

WHY ISRAEL? ROSH HASHANAH MORNING – 5773/2012

Last night, I spoke with you about the issue of belief in God. Why believe? was the question I posed, both to myself and to you. Even though the subject of theology seems forbidding to many of us, the fact remains that a great many modern Jews have trouble with traditional theistic belief. This morning, I want to continue my series of “Why” questions with a second major issue that confronts American liberal Jews. That issue is “Why Israel?”

Now, some of you may find even asking this question unnecessary and inane. For those of us who have lived through the Holocaust and its aftermath, the existence of a place on the face of the earth where Jews can go as a matter of right is quite beyond debate. Many of us remember the story of the steamship Saint Louis. In 1939, the Saint Louis, owned by the Hamburg-America Line, sailed from Germany with 937 Jewish passengers. Each of them held what appeared to be a valid entry visa to Cuba, and they were intent upon escaping the on-coming tragedy, the outlines of which were now apparent to them. But when they arrived in Havana harbor, the Cuban authorities refused them the right to enter on the grounds that the visas were fraudulent. For a month, the ship rode at anchor in the sweltering heat of the Caribbean summer while representatives of Jewish agencies sought refuge for these pitiful people in any port that would have them. But not only would Cuba not admit them. So, too, Panama, the United States and other potential refuges closed their doors and refused to offer sanctuary. Eventually, the German shipping line insisted that the boat return to Europe. Sailing north along the Atlantic Coast of America, even within sight of the lights of Miami, the ship first docked in Southampton, England where some of the passengers disembarked. Then others left the ship at Cherbourg, France and in Antwerp, Belgium. Finally, the ship arrived back in Hamburg, where the remaining passengers were put ashore. Virtually the only survivors of this voyage, an odyssey chronicled in a book and a movie entitled Voyage of the Damned, were those who found a new home in Great Britain. The rest perished because no country in the world would open its doors to save Jewish refugees. I am, incidentally, convinced that the Nazis had authorized this test-case all along, just to test the willingness of the free world with regard to European Jewish refugees. When no one would lift a finger to help them, the Nazis knew that the final solution could be undertaken without opposition.

Had Israel existed in 1939, or had even the British mandatory authorities in Palestine been willing to admit a large number of European Jews, the story of World War II might have been somewhat different. But a British White Paper, written to mollify Arab nationalists, had determined that the so-called absorptive capacity of the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River was no more than 250,000 people. Despite protestations from Zionist authorities that “if you give us the people, we will find room for them,” the British adamantly blocked any Jewish immigration to the area. They were more concerned with oil for their naval

ships and continued free passage through the Suez Canal than the fate of thousands of European Jews who would end up murdered in the death camps of Poland.

So, for those of us who lived through that era and that experience, the question of “Why Israel?” seems incredibly irrelevant. Of course, Israel. We must have at least one place where Jews can find refuge as a matter of right, where no one can bar the door to any Jew who seeks safety and protection under a Jewish banner. Even before the First World War, Robert Frost wrote a poem called “The Death of the Hired Man.” In that poem, he said that “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” No words could be more true of the Jewish national homeland – it’s the place where they have to, where they want to take Jews in. For those of us who lived through the terrifying years of the 1930s and 1940s, nothing more need be said about Israel. Its role as the Jewish place of permanent refuge is all we need to know.

For the first twenty or thirty years of Israel’s existence, American Jews viewed the developing country through rose-colored glasses. Every kibbutznik was bronzed and athletic, self-sacrificing and altruistic, dancing the hora, repelling Arab invaders and raising a generation of proud and independent Jews, the likes of which had not been seen for two thousand years. Every soldier was invincible. A new era of Jewish and Zionist glory was dawning, and just about everything the new state did was glorious and worthy of our overflowing praise. To criticize Israel was to act as a traitor, blemishing both the victims of the Holocaust and the sacrifices of the early settlers of Eretz Yisrael.

With the Israeli victory in the 1967 War, something changed. Now the custodian of lands that had formerly belonged to Syria, Jordan and Egypt, Israel was confronted with a series of issues that it had not previously had to deal with. Now there were questions of how to manage a Palestinian population that was, by and large, overtly hostile to the Jewish state: Are these people citizens, resident aliens, still Jordanians and Syrians and Egyptians? Who are they? What role do they have in determining the conditions of their lives? What public services must and should the Jewish state provide for these people who are under its care, but who are vehemently opposed even to the idea of a Jewish national homeland? What security measures need to be taken to safeguard Jews who already live in Israel? If we have conquered these lands in a fight we did not even invite, can we now build Jewish settlements on them? Are these lands part of the eternal promise that God made to the Jews in biblical times, or are we simply temporary stewards of them, until a peace treaty is signed and they are disposed of in some way?

These were questions that, of course, Israelis had to grapple with. But so did Jews in the

Diaspora, for the Zionist movement had long held that the Jewish national homeland belonged not only to those who lived in it, but to all Jews around the world. Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh Lazeh, the ancient Hebrew adage held; “all Jews depend on each other and their fates are inextricably entangled.” We are responsible for and to each other in all things, including the fate of the new state of Israel. We in the Diaspora contribute of our money for its support in ways that we would never dream to do for any other country in the world. We go to visit in droves. When Israel succeeds, the success is also ours; when Israel falters, its backward steps land crushingly on us as well.

And so we began to deal with the same questions that troubled Israelis. Some claimed that it was illegitimate for American Jews to raise questions about Israeli policies and actions; “if you want to criticize, first you must move there. Then you’ll have the right to raise your voice.” As the euphoric image of Israel from the days preceding 1967 faded into history, American Jews entered into a spirited debate about what Israel was doing and what our responses should be to their actions. It is, of course, only a mirror of the identical debate that occurs every day in Israeli society.

So, why Israel? For one thing, the role of Israel as a refuge for Jews who live under conditions of oppression and anti-Semitism is not over. Many of us recall the rescue of tens of thousands of Jews from the Darfur region of Ethiopia. The people who had been isolated from mainstream, rabbinic Jewish life for the last two thousand years, were being attacked by militias of other religious groups, as well as bandits simply intent on robbery, rape and murder. Their lives were in great danger. The Israeli air force mobilized an armada of C-130 transport planes that shuttled between Addis Ababa and Tel Aviv, airlifting these unfortunate Jewish souls within hours from their absolutely pre-modern lives to a first-world culture and civilization in today’s Israel. It was – and you ought to be suitably impressed and proud about this – the first and only time in the world’s history that a Black population has been relocated for reasons other than enslavement. The Ethiopian Jews faced an immense, almost incomprehensible adjustment, but they are making it. And so are Indian Jews from South Asia and Russian Jews and Argentinian Jews and Jews who have left Toulouse, France after a gunman attacked their school and Jews who are fleeing Belgium and Sweden because the governments have become so enthralled with the huge Muslim minority that Jewish rights are ignored and their concerns disregarded.

Not every Israeli is thrilled with the influx of new residents. There is unfortunate racism, as we saw in May when a riot erupted in Tel Aviv about new African migrants who had come into the country, many illegally, and who were challenging Israelis for lower-paying jobs. America is not the only country in the world with border control problems; the border between Israel and Egypt is porous, and as many as sixty thousand migrants have sneaked across the desert, entered Israel and now seek a better life for themselves and their families. The emotional violence that

characterized the anti-immigration riot arouse because some Israelis felt deeply threatened. But the violence must be condemned, and it was by many senior government officials. Still, there's a problem.

Not every Jew who lives outside the land of Israel wants to make aliyah. And not every Jew who resides in Israel wants to stay there. Life in Israel is not easy. Salaries, while they exceed what is offered in any neighboring country, are hardly enough for families to live on; taxes are high; the bureaucracy of the government is infuriating; threats to personal and national security darken even the brightest of skies. The eastern end of the Mediterranean is a volatile and dangerous region, and some people simply are not prepared to take the risks and the pressures of living there. We have a significant community of former Israelis living on our own barrier islands; from Port Aransas to Brownsville, there is a community of Israeli emigres who run many of the souvenir shops and who have branched out into other occupations.

You know, of course, that Israel is a place of conflict. There are Palestinian groups, both Muslim and Christian, who would be delighted to see the Jewish state vanish from the face of the globe. Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon are only the most well-known; but there are others. You and I have read of problems the Israeli military has, policing the occupied territories. We are aware of the so-called illegal settlements, Jewish squatters who have pre-empted Palestinian homes and fields and orchards. We learn about second-class citizenship rights, grudgingly accorded to Palestinians, even despite clear promises and commitments by the Israeli government. You want problems? Israel has enough problems to satisfy even the most masochistic among us.

So, faced with all these difficulties, why not chuck the entire Zionist enterprise, retreat into an American-Jewish capsule, take care of our own needs and let the rest of the world deal with its own issues? Maybe it's time to sever the umbilical cord that has up until now connected us with the Jewish state of Israel.

I reject that kind of Jewish isolationism. I reject this notion in the same way that I reject the idea that a parent may reject his or her children; Israel belongs to us as dearly as your son or daughter belongs to you. You may not at times like what your child does but you cannot reject your own offspring. Nor can we, American Jews, reject the rest of our Jewish family who happen to live in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and Haifa and Beersheva. We and they are bound together by bonds of family and fate, by history and by destiny. If there are problems in our relationship, we deal with them. We do not abandon each other when differences of opinion and challenges appear.

Every football coach in the world – probably a lot of other people too – have quoted Knute Rockne’s famous aphorism: “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” If dealing with the issues that Israel raises is difficult, now is the time to become tough. Supine surrender is not an option; confronting reality, even harsh reality, and dealing with it effectively, these are the virtues that have made it possible for Jews to survive for thousands of years and to remain a guiding light of decency and excellence for the rest of the nations of the world.

One more thing. When Moses was about to die, he pleaded with God (Deut. 3:25) “Let me go over [and enter the Promised Land], I pray You, and see the good land that is beyond the Jordan, that goodly hill-country, and Lebanon.” Moses asks to see the good land. But what does God do? Just before his death (Deut. 34:1), “The eternal showed him the whole land.” God showed Moses all of the land, the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly; the land lush with flora and fauna and water-springs, but also the land of desolation and waste. God said to Moses: All of this is the land. The bitter truth for you is that this Promised Land is imperfect. Moses came to the land with a lofty ideal. He found that vision far short of realization. And so it is for us, as well. The Israel of which we might dream is not the Israel of the real world. But the vision and the ideal remain before us. Is it not vitally important that we have one place on earth where we can hope to make the dream become the reality, where we can remain idealistic enough to think that the vision of a righteous society might come into being. For us, the State of Israel is that place. And, as Theodore Herzl once said, *Im tirtzu ein zo agadah*, if you will it strongly enough, maybe it will no longer be a dream.

AMEN