

Yom Kippur Morning Sermon Rabbi Bloom – September 30, 2017

The Torah says, ‘You are standing here today all of you before the Lord your God, your captains of your tribes, your elders and your officers with all of the men of Israel.’ I have two narratives that [have come] out of this text, narratives that we have witnessed with our own eyes.

In ancient times, the Jewish people stood together at the conclusion of the Exodus, united, as a new generation prepared to take on the responsibility of entering the promised land, and in modern times there are two story-lines that this verse reminds us of: narratives from modern Jewish history. One, ‘You are standing here this day, all of you inmates of this concentration camp, ready to descend down into the final pathway into the abyss of gas chambers and incineration, and to be forgotten by all mankind. I have seen and many of us have seen the remnants of that history which was the unholy Nazi covenant of terror and genocide.

The second narrative, Atem Nitzvaim moment, presents the 2nd historic narrative, which we must also behold with our memory. You are standing here this day, you, with all of your emaciated bodies, starved and beaten, raped and ravaged by the Nazi whip, the gun, the gas chambers, the terror, survived, scratched, crawled and walked to stand before the British and the world to say, ‘let us now after 2000 years enter the Promised Land of Israel.’

We have seen both stories unfold before our very eyes and so on Yom Kippur let us pause from the tussle of our daily lives and remember the second narrative of how we arrived to what was then called Palestine.

We Jews say, Zachor or Gedank (in Yiddish), and both words mean to remember. In two months, we shall commemorate the 100th anniversary of the document that made Zionism a political reality in the world and promised to make a Jewish “homeland” into a diplomatic reality. On November 2nd, 1917, the British government, then the world’s preeminent power, proclaimed the document later to be known as the Balfour declaration which stated that The Jewish people had a right to have a homeland in Palestine. It was a game-changer for Judaism.

Now, what do we learn from this critical piece of history and how does it impact us on Yom Kippur?

First, Jewish history contributes to our spiritual awareness and connects us to a deeper level of Jewish identity. For Jews, history is in the marrow of our identity. When we learn about our history, we see a new side of ourselves as part of a greater whole of Jewish Peoplehood.

Then there is the 2nd point: which is the Balfour declaration and its connection to Yom Kippur. The entire Torah portion for this morning is about remembering the past. It is about instilling in the future generations of Jews a respect for their history and, therefore, at seeing our bond to God’s role in that history of the Jewish people. Forgetting events that shaped our world today also distances us from our identity as Jews and our relationship to God who is an active force in Jewish history. History on Yom Kippur is, we believe, about redemption and each Jew seeing themselves as if they too entered the promised land just like Passover where God charges us to remember our going out of Egypt.

Lord Balfour was a religious person and believed, despite his diplomatic savvy acting on behalf of the British Empire, that God had chosen him to bring the Jews back to their ancient homeland. Despite the obvious politics that were involved, he believed that the Jews were the chosen people and returning them to Palestine might be a precursor to the Second Coming of the Messiah.

The Balfour Declaration proclaimed, “His Majesty’s Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

By 1917 Jews had already been emigrating to Palestine, building agricultural communities and laying the foundations for new towns. The Ottoman Turks had ruled Palestine since the 16th century, but with the advent of World War One, the British needed a victory over Germany in this brutal war. The Turks sided with Germany against their longtime rivals in Russia. Some historians claim that the British thought that American Jews and Russian Jews would influence their respective nations to enter the War on Britain’s side, which is why Lord Balfour heeded the appeals of the British biochemist and future first president of Israel, Chaim Weizmann, to issue this document.

The American government gave its support for the Balfour Declaration, beginning with President Woodrow Wilson. Among the greatest advocates for establishing a Jewish Homeland during that period, leading up to and following the end of World War One, were Christian Evangelicals. Certain Protestant groups saw in their Scriptures that Jewish immigration to Palestine would fulfill the Christian vision of the end of days with the Christian Messiah appearing, once the Jews had returned to Palestine. So, from a bit of guilt and the hope that their own theological expectations would be realized, many then and today became advocates for Jewish settlement in Palestine and supporters of Zionism.

Since today is Yom Kippur and Teshuva means acknowledging the mistakes we made, it should be noted that the Reform movement [was] among the most strident advocates against the Balfour Declaration.

Reform rabbis and leaders lobbied President Wilson against the Zionist cause, and thankfully, he ignored them. Reform Judaism was obsessed with proving that the true Israel was not a state for Jews but a world where Jews could live freely. America was going to be, they maintained, the new Israel for the American Jewish community and not Palestine. We discovered soon enough we were on the wrong side of history. By the mid 1930s the Reform Movement changed its position and embraced Zionism and a Jewish state in Palestine, but that stain will always be part of our history.

Remember the Balfour Declaration as a momentous occasion which conferred the mantle of legitimacy upon Zionism and the aspirations of Jews all over the world to live freely and discover their potential to live as Jews in our ancient homeland. This ongoing drama of Jewish history is why we send our kids to the March of the Living to visit Auschwitz and then to Israel. This is why we have each year a Yom Ha-atzmaut celebration to commemorate the Independence of Israel in May of 1948. This is why programs like Birthright have enjoyed such

success and have impacted so many lives. This is why I announce my intention to organize a trip to Israel for October in 2018.

If there is any mistake we make, it is that we, diaspora Jewry, do not differentiate between Israel's harsh and frustrating politics and our [ineradicable] bond with its people and the history we all share that defines us as Jews.

In Leviticus, we read that God promised us that God would never forget that covenant. Thus, even while (the Jewish people) are in the land of their enemies, "I will not reject or destroy them ...I am the Lord their G-d; I will remember them because of the covenant I made with their ancestors whom I brought out from the land of Egypt, in the sight of the nations, so that I might be their G-d." Leviticus 26:44-45

The great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy wrote in 1908, "The Jew is the emblem of eternity. He who neither slaughter nor torture of thousands of years could destroy, he who neither fire, nor sword, nor Inquisition was able to wipe off the face of the earth. He was the first to produce the Visions of G-d. He has been for so long the Guardian of Prophecy and has transmitted it to the rest of the world. Such a nation cannot be destroyed. The Jew is as everlasting as Eternity itself."

And Mark Twain wrote the following in his book of world travels called *Innocents Abroad* when he visited Palestine in 1899: "The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded into dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains."

— Mark Twain, "Concerning the Jews", *Harper's Magazine*, 1899

If so many gentile writers got it right about the mystery and eternality of the Jewish people, and even Lord Arthur Balfour saw it in the eyes of Chaim Weizmann who persuaded him to write this historic document in 1917, then surely, we the descendants of those generations can remember too and never take for granted the history and the future of our people. We are all part of that historic journey from one generation to the next.

It is written in the book of Deuteronomy,
"For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth." (7:6)

The Balfour declaration reminded the world for the first time ever that the link, the unbreakable bond, between us and our history and our relationship to the Eternal and the Land God promised us, was real and deserved the world's respect and support. If we lose sight of that fundamental teaching today, then we surely should take advantage of Yom Kippur to reflect upon our roots and our future.