

Jubilee

Proclaim Release

Yom Kippur Morning, 5778

Rabbi Jeff Marx, The Santa Monica Synagogue

There are, in our Jewish tradition, several important numbers. 18, for example, which is the numerical equivalent of *chai*, life. 40, such as the forty years in the Wilderness. And, of course, the 7 days of creation. Yet, there is also another important number, which is 50. It is the number of the *yovel*, the Jubilee year, the year of release.

The Torah states that once we had entered into the Promised Land, eleven of the twelve tribes were to receive a specific territory, and within that territory each clan, and then each family, was to have an allotted portion of land. But if it so happened that an Israelite family was forced to sell its land to another to pay for their debts, when the Jubilee year arrived, the land was to be returned back to them. Or if an Israelite was forced to sell himself as an indentured servant to pay off his debts, his contract came to an end when the Jubilee year arrived. At the start of the Jubilee year, we were, in the words of Leviticus (Chapter 25), words that are inscribed upon the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, to “proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all the inhabitants, thereof.”

The Jubilee was to be the time of restoration and of homecoming. It served, in a profound way, as a social corrective, giving a second chance to those who had been suffering under crushing debt. They were now permitted to return to their families, and their land was restored to them. It was, in effect, a chance for a new beginning: homelessness would not be forever, slaving away for another would not last an entire lifetime.

Rosh Hashanah, the start of our new year, seems like it would have been the perfect time to start the Jubilee process; yet, our tradition proclaimed that the shofar was to be blown to start it off on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It is as if both the indentured servant *and* the landowner who was forced to sell are to reflect on the initial behaviors that landed them in such a grave predicament. But not just them: The current master and new possessor of the land are to reflect, as well, on their behaviors: How, in the years since that happened, did they tend to the land that was sold to them? How did they treat their indentured servant during the years that he labored? So the Jubilee becomes both a time of liberation and of reflection.

This year, 2017, ushers in for us, another event of 50 years, one, which I believe, is linked to our Jubilee year of release. This year is the 50th anniversary of the Six Day War; a war in which, in June of 1967, against great odds, Israel drove back the Arab forces that assailed her from all sides. It was a time of great relief, of rejoicing, and of pride; a time that literally transformed our identity as American Jews and transformed our relationship to

Israel. It was also the time in which Israel seized land that others had been dwelling upon, and since then, for fifty years, has controlled it and its population. This morning, then, on its 50th year, I want to explore with you the ramifications of the Six Day War.

In the weeks leading up to the war, both Egypt and Syrian leaders declared publically that war was coming and their objective was to wipe Israel off the map. Egypt demanded that the UN peacekeeping forces in the Sinai, a demilitarized zone, be removed and the UN complied. The Egyptian army then entered the Sinai Peninsula, closed the Straits of Tiran, cutting off Israel's maritime access to Asia and Africa. France, which up to then had been Israel's main arms supplier, announced a ban on weapons sales to Israel. On June 5th, faced with hostilities on all sides, and Israel, at its narrowest point, only nine miles wide, the Israeli defense forces bombed the Egyptian airfields, essentially wiping out their air force. Next was an Israeli counter-attack, which captured the Sinai and pushed Egypt back to the Suez Canal. On June 7th, facing Jordanian attack, Israeli Defense Force soldiers entered East Jerusalem and the Old City, and occupied the West Bank of the Jordan. Finally, the Golan Heights from which Syria had rained down shells upon Israeli Kibbutzim was captured and the war was won on June 10th.

The victory transformed Israel. For the first time, Israel became a true strategic asset to the US and millions upon millions of dollars subsequently rolled in each year for military aid. Immigration shot up from Western countries and then from the Soviet Union. Israel's population was 3 million then; it now is at 8 million. The economy grew by thousands of percent. Israel's health system became one of the most progressive in the world and Israel led the world in agricultural techniques. Jews could now pray at the Western Wall and the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem began to grow.

The victory also transformed the American Jewish community. Before the Six Day War, though supportive of Israel, not all in the Jewish community were passionate about the Jewish State. We Jews still had our own worries about fitting into American society. The country clubs were still, de facto, restricted and everyone knew someone who had changed their too-Jewish sounding name. But now, we could be loud and proud. Suddenly, it was cool to be Jewish, especially when the entire world celebrated the plucky bravery of the Jewish State and saw the battle as David against Goliath. It became fashionable to wear oversize Jewish stars and mezuzahs around our necks. When the war ended, 40,000 Jews in Los Angeles crammed into the Hollywood Bowl, along with Jewish movie and TV stars, to pledge their donations to the State of Israel.

In the years that followed, Jewish studies departments were established on college campuses and we Jews began to more publically assert our own political voice. I do not think I am stretching the point to suggest that the Six Day War launched the confidence of

the American Jewish community that resulted, decades later, in a national Holocaust museum in Washington, DC, and two Jews running for the oval office in previous elections.

The Six Day War transformed our own Reform movement, as well. Our movement started a rabbinic seminary in Jerusalem, the first Reform kibbutz was established in the Negev, and the Reform youth movement launched summer trips to Israel.

But in the years that followed, it started to get complicated and ugly. Orthodox Jewish settlers began moving into West Bank territories, lands they called Judea and Samaria, determined that none of the Promised Land would ever be given back, espousing racist ideology that the Arabs were truly inferior and that all Arab citizens should be expelled. The Orthodox Jewish settler, Baruch Goldstein, sprayed a mosque with automatic gunfire during Purim, and the Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzchak Rabin, was assassinated by a Jewish settler who deemed he was a threat to the Jewish People for moving toward peace with the Palestinians.

And though Golda Meir had famously proclaimed that there was no such thing as a Palestinian people, none-the-less, these people, trapped inside miserable refugee camps, began to strike out. Eleven Israeli Olympic athletes were murdered in Munich, Leon Klinghoffer was thrown overboard from the Achille Lauro. Bombs were left to explode on Israeli city buses; soon followed by explosives strapped to suicide bombers in markets and outdoor cafes. A huge security wall, called “the fence,” went up separating Arab villages from Israeli towns.

And the Western nations of the world who had cheered Israel’s victory? Now they invited Yasser Arafat, the head of the PLO, to address the United Nations with a pistol on his hip, and soon, thereafter, followed the U.N.’s passage of the Zionism is Racism resolution. The kufiyah became the chic wardrobe of the Left, of sympathy for the oppressed Palestinians, and the Israelis found themselves viewed as the “neighborhood bullies” of the Middle East. In the US, we now hear the charges that Israel is an “apartheid regime.” And we are all familiar with the boycott and divestiture movement underway on college campuses and amidst academic associations.

What started out as a sigh of relief, an outpouring of joy and thanksgiving, the survival of our Jewish State against overwhelming odds, has turned out to be a mixed blessing. Fifty years since that triumphant time, that victory seems to have turned to ashes in our mouths. We are left with deep, conflicting feelings. Yes, we were not wiped out. Yes, we regained Jerusalem and controlled the Golan Heights so never again will shells rain down on farmers in the Jewish valley below. We survived. This, the fiftieth anniversary of the Six Day War, is a time of celebration.

Yet, the Jubilee year is to be a time of soul searching. While it is fitting to celebrate our Jewish victory, we are *also* to be concerned about it, for the survival of Israel has come

at a price, both for the people who have been ruled over *and* for their rulers. Many of us understand today, that to continue to rule over another people is also to impose a moral wound on our Jewish state.

We are able to see, now, through historical hindsight, how, as occupiers of hostile territories, our occupation went from euphoria to arrogance, to cruelty. Too many have been bullied, humiliated, and had decency toward them shunted to the side, their legal rights ignored. Yes, Israel's military victory brought peace but also an endless cycle of hatred and violence. Yes, Jerusalem was reunified but yet it remains a divided city to this day, with two public transport systems and two electric companies, one for the Jewish quarter and one for the Arab quarter. Jerusalem, whose streets and alleyways must be constantly patrolled and monitored by the military.

And what is one to do about the settlements? On the one hand, there are the intolerant religious settlers, the zealots living in tents and trailers who declare that not one inch of Biblical land will they give up; the ones who sees their Arab neighbors on the land, down below, as animals. On the other hand, there is my boyhood friend, Larry, now known as Eliezer, whom I visited this last February, who lives in the West Bank settler town of Karnei Shomron. The town, perched on a high hill, looks like a Los Angeles suburban community. There are parks, schools, paved roads lined with trees, supermarkets, and a movie theatre. He and his wife, together with a group of Jews from Chicago, settled there 30 years ago because the Israeli government subsidized their homes. There, they raised their children, and now babysit their grandchildren. They live forty-five minutes from Tel Aviv, where they can walk the beach, and go to the upscale restaurants. And, no, he has no bad feelings toward the Arabs who live down in the village five minutes away. They are quiet and give no trouble since the military maintains a security check post between them. His settlement is one of hundreds of settlements that have been established and flourishing for decades on occupied territory. There are currently 300,000 Israelis living on the West Bank. What is one to do?

What are we to do? On this, the Jubilee year, we need to soberly reflect over what the last fifty years has brought. The situation is complicated and morally difficult. When there is a 20-foot wall that divides a Palestinian village from the olive groves that helped sustain it but that wall has halted the incursion of terrorist bombers into Israel, what is one to do? We understand that the occupation must be brought to an end yet, a one state solution will not work. Annexing all the territories we occupy will alter the population balance of what was to be a Jewish State, and will make second-class citizens of the Palestinians. The occupation must be brought to an end; yet, a two-state solution is also impossible. Israel cannot allow the creation of a second Palestinian entity, just miles away from Tel Aviv, with no guarantee of who will, one day, be ruling there.

What are we to do? We are to wait. Though it is the 50th year, it is not yet time for the Jubilee, we will not proclaim it. We will wait and Israel will wait. Israel will wait because there is no one to negotiate with, because, in the meantime, the State is able to flourish in the midst of continuing to hold the land of others, just as the new owner of his neighbor's property flourishes during the years he holds it; just as the master flourishes while holding the indentured servant. Israel can wait. Its tech startups are flourishing; buildings are going up day and night in Tel Aviv, water desalination projects are providing Mediterranean water for an ever-growing population. The markets are full; the restaurants are booming; the country is flourishing. But the moral cost is high, the intolerance towards Palestinians grows, and the high hopes we had of being a light to the nations of the world are dimmed.

Thus, our waiting must be articulated as Jubilee waiting. Jubilee waiting means remembering, in the midst of our practical, real-politic, and complicated world, that ultimately none of us owns a land, that ultimately justice is to triumph, that peace is more valuable than property. Jubilee waiting reminds us that fifty years of occupation need not be fifty more. Jubilee waiting means that our goals must be towards release. We must encourage and financially contribute to more activities that involve Palestinians not as enemies but as future neighbors, not as occupied and occupier, but as neighbors on the same land. We must speak out whenever we hear all Arabs and Palestinians portrayed as savage children or animals and speak out against religious settler pronouncements that land is holier than people. We are to speak out against violence perpetrated by both Palestinians *and* Israelis. We are to simultaneously acknowledge that no; the occupation is not good for Israel *and* that there is nothing noble or moral about Palestinian terrorism. We are to speak out against those who would deny the very legitimacy of the Jewish state, and who treat its complicated problem as a simplistic black or white equation.

It is the 50th year, the year of Jubilee. "Proclaim liberty throughout the land", says the Book of Leviticus. "Proclaim liberty throughout the land, to *all* the inhabitants, thereof." Not just to the Palestinians but to our people, the citizens of Israel, as well. May the time come soon, if not in our days, then in the days of our children, when the shofar blast of release will be sounded and peace will come, at last.