

Ki Anu Amecha

Ki Anu Amecha

Yom Kippur Morning, 5775/2014

Rabbi Jeffrey Marx

An Asian and a Jew are sitting next to one another at a bar, when, suddenly, the Jew reaches over and pushes the Asian off the stool. “Whatya’ you do that for?” the man cried out, and the Jew replies: “That, was for Pearl Harbor!” “Pearl Harbor?!” , the other exclaimed, “I’m Chinese not Japanese!” to which the Jew replies: “Chinese, Japanese, what’s the difference?” A few minutes later, the Asian reaches over and pushes the Jew off his bar stool. “That’s for the Titantic”, he shouts out. “Titantic?” says the Jew. “Yeah, Iceberg, Goldberg, what’s the difference?”

Iceberg, Goldberg, what’s the difference? Israeli, Jew, Zionist, what’s the difference? In the eyes of the world, seemingly, not much. Even before Israel decided to defend itself against the rockets being fired into its territory from Gaza, we have witnessed, this last year, an outbreak of anti-Semitic attacks against the Jews of France, Sweden, Denmark, Italy, Ukraine, and even, here, in the U.S. In the eyes of the world, to misquote Gertrude Stein, “Jew is a Jew, is a Jew....”

The fact is, that for thousands of years, we Jews believed the same. That is, that we were all one People, no matter where we lived. There is an old Jewish custom that when two Jews meet one another, and they are not sure whether the other is Jewish, they use a codeword. They say to one another, “Amcha?, which means, “Are you part of our people?” “Are you one of us?”

The phrase, amcha, actually doesn’t mean “our people” it means “your people”. When the Israelites, soon after receiving the Ten Commandments immediately build the golden calf and dance around it, God says to Moses on top of Mount Sinai, “Get back down the mountain because amcha, your people, are behaving miserably. They have fashioned a golden calf after I just told them not to worship idols! Now, let Me alone so I can destroy them!” Moses answers God and says, “Please do not do this to amcha, your people. Remember that they are yours. They are the ones you took out from Egypt.”

This morning, we underscore those words, in the beautiful song, “Ki Anu Amecha, We are Your People”: “You are the Potter, we are the clay; You are our owner, we are Your possession; we are Your children, You are our Father; we are Your People.” To be a Jew, then, is not only to believe certain things about God, the universe, and humanity, it is not only to follow a system of practice, but it is also to be part of a People. For over two thousand years, wherever we went, wherever we lived, we were linked to one another through our religious practice, through our holy language, through

our conviction of our unique relationship, as a People, with divinity. Yet, today, too many of us seem to have forgotten this, due to our self-induced historical amnesia. Oh, we might make a joke about someone being MOT, Member Of the Tribe, but we don't take that too seriously, because for the past 200 years, we liberal Jews, most specifically, we Reform Jews, have been attempting to reject that definition. Following the French Revolution, in the 1790s, Napoleon Bonaparte summoned a delegation of Jewish leaders and said to them: "I have a deal for you. I will extend citizenship to the Jews of France. The ghetto walls will come down, you will be able to move around the country freely, you will be able to join the trade guilds, send your children to the university, vote, in short, be full citizens of France. But I want to know: Who are you? Where does your loyalty lie?" The Jewish delegation said to Napoleon: "We are Frenchmen first, Jews second. Our ultimate loyalty is to the Emperor. We do not want to return to the land of Israel. We are not a People, we are simply a religion, like the Catholics of France. We will follow French law, and spill our blood on the field of battle for France."

As Napoleon's forces swept East, the Jews on both sides of the Rhine river were also granted these privileges, and were quick to proclaim a change in their identity. Yesterday a Jew, today, a believer in Judaism; a Judaism, by the way, that did not look so different than the religious practice of our Catholic and Protestant neighbors. They had an organ? We would have an organ. They sat men and women together? We would do the same. And if we would be able to mingle with them, then we should dress like them, eat like them, and marry them, as well. We proclaimed that Judaism and Christianity were both monotheistic religions with but superficial differences.

With enormous hope in the power of rationalism and universalism, of "Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite", we Jews rushed, with wild abandon, into this new world that was offered to us. The future really was going to be better for us and our children. In all the lands of Western Europe that were open to us, we became successful merchants, and traders, professors, scientists, writers and playwrights. France and Germany became our motherland and fatherland. And word came rapidly back from far off America, that, there, too, was a land in which there were few restrictions for Jews.

It took only a hundred years, however, for all this to be revealed as a fiction, much to the shock of Jews who had embraced it and taught it to their children and grandchildren. The world knew better than we that, we were, despite all of our claims, a People, a People who were not true members of the nation states in which we lived. Just 100 years after Napoleon, Captain Alfred Dreyfus of France, in 1894, was convicted in a trumped up trial, of treason, of passing on military secrets to the Germans. And the French press was strident in its condemnation of the Jews living in their midst. The

papers were filled with virulent anti-Semitism.

Attending the trial was Theodore Hertzl, a mild-mannered reporter for an Austrian metropolitan newspaper. Hertzl was shocked and dismayed, as were the Jews of France and of Europe: How could it be that the Enlightenment which had promised us that we would be able to fit in to the countries of Western Europe, how could it be after all our advances, that, suddenly, France, the cradle of the Enlightenment, could turn on its Jewish citizens like this? Hertzl went home and wrote a book, not called the Jewish State, as we so politely mistranslate it, but the Jew State. He wrote, that, in the end, we were a People, a People that could only be safe in a land of our own.

But the Jews of France, and Germany, and Austria, did not want to accept that definition of themselves any longer, despite the fact that the rest of the world still did, and they rejected Hertzl's plan and the plan of the First Zionist Congress for a Jewish homeland. They were, and would be, good Germans and Frenchmen, first.

That was true in America, as well. Here in the US, my grandfather belonged to the American Council for Judaism, an American organization that was vociferously opposed to the creation of a Jewish State because it was bad for the Jews, because it raised questions of dual loyalty. We were to be solely Americans of the Mosaic Persuasion. We were most assuredly not American Jews, we were rather, Jewish Americans.

And then came the Holocaust, and we were shocked, again, to discover that the world still saw us as a separate People, worse, as a parasitic People, sucking at the marrow of German racial purity, threatening to pollute their blood. We do not fully appreciate how the Jews of Vienna and Berlin were simply dumbfounded as the Nazis began to systematically vilify them, and scapegoat them and isolate them before murdering them. "How could this be in the land of Schiller and Goethe, Rilke, and Wagner", they exclaimed. "How could this happen to us? Did not we or our fathers spill blood in the World War for our Fatherland?" We were judges, and professors, bankers and lawyers, we went to theatre with our neighbors, sent our children to the university and many had even married outside of our faith. How could it be now that the Nazis were proclaiming , "Die Juden sind unser unglück", the Jews are our misfortune?! And now, today, we are shocked again at the outbreak of anti-Semitism around the world, following Israel's incursion into Gaza ten weeks ago. There have been anti-Semitic incidents in Mexico, Argentina and Brazil; in Turkey, Ukraine, and Hungary; in Ireland and Australia; in Sweden and Denmark; in Greece, Italy, Holland, and especially in France, where the number of families leaving will soon exceed 5,000. Synagogues have been defaced, Jews have been attacked and threatened. This outbreak is much more than anti-Zionism, that is, opposition to Israel's policies in Gaza or even about the

legitimacy of the Jewish State; it is much more than anti-Judaism, that is, Jews as infidels, holding heretical religious beliefs; rather it is anti-Semitism: directed against us for who we are: the Jew qua Jew. Our very existence, once again, is being delegitimized and threatened. Wherever Jews are living – Iceberg/Goldberg – it makes no difference, we are being targeted as Jews.

And, while, here in America, we remain relatively free from anti-Semitic attacks – not entirely, but on the whole, rarely – we are still dismayed at the way that Israel is unfairly painted and portrayed in the press. We are taken aback by the virulent attacks on Facebook, and the ignorant pronouncements from Hollywood stars, and the renewed calls for boycotting Israeli products and divesting from investments there. It's as if the entire world has gone mad. The Syrian civil war continues into its third year, with over 150,000 people dead; in Iraq, over 5,000 civilians have now been killed by ISIS and well over a million forced to flee their homes; in Nigeria, thousands have died under the hand of Boko Harem; 5 million have died in the Congo over the last two years; tens of thousands in the Mexico drug wars; while Israel, having endured 11,000 rockets fired into cities and towns over the last nine years – that's an average of three rockets a day, every day of the year, for nine years – Israel, the only nation on the planet to give warning to civilians before a bomb is dropped on a rocket-launching site – is condemned for defending itself and when Hamas fires off rockets from hospitals, mosques, and orphanages, the world is silent.

When the Israeli writer, Amos Oz, long a peace activist, was recently interviewed by a German radio station, he opened with a question for the listeners: "What would you do if your neighbor across the street", he asked, "sits down on the balcony, puts his little boy on his lap and starts shooting machine gun fire into your children's room?" The fact that he even needed to rationalize Israel's right to defend itself against attacks by a militant group sworn to destroy it, is evidence not only of a double standard that Israel is held to, it is more than that, it is evidence of a world that, at best, is indifferent to, and, at worst, seeks the destruction of the Jewish People.

And we are all in this together, like it or not. I have to tell you that my thoughts, these days, goes back twenty-nine years to poor Leon Klinghoffer, who went on a pleasure cruise with his wife on the Achille Lauro. The boat was hijacked by the PLO, and Klinghoffer was dumped into the ocean because, well, because he was a Jew. I think of Daniel Pearl who was kidnapped and killed by Al Queda just twelve years ago. His last words before he was murdered: "My father's Jewish, my mother's Jewish. I am Jewish." Iceberg/Goldberg, there's no difference. A Jew from Israel, a Jew from France, a Jew from America, a Jew who's religious, a Jew who's not, a Jew who supports the settlements and a Jew who opposes them, Jew is a Jew is a Jew. We are all in this

together and we are all in this together, because the world will not let us forget, even if we might seek to deny it, that we are amcha.

The question that each of us must now ask ourself is whether we consider ourselves to be part of our People or not? That is the question that is also asked and answered around our Seder tables when we relate the story of the four sons. What makes the wicked son wicked and the wise son wise, is their answer to this question. The wicked son says: "What do you mean by all of this?" In other words, "I don't consider myself to be part of you", while the wise son answers, "What does this mean to us? I want to state this morning that we can no longer point our fingers at Israelis or at the State of Israel and say "them".

This does not mean that to be part of amcha we can't be critical of Israel. O contraire. It is because of our connection with our People, there, that we must speak out. We can voice our opinions that the price of occupation is high for Israel, that the range of rockets grows longer with every passing year, that establishing new settlements in what may be contested territory for the sake of current political popularity is a short-sighted move but there is a world of difference between one who criticizes from within and one who criticizes from without, between the wicked son who says you and the wise son who says us.

But it is not enough that we do not act like the wicked son. We also can't be the fourth son, the silent one, who is unable to open his mouth. When our friends ask us about Israel, when the left refuses to acknowledge the Hamas monsters whom the Palestinians in Gaza have allowed to control them, we can no longer sigh or shrug or turn away in silence. We must defend Israel from the scurrilous lies of those who hate it, we must speak up in the midst of the madness and make it clear who is firing on whom. We must, ask of others, no, we must demand of them an answer to the question of what one is to do when one's neighbor digs a tunnel into our home in an attempt to kill our family. We must speak out against the Orwellian double-think that is filling our discourse. Terrorists are not freedom-fighters. Suicide bombers are civilian killers.

Firing 11,000 rockets into towns and cities is an act of war. Firing rockets from hospitals violates every international agreement of how war is to be fought.

Israel has been enormously fortunate, in its efforts to defend its population, that it has had the support of the U.S. In the beginning of August, a divided Congress that has been one of the most ineffectual congresses we have ever had, passed, nearly unanimously, legislation to further increase the funding for more Iron Dome defense missiles for Israel. The House and Senate's willingness to do so, the fact that it was signed into law by the President just two days later, came, in part, because of the political muscle of the American Jewish community. We must continue to speak up, as amcha, to

ensure that. And, given polls that a far larger number of older Jews than younger ones support the Jewish State, we must see to it that our young people are exposed to the reality of Israel, that they go on Birthright trips, and that Hillels on college campuses are strengthened. We can do all this as amcha.

And, as anti-Semitism raises its head, we must speak out and call it out for what it is: intolerant and hateful. We must respond to those who put forth in spray paint or in print, that we are somehow, less human than others, we must respond to those who call for our expulsion or our extermination.

We are amcha. We are a People. Over 3,000 years ago, Moses addressed our People and said to us, in words we read this morning: "Atem nitzvavim hayom, You are standing here, this day, to enter into a covenant with God." All of you, all of us: men, women, and children. For thousands of years, we have stood together as a People, wherever we have lived, during all that has befallen us. We still need to stand together, we still must stand together, may we still stand together, in the days ahead.