

A Response to the War in Iraq

A Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman

When I heard that the war began, my first reaction was a great sense of sadness, and a feeling of failure, not for me personally, but for all of humanity. As many of you know, I did not feel this war to be justified. Nevertheless, we are now at war, our troops are in harms way, people are killing and being killed. As we speak, missiles and bombs are raining down on Iraq. We are at war, whether we agree with the reasons for the war or not, the war is a reality we must deal with now.

It is important to recognize that we are a diverse community with many and conflicting feelings about what is happening in Iraq. Some support the war; others are out on the streets in protest. It's also important to remember that some folks in our community may have loved ones or friends in harms way, serving in the armed forces, or living in the region. Let us be easy on each other during this trying time, recognizing that we are all to some degree exposed, and on the edge.

At times like these, the words of Isaiah come to me – “Fear not for I am with you, be not dismayed for I am your God, I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will sustain you through my power.” (41:10)

I, like many of you, listened to President Bush's short speech at the beginning of the war. What I appreciated about his short talk was that he did not invoke God except to say that we can all pray that our troops come home safely. This, I think, is the ground we all share, the wish, the hope, the prayer that our troops come home safely and more than that, that the Iraqi people's suffering is minimized – that everyone comes home safely; if that could only be so.

As a student of history, I happened to be reading a book about President Lincoln's second inaugural address. It was arguably, the greatest speech he ever gave, and perhaps one of the greatest speeches any president has delivered. Oddly enough, some of what he had to say still rings true today.

In speaking about the soldiers on both sides of the conflict – north and south – he notes: Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His name against the other.... The prayers of both cannot be answered, the prayers of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes. Woe unto the world because of offences! For it must needs be that offences come but woe to that man by whom that offence cometh.

I don't know how many of you saw the picture in the Press Democrat of the American soldier in his desert fatigues, praying in a chapel. That picture moved me. I could imagine if in his shoes, what I might be saying, what I might be feeling...

“God, may I return home safely to hug my wife, to throw a ball with my son, to listen to my daughter play piano...to cuddle in bed with the whole family over a book...God, please, let me live, let my family live, let it all be ok...”

And then I thought, I could see his family praying, perhaps gathered around the kitchen table...”Protect daddy, please, please let him come back in one piece...please God, please...”

And then I could imagine an Iraqi soldier, scared beyond our reckoning, praying a very similar prayer to Allah, another name for the same God his American counter part is praying to, and his family at home, also begging that same God will bring him home in one piece as well.

This is the human ground we all share; this is the place that all hearts meet.

Lincoln’s words ring so true – “Both ... pray to the same God;The prayers of both cannot be answered, the prayers of neither has been answered fully.”

God, Adonai, Av Harachaman, Source of Compassion, rachem aleynu, have compassion upon us, our troops, their families and everyone else caught in the crossfire of this war.

Oseh shalom bimromav, You who are The Source of Peace, brings peace to us, and all the world, and let us say, amen.