

The Holocaust, Israel and other Matters

*Erev Yom Kippur 2009
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It is widely believed that in his speech to the Moslem world delivered in Cairo this past June President Obama declared that the State of Israel was created in response to the Holocaust. The only thing is he didn't say that. I went back and read and re-read the transcript. In fact he courageously denounced Holocaust denial in the Arab world while standing in the heart of the Arab world and reiterated the long standing and unbreachable bond between Israel and the United States.

So why was the speech so disturbing to so many Jews and Jewish leaders, and why were so many left with a false impression?

One of the problems was that the Holocaust comment was the only factor mentioned in relation to the state of Israel. He did not make any reference to the long historical ties dating back over 3,000 years or of the continued ongoing presence of Jews in the Holy land throughout the millennia. Instead in the very next paragraph he referred to Palestinian suffering, as if to place the blame for the plight of the Palestinians on Israel and as if to imply that Palestinian suffering is equated to the deliberate attempt to exterminate the Jewish people.

A number of Jews and Jewish leaders were concerned because this depiction plays into the hands of the Palestinian narrative, who contend that the Jews are latecomers, usurpers and intruders in the Middle East. The Palestinians try to score rhetorical points by asking why should they have to pay the price for the sins of Europe. This is why pernicious Holocaust denial is so prevalent and pervasive in the Arab and Moslem world. If the only reason for the existence of the state of Israel can be undermined, they assume they weaken the very *raison d'être* of their nemesis and that their dream of the disappearance of Israel becomes plausible.

Just this year a music teacher from the Arab town of Jenin had what she must have thought was a wonderful idea. She brought her Israeli Arab students to play for elderly Jewish Holocaust survivors in a nearby town in Israel so the two could meet each other. When word got out of what she had done, her classes were shut down, her studio shuttered and she was fired. All because she had the audacity to try to introduce her students to a narrative her fellow Arabs would just as soon believe never occurred. For them the Holocaust is merely Jewish propaganda, a tool of the Zionists. They go to great lengths to deny the Holocaust. But then again Palestinian leaders also deny that there ever was a Temple in Jerusalem and object to archaeological excavations that validate the historic connection of Jews to Eretz Yisrael.

We Jews rightfully insist and want the world to know that our ties to the land of Israel predate the horror thrust upon us in the middle of the twentieth century and that Israel does not exist only because of the Holocaust. As Yossi Klein HaLevi wrote in *The New Republic* after the speech, "the Holocaust helps explain why Israel fights, not why Israel exists."

But let me play devil's advocate for a moment and ask, if this was the only reason to have a Jewish state, wouldn't that be reason enough? After the annihilation and slaughter of six million Jews, is it really necessary to produce any further justification for the creation of the State of Israel?! Shouldn't we be able to say "Dayenu," this should suffice.

It was obvious that after over a thousand years of hostilities, we were not welcome in Europe. In the 1930's and '40's signs were often seen in rallies which said, "Jews out of Europe." We can take a hint. The only problem was the doors of the rest of the world were closed. The Jews

couldn't leave and they had nowhere else to go. The St. Louis, the ship of 940 Jews whose journey came to be known as the "voyage of the damned" proved that there was no interest or desire on the part of the United States or other nations to accept Jewish refugees. Palestine was administered by the British at the time under a mandate from the League of Nations. They too, closed the borders and sent ships filled with Jews to a certain death.

Refugee conferences in Evian, France, in Bermuda and elsewhere were convened by western nations to discuss the Jewish problem. They all concurred it was a serious problem requiring attention, but they all concluded with no nation agreeing to accept any Jewish refugees from Europe. The Nazis understood. They took it as a green light and knew they could get away with implementing their Final solution to the Jewish problem with impunity and without having to worry about interference or resistance from the west.

Is any further justification necessary? Case closed. What other people has had to endure such suffering to pay the price to convince the world of the justice of its cause? The Holocaust is clearly more than enough of a reason for the Jewish people to deserve a national homeland to insure that never again would Jews be vulnerable victims at the mercy of others.

So why do Jews appropriately object to those who say it is the only reason for the founding of Israel?

Dr. Robert Rozett of Yad Vashem served as Desmond Tutu's guide on his recent visit to Israel with his buddy Jimmy Carter. Rozett wrote in Haaretz how disappointed he was with Tutu who parroted the Palestinian narrative. Rozett called upon him to abandon his incendiary rhetoric and wrote, "it is the Jews who paid for the Holocaust with the blood of some six million innocent victims - not the perpetrators, not the bystanders and not Arabs in Palestine or anywhere else."

He went on to say, "Your statement presumes that the world granted the Jews a state primarily because it felt overriding guilt and sympathy for the victims of the Holocaust. Serious scholars concur that such guilt and sympathy at most played a secondary role in the establishment of the State of Israel. More significant for supporting the foundation of Israel were issues of realpolitik." He is referring to the fact that after World War I and II territory was carved up throughout Europe, Asia and the Middle East to create a number of nations. Yet only Israel must still constantly fight to justify its existence.

There are several factual problems and inaccuracies with the portrayal that Israel was created only on account of the atrocities of World War II. For one it ignores the deep and ancient ties between the Jewish people and the land of Israel. Israel is where the patriarchs journeyed and the prophets walked. The Temple of Solomon stood for almost a thousand years. In the 1200's Spanish poet Yehudah HaLevi lamented, *ani bema'arav, veelebee bemizrach*. I am in the west but my heart is in the east." For 2,000 years Jewish prayers have expressed the dream of a return to Zion.

Second, it overlooks anti Semitic acts in Europe and in Arab lands which preceded the establishment of Israel and the Holocaust. Some would have us believe if only Jews had not been plunked down in the middle of the Middle East, everything would have been fine. History shatters that myth. Jews were treated as second class citizens in Moslem countries. The farhud, a pogrom against Jewish citizens and businesses in Baghdad, Iraq resulted in the death of between 200 – 600 Jews and terrorized and terrified the Jewish population of Iraq.

And the final problem with this approach is that important steps had been taken before the Holocaust towards establishing the Jewish nation. Zionism was a response to 19th century nationalism and anti Semitism, as well as the Enlightenment and the Emancipation. In the 1880's Jews started immigrating in mass numbers to Israel. Theodore Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress in 1897. In 1917 the British government issued the Balfour Declaration which stated, "his majesty's government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home

for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object.” In 1922, almost two decades before the outbreak of World War II the League of Nations adopted this same position, showing there was already widespread international support for and recognition of the nationalist aspirations of the Jewish people.

In other words, long before there ever was a Holocaust, Jews had already started to actualize and bring to fruition the longing of 2,000 years, to move to Israel in significant numbers, and to work for the establishment of a Jewish homeland on land that was not an independent state, that did not belong to the Palestinian people, but was a part of the Ottoman Empire. It would have been helpful if some of this would have been mentioned in the Cairo speech, but alas, the President did not ask me to help draft his speech. (Who knows, I might have even written in a joke or two.)

The President’s address and the commentaries and reaction to it afterward got me thinking: If the Holocaust is a critical factor, but not the sole reason for the creation of Israel, what is the significance of the Holocaust? What does it mean for me as a Jew and as a rabbi? What is its impact on my thinking and how does it affect my outlook, world view and actions? And what should we feel about it, and what do I wish my congregation to derive from it? And that is the subject of my sermon this evening.

Our history is fraught with tragedy. The Chelmenicki Pogroms led by Ukrainian peasants in Poland in 1648 resulted in the death of 100,000 Jews. The Inquisition in Spain resulted in the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula. Those who did not leave were either killed or forcibly converted to Catholicism. Countless pogroms and expulsions were often spurred on by zealous priests or noblemen seeking to take the minds of their people off their troubles. Accusations that Jews murdered Christian children to use their blood to make Passover matzah would often result in the slaughter of hundreds of Jews. The Crusades were an especially cruel time as Jews lived in fear of marauding armies.

Although we have experienced persecution throughout the ages, the Holocaust was unique. For one, the sheer magnitude of the effort was unprecedented. It wasn’t the work of just one madman or even just one country. An entire political apparatus and bureaucracy, as well as their allies and those they conquered participated in committing genocide, over an extended period of time. There were willing accomplices from all walks of life: Peasants, Poles, and priests, Ukrainians, Estonians and Latvians who formed the *einsatzgruppen*, Arabs and Moslems, such as the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem tried to get in on the action, Christians, and atheists, mothers and fathers, scientists, academics, educators and street cleaners. It was a world gone mad.

It is depressing and overwhelming to realize how successful the Nazis were and how close they came to pulling it off. 1/3 of the Jewish nation is no more. The vibrant world of Yiddish language and culture, the yeshivot, the shtetls, the thriving secular assimilated yet culturally Jewish Jews of Europe are all gone. Of the 80,000 Jews of the storied historic community of Salonika, Greece, which once constituted 50 % of the population, less than 1,000 survived the war. The city of Krakow, Poland once was 50% Jewish. The magnitude of the destruction was unprecedented. The impact on Jewish life, as well as on the cultural, financial and secular intellectual life of all of Europe was devastating. After the war Europe was basically *Judenrein*.

Unlike earlier forms of anti-Semitism the Nazis sought to annihilate Jews *and* to extinguish Judaism, to wipe both off the face of the earth. No Jew was immune or spared. It didn’t matter if they were observant or not, if they even knew anything about Judaism, if they ever attended synagogue or lit shabbos candles or not. All Jews were targets and victims. In previous incarnations, Jews who converted and accepted Christianity or Islam were often spared. This was not an option this time. In the countries ruled by the Nazis, anyone with even only one Jewish grandparent was to be murdered.

The harnessing of so many resources to wipe us out has deep implications and ramifications for us today.

We Jews in this early part of the 21st century either are or should be cognizant that we live in the shadow of the horror known in Hebrew as the Shoah. We are not so removed or chronologically distant from this seminal event in which 1/3 of our people was taken from us. We are the last generation to hear first hand accounts and to know and speak with survivors, so we are preservers and transmitters of the experience. We have a responsibility to them, to tell their story, and more.

First and foremost, I subscribe to what philosopher Emil Fackenheim called the 614th commandment. He taught that we must not allow Hitler to have a posthumous victory. We have an obligation, a holy obligation to see to it that Judaism survives. This is how we deny the Nazis the victory they sought and how we defeat them. Our revenge is sweet when we see to it that the Jewish religion lives on. There is nothing like the sense of joy at the *simcha* of the bar or bat mitzvah, or wedding of the offspring of Holocaust survivors. It is a testament to the failure of the Nazis to eradicate our people. It breathes meaning into the words, "Am Yisrael Chai, the people of Israel lives!"

Fackenheim's thinking is part of what drives and motivates me. It is why I feel so strongly about working to insure the survival of Judaism and the Jewish people. It is why I tell every couple I marry if at all possible they should try to have 3 or more children. In a post Holocaust world we must replenish the depleted numbers of the Jewish people. (Incidentally, it is one reason why I encourage conversion to Judaism and actively encourage those who are married to Jews and who live in Jewish households to "join the tribe.") If you only have two children, I explain to the couples I marry, you have only replaced yourself. It is when you have had a third child that you have added to the number of Jews in the world. I know of one rabbi who calls them "mitzvah children."

But then the challenge is to raise them as Jews, to live as Jews, to be members of a synagogue, to have a Jewish home, to be active participants in the Jewish community. And this is why I literally cry and shed tears every year when I review the list and see how many of our children for whom bar or bat mitzvah is their last formal ongoing contact with the synagogue, with Jewish education, with me, their rabbi, and all too often with the Jewish community. I know. I know. I understand. I do. Really I truly do. I am not unsympathetic. I recognize that they are pulled in many directions and participate in many activities, classes and programs. Lacrosse is important. Dance is important. Soccer is important. **But damn it -- so is being Jewish!**

Six million Jews live in America. Six million Jews live in Israel. We are the voice of the six million who no longer have a voice, who perished in the Holocaust. I realize that not all the victims were religious, but the Jewish religion and performance of mitzvot is the conduit and conveyor of the values of Judaism the Nazis sought to destroy. Since there are those who are no longer with us to carry it on, and we are such a small minority an extra burden is placed on each of the rest of us. We have a responsibility to honor the memory of our martyrs by consecrating our lives and by embracing and not abandoning the world they knew, and for which so many died. This is what Fackenheim implores us to do.

I do not believe that we should be Jews only because of some guilt complex or based on negative reasoning. Rather I believe we have an obligation to carry on the Jewish faith and heritage precisely because of how powerful and beautiful it is and the meaning it brings to our lives. The Jewish outlook on life, the way we celebrate the holidays, what we have brought to the world, the wisdom of the Talmud, our values, our sense of humor, I do not want any of this to perish.

The second area in which the Holocaust has an impact on my thinking and attitude is in its implications upon our role as advocates for Israel.

Since its inception Israel has fulfilled its noble calling to be a safe haven for Jews. In 1948 the nascent nation absorbed the refugees who had been scorned and turned away by others. It opened its arms and accepted Jewish refugees evicted from Arab lands, as part of a great population transfer. And as we all know, rather than leave these people in refugee camps for 60 years, as the Arabs have done with their refugees, they gave them a home. This is the story of Israel. It has lived up to its role to rescue and protect Jews around the world. In the 1980's it conducted clandestine operations to bring black Ethiopian Jews to Israel, the first time in history blacks were ever taken out of Africa and brought to freedom. It is why when Israeli commandos travelled halfway around the world to rescue Jewish hostages being held in Entebbe, Uganda in 1976, they told the startled captives, "*Banu lakahat otchem habayta: We have come to take you home.*"

Israel is the one country in the world which sees as its very mission the protection and rescue of Jewish lives. We dare not turn our back on it. Is it a perfect society? Absolutely not. But what country is? And since when is perfection a prerequisite for existence?!

Having been abandoned to stand alone with few notable exceptions during the Holocaust, we have a moral obligation to stand with our fellow Jews, and do all we can to defend and protect the Jewish nation. As Hillel taught, "*Im ein ani lee, mee lee: If I am not for myself, who will for me?*" It is why I have been an active member and supporter of AIPAC for over 25 years, and urge you to do so as well.

Non Jewish author George Gilder's most recent best selling book [The Israel Test](#) portrays Israel as a leader of human civilization, technological progress and scientific advances. He argues that the root cause of the Middle East conflict is not land or religion. He contends that anti Zionism, like anti Semitism, is driven by envy and resentment of Israel's success.

I sometimes think of the Saturday Night Live shtick from many years ago, in which a baffled Michael Dukakis impersonator hears the incoherent ramblings of the person playing George Bush, and says, "I can't believe I'm losing to this guy." I often can't believe that Israel is losing to these guys in the realm of public opinion. I have never understood the sympathy expressed by the Left and their preference for the oppressive, xenophobic, homophobic Arab regimes which deny equal rights to women and where freedom of the press is nonexistent. If only people stopped and examined history and knew the facts and what the totalitarian dictatorships they support stand for.

Gilder sees Israel's struggle as part of a larger conflict of barbarism and envy against civilization and creativity and challenges us not to allow the negative forces of envy to succeed in their desire to destroy the state of Israel, a beacon of hope and human accomplishment. Ultimately it comes down to a question of whose side are you on?

I must confess I do not have much appreciation for the fine and subtle distinctions between anti Semitism and anti Zionism. As I recently explained to Turkey's ambassador to the United States who asked me why we link the two, the singling out of Israel, the use of anti Semitic images in cartoons and propaganda, the attempt to deny Israel its rightful place among nations, are part of why the two are indistinguishable.

In recent weeks, I have heard a number of people express the concern that the current poisonous atmosphere is eerily reminiscent of the ominous 1930's. A few months ago a Swedish newspaper published a blatantly false report that Israeli soldiers during the Gaza campaign took human body parts from Palestinians to sell them, evoking the medieval blood libel and the government of Sweden refused to denounce the lie. In Arab countries, Jews are routinely denounced as the offspring of pigs and monkeys. Popular television shows depict Jews as blood-thirsty lechers. Demonstrations in Europe and even in America show the intense pent up anger and hostility and do not even attempt to mask the outright venomous and vehement hatred. The United Nations

and its agencies routinely find new and creative ways to condemn Israel -- Most recently issuing a report on the Gaza War which relied on Hamas operatives for “objective” testimony and radical fundamentalist Islamic imams as “reliable and trustworthy” witnesses. It ignored the 8,000 rockets launched indiscriminately from Palestinian population centers on Israeli civilians that precipitated Israel’s actions and the extraordinary precautions taken by Israel’s army to avoid and limit civilian casualties. It is all part of a broader campaign to achieve in the realm of public opinion what they have not been able to achieve on the battlefield: to isolate and defeat Israel.

And most disturbing of all, Jews, and even Israelis support efforts which weaken support for Israel. Unfortunately even Israelis sometimes do not understand how precarious its survival is and provide fodder for the obsessive hatred of Israel. Israel has more than its share of those all too quick to point out its faults and to apply pressure. We need not join in the chorus. International boycotts of Israeli academics are led by Israeli academics, reminiscent of the scene in *Blazing Saddles* where the African American sheriff holds a gun to his own head and tells the mob, “one move and the black guy gets a bullet in the head.” It is my belief that a nation surrounded by hostile forces intent on its destruction cannot afford the luxury of giving ammunition to those who seek to destroy it.

Columnist Barry Rubin cautions against applying excessive pressure on Israel to make concessions and where getting an agreement, just for the sake of having an agreement becomes the obsession, without regard for its long term impact. He points out that Israel has had to pay the price of previous sacrifices made for agreements which resulted in more violence and Israeli casualties. This is why I have little patience or tolerance for the arrogance and naïveté of those in the Diaspora who think they know what concessions Israel should make and who believe it is best to put pressure on Israel. He wrote, “What Israel needs today is not ‘tough love’ but real support.” We have an important role to play to help those who cannot distinguish between terrorists who hide behind human shields and take lives indiscriminately and a sovereign nation protecting its citizens.

Finally in regard to Israel’s place in the world the Holocaust teaches us: We must take anti-Semitism seriously. We dare not ignore or minimize the seriousness of threats of madmen who call for the annihilation of the Jewish people just because they are made in shrill voices, especially when made before hundreds of thousands of adoring mobs chanting “Death to the Jews.” If we learned anything from the Holocaust it should be to take dictators who say they are going to wipe us out at face value. As a result we must cry out against Iran, a regime which sent thousands of its own children to fight in its war with Iraq in the 1980’s, that has brutally repressed its opposition, is the primary sponsor of international terrorism and which has declared its intention to wipe Israel off the face of the earth. We must do all we can and support actions to stop its mad march towards acquiring nuclear capability, for the threat to the region and entire world is too grave.

And the third and final message I derive from the Holocaust is that as a Jew I cannot worry only about our people. We have a responsibility to the world. The other part of the sage Hillel’s statement was, “*ookeshah ani lee, az mah anee*: For when I am only for myself, what am I?” He concluded by imploring us, “*eem lo achshav, aimatai*: If not now, when?”

As a result of our history we are the moral conscience of the world. Just as we learned from the experience of slavery and having been strangers in the land of Egypt to have compassion for the stranger, so, too, do we learn from our more recent experience how important it is to work for justice. This is why Jewish groups have been in the forefront of efforts to help save refugees in Darfur. It is why Elie Wiesel urged President Clinton at the ceremony dedicating the Holocaust Museum in Washington to do something about the bloodshed in Bosnia in the 1990’s. The Torah teaches us that we cannot stand idly by the blood of our neighbors. It is why tiny Israel under Prime Minister Menahem Begin in the 1970’s was the first nation to open its doors and accept

refugees from southeast Asia in the aftermath of the fall of Saigon. Even before the United States accepted a single boat load of people escaping to its shores, Prime Minister Begin said, as Jews we know what it means to be a boat people, and to be turned away when seeking refuge and safe haven. Tikun Olam, making the world a better place, is an imperative, not a choice.

The one area I am not addressing this evening is theology and Jewish belief after the Holocaust. I choose not to address it for a number of reasons. While the magnitude of the shoah is unique, the truth is earlier generations of rabbis had to explain the tragedies of their time to their people. Is someone who loses a loved one in a terror attack, a random act of violence, or a sudden, unanticipated, or even a natural death any less of a mourner? There is much beyond our comprehension. I agree with Elie Wiesel that there are times when the questions are more important than the answers, and there are times when silence speaks louder than words.

I do know that I maintain my faith and belief despite and even in the face of loss. Like the generations who came before me I will not let it to be shattered and refuse to allow it be taken away by those who hate God.

I conclude with the simple words found in our prayer book which capture my belief and is my eternal prayer: *Shomer shomer yisrael, shmor she'arit yisrael*: Guardian of Israel, guard the remnant of Israel. *Ve'al yo'avad yisrael*, and let not Israel, the holy people who proclaim Shma Yisrael ever perish from this earth.

I can't be sure about what God will do. I can only pray that God will do His part to protect the remnant of the people Israel so that we will never perish from this earth.

As for me, I try to do what I can, and hope you will join with me.

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September 27, 2009
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