

You Shall be a Blessing

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5771
Rabbi Jeffrey A. Marx
The Santa Monica Synagogue

There is an old Jewish joke about the rabbi who gets sick and is in the hospital, where he receives a card from the Board of Trustees, which reads: "Dear rabbi, the Board of Trustees send you their best wishes for a speedy recovery...by a vote of 12 to 9."

When, in November of 1947, as the British Mandate over Palestine was coming to an end, and the United Nations voted whether the territory should be partitioned into a Jewish part and the Arab part, of 56 votes, only 33 were for the establishment of the Jewish State.

After the vote, though 87% of the land was allocated to the Arabs - which included Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza - none-the-less, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria invaded Israel. Not all the world was convinced about the necessity of a Jewish State, not the Arab nations, and not the nations of Europe.

Today, sadly, the conviction still remains among most Arab nations of the world, some African nations, as well as Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Indonesia, and Pakistan, that Israel does not have the right to exist.

Thus, it came as a shock when here in America, this year, a once prominent journalist publically declared that the Jewish State be disbanded. What exactly was Helen Thomas thinking when she said: "Why don't they go back where they came from?" Back to where? The Holocaust survivors to return back to Poland and Germany and Lithuania and Latvia and the Netherlands, where their neighbors - not just the Nazis but their neighbors! - had attacked and butchered them? France, where the Jews were rounded up during the Holocaust and where, now, anti-Semitism is on the rise? Back to starvation in Ethiopia? Back to the pogroms of Russia? Back to the Arab countries of the Middle East from where they had fled? Exactly what was she thinking?

I'll tell you what she was thinking, it's what an increasing number of European and American politicians are thinking, that if we can just give Hamas what they want, then all the Arab nations will love us. Iran's nuclear threat will disappear, Saudi Arabian oil will freely flow again, and Al Qaeda will lay down their arms.

Now, it is one thing to debate whether the present ruling coalition in Israel is good or not for peace negotiations with the Palestinians. It is one thing to speak up against the stubborn intransigency of the militant West-Bank settlers or even of succession of Israeli governments that allowed these thugs to flourish. It is one thing to criticize Israel's shameful treatment of its Bedouin citizens. It is one thing to be alarmed by the rising poverty in the slums of Tel Aviv, or Israel's dependence on foreign laborers. It is one thing to deplore the rise of the intolerant, ultra-Orthodox in Israel. It is one thing to debate whether the security fence is a necessary evil or a positive step towards peace. It is one thing to declare that Israel could have conducted itself better during the Gaza incursion. But it is another; it is another thing all together, to proclaim that Israel does not have the right, as a modern nation-state, to exist.

Almost as alarming, has been the growing number of voices both in Western Europe and in America, which insist on holding Israel to an unrealistic standard of behavior. Is there another nation on earth that would be condemned as Israel has been, for acting militarily to put an end to the thousands of rockets that were being shot into their population centers? Is there another nation on earth that would be castigated, as Israel has been, for insisting on inspecting cargo ships to make sure they didn't contain weapons that would be used against them? Is there another nation on earth that would be criticized, as Israel has been, for taking seriously the threat posed by a terrorist organization ruling on its very border?

And when Israel declares that it is to be a Jewish state and not a bi-national one, it is called racist. Somehow, the struggle of the Kurds and the Basques for a separate territory of their own is noble, somehow Quebec is just fine, but it is Israel in its declaration that it is to be a Jewish State that is labeled as bigoted.

I will say it again. We have the right to be critical about what Israel does; but that is a far cry from insisting that Israel does not have the right to defend itself against its avowed enemies nor declare that it does not have the right to be the Jewish State.

Now while these two movements, either to deny Israel's right to exist or to hold Israel to an unrealistic standard, are extremely serious, there is yet a third movement that fills me with alarm, that I want to address this morning. And that is the growing silence on the part of our American Jewish community to speak up and defend

Israel, not from legitimate criticism, but from attacks as to its very existence. This morning, I want to address our collective sin of silence, the sin of not speaking up, and I want to explore why I think this is so. That answer, I believe, lies in some of our deepest issues of what it means to be a Jew.

Now, at home, when my wife asks me a casual question, and I pause before answering, she knows she's in for trouble, because I'm going to start back in the 15th or 2nd Century. With that in mind, I ask your indulgence and patience for a few minutes, since the story starts with Abraham four thousand years ago, stops at Mt. Sinai, winds it's way through the Middle Ages, pauses for a major detour in post-revolutionary France, before ending up on our doorstep today.

In this morning's Torah portion, because Abraham has faithfully followed God's instruction and brought his son, Isaac, up to the top of Mt. Moriah to be sacrificed, God proclaims to Abraham: "...I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore...All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants..." It is at this moment that the Jewish People begins.

By the time Joseph and then his brothers go down to Egypt, there are 70 of them. Four hundred years later, when we go up from Egypt, out of slavery, there are over a million and one half of us. We have become Am Yisrael: The People of Israel. At Mt. Sinai we entered into a collective covenant with God. We recall that moment in the afternoon Torah reading for Yom Kippur: "Atem Nitzavim Hayom", proclaims Moses. "All of you are standing here today to enter into the covenant: men, women and children. Priests, water carriers and woodchoppers." Everyone. Thus, the rewards for following God's commandments and the punishments for disobeying them would come upon the entire people.

From the very beginning then, we have been a family, a clan, a People. When others joined us, they did not just express their devotion to the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, but they literally became a member of the tribe.

Now, in this, we were just like many others. There were, in the Ancient Middle East, many clans and tribes, each one who had their unique gods and rituals. Over time, however, most of these tribes adopted the same gods or god and ways of worship. Zoroastrianism became the religion of all the Persian tribes, and later, Christianity the common religion of the Romans, the Goths, Vandals, Visigoths, and

Franks. Still later, Islam united the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. But our tribe, our People, maintained its own, unique religious beliefs and practices.

For thousands of years, as we Jews took seriously God's promise to Abraham: "You shall be a blessing to the nations of the earth", we did so as a unique People with our own unique religion. We declared this through our recitation of the Shma which affirms both our Peoplehood and our religion: "Shma Yisrael, Listen Jewish People, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad, Adonai our God, is One." And when we are called up for a Torah blessing we recite a religious blessing that also affirms our Peoplehood: "Baruch Atah Adonai", Blessed are You, Adonai, asher bachar banu mi kol ha'amim: You have chosen us from among all peoples".

Because we were a People, we created boundaries as to who was a Jew and who was not; how one could enter; how one left; and which of our potential marriage partners was permissible or not, based primarily on whether they were or weren't a member of the tribe. For thousands of years, we strove to be a blessing to the nations of the earth through our unique configuration as a People with a unique religion.

But a little over two hundred years ago, in truth a short time as Jewish history goes, just two hundred years ago, a series of events happened that bifurcated our identity as Jews. Those complex events can be represented in one single word: Napoleon. Napoleon Bonaparte.

Following the French revolution, which proclaimed the principles of Libert , Egalit , Fraternit , the Jews of France were to be given full rights as French citizens. No longer were they to be forced to live in enclosed ghettos in French cities, they could move freely about from town to town, there would be no discriminatory taxes placed solely upon them, their children could enter the universities, they could join the trade guilds, and own land.

But before this happened, Napoleon summoned the leaders of the Jewish community before him and asked them a series of questions: "Who do you Jews believe yourselves to be? Are you a religion, albeit a different one than Christianity? Are you a People, separate from the French people in whose presence you dwell? To whom is and will be your loyalty?" And the leaders of the French Jewish community, seeing before them an incredible opportunity not only to avoid further persecution but to have enormous privileges extended to them, replied formally to Napoleon:

"We are a religion, like every other religion. Our loyalty is to France, our fatherland."

As Napoleon went on to create, for a brief time, an Empire in Western Europe, he held the same carrot and stick out to the Jews in all the lands he conquered: renounce Peoplehood, and become part of the fraternite of humankind. In later years, for a brief period of time, the Russian rulers also held out this incentive to their Jewish subjects: "Become Russian, abandon those Jewish practices which make you distinct from us, and all will be well."

For many of the Jews of France, of England, of Germany and Austria and Hungary, and later, in Poland, Lithuania and Russia, the universal message of the 18th Century Enlightenment was clear: "Be a Jew in the home but in the street be a member of one's host country." This declaration that we were no longer a People, that we were no different than our neighbors, was carried into our religious practice by the Reform movement, in Germany and here, in America. We sloughed off, as quickly as possible, the markers which distinguished us from our American neighbors. Gone were the beards, the payeses, and the head-coverings. Gone were the kosher restrictions, which separated us from our neighbors. Gone were the prayers in our prayer book to God to bring us back to the land of Israel, for Germany and America were now our homelands. We were a religion like our neighbors' religions. We established mixed seating of men and women just like them, we moved an organ into our sanctuaries and established choirs just like them.

Our vocabulary also started to change. We started talking about what Jews believed as opposed to what Jews did. Since we were no longer a People but a religion, as long as we still could go to services on the High Holy Days, what did it matter whether or partner was a member of the tribe or not?

When it turned out that there still were some barriers to totally fitting in, we changed our names, changed our noses, and even changed our religion since wasn't all religion, in essence, about being good to one another? Thus we are able to get into the fraternities, be accepted into medical schools and be invited to join the country club.

Overall, the American experiment with divorcing religion from Peoplehood has been a success. We have truly made it in America: to the Supreme Court, the Congress, even the marriage to a daughter of a former President. Movie and rock stars, heads of Fortune 500 companies,

bankers, intellectuals, scientists...We have enjoyed enormous economic success, and safety and truly, in many, many ways, we have been a blessing to this country and to many other countries in which we have lived.

But the American experiment is only one-half of the coin. For, as I said earlier, our identity as a religious people was bifurcated. Soon after Napoleon, a second Jewish experiment was begun. This time, it was religion that was dropped for the sake of Peoplehood.

The fact is, that while in America, the ideals of the Enlightenment were an unqualified success, in Europe, there was soon a backlash against the privileges that the Jews had been given. France's reaction to the new freedoms of the Jews launched the Dreyfus affair and an outpouring of anti-Semitism. In Russia, the backlash against Jewish freedoms resulted in the pogroms. And, in later years, one's loyalty to the Fatherland proved no protection to the Jews of Germany, as all their vaunted efforts to speak, dress and behave like Germans, ended in the furnaces of Auschwitz.

The failure of Enlightenment values, the failure of trying to deny Peoplehood and be just like our neighbors, launched the modern movement called Zionism. Zionism proclaimed that the only way for us to be safe as a People was to establish ourselves in our own land. What Jewish history has taught us, it proclaimed, was that we would never be ultimately safe in the lands in which we lived. The only solution was to live in a land of our own, to take our own unique people back to the land of our origin and to establish there, a homeland of safety and security. It was to be an experiment to see what would develop if we Jews were totally responsible for our own education, health, and defense. It was about seeing what would develop culturally, if we didn't have to worry about trying to be like our neighbors but could freely be ourselves.

Our religious practices and beliefs, however, were in the way of establishing the State. Our millennia-long belief that we should do nothing to return to our land until God sent the Messiah, was an obstacle. Our traditional religious insistence that our condition was in God's hands, and not ours, was an obstacle. For the Socialist Zionists, religion was, indeed, the opiate of the masses. The Zionist enterprise was clear that religious practice was a barrier to be overcome in order to establish a homeland of our own.

There was a time that we were a People with a religion. Today, however, we are two: a People and a

religion. Due to the success of the Enlightenment, the Jews of America see themselves as a religion. Due to the disappointments and failures of the Enlightenment, the Jews of Israel see themselves as a People.

I would suggest this morning, that our uneasiness as American Jews about Israel, and our unwillingness to come to her defense when her very right to exist is questioned, is deeper than our discomfort or our righteous anger about some of Israel's policies and deeds. I think our silence is because Peoplehood is now a foreign concept to us.

At exactly this moment in history, when the nations of Western Europe are proclaiming the age of the European Union, with one economy and open borders - in essence a vision of universalism - Israel still loudly declares that it is particularistic: a state of Jews for Jews. In a time in which tribal identity seems so primitive, as we think of Serbs, Croatians, and Afghani clans, Jewish Peoplehood seems embarrassing to us.

Jews as a religion and Jews as a People. It is still unclear, for the long run, which experiment will be more successful. But both are legitimate, both need the other for balance and perspective. For we are two sides of one coin.

In a time in which too many Jews either "care mostly about the Jews and ignore the rest of the world or care about the whole world but forget their own identity" (Rabbi Shai Held), Israeli and American Jewry can be a blessing to one another.

Israel serves to remind the Jews of America that we are truly, a people. For Israel says to us: "You American Jews want the easy parts of Peoplehood, you want to enjoy the culture which arises from a People: the bagels and lox, the Yiddish words, the humor, but you also need to take on the responsibility to take care of one another." Israel reminds us that we are, indeed, more than just a religion.

And Israel needs us, as well, as we continue to demand that Israel be a place of Jewish diversity and pluralism, where military and social policies are morally defensible. That it strives to represent the best of our religious moral values.

How shall we be a blessing? Through both of our two, unique Jewish experiments. Through our presence in America, we shall be a blessing as we help influence and guide the policies of this nation; as we interact with our Christian neighbors; as we share our religion's values in regard to the social issues of our time. We shall be a

blessing by stressing the universal values of Judaism and their importance to the world.

And, Israel can be a blessing to the world as it shares its scientific inventions and agricultural discoveries with other nations, as it demonstrates how an army may strive to uphold the highest of values, how a modern nation can take care of its citizens. How enormous cultural creativity can be nourished and explored. Israel can be a blessing to the world by demonstrating that particularistic visions can be moral ones, as well.

If we are both two sides of the same coin than we American Jews cannot retreat into silence or tacitly join those who unreasonably attack Israel. That means we need to speak up when Israel is unfairly portrayed; to vote for candidates who support the right of our people in Israel to exist and who hold domestic positions that we value. We are to vote for candidates who espouse the best of our Jewish values, the best of our universalistic vision, and who support the existence of our modern experiment in Peoplehood.

Adonai oz l'amo yitein. May God give strength to our People so that we may endure in both of our manifestations. Adonai yevareich et amo, bashalom. May God bless our People, and through us, may all the nations of the world be blessed with peace.