I said, "You're doing real mitzvah work." She smiled and thanked me.

Here I was attending a conference where world class analysts, Pulitzer Prize winning news commentators, former federal elected officials were lecturing us about their views on Israel's strategic predicament and potential options. The conference was all theory and speculation about the complexities of Israeli politics and the volatility of the current explosion of violence ripping through the Middle East. Yet, in this one chance encounter I had met someone who embodied the very opposite of theoretical speculation. I was looking into the eyes of collateral damage, in the real world, from the bone and sinew of families and especially children who understand the full repercussions of today's peace negotiations without ever entering into a think tank.

This brief encounter reminded me just how wide the gulf is between the way the world really is with all of its brutality and suffering, versus what I would like the world to be. The group counselor's somber eyes hit me right in the face as I sat the rest of the day, taking notes on one speaker after the next offering their strategic and tactical scenarios about Israel's options amidst the forest fires of violence raging through its Arab neighbors. I came back to the kids in the hotel who bear witness to the stark realities that our world is broken. At the same time who am I to give up hope when these kids have the fortitude and faith to move forward in their lives and seek out a world that will give them and their country peace?

We enter into the High Holy Days with the hope and optimism of how we can make a difference on issues affecting our own lives, but we are also obligated to look beyond ourselves and our needs. Our own national leadership also is engaged in a debate about looking beyond our nation's needs versus our humanitarian and moral values in regards to Syria. Some argue military intervention as a tactic is beyond America's moral concerns and beyond her vital interests whereas others in Congress including the president see military action in Syria in the opposite view. In either situation there is fear and trembling spreading whether we are talking about the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians or

whether we are debating the repercussions (especially towards Israel) of attacking Syria due to the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime. The peace process in Israel is fraught with every reason why experts predict it will fail. It is so easy to be cynical and dismiss these new negotiations, yet, I come back to the children at the hotel, wondering if they too feel the same way especially now as people in Israel stock up on gas masks.

Our representatives are now focused on voting for war or not but I am not losing sight on peace because this peace process between Palestinians and Israelis will have to continue no matter what happens in Syria. We cannot lose sight of the peace we all seek for Israel even though our attention at this minute in America is on an imminent decision our elected representatives are debating about attacking Syria.

What does our faith teach us regarding the value of peace? The last Mishnah of the Talmud, according to the sage Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta, tells us that the Holy One found no vessel that could hold blessing for Israel except peace, as it says, "God will give might to the Jewish people. How? One commentary said, "By blessing them with peace- For all the blessings in the world will endure only if there is shalom."

This is why peace is the most important thing that Jews should pray for at this time of the year. In a way we have to be of two minds regarding peace. We are cognizant of the potential hazards that might derail peace talks with the Palestinians-now add to that the prospects of America's potential bombing of Syria. On the other hand, everything that our tradition teaches is that we shall never give up on our prayers for peace on behalf of the state of Israel, no matter how remote the chances may appear to be in achieving peace.

I am not suggesting that we ignore the stark realities that Israel faces to its security especially the frightening thought of Syria attacking Israel in retaliation if America launches cruise missiles. Clearly one can argue persuasively that an eventual peace agreement is not likely and that, if history is a teacher, a failed peace process could easily lead to another Intifada. At the same time, if I allowed that kind of thinking to dominate my own outlook, and God forbid it overshadowed Israel's mindset, would it not signal a moral and spiritual defeat for Israel in the long run?

I am of the belief that if God opens a book and decides which individuals will be inscribed and sealed in the book of life then why can't we pray that a people such as ours should be worthy to be inscribed and sealed into the book of life as well? Should we completely ignore the Mahzor's prayer for the State of Israel which is for peace? Does the Israeli national anthem HaTikvah (meaning the Hope) have no meaning anymore? I don't think that Jews can ever afford to give up on peace, no matter what the odds are in attaining it. Tikvah and Shalom go hand in hand in our prayers.

The leaders of the Jewish state have debated for decades what it would take to make peace in the Middle East, without achieving anything like consensus. David Ben Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, was a realist who never lost sight of what Israel could be or what it had to be, given the dangers that faced it on every side. Nahum Goldman, a leading Zionist and founder of the World Jewish Congress, wrote in his memoirs of a conversation with Ben Gurion. Ben Gurion the realist once remarked, "Why should the Arabs make peace? If I were an Arab leader I would never make terms with

Israel. That is natural: we have taken their country. Sure, God promised it to us, but what does that matter to them? Our God is not theirs. We come from Israel, it is true, but, two thousand years ago, and what is that to them? There has been anti-Semitism, the Nazis, Hitler, Auschwitz, but was that their fault? They only see one thing: we have come here and stole their country. What should they accept that? They may perhaps forget in one or two generations time, but for the moment there is not a chance. So it is simple: we have to stay strong and maintain a powerful army. Our whole policy is there. Otherwise the Arabs will wipe us out.”

However, that same pragmatist said, in an interview with CBS news in 1956, “In Israel, in order to be a realist you must believe in miracles.” Both of these quotes represent a paradox that we as Jews should revisit when assessing chances of peace today and in the future. It is the same sentiment we read in the Shabbat Siddur that says, “Pray as if everything depended upon God and act as if everything depended upon you.” I would like to believe that this unique paradox of pragmatism and faith began with Moses facing the odds of leaving Pharaoh’s Egypt and from that point on it became part of our spiritual DNA-suppressed for 2000 years and reawakened in this modern era.

I have faith that Israel will do its part in keeping its military strong, whether it will be resisting Hezbollah, or any Syrian action in the advent of an American attack against Syria, knowing that Ben Gurion’s prediction was correct: that only a strong military presence will motivate the Palestinians to come to the peace table. But there is a propaganda war going on in America and around the world that requires our involvement. We could be taking more positive steps in this congregation to support Israel’s position in America. Don’t think for a moment that it does not help Israel’s standing and credibility in the peace process and in world opinion. For there is enough evidence to convince me that public support is shifting slightly in favor of the Palestinians. We are seeing this in the liberal Christian denominations in particular. College campuses have also been major areas of success for pro-Palestinian propaganda.

Here at Congregation Beth Yam there are a few things we should be doing to influence public opinion and educate the community. We need to be sponsoring on a yearly basis at least one Israel cultural event for the community at large. We need to and shall begin the planning of another trip to Israel. Details will be coming out by Yom Kippur. We need to find a way to help our teens visit Israel. We should be more supportive of Progressive Jews in Israel and developing a relationship with a progressive Israeli synagogue would be a good thing for us to connect us to Israel in a more personal way than simply being tourists. All of these are doable and would make a huge difference for our congregation. Who among us is willing to step forward and help out? Who will make the miracles happen when there are always ten reasons why something can’t be done? This is the exact same spirit that Ben Gurion evidenced when we he said, “You have to believe in miracles in order to be a realist.”

These high Holy Days will remind us that the past still weighs heavily on our minds. This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War. During the Yom Kippur afternoon services when we read prayers remembering the martyrdom of our people over the centuries, our chaver Yale Roe who lived in Israel at that time will reflect on what it was like that day when Israel woke up to discover its very existence was being threatened. Please plan to join us then.

I am convinced that most of American Jewry never grasped the depth of the impact upon the spiritual life of Israel that the Yom Kippur War has had. Yes, we watched with horror and then relief as Israel, with the help of the US, recovered from near defeat against Egypt and Syria, to defeat the Arab armies. But I am not sure we watched Israeli society carefully to see the gut wrenching process of reflection and yes, atonement, that the people engaged in afterwards when they realized that the victories of 67 were now dust in the wind and may have blinded them to the need to preempt the YK War, a war which caused over 2600 casualties.

Forty years have gone by since then, and the changes to the religious fabric and political character of the country that began in '73 are still evident today. Sadly, an unresponsive Orthodoxy still is entrenched, and the chief rabbinate in particular is by most accounts a corrupt institution. On the positive side there is hope for positive change when we see the modest beginnings of different forms of experimentation with other ways of expressing Jewish spirituality, including but not limited to, Reform and Conservative Judaism. I'll talk about some of those changes with regard to the Women of the Wall tomorrow morning. But when it comes to making peace we have a nation that is able to shield itself for now and heal its wounds, knowing it is a different nation that tourists do not grasp on a ten day trip or by reading the New York Times. It is a country that has learned hard lessons from the lost lives and from the mistakes made by their political and military leaders and for the victims of war who could have been saved from injuries. We are seeing this same process play itself out from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars in the national debate on Syria as well.

I say this because it all goes into the layers of thinking which underlie the peace process. It explains how complicated these negotiations are from a historical, moral, theological and political perspective. I am enjoining us to pull together and pray for Israel's leaders-and now I must add to pray for our own national leaders - to find the wisdom to make the kind of decisions where Israel and America can find the security and peace it deserves and needs. I am asking that we not indulge the temptations to be cynical and instead remember what our religious teachings say about the importance of striving for peace. I am asking us to suspend that understandable suspicion and pray to the God who some say saved Israel in YK 73 from total annihilation to be a presence in these forthcoming negotiations and in the national debate we shall watch from the comfort of our homes.

Think about the Israeli kids on that trip who will enter the military in a few short years. They too have a birthright to enjoy the fruits of the land and the promise of history starting from the Torah down through the ages that our sages taught to this very day. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem and for the miracles that Ben Gurion believed in and for all the soldiers who fought and for those who died so that one day Israel could pursue and win the peace. That is the ultimate prize we seek.

And during these High Holy Days when contemplating Israel's efforts to make peace, despite listing all the practical reasons why this process could fail, remember the following poem for why Israel must engage every opportunity for peace regardless of the potential risks. This poem is found from the Gates of Prayer Shabbat Siddur.

"The young soldiers do not speak

Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses; who has not heard them?

They have a silence that speaks for them that speaks at night and

When the clock counts.

They say; we are young. We have died. Remember us.

They say; we have done what we could but until

It is finished it is not done.

They say; we have given our lives but until it is finished no

One can know what our lives gave.

They say; our deaths are not ours; they are yours; they will

Mean what you make them.

They say; whether our lives and our deaths are for peace

And a new hope or for nothing we cannot say; it is you

Who must say this.

They say; we leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.

We were young, they say. We have died. Remember us.

Please pray that peace comes to Israel this year. Pray for the wellbeing of American soldiers who wait on battleships alongside the coast of Syria. Pray for the innocent victims in Syria who have suffered from the relentless war and chemical warfare waged by Assad and his regime and for all other endangered religious minorities such as Coptic Christians in Egypt. Do they not deserve our prayers? But right now we ask the Eternal One to help us in our prayers to bring Israel one step closer to the Peace we all yearn for in this New year.

Shana Tova.