

## KOL NIDREI SERMON - ISRAEL

25 SEPTEMBER 2012

“What if Israel bombed Iran?” That bold headline in this past Sunday’s Washington Post Outlook section practically took my breath away! Of course, like everyone else, I have been closely following the news about Iran’s impending nuclearization – Israel’s ever-growing fears – and America’s efforts to stave off the impasse by diplomatic and economic sanctions.

In that context, the headline – “What If Israel Bombed Iran?” leading to three side-by-side articles projecting the potential scenario of an Israeli attack in Tel Aviv, Teheran and Washington became -- at least for me – a highly disconcerting read.

On August 17, as he has done many times before, Iranian President Ahmadinejad spelled out his intentions precisely: “Anyone who loves freedom and justice,” he said, “must strive for the annihilation of the Zionist regime.”

Earlier this month, Prime Minister Netanyahu – responding to our American State Department’s reluctance to set deadlines for Iran noted that “those in the international community who refuse to put red lines before Iran do not have a moral right to place a red light before Israel.”

(September 11, 2012 Haaretz)

As we come together on the most sacred day of the Jewish year here in the peaceful setting of our Synagogue, we must recognize that for Israel the course ahead is fraught with exceptional peril. The hopes of the “Arab spring” have imploded – Israel’s neighborhood continues to disintegrate in whatever direction one turns – but, in spite of obstacles galore, Israelis manage to move forward with remarkable energy, determination and courage.

Writing on Yom Haatzmaut, Israel’s Independence Day, last spring, Dr. Daniel Gordis, an American who made Aliyah and is on the staff of the Shalem Center in Jerusalem, put it aptly:

“Just after World War II, when Hitler had destroyed one-third of the world’s Jews, including 90% of Eastern Europe’s Jews, no sane level-

headed person could have imagined that 67 years later – we would have what we have: a language brought back to life – and bookstores filled with hundreds of linear feet of books in a language that just a century ago virtually no one spoke . . . an economic engine that is the envy of many more established countries . . . a democracy fashioned by immigrants, most of whom had never lived in a functioning democracy . . . cutting-edge health care . . .and an army that keeps us safe.”

And Dr. Gordis concludes:

“It’s worth remembering that the Jews have a future, because the Jews have a state . . .”

Talk to those who participated in our Synagogue’s trip to Israel this summer: Back home in their Washington routine, they are still glowing emotionally from the impact of their experiences.

Talk to any of those thousands and thousands of young men and women who have gone on Birthright: they return deeply-impressed by Israel’s vitality and beauty – and strengthened in their own Jewish identity and their commitment to the Jewish state.

Could Israel be better? Of course. I do more than cringe when I hear about a mob of Israeli Jewish teens beating an Arab teen to a pulp in the middle of Zion Square in Jerusalem – or other Israeli Jewish teens from the ultra-traditional community fire-bombing a taxi filled with a Palestinian family going to the supermarket. These are profoundly un-acceptable actions in a society which should be teaching more vigorously the values of tolerance and co-existence.

I do more than cringe when I hear a State-appointed official – the Chief Rabbi – calling my Masorti/Conservative movement colleagues in Israel “enemies of God.” My dream of a Zionist, democratic, religiously-pluralistic State does not square with the reality of a woman detained by the police for the crime of wearing a Tallit at the Kotel.

I do more than cringe in witnessing the abject poverty which too many Israelis still encounter – because sadly there are really two Israel’s – one “of the first-world” and one much, much behind.

At a time of potentially-existential danger to Israel, I am willing not to forget – but to at least side-step for the moment – some of the issues which continue to trouble me deeply. As Jews, we must ultimately be proud of Israel in all its dimensions – and that journey remains a work-in-progress – one in which we must all be partners.

Let me close with a vignette about Noam Gershony. He was an Apache helicopter pilot for the Israeli Air Force on a plane that crashed in

the Second Lebanon War. His co-pilot died on the spot – and no one believed that the then 23-year old Gershony would survive his wounds.

But survive Gershony did – and 4 years later he started playing tennis at Tel Aviv's center for disabled veterans. A few weeks ago, he won Israel's first gold medal at the London 2012 Paralympics Games. Watching him there were his family and friends from his military days.

"I never thought that I would represent the state in anything," Gershony commented, as the blue and white flag draped his shoulders. And he added: "You can't explain the feeling that runs through you when the anthem is played in front of so many people."

And indeed – the now 29-year old, sitting in his wheelchair, burst into tears as Hatikvah was played and the Israeli flag hoisted high.

That's the Israeli spirit . . . and as I watched the scene on Youtube, my eyes welled up – as I am sure yours would too.