

ROSH HASHANAH EVENING SPEECH – 2014

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At a recent rabbinic seminar sponsored by AIPAC on Israel, I listened in amazement to a story from a young Arab man whose father was one of the founders of Hamas. The young man described his story in a recent book of how he rejected his father's radical and violent ideology as the basis of Hamas. He decided to turn against them and work with the Israelis to foil terrorist plots. Eventually after saving many lives and converting to Christianity, Mossab decided to immigrate to the United States claiming political asylum. When one of the Rabbis asked him how he felt about Israel, he responded, "I risked my life for Israel and I love Israel." The Israeli Shin Bet Officer who worked with him during those years stood on the stage and nodded his head in the affirmative.

Is it only a dream that one day our enemies will bless us as will we bless them? I know that seems almost ridiculous considering this summer's war in Gaza. I even feel it is a fantasy but one which I cannot let go of from my soul. If even a son of the founder of Hamas can reverse course then anything is possible.

Sadly, this is no time, however, for reversing course these days because it is a difficult time for Jews and, of course, especially for Israelis. Not only do we feel sadness when Israel loses its soldiers in battle and innocents on all sides in rocket attacks but we also witness bursting forth a lava flow of hatred pouring down upon us from around the world. Incessant and relentless cable news broadcasts, social media posts and videos as well as world governments excoriating Israel and Jews in general signal a major upsurge in anti-Semitism. Muslim communities in Europe as well as some Jewish groups are opposing Israel's response to Hamas. Our longstanding allies wavered in their support recently. Is Anti-Semitism and Anti-Israel propaganda metastasizing throughout the world including America? Will we see the day when our former enemies will bless us as we would bless them?

The New Year forces us to think seriously about the current challenges to Israel not only on the battlefield but through world opinion. This is a time for cheshbone nefesh, an examination and reaffirmation of our stand on behalf of the state of Israel. We have come to the point where we cannot take for granted the support we have enjoyed from the world over the last six decades. It is a time of looking inward about what the hour requires of us given that even long-term friends from other religions are challenging and opposing Israel.

What important values should we be focused upon? Until that day of peace comes there are three points I want to make tonight to the question of how to react and cope with the intensity of pressures that Israel and world Jewry are contending with at this hour in the aftermath of the Gazan War. First, despite all that Hamas has done to Israel, we must restrain our hatred. The second is to not fall into the trap of framing our state of mind as victims. The final point is to not give up on the hope that Israel will one day win the peace.

Remember what Isaiah said, "For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from you. Nor shall the covenant of my peace be removed, says the Lord who has mercy on you" (Isaiah 54:10).

The first lesson we must hold on to is not succumbing to hatred. We heard a story several weeks ago at our Stand by Israel program from a couple who had just returned from a mission to Israel. At the town of Sederot in the south of Israel the principal of a high school addressed his students and adjured them “not to hate all Palestinians even if they hate us.” His wisdom is quintessential Judaism even though it is a hard lesson to embrace given the death of our soldiers and civilians.

To hate a person let alone an entire people can only draw us deeper into the same mindset that our adversaries in Gaza have demonstrated over and over. We can hate what they do to us but must we hate them so thoroughly that we can never return to peace either?

If only someone were giving these same ideas from the Muslim perspective to the Muslims of Gaza! We follow our course of teachings and they will or will not pursue compromise and peace. They have to live with themselves and the results of their teachings and where it leads their people will be the ultimate factor to determine the righteousness of their cause. As for us and the teachings of Judaism are concerned, in the Talmud it is written, “Rabbi Nehemiah said, “On account of hatred, strife grows abundant in a man’s household”(Talmud Shabbat 32b). We cannot let their hatred infect our house.

The fact that Israel has granted citizenship to over a half a million Arabs is a true testament to the spiritual strength of Israel since its founding. The fact that thousands of Druze actually serve in the armed forces is another example of Israel’s willingness to embrace diversity. The fact that an Arab sits on the Supreme Court of Israel also sends a powerful message that Israel strives, albeit imperfectly, to find the balance to maintain a Jewish state but also to provide justice to all its citizens. This is not about hatred of Arabs; rather, it is about learning how to share existence as equals in two states. In fact Israelis as well as the Palestinians on the West Bank are both indigenous peoples with a right to sovereignty. How does hatred advance the cause of peace which is what we really need? This is a question I can never get a straight answer from Palestinians or their allies. The radicals give us hatred as the bait for the trap they set in this ongoing conflict to perpetuate hatred. That is how they thrive.

A second challenge is rejecting a perennial mindset which is that the entire world hates us. Embracing victimhood creates its own self fulfilling prophecy that leads us down the road of hatred. It is true that we are engaged in a propaganda war around the world. Our enemies portray us as the new apartheid state or seize on the comments of more radical elements in Israeli society who sometimes use the press for political and ideological purposes. Is there any surprise that chauvinistic statements play into that new image of the Jew as a brute? I have heard Americans say to me comments like “Israel used to be a light to the nations and now they are the black hole.”

More and more Americans, particularly on America’s college campuses, call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel. Our longtime friends in American religions like the Presbyterians and Methodists have passed resolutions excoriating Israel and affirming the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions machine. They have crossed over the line from legitimate disagreement over Israel’s policies to dismantling the fundamental economic foundation of Israel. The BDS movement is an anti-semitic movement and I pray that one day the

Presbyterians will rescind that resolution in the near future. A victim cannot respond out of strength, instead, our mission is to reply to our adversaries out of conviction and not out of fear.

The last point is that while we cannot ignore our own thoughts or beliefs that might put us in opposition to some Israeli government policies we must be able to protect the meaning of Zionism today and its importance to all our identities as Jews here and around the world. Palestinians and others threaten to take Israel to the International Criminal Court for war crimes. The intellectuals around the world are condemning Zionism as the root cause for Israel's so-called callous behavior against Palestinians and its alleged unwillingness to make peace. We cannot live in a fantasy that everything Israel does is right and neither can we succumb to worldwide pressure to brand Zionism and Israel as the cause of war and strife in the Middle East. Zionism is a liberation movement not a vestige of European colonialism. Israelis debate and will continue to discuss its meaning for years to come and that is a healthy thing.

We need faith in Israel's future even with Iran and terrorism threatening Israel's borders and existence. Israel has proven its ability to make peace with its adversaries such as King Hussein from Jordan and the Presidents of Egypt since Anwar Sadat. I do not know how or when but maybe this time or the next time that opportunity for peace will arrive again. I will pray for our adversaries that they will see the light that peace is in their interest and not war. It is not a fantasy but it is a dream that none of us should let go of in our prayers as the New Year begins.

Savlanut. The word means patience but the root of the word also means to suffer. It is excruciatingly difficult to wait for peace when a sworn adversary refuses to recognize the opponent's basic humanity. The gap between patience and suffering is called hope.

Conclusion:

The truth is that we all need to fill that gap of hope for Israel.

I am well aware that Hamas will not recognize Israel and its existence as a Jewish state. It cannot for to do so would violate its core beliefs in Islam. Even West Bank moderates refuse to accept the people of Israel's right to their beliefs and their right to the land. It is not a good prognosis now for peace in the near future. Yet I am an optimist and I believe in miracles. Israel is a miracle and sometimes there are miraculous moments when we least expect it that peoples make peace with each other. I refuse to let Hamas or the Palestinians define or shape my belief in Israel's willingness to pursue peace. I reject hatred and being the victim and I will hold fast to the vision of the prophets that God's covenant of peace will bring peace one day.

A sage Rabbi Aha reacted to a verse in the Torah that said, "These are the rebukes which Moses spoke to all Israel right before they entered the Promised Land." The rabbi was upset because he thought that a false non-Israelite prophet in the Torah by the name of Bilam who was hired by the king of Moab to curse ancient Israel and ultimately ended up blessing them as the story was told in the book of Numbers. Commentators of the Torah questioned this story by saying, "Shouldn't Bilam have uttered the rebukes against Israel whereas Moses should have proclaimed the words of blessings and not rebukes to our people?" But had Bilam uttered the curses against the Israelites, the Jewish people would have said.

“See an enemy rebukes us! So what! Had Moses blessed the Israelites, the nations of the world would have said, “See a friend blesses them .So what!” Therefore God declared, Let Moses who loves the Jewish people rebuke them and let Bilam who hates them, bless them so that the genuineness of the blessings and of the rebukes bestowed upon the Jewish people will be made clear.”

Even the sages hold the belief that an enemy can bless an adversary as can a friend can rebuke their ally. Maybe then peace can flow down upon us. The state of Israel is always ready for peace and it must also be ready for armed conflict to defend itself. It is a difficult situation that we have all anguished over this past summer and for the last 60 years. Yet, let us not forget the hope that Israel, at the end of the day, can and will not only win the wars but win the peace. Its enemies will one day bless it just as Bilam said to Israel, Mah Tovu Ohalechah Yaacov Mishkentonecha Yisrael. How goodly are your tents Oh Jacob your Dwelling Places Oh Israel.” We read these words every morning in the Siddur prayerbook. Stand by Israel, visit Israel and speak up for Israel and don't forget that one day peace will come to our tents and dwelling places. Do not despair. Peace will come.

Shana Tova.