

**Yom Kippur 5777 – Alternative Service
I Stand This Day**

A political cartoon that appeared recently in *The New York Times* shows a lone, towering man perched precariously on the bow of a small ship. The ship is pulled through the turbulent waters by a flock of doves that hold in their beaks ropes that are tethered securely to the ship. Using a hand-held telescope, the man gazes out toward the expansive waters. What does he see? What does he hear? For what is he searching? Who is this man?

Perhaps this man is the Biblical Jonah who set out from the ancient port of Jaffa in an attempt to flee God's command. This afternoon, we'll read his whale of a tale. (It actually was a big fish that swallowed Jonah; Pinocchio was the one swallowed by a whale.) You know the story: God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and instruct the people there to do *teshuvah*, to turn back from their evil ways and repent. Jonah, however, had no intention of following God's command. Attempting to flee from God, he booked it out of Israel via the sea. If Jonah is the man depicted in the cartoon, what does he see peering through the telescope? For what is he searching?

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Perhaps this man is the historic Christopher Columbus. Once upon a time October 12 was Columbus Day, so it's to my benefit that this year Yom Kippur and Columbus Day coincide. We're all familiar with the unanswered question: Was he or wasn't he... Jewish? Inquiring minds want to know! If Columbus was Jewish, was he, like Jonah, attempting an escape, not from God, but from the anti-Semitic edicts of Ferdinand and Isabella? If Columbus is the man depicted in the cartoon, what does he see peering through the telescope? For what is he searching?

Jonah and Christopher Columbus have more in common than this day on which each figures prominently. In Hebrew, the name Jonah is pronounced *Yonah*. *Yonah* means dove. Columbus is a Latinized version of the Italian surname Colombo. Colombo, like *Yonah*, means dove.

While the lone man perched precariously on the bow of a small ship in *The New York Times* political cartoon could be the Biblical Jonah or the historic Columbus, it isn't either of them. The man depicted is the former Prime Minister and President of Israel, the late Shimon Peres. Clad in his

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signature suit, his hair combed back and a tentative smile on his face, Peres looks out at the expanse to which he is guided by a flock of winging doves.

I was saddened when I heard that Shimon Peres had died. I met him once when I was a college student spending my junior year at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In March 1983, I was invited to represent Brandeis University Hillel at an international solidarity gathering for Soviet Jews. Hundreds of students attended the event in Jerusalem. Afterward, we were encouraged to mingle with the dignitaries, so I did. It was there that I met Shimon Peres, who patiently greeted everyone with a wide smile and a firm handshake. To this day that's how I picture Peres: statesmanlike and cordial. For more than 60 years Shimon Peres served the Jewish people. For more than 60 years Shimon Peres was a presence in Israeli politics. From the founding of the State to his last days on earth, Shimon Peres was a giant among Israel's *avot*, the Founding Fathers of the modern Jewish homeland. In *The New York Times* cartoon, it is Shimon Peres who stands

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alone on the bow of the small ship. What does he see? What does he hear? For what is he searching?

Shimon Peres was a visionary. He foresaw in Israel's technological innovations its chance to bridge people and nations, not just in the Middle East but around the world. Shimon Peres was a dreamer. He believed that peace was possible, but he didn't just envision a time of peace. He pursued it vigorously and hounded opportunity after opportunity to bring peace to his beloved homeland and its beloved people.

In one article celebrating Peres' life, the author noted that before retiring each night, Peres asked himself: "Did I bring more good to the world today or bad?" How deeply that question resonates on Yom Kippur. Indeed, our obligation on this sacred day is to ask ourselves that very question as we contemplate our actions, as we consider our words, and as we reflect on the past as we are drawn into the New Year.

A few weeks ago I participated in a webinar sponsored by a non-partisan, pro-Israel organization. The guest speaker was a renowned

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national correspondent for a popular American journal. Asked what he expected his Rabbi to preach about on the High Holy Days, he immediately replied Israel. He then went on at length about how important it is for Rabbis to take a stand on Israel and how ignoring the topic not only is a cop out, but an abdication of a Rabbi's professional responsibility. If we don't have the *chutzpah* to share our thoughts about Israel, who will? Of course his assertive remark caused quite a stir. One Rabbi countered that his synagogue board forbade him from broaching the subject and that if he dared to do so, his job would be on the line. Another Rabbi shared with the group his fear of offending congregants by voicing an opinion not in alignment with theirs. A third Rabbi declared that there aren't any "hot topics" right now, so what's there to talk about? The Iran deal is signed; the two-State solution is stuck in a rut; the lone-wolf stabbings have abated. *Hakol b'seder*, everything's okay. Really, I thought? No hot topics? What about BDS? What about civil liberties and human rights? What about religious pluralism? What about the rights of women to wear *tallitot*, to pray

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aloud and read aloud from a *sefer Torah* at the Western Wall? What about the status of Jerusalem? What about the peace process? What about the US-Israel relationship? What about the UN-Israel relationship? What about the internal and external threats to Israel's existence? Nothing to talk about? Really?

I'm not oblivious to the fact that Israel has a lot of challenges. No country is perfect and not every leader is flawless. But I care passionately about Israel. If I don't stand up, speak out, and publically advocate for Israel, then I, to paraphrase Shimon Peres, have brought less good to the world today. When it comes to Israel, each of us needs to be standing on that ship's prow. I'm not going to dictate what you should see through the telescope. There is a kaleidoscope of images. But as Jews, we are obligated to at least look! "No comment" or "I don't know" or "I don't care" are unacceptable responses. Israel needs us to envision a future. Israel needs us to be tethered to the doves advancing onward. Israel needs us on its journey. In a way, the *Times'* image of Shimon Peres standing alone on

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the ship's prow is disheartening. Many Israelis think they are on a solo journey and that no one really cares about them, their welfare, or their safety. We know that's not true, but they don't see it, they don't feel it. How can we change this perception? First, by being tuned in to what's going on in Israel: politics, culture, technology, agriculture, religion. Pick your passion and learn as much as you can! Second, if you're not already involved with a Zionist organization, get involved. AIPAC, Hadassah, ARZA, Jewish national Fund, Magen David Adom, Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, Friends of the IDF.... Choose something and learn how you can make a difference. Third, visit Israel. The most effective way of showing Israelis that we care is by being there with them. I love standing on the beach in Tel Aviv watching wave after wave of airplanes approaching the shoreline on their way to Ben-Gurion Airport. I know that in those planes are passengers with their noses pressed against the windows waiting to get a first glimpse of the Holy Land. If you can, go to Israel. Send your children and your grandchildren. There are so many wonderful tours,

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so many unique opportunities. You don't have to take my word for it. If you've been to Israel, you know what I'm talking about. If you haven't been to Israel, just ask someone who has. They'll tell you. The best public relations Israel has is from those who go. When we visit, the people of Israel know that they are not alone. They see and hear and feel that we are with them on this journey.

A few minutes ago we read these words from the *sefer Torah*:

You stand this day, all of you, before Adonai your God -- your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer -- to enter into the covenant of Adonai your God, which Adonai your God is concluding with you this day, with its sanctions; to the end that God may establish you this day as God's people and be your God, as promised you and as sworn to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before Adonai our God and with those who are not with us here this day. (Deuteronomy 29:9-14)

I stand with Israel because Israel stands for democracy. Israel is the only country in the Middle East where freedom of religion and speech are

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guaranteed rights for all its citizens. I stand with Israel because Israel stands for equality, for human rights, and for pursuing a better world for all its inhabitants. I stand with Israel because Israel stands for improving the world through life-saving innovations, through cutting edge technology and through its commitment to caring for and welcoming those in need. I stand with Israel because Israel stands for values and principles that help make the world a better place. Has Israel achieved all these ideals? No. No country has, but Israel is making an honest attempt. I stand with Israel because of what Israel stands for. And I stand with Israel because as a Jew, Israel is my inheritance. Israel is my homeland. Israel is my responsibility. I stand with Israel because by doing so, I bring more good to the world than bad.

Standing on the prow of a small ship being drawn forward by a flock of doves over choppy water is a lone figure. It is Jonah. It is Christopher Columbus. It is Shimon Peres. It is you. It is I. Each of us sees through the hand-help telescope our own vision of the future. Like those who journeyed

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before us, may we have the stamina, the strength and the wherewithal to stand fast and strong through choppy waters and to pursue our dreams in this New Year: dreams for ourselves, dreams for our families, dreams for our community, dreams for the people of Israel and dreams for the entire world.