

SERMON ON ISRAEL-GAZA, ROSH HASHANA 5775

Rabbi Suzanne Singer

This morning, I am going to talk about a very difficult subject – a subject that, in many ways, I would rather avoid discussing because it is a subject that arouses so much passion and so much vehement disagreement. Often, whatever one says about this subject is misunderstood, distorted, and, even if heard as was intended, draws the ire of one side or the other. But I feel it is my moral obligation to address this subject, and I would hope that you can hear me without prejudice.

The subject is Israel and the recent war with Gaza. Unfortunately, the sides have become so polarized that people have unfriended each other on Facebook over posts to which they object. Others have decided to remain silent in order to avoid getting into a screaming match with friends and family. Last night I spoke about the importance of dialogue. I believe we must be able to engage in dialogue about Israel as well. We need to be able to hear and respect each other, as well as the narrative of our enemies, or this conflict has no chance of ever being resolved.

At the outset, let me state unequivocally that Hamas is an extremist terrorist organization that does not even have the Palestinians' welfare in mind, much less the Israelis'. I do not believe they have a voice in this dialogue. The Hamas Charter calls for the destruction of Israel and considers all Jews to be its enemies. There is no dialogue with such a group. During this most recent conflict, we discovered the extent of the network of tunnels built by Hamas that reach under houses, hospitals and schools. We know that Hamas uses civilians as human shields. Body counts serve their public relations interest. These are unacceptable tactics no matter what the cause. Hamas' actions over the past decade are outlined by Dennis Ross,¹ who was President Bill Clinton's Middle East negotiator. "Even as Israel was completing the process of withdrawing all its settlers and soldiers from Gaza, Hamas carried out a bus-station bombing in Israel. Then, from late 2005 to early 2006, Hamas conducted multiple attacks on the very crossing points that allowed people and goods to move into and out of Gaza. For Hamas, it was more important to continue 'resistance' than to allow Gazans to

¹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/hamas-could-have-chosen-peace-instead-it-made-gaza-suffer/2014/08/08/eefd2b48-1d83-11e4-82f9-2cd6fa8da5c4_story.html

constructively test their new freedom — or to give Israelis a reason to think that withdrawal could work.

Some argue that Israel withdrew but imposed a siege on Gaza. In reality, Hamas produced the siege. Israel's tight embargo on Gaza came only after ongoing Hamas attacks." There is no doubt that Israel faces an ongoing existential threat from radical Islamic extremists such as Hamas who refuse to accept the very existence of Israel as a sovereign Jewish state. And there is no question that Israel has every right to defend herself against rockets and suicide bombers and kidnappings and underground tunnels. Rabbi Hillel famously said: "If I am not for myself, who will be?" Israel must insure the safety of its citizens.

As to criticism of Israel's tactics, it seems pretty clear that Israel is targeted almost exclusively for what protesters consider human rights violations. The Syrian government's assault on its own people, resulting in nearly 200,000 dead and 3 million refugees, sparks no demonstrations while "pro-Palestinian student activists publicly call for the renewed slaughter of Jews in the name of Palestinian self-determination...publicly proclaim[ing] that 'We are all Hamas now.'"² Unbelievably, and horrifyingly, even the Holocaust has been appropriated as a means to lash out at and delegitimize Israel. Israel is demonized as the new Nazi Germany and Palestinians are designated as the new Jews. This continual assault on Israel for human rights abuses is unfair and, in my view, a symptom of anti-Semitism which, has been unleashed in Europe to a frightening degree.

It goes without saying that I believe Israel has a right to exist, as a Jewish and democratic state; that we need Israel, not only as a last refuge for Jews, but also as a center for a thriving Jewish culture, a country where Jewish life is at the forefront, where we have the opportunity to live out and implement Jewish values. And certainly during a time of crisis as we are experiencing today, we must stand by Israel and avoid 20/20 hindsight about what might have been done, but was not, by the Israeli government. We must look to the future to figure out how we can achieve peace and prevent future attacks by the likes of Hamas. Which brings me to the next part of Rabbi Hillel's aphorism. Rabbi Hillel also said: "If I am for myself alone, who am I?" In other words: What kind of an Israel do we want to support? What are the values we want to see it live by?

² <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-moral-psychosis-of-demonstrating-in-support-of-hamas/#ixzz39Fwkng72>

Even during this most trying of times, Rabbi Jill Jacobs calls for “radical empathy.” She explains: “By this I mean opening ourselves to the pain of the other exactly at the moment when we are terrified of this other, and exactly at the moment when fear for our lives and for our loved ones pushes us inward.” Rabbi Jacobs calls for, “...pro-Palestinian voices that empathize with the Israelis racing for shelter, that denounce terrorism and rocket attacks, and that refuse to tolerate any anti-Semitic tropes masquerading as criticism of Israeli policy....And we need to hear pro-Israel voices expressing authentic grief at the deaths of Palestinian children, calling for protection for civilian populations, acknowledging the damage inflicted by 47 years of occupation, and denouncing any language that dehumanizes Palestinians or Muslims.” In other words, we must be able to see each other as human beings – both sides – the Israelis and the Palestinians -- need to do this.

Unfortunately, all too often, we have not been able to hear each other’s stories. All too often, we have been entrenched in our own narrative, deaf to the pain and suffering of the other. It may be easiest if think about the children caught in the crossfire. Leonard Fein, a long-time Jewish social activist, who died last month, wrote in his last column for The Jewish Forward: “Once, I was in Sderot, which for years was the prime target of rockets from Gaza. A friend who lives there explained to me that all the children in Sderot suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. All of them. As it happens, I was in Gaza the very next day, chatting with a prominent psychiatrist who explained to me that all the children in Gaza suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder...The trauma goes on, seething daily...What we have is ongoing traumatic stress disorder...I talk with people on both sides, and sometimes I cannot hold back the tears...I can empathize but cannot truly fathom how one lives with all this pain, with all the interminable horror...”

In this most recent war with Gaza, as well as in previous wars, those on either side of the conflict who have sympathized with the casualties on the other side, have all too often been demonized themselves. Have we come to a point where we consider Palestinians, even Palestinian children, to be less than human? Can we not heed the cry at peace rally in Tel Aviv, “*B’Gaza b’Sderot, yeladim rotzim lichyot,*” “in Gaza, in Sderot, children want to live”?

Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of The New Republic, affirms:

“the population of Gaza are not monsters and the Palestinian people are not monsters...the war has filled me with disquiet, which my sympathetic understanding of Israel’s position has failed to stifle...I do not know how to do the arithmetic of conscience...There are no concepts that can catch up with the murder of children. I have been surprised by the magnitude of the indifference in the Jewish world to the human costs of Israel’s defense against the missiles and the tunnels.”³

Now none of us lives in Israel facing a constant threat to our existence, worried that our children will serve in the army facing almost certain combat. So any response we might have to how Israel deals with her situation must be tempered by this reality. On the other hand, what happens in Israel does affect Jews everywhere – as we have seen in the unfortunate anti-Semitic incidents that use the actions of Israel in Gaza or the West Bank as an excuse. We must have a voice in this conflict. What I think most of us here hope for is a two-state solution.

After all, the Palestinian people yearn for a state of their own. For 47 years, they have lived under, and chafe under, Israeli occupation. If Israel is to remain a democratic and Jewish state, Israel must get out of the West Bank, the settlement project must cease, and the Palestinians must have a state.

I know the argument against this. It goes like this: Israel does not have a trustworthy partner. And that is very possible. However, according to former Israeli president Shimon Peres, according to former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, and according to current Knesset Member Yitzhaq Herzog, President Abbas is a real partner for peace. President Abbas is a moderate. And after him, there may not be such a potential partner. A moderate regime in an economically viable West Bank and Gaza, would offer a real alternative to the Hamas regime that currently controls Gaza. Unfortunately, the collapse of the recent negotiations conducted by Secretary of State Kerry left the Palestinians with a sense of hopelessness. Especially because it has been so very long that the situation has not moved forward. From hopelessness arises extremist solutions such as Hamas. Rabbi Donniel Hartman cautions us against ignoring this reality: “For many years now,” he says, “...we have been trying to tune out the Palestinians. Economic prosperity, buttressed by a regionally disproportionate powerful army, a barrier wall, and an ever-evolving missile defense system, have allowed us to believe that

³ <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118986/leon-wieseltier-israel-and-gaza-just-and-unjust-war>

we can ignore the neighborhood.”⁴ But we do so at our own peril with the consequence of more and more wars against the Hamases of the world.

Rabbi Sam Gordon, who recently visited Israel on a solidarity mission, reminds us: “the Zionist dream was a democratic Jewish state where the eternal values of prophetic Judaism could be lived out in the real world, not just in the minds of theologians and philosophers. ...Will the Settlement Enterprise continue its course in direct conflict with the definition of Israel as both democratic AND Jewish? It can't be both, if Israel continues to occupy the West Bank...More importantly, will this finally be the time to recognize that the old tactics will not resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? ...The question now is what is the vision for the future?”

The premier Israeli novelist and peace activist, Amos Oz, supports the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank. Oz believes that: “When Ramallah and Nablus on the West Bank live on in prosperity and freedom, I believe that the people in Gaza will sooner or later do to Hamas what the people of Romania did to Ceausescu. I do not know how long it will take, but it is destined to happen - simply because the people in Gaza will be very jealous of the freedom and prosperity enjoyed by their brothers and sisters on the West Bank in the state of Palestine. This in my view is the solution, although this solution cannot be implemented in 24 hours or 48 hours.”⁵

Clearly, there are risks in following such a course. What if we allow a Palestinian state on the West Bank only to have another hostile neighbor at our border? What if Hamas takes over the West Bank and builds tunnels from that side? There are a lot of “what ifs.” In the final analysis, it comes down to a question of what values we want to live by. Noga Brenner Samia is Deputy Director of BINA, the Center for Jewish Identity and Hebrew Culture. “Israel is divided,” she says. “There are those that believe that Israel needs to fight longer, be tougher, strike harder; and there are those that say let’s talk, let’s negotiate, let’s come to an agreement. So far, Israel has tried both these approaches and both have failed...

⁴ [Did we win the war? 'Everything OK?' | Donniel Hartman | The Blogs | The Times of Israel](http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/did-we-win-the-war-everything-ok/#ixzz3AJhkXQ8t)<http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/did-we-win-the-war-everything-ok/#ixzz3AJhkXQ8t>

⁵ <http://www.dw.de/oz-lose-lose-situation-for-israel/a-17822511>

So when you don't have any reassurance as to what the solution might be (or if there is any solution at all), what it comes down to, ultimately, is what kind of person you want to be. Do you want to be a fighter or a peace-maker?...I choose...to fight terrorism, support our soldiers and defend Israel's right to exist; while educating for tolerance, dialogue and understanding. I choose peace every moment, but it doesn't make me any less worried."⁶

We choose dialogue and offer peace DESPITE the fact that we may be rewarded with a kick in the teeth. We offer peace because we cherish the value of everyone created in God's image, *B'tselem Elohim*. We offer peace because we continue to hope; we continue to hope DESPITE the odds. Leonard Fein reminds us: "There's an Israeli song...'do not uproot that which has been planted, do not forget the hope.' He continues: "Do not uproot that which has been planted? But...there is uprooting everywhere. On our side, there is the dank and bloody and ever-abiding awareness that that which we plant in the morning may well be trampled before night. If so, we will nonetheless be back the next morning to try once more, for we know no other way, for sooner or later, we are taught, those who plant in sorrow will reap in joy. Faith, despite history."

I leave you with this poem, a hope for peace.

When Peace Comes: A Meditation (*Alden Solovy*)

When peace comes,
When the tunnels are gone and the walls come down,
When we sing together as brothers and sisters,
We will remember these days of sorrow and grief,
Of rockets and terror,
Of longing and despair,
As a memorial to those who were lost,
As a remembrance of our mourning,
As a monument to our yearning,
On the road to wholeness,

⁶ Noga, Tel Mond, July 2014

On the road to wisdom,
On the road to our days of rejoicing.

Oh you children of Abraham,
You sons and daughters of Sarah and Hagar,
What will you become?
How long before shalom and salaam
Echo in these hills,
In these valleys and on these shores,
As shouts of awe and amazement?
How long before we remember
To hold each other dear?

One God,
Maker of All,
Banish war from our midst.
Speedily bring forth justice, understanding and love.
Bind these wounds and heal our hearts.
On that day the children of Ishmael
And the children of Isaac
Will dance as one.
Joy will rise to heaven
And gladness will fill the earth.

Let us remember the end of Rabbi Hillel's statement: "If not now, when?" Let us awaken ourselves to our quest for peace as we hear the call of the shofar.

We continue with the Shofar service.