

A Nation Cannot Be Redeemed Until It Recognizes the Flaws in its Soul and Tries to Mend Them

On this *Kol Nidre* night I want return to the theme with which began in my Devar Torahj on the Friday before Rosh Hashanah, formed my meditation for *Selichot* and framed my *Rosh Hashanah* D'var Torah. The Rabbi of Levov taught:

“People cannot be redeemed until they recognize the flaws in their souls and try to mend them. A nation cannot be redeemed until it recognizes the flaws in its soul and tries to mend them. Whoever permits no recognition of his flaws, be it a person or nation, permits no redemption. We can be redeemed to the extent to which we recognize ourselves.”

We need a national *cheshbon hanefesh*, a national accounting of our behavior. We need a communal *cheshbon hanefesh*, a communal accounting of our behavior. Without such an examination we stand little chance of making progress on the world's and the nation's most intractable problems.

For me, one of the most powerful and influential biblical stories is the confrontation between the King David and the Prophet Nathan. After David commits adultery with Bathsheba and arranges to have her husband Uriah killed by sending him into battle, Nathan comes and tells the following parable:

"There were two men in one city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had only one little ewe lamb, which he had purchased, and preserved and reared. It grew up with him and his children together, ate of his bread and drank of his cup, slept in his bosom and was to him as a daughter. Once a traveler came to the rich man, and he did not take a lamb from his own flocks to slaughter for the traveler, but he took the poor man's lamb and slaughtered it for the guest."

King David became very angry with this person and said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man that did this thing shall surely die. And he shall restore the lamb seven-fold because he had no compassion."

Then Nathan said to David, "Thou art the man that has done this."

This is an example of telling truth to power. Our haftarah for tomorrow morning, Isaiah 58, is a trenchant critic of religion which is identified only with fasting and praying rather than with justice. True worship according to Isaiah is "to unlock the shackles of injustice, to loosen the ropes of yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to tear every yoke apart...to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into you house, when you see the naked to cover them, never withdrawing yourself from your own kin."

Every year, when we had a family dinner for the holidays, the sink would become clogged and on the eve of a holiday we would have to find a plumber to unclog it. A few years ago we redid our kitchen and have not had the problem since. A couple of days ago I was in our basement and saw water on the floor. It was a beautiful day so I knew it was not from flooding. I mopped it up and paid no attention, but then I did the laundry and low and behold when I returned to the basement there was water on the floor. We called the plumber, who found the drainpipe was clogged. He looked at the pipe and said we do not use cast iron any more. We remarked that it was original plumbing. The house was built in the early 1950's. With great difficulty, and a very large wrench, he opened it and cleaned it. The water is now flowing out again, but it struck me that so many of today's problems need to be addressed in the same way. We need to unclog the pipe and allow the solutions to flow.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of the Union for Reform Judaism in a groundbreaking and controversial move, addressed the annual convention ISNA - the Islamic Association of North America in Chicago. He declared that we Jews know very little about Islam and that Muslims know very little about Judaism. He called upon each community to enter into serious dialogue and teach each other. He acknowledged that each community had their extremists and we should not allow them to define us or our relationship. He decried racial profiling and discrimination and intolerance against Muslims, and informed them of our concerns about anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, and then he addressed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He spoke univocally about American Jews' commitment to a safe and secure Israel and gave voice to Muslim concern for the Palestinians. He stated that an outline of a solution has been known for a long time - a safe and secure Israel standing next to a safe and secure Palestine.

He laid out three tasks for both of our communities:

First, while the terms of a settlement must be negotiated by the two parties, an American role in achieving such a settlement will be essential. Therefore, we must urge our government to commit itself to active, high-level engagement, in order to move the parties toward peace.

Second, if the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is seen in religious rather than political terms, resolving it becomes impossible. If Israel is portrayed as “a dagger pushed into the heart of Islam,” rather than a nation-state disputing matters of land and water with the Palestinians, we are lost. As religious Jews and religious Muslims, let us do everything in our power to prevent a political battle from being transformed into a holy war.

And finally, to all those who desecrate God’s name by using religion to justify killing and terror, let us say together: enough.

He concluded with a reminder that violence cannot honor a religion of peace nor can it honor the image of God in every one of us. He reminded the audience that it was important for other Muslims to join ISNA in its condemnation of violence. He acknowledged the difficulties ahead. He ended with following words:

...We are interconnected since the time of Abraham, thrust into each other’s lives by history and fate, and living in a global world, what choice do we really have? Surely here, in this land, we cannot permit fanaticism to grow or prejudice to harden. Surely here, in America, as Muslim and Jew, we have a unique opportunity to reclaim our common heritage and to find a new way and a common path. Brothers and sisters, let us begin.

At the Union for Reform Judaism Biennial in San Diego he will announce a new movement-wide Muslim-Jewish Dialogue Initiative. I am proud of the leadership work that Rabbi London began several years ago and continues to this day. I encourage you to join Rabbi London and attend the Iftar dinner at 5:15 p.m., October 9, at the Muslim Education Center in Morton Grove, where Muslims break their daylong fast during the holy month of Ramadan. I call upon

us to expand the dialogue. This is one way to unclog the pipe and get solutions flowing.

All are agreed that the United States must play an active and constructive role in bringing the Palestinians and Israelis to the peace table. NILI, the National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East, of which I am founder and a member of its steering committee, is made up of the leadership of the United States Catholic Bishops Conference, the Greek Orthodox Church in America, the Armenian Apostolic Church in America, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ), the Presbyterian Church, The United Methodist Church, the National Council of Churches USA. The Jewish Leaders include heads of the Central Conference of American Rabbis Union for Reform Judaism, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, and the Muslim Leaders which include the heads of Islamic Society of North America, the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA) Council of Mosques, and United Muslims of America.

As a group we have been appealing to the White House and Secretary Rice for active, consistent high-level attention to Israeli - Palestinian peace. Representatives of the Steering Committee have met several times with Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns. What makes me hopeful is that Cardinal McCarrick, who chairs the group, is close with President Bush and he has told the President that he has to decide whether his legacy will be the war in Iraq or peace between the Israeli and Palestinians.

In theory NILI represents millions of Americans. But I learned a very important lesson from a meeting I had a number of years ago with former Senate Majority leader Tom Daschle's chief of staff. I was part of a group of liberal clergy who were working to counter the influence of the religious right. He told us that the Senator agreed with our views but did not feel he could push them unless he knew we could help deliver the votes because, as he said, it was all about getting re-elected. NILI needs your help. The Palestinian Israeli peace process needs your help. The Administration is planning a peace conference in November. It is vital that it succeed. They need to know that there is grassroots support. Each of members of NILI is being asked to call upon his/her constituents to contact their Senators and Congress people and Secretary of State Rice. The campaign is called "Five Minutes for Peace."

Your messages should emphasize three things:

1. Conference invitees should include all Israel's neighbors, as well as Israel and the Palestinian Authority; and all issues to resolve the conflict should be on the agenda. Commentary: the time for halfway measures, is over.

2. Both Israelis and Palestinians need to take pre-meeting steps on the ground and come to an agreement on principles for peace. Commentary: the US needs to press harder for concrete steps by Israel and the Palestinian Authority which will improve conditions on the ground, including a comprehensive cease-fire including principles to resolve the final status issues.

3. The split between the West Bank and Gaza is inconsistent with a durable peace. Commentary: Secretary of State Rice stated July 18, "There is one Palestinian people, there should be one Palestinian state." The United States should quietly support efforts to form a united Palestinian government that can represent the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and is committed to reject violence and negotiate two state peace agreement with Israel.

I have asked Bekki to send out an email next week with the information and I hope that those of you who agree will take five minutes for peace. It is time to unclog the pipe and get the solutions flowing.

Finally, I am very proud that Beth Emet, after a laborious process of education and preparation, has chosen to oppose the war in Iraq. When the war was first proposed, I indicated my opposition and asked the Board of Trustees to endorse that position. Having failed to properly do my homework, the Board decided not to take a position, and in fact decided that it was necessary for us to evolve a participatory process of education before the Board would take a public stand on behalf of the congregation. I applaud this decision, and I believe that the process sets an important example for other congregations that want to engage in congregational activism on controversial but crucial matters.

After the completion of the process, the Social Action Committee was assigned the responsibility of implementing the decision. It decided to place a banner outside of the building indicating our opposition to the war. We are all aware that whenever we articulate a congregational position, there will be people in opposition to it.

At this moment I want to invoke the name of Victor Rosenblum, of blessed memory, who was perhaps the most important right-to-life advocate in the Jewish Community. Twice during my tenure the Board of Trustees adopted a Pro-Choice Position. In each case, Victor argued brilliantly on behalf of the Pro-life position using the *Union Prayer Book*. Victor was always gracious in defeat, and was proud of us for being principled even if he disagreed. He taught me a powerful and important lesson.

Over the long history of this congregation we have taken a number of important and often controversial stands. When we have differed on a position we have agreed to disagree agreeably. It is one of the great strengths of this congregation. I know that the banner is controversial for some of you. I truly respect the fact that some of you do not believe that a banner or sign advertising

our stand should be displayed on our property. I, for one, believe that it is essential that Beth Emet declare its opposition to this disastrous war which is not leading to greater safety for our people, has inflamed much of the world against us, and is dividing our nation and distracting and preventing us from doing the many important things that we need to do to make a safer world and create a more just society.

How we extract ourselves from Iraq is a complex matter. Our responsibilities to the people of Iraq are significant and cannot be shirked. Our decision to invade Iraq has emboldened Iran. But issues of war and peace are not merely political issues, but issues of religious values. Our tradition mandates wars of self-defense, and rejects wars that are to gain territory or power. While the war in Iraq has become the most important issue in today's battle to determine who will be the next Republican and Democratic presidential nominees, there is a failure on the part of the religious community, especially the Jewish community, in spite of resolutions passed by our national bodies against war to actively inspire us to protest the war.

While analogies to past wars are dangerous, I believe that the war in Iraq is this generation's Vietnam War. Our opposition to that war was inexorably linked to the draft. Only my clergy status protected me from being drafted, but I was required to volunteer for the chaplaincy, and only a high school wrestling injury made me unfit to serve. We and our young people were at risk. We all awaited the dreaded letter from the Selective Service Board. College campuses became a hotbed of protests and, unfortunately, sometimes violent and deadly confrontations. Following Vietnam we decided we no longer needed conscription. We chose to rely on an all voluntary professional armed services. At that time I applauded that decision because it meant that I and my children and my grandchildren would not have to serve. Now I believe this was a grave error.

The war is now being fought by volunteers, and we are personally and emotionally distanced from it. Even our opposition is passionless and halfhearted. I believe that we ought to reinstitute the draft, and with all of the complications work for a program of Universal National Service. Only if all of us understand that we, our children, and our grandchildren have an obligation to serve this great nation will we hold the politicians responsible for their actions.

We need to rethink our national priorities and our growing xenophobia. We must consider how this great superpower will use its resources to help bring about a safer more just and compassionate world. In the political campaign ahead we Jews need to raise our voices with all of the candidates, Republican or Democratic, and ask them how they intend to provide healthcare for all of our citizens, guard the environment, and create greater understanding among the competing religious, national and political entities which are in conflict with one

another. In an age of global terrorism we must ask them how they will protect us and how they will safeguard our liberties.

As concerned citizens and Jews we should utilize the resources of the Religious Action Center of the Reform movement (www.rac.org) and the joint CCAR and the URJ Commission on Social Action to better comprehend the societal and Jewish implications of the various party and candidate platforms. I encourage the adults to attend the Biennial Consultation on Conscience when it occurs in the spring of 2009. I encourage those of you who can, to join the Denlows, the Cutlers, the Kaufmans and the senior staff at the URJ National Biennial in San Diego December 12 -16, 2007. If you are interested, please contact me. There is also some scholarship money available.

In the meantime we need to inform ourselves. We need to debate the issues which face our nation and our society. We should hear from scholars, politicians, rabbis and Jewish ethicists. Our tradition mandates our involvement. We must learn the Judaic values which are at stake. We must speak truth to power. We must insist with the passion of the prophets of Israel that "justice shall roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream, nation shall not lift up sword against nation neither shall they learn war any more," We must "unlock the shackles of injustice, let the oppressed go free, tear every yoke apart, share our bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into our houses, clothe the naked, never withdraw ourselves from our own people." And declare that each of us is "created in the image of God" and that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." It's time to unclog the pipe and let the solution's flow.