



**Yom Kippur Morning - Yom Kippur 5770**  
**Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen**

**Israel: Will there be peace? Can there be peace?**

Talking with high school and college groups about identity and Jewish identity, we sometimes throw out the hypothetical – if Israel and the US were in a war, which side would you stand on? Usually it quickly comes up that we can be “Jewish Americans” and not have to take sides. It also usually comes up from some participant, either an ‘out of the box’ thinker or just a trouble-maker that this would never occur because Israel and the US would never be on opposite sides of a conflict.

This of course begs the question: Who is Israel’s greatest enemy? One possible option is obvious when we listen to media reports – it is described as the “Israeli-Arab Conflict” after all: Israel’s antagonists must be the Arab countries that surrounds it. It does seem like an obvious opponent for some – the encircling Arab countries make up an area equal to the states of Texas and California combined, and all border a country the size of Rhode Island. (that’s the one too small to get its own color on a map of the United States).

But I would postulate a different theory: Israel’s greatest enemy is in fact closer to home. Very close, in fact – In the words of political satirist and cartoonist Walt Kelly – “We have met the enemy, and he is us”.

I’m not speaking about any of our elected officials, but of the general populace, specifically the Jewish populace, or rather, our attitudes towards Israel. To quote the philosopher George Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat [it]”. In our long history, we can say we have definitely found this to be true.

Audience participation time: Please stand if you if you were b’nai mitzvah or 13 years old or older when Israel became a state on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1948. [pause] . Please remain standing, and now I’d like to ask all of you who were born before May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1948 to please rise. I’d like everyone who is not standing to please look around you and note how many people are standing. This is our living memory – these are our first primary sources to the living memory of the birth of the state of Israel. You can all now sit down.

Two months ago, we recognized the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first moon landing. How many of you recall this event and its significance. You can consider yourself a “Primary Source” for that event. What about 9/11? Do you recall where you were when you heard the news? I can say with certainty that you all have vivid and emotional memories of that event - and how it has shaped our lives and attitudes.

Being a primary witness to history shapes our actions in this world. But as we move further away from these events in time, they have less effect on us, and if we didn’t experience these events personally, or if we have no contact with a ‘Primary Source’ for these events, they have only a tangential hold on us.

I would argue that we have become so complacent with the history of why Israel exists, because of our lack of primary sources among many of us, that we no longer consider this small country’s creation as a significant event. I also argue that having forgotten our history, **we** are not as prepared to face and respond

to the criticism as to why Israel should be a "Jewish" state, not only to her neighbors who deny her right to exist, but even with those throughout the world who challenge the Holocaust's occurrence in the first place.

It was Theodore Herzl who in 1896 had an epiphany: As long as Jews do not have a land of their own, they will always be at the mercy of their host country. 2000 years of exile and expulsions led Herzl to conclude that we needed to go home. So he wrote *Der Judenstaat*, *The Jewish State*, and became the founder of Zionism, meaning, the establishment of a Jewish political entity in the ancient land of Israel.

Israel's statehood was a result of the tragedy of the Holocaust in Europe. Yet, from the ashes this small nation would rise up bringing to her shores the orphans, widows, and homeless. The establishment of the state of Israel was an affirmation of life after centuries of enduring persecution.

When Israel declared her independence, it was written in the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel:

The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

In the book of Numbers we read: 'You shall share with your neighbor what you think they are doing wrong. Love your neighbor as yourself.' We forget the first part of this important text – even for those we love we are to call out when we think something is being done wrong and seek ways to improve the task ahead.

When Moses stood on top of Mt. Sinai, having a wonderful celebration with God in the receiving of Torah and the commandments, it was cut short when God called out to Moses, "Go down!" What could have gone through Moses' mind when just as he was basking in the self-congratulation of his leadership of the people of Israel, he was kicked off the mountain and forced to encounter the Israelites as they built the Golden Calf.

The problem that God foresaw was that it was only Moses, God and the commandments that were on the mountain. Judaism was not on the mountain and there is no Judaism without the gathering of the people. Unlike what some may profess, Judaism is not an individualized religion and culture that can be experienced alone on top of a mountain like Moses did. Judaism is about community and peoplehood, that is why a community – that is why a Jewish State is essential.

So Moses, go down from the mountain; scold the people for their behavior; redirect them, teach them, and create the community that will then be able to enter the land today and in the future. But Moses, remember, you will never be a nation like all the other nations. You and the Israelites are different and should remain so. As soon as you accept full assimilation where your Jewish identity is no longer a strong guide in your life, then you will be in danger of losing your identity, losing your community, losing your land. So go down Moses and bring the people into the land and remember, the real lover of Israel, the people Israel and the land of Israel, is the person who expects more and strives for more for the betterment of the people and the land.

Israel is an attempt for real people to build something. Today, Israel is the fulfillment of a dream for those who were exiled from their land, those who were persecuted, those who lost everything. Israel is a place where Torah is not only taught, it is lived. Where values and ethics and moral truths found in our tradition are alive each and every day.

Unfortunately, since the withdrawal from Gaza four years ago, Israel is losing hope in that dream – that they just need to get through the next decade, the next administration, the next election to see what will become of their future. The Israelis have started to lower their expectations for their country and for peace in her borders.

What does reinforcing the status quo mean for peace in Israel and the Middle East? 97% of Israelis do not know what to do to bring about peace. They do know unilateral withdrawal is not the way to go as it would mean that 80% of Israeli citizens could be reached by mortar shells from their enemies.

From the outside, we in any other country outside of Israel can not understand the stress of staring down the barrel of our enemy's weapon or the fear of knowing that a rocket is capable of hitting our children while at the playground in the park. We can't understand what the Ima's and Aba's in Israel experience each day as they send their children on a bus to go to school not knowing who may cross the child's path seeking to do harm. We do not watch our children grow with the knowledge that they will join the army as teenagers. We are not in their shoes – but it's easy for us to judge and suggest how Israel should secure her borders from across the ocean.

From these emotions arise two realities for Israel.

First: There is no possibility for peace. Israelis are getting to the point that they just do not believe they can have peace in this life-time. Therefore, they just have to get through this moment. Until Palestinian mothers stop celebrating the martyrdom of their sons & daughters and mourn the loss of their children the way an Israeli mother mourns her child, than peace cannot exist. Peace cannot exist while those like Sheik Taysee Rajab Tamimi, chief Islamic judge of the Palestinian Authority, publicly spreads vicious rhetoric such as:

Jews have no history in the city of Jerusalem: They have never lived there, the Temple never existed, and Israeli archaeologists have admitted as much. Those who deny this are simply liars.

Bari Weiss of the Wallstreet Journal wrote this past week:

The previous mufti of the Palestinian Authority, Sheik Ikrama Sabri, dismisses the Western Wall as "just a fence." Yasser Arafat classified it, bizarrely, as "a Muslim shrine." As Saeb Erekat, Arafat's chief negotiator, said to President Clinton at Camp David in 2000: "I don't believe there was a temple on top of the Haram [holy site], I really don't."<sup>1</sup>

Or, as Nathan Sharansky writes, when Palestinians and other surrounding nations have an active democracy, then there can be peace. With these attitudes among her neighbors, it is not about Israel's left or right politics, it is about a Messianic dream to bring about peace. Hence keeping the status quo means keep expectations low and then we won't be disappointed when peace doesn't come.

Second, and in antithesis to this first point: Israel cannot publicly declare that they have no hope. Israel must talk the talk and walk the walk of hope and peace. The talk for a two state solution is right now, only that, talk. How can a two state solution possibly exist if the other partner does not even want to talk about it in a realistic manner? So who do the Israeli's speak to? The American administration - this way, they are able to maintain the status quo. 78% of Israelis agree that there needs to be a two state solution, but because there is no partner, no one is able to give realistic instructions on how to make it happen.

We must find a way to revalue peace. Is there peace when there is occupation? Is there peace when there is control of another people? Is this what Israel wants to do – to occupy and control other people? Of course not, we would hope that the Palestinians would be able to live in their own land, under their own laws, and in peace with all its neighbors. We do not disregard the aspirations of another people.

Consider what we have been saying for over 2000 years at every passover *seder* – next year in Jerusalem? What does this mean? It means, next year in Jerusalem with peace. It means reaffirming what we believe as Jews that we pray for peace in our land and with our people and that we pray for peace for Palestinians and all people to be able to live in their own land where they can live their own lives.

As Jews, we do not want to control another people. We are not comfortable with occupation.

It comes down to the importance of our embodying our values, even if it means we can't have all the land. We can't afford to diminish our moral fiber because we are arguing left wing opinions to right wing opinions. Yet we spend so much time arguing that when the time comes for there to be peace, will we be ready?

Four years ago, when Israel left Gaza, 7000 people were forced from their homes. Today, two years later, 80% are still not in permanent homes. Each family received two million dollars but still, they are experiencing the highest percentages of death, depression, and unemployment in the state of Israel. While Israel hoped to create peace by leaving Gaza, Israel forgot to prepare for peace.

The same will be true if we are to leave certain areas that are clearly outside the boundaries. I am not talking about the so called settlements inside Jerusalem proper, but rather those that are clearly in areas that would become part of a Palestinian state. Israel needs to prepare to move 80-100,000 people if peace were to ever come.

While the status quo seems to be the accepted method at the moment, Israel should still take action and make an effort to prepare to care for the thousands of citizens who will need housing. And it will not happen overnight, it will take at least the next five years to prepare for peace.

Today, we try to recall why it is that Israel became a state in the first place. Today, as we remember that we must never forget why she came to exist, we must also remember that it is not enough to accept status quo but rather reach for higher goals and not just talk the talk. It is easy for us to take for granted Israel's existence and say from the comfort of our shores across the ocean, she is strong and can handle her world herself. However, to be naïve is to yearn. Israel is worth our sacrifice to put politics aside and declare that the current state of affairs is not acceptable. It is our responsibility to give new meaning to what it means to be a Zionist as Herzl once dreamed and Israel declared 61 years ago.

Israel is to be a home for all Jews and its laws are to be those that are based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by our Prophets. This is not about politics of who is right and who is wrong, this is about our responsibility to stand up and say, Israel deserves to have peace as do all of her neighbors. We must also say, as Jews we are all partners in helping achieve that peace.

**notes**

<sup>1</sup> Wallstreet Journal Opinion Article: "Palestinian Leaders Deny Jerusalem's Past." Bari Weiss, September 25, 2009.

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