

## Rabbi Bloom Sermon – Rosh Hashanah Day: Peace - 2020

I will not forget that moment when during the first trip to Israel at CBY I led when we stood at the famous Mt. Nebo in Jordan overlooking the other side of the Jordan River into the Promised Land just like Moses did in the Torah. In the final chapter of the Torah Moses ascended Mt. Nebo and gazed over knowing full well that God would not let him step foot into the Promised Land. Yet, just imagine what he envisioned as the future of this people's destiny. They had the Torah and the laws detailing how to live and covenant of being God's treasured people. Surely it must have been a powerful and dramatic moment at the end of a fascinating life of this first prophet of God.

I remember another sacred moment during that trip when we stood on Har Tzofim in Jerusalem. Mt. Scopus is part of a ridge of mountains east of ancient as well as modern Jerusalem and offers the best views of the city, which it dominates. Since the main part of the ridge bears the name [Mount of Olives](#), the name "lookout" was reserved for this peak to the northeast of the ancient city. In the 1920s they built the foundation of the newly formed Hebrew University and after the Six-Day War, Mt. Scopus was fully integrated into the city of Jerusalem after the Jordanian troops abandoned their positions and the Israeli army took it over. That mountain is also sacred because it reminds me of the future of the Jewish state.

Instead of looking at the Promised Land as Moses did, Mt. Scopus is looking out into the world from the seat of learning of Hebrew University. Despite all the politics we see today in Israel, Mt. Scopus is for me a symbol of seeking Israel's place in the world. Two mountains with two different perspectives about the future of the Jewish people. One looking from the outside in and one looking from the inside out to the world.

This week's signing of a mutual recognition and establishing official diplomatic relations between Israel and the two gulf states of Bahrain and United Arab Emirates is an unexpected step in the direction of peace for Israel inside the Arab world. It is one more step towards Israel's normalization of relationships with its Arab neighbors.

Peace is a core value for the state of Israel. The political side of ourselves can discount all of it as a gimmick or just another election year trick or a way of selling more military equipment to Arab nations or as an effective deterrent against Iran and the shite alliance. I acknowledge that all of that could very well be true. Yet, the prospects for peace and for saving Jewish lives and for expanding Israel's presence in the world for good should not be defined just by the current stock of politicians. My hope is that long after these elected officials are gone that this peace agreement will bear fruit for Israel and the Jewish people around the world.

I ask that we rise above our own political ideologies and pray for the peace of Israel and Jerusalem. Standing on Mt. Scopus at Hebrew University means that Jewish knowledge and know-how in all aspects of Jewish civilization can, in the long run, prevail. The Palestinian issues with Israel are not resolved. I worry about that too. Much work is to be done and that too is a two way street as well.

Achieving peace is a messy business and it does not come in some orderly process as we would prefer. Still this new agreement has become a reality. Does it deserve our prayers for the success of it in the future just like Moses prayed for Israel's future at Mt. Nebo? I say yes. Does

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it deserve our prayers just as the soldiers who reclaimed Jerusalem for the Jewish people after the Six-Day War? I say that hope for peace also deserves our prayers for those who fought and died for Israel's survival then as well.

Our sages understood well how important peace was to the survival and integrity of Judaism and its people with its neighbors. When the Torah spoke about how “the Land will yield its produce” (Leviticus 26:4), they commented by saying, “Well, we’ve got food, we’ve got drink.” Still, if there is no peace, there is nothing at all.” This is as if to say that peace equals all other blessings. They even spoke about making friends out of enemies. Judaism does not believe that another person or nation need be considered a permanent enemy. Under the right conditions, positive changes can occur: “Who is the mightiest of heroes? He who makes his enemy into his friend” (Avot d’rabbi natan).

What we would not give to see that happen between Israel and the Palestinians. We have seen a big step forward with the Arab nations in the gulf states this week. I understand how easy it is to fall back on the real politik and discount intentions for this current peace agreement. At the same time who is to say that it will never lead to more Arab nations to get on board and normalize relations with Israel and how that might lead to negotiations with the Palestinians? We will leave that to future discussions. Right now fighting wars is one thing but winning the peace is another.

Judaism has a lot to say about making peace with our adversaries even if it is about our neighbors who we have been at odds with over the years. Some of our most powerful dictums remind us that despite our disagreements the value of *mentschlichkeit* prevails even to help out a person we are in conflict with in our community.

Rejoice not when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles....”  
([Proverbs 24:17](#))

“If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.” ([Proverbs 25:21](#))

God feels compassion even for the enemies of the Jewish people: “In the hour when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea [while the waters drowned the Egyptians], The ministering angels wanted to sing a song of praise before God. But He said to them: “My handiwork is drowning in the sea, and you want to sing a song before Me!”

Reconciliation with folks we have been at odds with is no easy task. Just to face someone with whom we have a beef requires great strength and courage to address issues. So looking at the big picture whether it is an estranged relationship with, for example, a parent or a sibling or a child and asking the question: ‘Do I pursue peace or do I maintain the animus of a hostile relationship? Peacemaking and reconciliation between individuals is hard but it is possible to make a difference and to heal the pain of years of bitterness and hatred. Making peace does not require one to love the other person but it can mean to alleviate the angst and the stress of ongoing hurt.

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I am praying this year that if we can see Arabs and Jews make peace again in the Middle East then anything is possible even in our own nation. The issues that divide us these days are equally bitter but are we supposed to give up and just say that is the way it is and will always be? I hope not because that is not the Jewish way. We are supposed to take the high ground.

The following story epitomizes the Jewish stress on converting an enemy into a friend. Samuel ibn Nagrela, a Spanish Jewish poet of the eleventh century, was vizier to the king of Granada. One day a certain man cursed Samuel in the presence of the king. The king commanded Samuel to punish the offender by cutting out his tongue. When Samuel treated his enemy kindly instead, the curses became blessings. When the king saw that Samuel had not carried out his command, he asked why not. Samuel replied, "I have indeed torn out his angry tongue and given him instead a kindly one."

I have no illusion about how peace agreements can be fragile and fall apart in an instant. At the same time, should we give up on our ideals and hopes that, despite the realities of politics, this peace agreement is a waste of time? Judaism is not Pollyannaish about war and peace. Yet, those values which the prophets uttered long ago still have meaning today and should not be lost on this occasion when nations attempt to make peaceful relations.

And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken." [Isaiah 2:4](#)

I choose Mt. Scopus and I see the future looking outside of Israel into the world with the hope that its future will be better and more at peace. Peace is not complete but is this week's agreement with the Gulf States worthy of our prayers? I pray that God gives us all the strength to see it bear fruit for future generations.