

FULFILLING OUR RESPONSIBILITY AS THE CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM

Rosh Hashanah morning sermon by Rabbi Moshe Tom Heyn
from Temple Israel of Greater Miami, 2014 / 5775

Today we commemorate the birthday of the world and read the opening verses of Genesis, the story of creation. This is actually a Reform tradition, symbolizing on this day “new beginnings” and our belief that the world in which we live is inherently good. In fact, very good. After the creation of humans on the sixth day, God says “*Va-yar Elohim et kol asher asah, v'hinei tov meod* - and God looked upon all that God had created and, behold, it was very good.”

There is another story traditionally associated with Rosh Hashanah, however. One that is a bit troubling: Chapter 22 of Genesis, the story of when Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac; a story we know of, in Hebrew, as the *Akeidah* - the binding of Isaac. This story is usually read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah and since there are quite a few people who enjoy observing the second day of Rosh Hashanah here at Temple Israel, we will be together again tomorrow to read that story and explore its meaning and relevance.

In traditional synagogues, the Torah reading for today is not Chapter 1 of Genesis but Chapter 21, the chapter just preceding the story of the binding of Isaac. In Chapter 21, we read of the birth of Isaac and how his mother Sarah became jealous of Abraham's concubine, Hagar, and her son Ishmael. In fact, Sarah insisted they be banished to the desert, thus beginning the discord between the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael that continues to this day.

Nowhere do we see this discord played out more intensely than in the Middle East, where huge segments of the Arab and Muslim populations are committed to the destruction of the State of Israel. Many of you saw the New York Times article just a few days ago, explaining why many rabbis today are afraid to talk about Israel before their congregations. I lost track of how many people forwarded to that article to me, but I know many of you saw it.

Debates among Jews about Israel is nothing new, but some rabbis believe the topic has become too contentious to discuss from the *bimah*. This is particularly true for Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist rabbis who hope for a “two-state solution.” If they defend Israel, they risk alienating younger Jews who are increasingly detached from the Jewish State and organized Judaism. And if these rabbis say anything critical of Israel,

they risk angering the older, more conservative members of their congregations, who often are the larger donors and active volunteers.

In the beginning, Jews were more united when it came to supporting the State of Israel. It used to be that Israel is always the uniting factor in the Jewish world. But now, the debate around Israel has become so contentious that it appears to be driving people away from the organized Jewish community. Many rabbis now avoid the topic for fear of losing members. One pundit, Peter Beinart, an outspoken liberal Zionist, just wrote a column suggesting that rabbis are better off talking about Jewish texts and improving Jewish literacy during the High Holy days, rather than talking about Israel.

But I agree, instead, with Rabbi Jill Jacobs, who wrote a column suggesting that the job of a rabbi is to be a moral leader, and that there is nowhere in the Jewish community more in need of moral leadership than in the Israel debate.

Unfortunately, most of our conversations about Israel are of a political nature. We get into citing factoids and arguing over evidence which supports our views about who is right and who's wrong. But these arguments lead nowhere and each side becomes more and more entrenched in their pre-existing beliefs.

I believe it is the responsibility of the rabbi to break through this standstill by helping our congregations to cultivate deep empathy for all sides. It is us who must bring the wisdom of Jewish text and tradition to conversations about the Israel we want to create. We can look to rabbinic insights as guidance for creating a just society in the country that reflects Jewish values. For example, this new year is called a *shemita* year, the year in which land is allowed to lie fallow and rest. The idea of releasing the land my prompt us to consider when and how we might be willing to release some land in order to achieve peace. We might also look to the biblical stories of pacts between our ancestors and foreign rulers as precedents for peace agreements made, even in times of fear.

As Jews we are taught to question and to wrestle and so it is in keeping with our nature to be in a relationship with Israel that includes deep commitment, loving critique, and the ability to hold multiple narratives at the same time. And as a rabbi, it is my duty to follow the example of our prophets who comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable.

Some might be afraid that having an honest discussion about Israel will frighten away

young Jews, or the marginally affiliated. I believe that the opposite is the case. Too many young Jews complain that they hear nothing in synagogue that speaks to their own experiences with Israel and their discomfort with the occupation. If instead, they hear rabbis moving beyond platitudes and speaking about Israel in a way that takes multiple truths into account, these sporadic synagogue-goers may feel re-energized about being part of a tradition which speaks powerfully to today's moral questions.

During my two years here at Temple Israel, I have had many frank discussions about Israel and have hoped to foster an environment in which these discussions could be held. About a year and a half ago we had a forum during which our Consul General from Israel, Chaim Shacham, came and spoke alongside a former ambassador, Daniel Kurtzer. Both men held different positions about America's role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and yet we had a remarkably civil and informative discussion. I hope to provide more opportunities for us to hear a range of views that allow us to adjust our own positions and come away more informed and more inspired. I hope to draw on our tradition to acknowledge fear, address ethical questions, offer loving critique, and inspire the hope that will move our communities towards supporting peace.

Last night I opened our service by acknowledging the presence of different groups within our community -- from those who feel very engaged to those who feel completely unengaged. This morning I would like to acknowledge the presence of four different groups within our community that hold very different opinions about Israel.

First I'd like to speak to those who love Israel and feel that Israel deserves our unconditional support. And then I'd like to speak to those who love Israel but wrestle with some of those moral and ethical questions that trouble us. Then I'd like to speak to those, some of you may be here, who feel antagonistic toward Israel's aspiration. And there may be some here, from the fourth group, who just don't really care very much.

To the first group, I'd like to say "thank you." Thank you for your unconditional support of Israel. Thank you for the love that has made possible for Israel to exist as such a vibrant country in such a dangerous neighborhood. In a short short span of time, Israel's people have created an amazing culture and society, thanks for your help. It guarantees free speech, freedom of religion, rights for women, for gays and lesbians and the like. It's disproportionately represented on many indexes: Nobel Prize winners, scientific papers, start-up companies and the like. Israel is a global leader in being "green," something especially important as we consider a future of more limited natural resources. Israel plants trees, uses solar power and reuses water. It's the only

country in the world that is reversing “desertification,” the encroaching desert. To you, those who offer your unconditional support to Israel, I say, “thank you!”

To those who love Israel yet wrestle, you are very much like our ancestor Jacob who wrestled and consequently became known as “Israel.” If Israel is committed to his two states, you might ask, “Why the unending declarations from Israel's government about more settlement construction? How is that consistent with the desire for a Jewish and democratic Israel?” You might ask, “How can we explain settlements to anti-Israel activists? How can we explain settlements to ourselves?” Even if Palestinian refusal to exempt Israel is the heart problem, “What,” you ask, “does Israel propose to do about it?” “How does it make sense for Israel's government to do nothing, other than build more settlements and wait for a restive, impoverished Palestinian population to react.”

There are possible courses of action that Israel could take to ease the dangers of international isolation and strained relations with the United States: a unilateral withdraw from some of the territories, a general settlement freeze, a decision by Israel to define its borders, an announcement that settlement will be confined to the major settlement blocs. But those of you in this group of wrestlers want to know, “Will Israel actually do these things?” I can say that I'm not sure, but I truly hope so.

Usually these questions that you ask are not in a hostile tone. They're asked often by young Jews who care about Israel and who understand that without Israel, we Jews are a truncated, incomplete people. But in these difficult times, young people desperately want to Israel that appeals to their values and their highest ideals. They need an Israel that, when facing determined enemies, will do what it can even if it can't bring peace. They want an Israel that will stand up to its own extremists and do what is necessary to win over its allies and cultivate its friends. And they are entitled to such an Israel.

An Israel that seems unresponsive to these questions risks losing these young people, and many others in the process, and this is the risk that the leaders and supporters of Israel must not take.

To those of you who are antagonistic toward Israel's aims, I can say that I, too, am bothered by those Jews and Israelis on the far right who don't want peace with the Palestinians. I am bothered by extremists in all religions, as I said last night. Not only Jewish extremist but any extremists who committed violence and destruction. I, too, am bothered by injustices against the Palestinian people, not only those perpetrated by Israelis but those perpetrated by Hamas and the Arab nations themselves. I am

bothered by the expansion of settlements. But to those who are antagonistic toward Israel's aspirations, I can say we need you to engage in this discussion. We need you to understand who we are and what we're trying to accomplish in this world.

And to those who don't really care, I can only quote Elie Wiesel, who said, "The opposite of love is not hate; it's indifference." And that we'll talk about on Yom Kippur.

This conflict is "*lo tov*," - it's not good, and the problem has to do with what we discussed last night: those who are convinced that their way is the only way; those who are unable to listen. We have to be able to talk and listen to one another. If the descendents of Isaac cannot talk to and listen to one another, how can we expect to talk with and listen to the children of Ishmael?

We, the members of Temple Israel, must live in such a way that gives meaning and relevance to our congregation's name. We are central, in terms of location, but we must also be in the center -- not only between north and south, and east and west, but between "left" and "right." A place where both can come together and feel at home. We Jews, the descendents of Isaac, must bring healing to this planet. We the children of Abraham, have the intelligence and power to bring about reconciliation. This is our mission, not only as a people year-round but on this day; this day of reconciliation. The question is, "Do we have the will?"

On this day we celebrate the birthday of the world. This day that symbolizes the possibility of new beginnings. We must make that choice. Whether we unconditionally support Israel, or are frustrated lovers of Israel; are antagonistic or indifferent towards Israel's aspirations. We must find a way to end the violence. It will require some compromise and, right now, the only possible compromise is to implement a two-state solution. It may not make everyone happy but it can ensure the survival and security of the Jewish State and the dignity of the Palestinian people.

I invite all of you to engage in discussion and action. There is nothing that would bring about a more complete fulfillment of our responsibility, as the children of Abraham, than to bring peace to the Middle East. On this day when we recall the estrangement between Isaac and Ishmael, bringing about some kind of reconciliation must be our goal.

And as our Reform tradition's reading from the opening verses of Genesis on this morning suggests, peace and reconciliation would be the fulfillment of Creation itself:

“Va-yar Elohim et kol asher asah, v'hinei tov meod - and God looked upon the world [now inhabited by God's children] and, behold, it shall be very good.”

This is our responsibility, our mission and our hope. As long as, within our hearts, the Jewish soul sings; as long as, forward the eye looks toward Zion, our hope is not yet lost. It is 2,000 years old: to be a free people in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem. *Kol od baleivav...* (Israeli national anthem...]