

Rabbi Michael Beals

Rosh Hashana 5782 Day Two

Shanah Tovah!

In today's Torah reading, we read about the almost end of the Jewish people. Really. Think about it. God promised to make the seed of Abraham as the stars in the heaven and the sands on the beach. But the Jewish blood line was nearly severed soon after it began. God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Then in the 11th hour, a ram is presented as an appropriate sacrifice. We continue to blow the ram's horn, the shofar, as a constant reminder of this gruesome story, and the sacrifice Abraham was willing to make for his faith. And possibly the fragility of our faith.

It seems we are the ever-dying people. In each generation we get predictions about our imminent demise as the Jewish people. The recent Pew Study is the just latest bearer of bad news – intermarriage is up to more than 70% in America if you exclude our Orthodox brethren. And yet behind these numbers there's great hope. Intermarried families are embracing Judaism in a serious way, including synagogue memberships, kids enrolled in Hebrew school, bar and bat mitzvahs, plus new allies among the non-Jewish branch of the family.

This also mirrors the work we are doing here at Congregation Beth Shalom to be welcoming to these families. Our inclusiveness has helped maintain our membership numbers and has supported significant leadership for our shul.

However, another real threat to our future comes from the very college campuses where we aspire to send our children.

One of our congregants shared a recent article from CNN regarding the rising level of anti-Semitism on campus, specifically tied to Jewish support for Israel. One student interviewed for the article, Blake Layton, a 20-year-old senior at George Washington University, in Washington, DC, shared that just by wearing a kippah on campus, his anti-Semitic fellow students would call him:

A white supremacist. A Nazi. A baby-killer. A genocide apologist. A racist. They said he supported ethnic cleansing and colonialism. Layton added: "I get more death threats than my parents would probably like to know about."

(Pause)

Anti-Semitic rhetoric has grown at alarming rates on campuses nationwide, according to Matthew Berger, a vice president at Hillel International, an international Jewish campus organization. In the last two months alone, Berger says he's dealt with issues on 50 campuses from coast to coast.

Some of these arguments are subtle. A Chicago University student Julia Jassy, says if she tries to talk about the complex history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has existed for centuries and remains an almost intractable international geopolitical issue, "you're instantly on the wrong side."

Blake Flayton adds, when Jews, as liberals, say, 'I'm a Zionist,' they're not given the space to explain all of what that means. He says the word means that you support the Jewish right to self-determination in part of our ancestral homeland, not even specifying where the borders are, not even specifying which government they would like to see in charge in Israel." He says, "They're not given the space to explain that. They're banished."

How will our children entering college even know how to counter accusations? During yesterday's sermon, I shared the quote from Pirkei Avot: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me," But a lot of our entering Jewish freshman don't even know who the Jewish "I am" is in this quote.

Perhaps these simple explanations will help students and the rest of us explain the relationship between Jews and Israel.

For example, the accusation of being Jewish or a Zionist makes you a colonialist, flies in the very face of the Zionist story.

Theodor Herzl, founder of the modern political Zionism, felt that the Jews of Europe were doomed after experiencing the anti-Semitism in Paris around the Dreyfus Affair. Background: In 1894, Dreyfus was framed for espionage and as he was court martialed, the French crowds yelled “kill the Jew ... kill ALL the Jews.” Herzl was desperate to establish a Jewish state wherever he could. He saw the handwriting on the wall if Jews stayed in Europe. After all, if the French, who gave us “liberty, equality, fraternity,” could so easily turn on their own Jewish population, imagine what less enlightened parts of Europe would be capable of doing to their Jewish citizens.

When the British, with an eye to strengthening their colonial hold in East Africa, offered Herzl a Jewish State in Uganda, he was in favor. But the Religious Zionists refused. They said the only home for the Jewish people was in their ancient home of *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel, where there had been a Jewish presence for the past 3,200 years.

Had Herzl won, and the Jews established their home on the backs of blacks living in Uganda at the behest of the British, then yes, Zionism would be guilty of colonialism. But, by insisting that the Jewish homeland be re-established in their ancient biblical homeland, then under the control of the Ottoman Empire, Jews rejected colonialism.

(Pause)

As for apartheid, as long as the government of Israel does not annex the West Bank and deny the Palestinians the right to vote, what is transpiring in the West Bank cannot be called apartheid. It looks absolutely NOTHING like the repressive White government of South Africa which denied basic rights to their Black countrymen. Now, there is a REAL risk that a future Israeli government could turn their back on the democratic underpinnings of Israel's founders. Let's not allow the label of Apartheid to be used NOW. Let's give future Israeli governments the incentive to do the right thing by the way of the Palestinians AND preserve democratic Zionism.

As for the accusations of genocide and ethnic cleansing – such terms leveled against Israel cheapens the very nature of these horrendous crimes against humanity.

Consider the murders of Tutsis in Rwanda, the Albanians in Kosovo, the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, and, of course, the Jews during the Holocaust. Such slander cannot go unchallenged! This is sloppy rhetoric meant to fan the flames of hatred against Israel, by blurring historical facts. We have to arm our teens with knowledge, explained in a way which they can easily digest and articulate to others. This is why Congregation Beth Shalom has been so focused on outreach towards younger families and why that outreach involves skilled educators.

I am very excited about the recent hire of Rabbi Nick Renner as our new Associate Rabbi and Director of Life-Long Learning. His most recent position has been as Rabbi of the Hillel at the University of Delaware. If anyone understands how unprepared Jewish college freshman are to deal with the complicated issues surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is Rabbi Renner. Part of his commitment to our Hebrew School is to grow attendance.

And part of his commitment to our Hebrew School teens is to strengthen their Jewish identity, and better educate them on issues regarding Israel BEFORE they hit the university campus.

This is also the inspiration for Rabbi Jeremy Winaker assuming the role of Vice President of Education and Youth Engagement. In addition to being the former Head of School at Wilmington's Albert Einstein Academy, Rabbi Winaker is now the executive director of the Greater Philadelphia Hillel Network. He is responsible for guiding the Jewish campus experience at West Chester University, Haverford, Bryn Mawr, and other area colleges. Setting the tone for discussing Israel on the college campus and here at CBS will be a priority.

That does NOT mean presenting Israel as a perfect place, especially regarding the Palestinians. But it DOES mean better educating our teens to the goals and accomplishments of the State of Israel. It means aspiring to the very best of Jewish values, and exposing untruths about Israel by those who would wish her ill.

Today's Torah story is not only about Abraham's faith, but ultimately it's about the story of Jewish survival. Today, I believe we want to celebrate the THRIVING of the Jewish people.

That means ALL of us, Hebrew school, teens, parents, grandparents, and Hebrew school teachers, need to know the history and nuances of Zionism and the State of Israel.

We need ways to tell that story in a clear and compelling way to others. With Rabbis Renner and Winaker as my partners, we will be able to give ALL of you, the tools you need to become effective storytellers. I look forward to you telling one of the most compelling stories of world history. It is how of a rag-tag group of historical misfits with, a radical belief in one God, settled in a tiny country the size of New Jersey. Their faith and ideas would go on to change the world, creating the foundations of three of the world's major religions. It is a story worth knowing, and it is a story worth sharing.

Shana Tovah!