

KOL NIDREI SERMON - ISRAEL

7 OCTOBER 2011

Do you remember those lines in Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities? "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" ... "it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."

What an extraordinary year we have witnessed in the Middle East! In January, a revolution, heavily fomented by social media sites, toppled the Ben Ali Presidency of Tunisia. The world watched, as the ripples of that upheaval spread eastward to Egypt. On February 11, after 18 days of protest centered in Tahrir Square in Cairo, President Hosni Mubarak left office. In Syria, in Algeria, in Yemen – movements pitted against the long-prevailing status quo have emerged with dramatic intensity . . . Most of the entrenched, predictable formulas of realpolitic in the Middle East have suddenly disappeared.

As Jews and as staunch friends of Israel, we are not passive, casual observers of a region in the throes of radical change. For what happens in Tunis or Cairo, in Damascus or Tripoli clearly has a profound impact on Israel . . . and the evidence is easy to marshal.

Just a few weeks ago, the Israeli Ambassador in Cairo and his staff had to be evacuated out of the country, as a raging mob besieged the building. Security concerns prompted a similar – albeit temporary – move to safety for the Israeli Ambassador in Amman.

The President of Turkey – at one time one of Israel’s most reliable allies – has been unrelenting in his hostility and his demands for an Israeli apology for the raid on the Turkish flotilla that was headed for Gaza.

Iran is still in fierce pursuit of nuclear weapons – and its President Ahmadinejad – never misses an opportunity to denounce Israel and to press for its destruction.

And of course, we are all aware of the efforts of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to side-step bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians and to use the United Nations as the forum to declare a formal Palestinian state.

And if all of those dynamics were not enough to make me worried – as in stay-awake-at-night worried – about Israel and its increasing isolation in an exceptionally volatile and unpredictable neighborhood, there are issues galore within Israel itself that trouble me sorely.

Terrorism is wrong on whichever side it occurs. After an Israeli and his 18-month old son were killed in an automobile accident near Hebron caused by stone-throwing Palestinians, anonymous Israelis torched a mosque last Monday in the Arab village of Tuba Zangaria in the Galilee. Copies of the Koran were burned. Prime Minister Netanyahu correctly noted that such images are “shocking and have no place in the State of Israel.” Israel was founded on the premise of freedom of religious expression for all its citizens – and Israeli Arabs have the right to that protection.

Let me amend that proposition: unfortunately, full freedom of religion also does not apply to Jews in Israel who identify with our Masorti/Conservative

movement. How galling it is that authentic religious pluralism – such as we know and cherish in our American Jewish community – is still an elusive goal in Israel. The Israeli religious establishment becomes ever-more intransigent. A relatively small number of ultra-Orthodox members of the Knesset hold hostage over the process of government. Their agenda: promoting segregated bus lines, where women must ride in the back – constructing a fence so that young children in a playground will not see their non-religious peers – and placing innumerable obstacles in the path of those who seek conversion to Judaism.

By contrast, I am heartened that 400,000 Israelis took to the streets in recent months to demonstrate that the divide between the “haves” and “have-nots” in Israeli society has become too great. “The people demand social justice” is their mantra. One of their leaders put it this way:

“If you are a child whose parents have no money to pay for a school trip – things must change . . .

If you are a pensioner or Holocaust survivor – things must change . . .

If you are a resident of Yerucham – (a town where the prospects for the future are limited) – things must change.”

With its expanse of energy and expertise, Israel has the building-blocks to be more responsive to the legitimate needs of all its citizens.

I am heartened that Israel – a water-constrained country if ever there were one – is pioneering the conservation of this precious resource through a range of innovative techniques.

I am heartened that Israel was in the vanguard in sending medical aid and crucial supplies to Japan after the devastating earthquake and tsunami on March 11.

I am heartened that an Israeli company has developed a new home diagnostic product that can detect a heart attack from the moment symptoms start to appear . . . and that another company is pairing electrodes with living neurons in the eye to create bionic sight for the visually impaired.

I am heartened that in part because Israel attracts more venture capital than any other country in the world, it has extraordinary ability to advance human progress for all God's children – everywhere.

The Israel that I celebrate is more than just the home of half the world's Jews – more than just the refuge it has been for those encountering persecution and oppression for the last 63 years.

The Israel that I affirm is a global force for good – drawing on the values which are at the core of Judaism – to be a light for its citizens – and far, far beyond.

So – what can we do? Now is precisely the time to visit Israel – we are planning a B'nai Israel trip for early summer 2012. Now is the time to buy Israeli products – to convey support for the critical US-Israel relationship to our own elected officials – and to be an advocate on behalf of Israel in the conversations that take place at every office water-cooler and at every kitchen table in America.

Nothing less will be enough.

David Harris, Executive Director of the American Jewish Committee, writes regularly and passionately in staunch defense of Israel. He tells the following story: After a lecture at a British university, an old acquaintance said to him:

“I read the things that you write about Israel. I hate them . . . what happened to the good liberal boy I knew 30 years ago?”

David Harris’ response: “that good liberal boy has not changed his view. Israel is a liberal cause, and I am proud to speak up for it . . . And he continues:

- Sometimes it’s the small things, the driving lesson in Jerusalem, with the student behind the wheel a devout Muslim woman, and the teacher an Israeli with a kippa. It’s the two gay men walking hand-in-hand along the Tel Aviv beachfront and no one looking at them. It’s the Friday crowd at a mosque in Jaffa.**
- It’s the central bus station in Tel Aviv where a free health clinic was set up for the thousands of Africans who have entered Israel, some illegally. While tiny Israel wonders how many such refugees it can absorb, Israeli medical professionals volunteer their time in the clinic.**
- It’s Save a Child’s Heart, an Israeli institution providing children from Iraq, the West Bank, Gaza, and other Arab places with world-class cardiac care for free.**
- It’s the Israelis who, with quiet resolve and courage, are determined to defend their small sliver of land against every conceivable threat – the growing Hamas arsenal in Gaza; the dangerous build-up of missiles by Hizbullah in Lebanon; nuclear-aspiring Iran’s calls for a**

world without Israel; Syria's hospitality to Hamas leaders and transshipment of weapons to Hizbullah; and enemies that shamelessly use civilians as human shields."

Recently, President Mahmoud Abbas returned to a hero's welcome in Ramallah following his visit to the United Nations. He spoke to his followers – emphasizing that they are now part of "a Palestinian spring."

Friends – the events of 2011 should make it crystal-clear that Israel still urgently needs us . . .

our support – our empathy – our commitment – our determination, so that Israel can continue to flourish.

I echo the words expressed by the Prophet Isaiah more than 2500 years ago

"for Zion's sake I will not be silent . . .

for Jerusalem's sake I will not be still."

Isaiah 62:1

The Arab and Palestinian spring has indeed begun . . .

Our responsibility must be to ensure that we are not journeying into an Israeli winter of despair.