

From Blindness to Seeing;  
From Deafness to Hearing

Sermon by Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom  
Congregation Adath Jeshurun  
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In May, Cindy and I led a group of congregants on a Pilgrimage to Prague and Israel.

The trip could be titled, “A Tale of Two Verses on Walls.”

We saw the first verse in Terezin, the walled city which the Nazis turned into a concentration camp. I spoke on the second day of Rosh HaShanah about the Hidden Synagogue, a tiny room that was originally probably a wine cellar or storeroom. But some prisoner with a talent for artful decoration adorned this clandestine prayer room with verses from Scripture and the prayer book.

One of those verses was from Psalm 137, originally sung by exiles by the Rivers of Babylon.

אִם-אֶשְׁכַּחךְ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי: תִּדְבַּק-לְשׁוֹנִי | לְחִבֵּי אִם-לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶנּוּ. אִם-לֹא אֶעֱלֶה  
אֶת-יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמֹחֲתִי:

“If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget all its cunning. May my tongue cleave to my palate if I remember thee not, if I do not raise Jerusalem above what gladdens me most.”

This vow was affirmed in every exile. Even in the hidden synagogue of a Concentration Camp.

From there we moved to Israel, to the second verse, also inscribed on a wall. This wall is in plain view, bordering a public courtyard in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. It is from the book of the prophet Zechariah (8:4-5), who lived in a period as Jews were returning from the exile in Babylonia:

כֹּה אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת עַד יֵשְׁבוּ יְקִנִּים וְזִקְנֹת בְּרַחֲבוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם וְאִישׁ מִשְׁעֲנָתוֹ בְּיָדוֹ מִרְבַּי יָמִים:  
וּרְחֵבוֹת הָעִיר יִמְלְאוּ יְלָדִים וְיִלְדוֹת מִשְׁחֻקִים בְּרַחֲבֹתֶיהָ:

This is the word of the Lord of Hosts. The day will come when old men and women will sit in the broad squares of Jerusalem, and each, bowed by the years, will have a staff to lean on. And the squares will be filled with boys and girls at play.”

What the Jews of Terezin never lost hope for, is now a living reality. It is our joyous privilege. It is our awesome responsibility.

From the moment the State of Israel was declared on May 14, 1948, 63 years ago, there has been no moment of peace with all her neighbors. Israel has never known security that derives from mutual respect and recognition with the nations who share her borders.

Peace has been an elusive goal. There have been moments of hope. When Sadat came to Jerusalem. When Arafat shook hands with Rabin and Peres on the White House lawn. When King Hussein signed a treaty of peace between Jordan and Israel.

But then there were the First and Second Intifidas. Suicide Bombers. Terrorism. And the measures Israel had to take to protect her society. Checkpoints, restrictions on employment inside Israel of Palestinians from the territories, a naval blockade, and a massive Security Wall.

This is the year of the Arab Spring. Does it portend democracy and peace? Or destabilization?

Israel is apprehensive. The recent attack on the Israel embassy in Cairo seemed to confirm our worst fears. The worsening relations with Turkey erode what had been another source of stability in the region. The everpresent threat of Iran, whose nuclear reactor is now online, and who, we suspect will never give up their designs for a nuclear weapon, looms menacingly.

And now comes the request by the Palestinian Authority to the United Nations to be recognized as a member state, the independent state of Palestine.

It was a remarkable day, two weeks ago, September 23. Both Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Mahmoud Abbas addressed the United Nations General Assembly. Two remarkably articulate presentations, back to back. So many common themes, even common language.

And yet two very different narratives of what the conflict is about, why it continues, and what it would take for peace to be achieved.

This evening, I'd like to think with you, on the eve of the holiest day of the Jewish year, about these two different narratives, and why they will likely, for the indefinite future, separate the two nations as by an unbridgeable chasm. And make peace impossible.

And I would like to think with you about what we can do, who are graced with the blessing of living in times when the dream of our ancestors, whether in Babylonia or in Terezin, is now a reality, but despite its many strengths, remains vulnerable.

So let us begin.

### *The Common Themes*

First, let's look at the the common threads that link both speeches.

President Abbas: "On behalf of the Palestinian people: We extend our hands to the Israeli government and the Israeli people for peace-making."

Prime Minister Netanyahu: "Israel has extended its hand in peace from the moment it was established 63 years ago. . . . I extend that hand again today . . . to the Palestinian people with whom we seek a just and lasting peace."

President Abbas: "Let us build cooperative relations between two neighboring states, Palestine and Israel."

Prime Minister Netanyahu: “After a peace agreement is signed, Israel will not be the last country to welcome a Palestinian state as a new member of the United Nations. We will be the first.”

President Abbas: “The PLO is ready to return immediately to the negotiating table.”

Prime Minister Netanyahu: “Let’s meet here today in the UN. If we genuinely want peace, what is there to stop us from meeting today and beginning peace negotiations.”

So here we have three key points, fundamental principles, and each one declares his commitment to them:

Each extends the hand of peace to the other;

Each recognizes that peace will be based on a two state solution, Israel and Palestine;

Each is ready for immediate negotiations.

It should be simple, shouldn’t it, to come to a quick agreement?

But when we consider the rest of the speeches, we can see why it is not.

### *Fundamentally Different Narratives*

The President and the Prime Minister have fundamentally different narratives about their national identities and about the nature of the conflict between them.

I think the first key indicator of the gulf that separates them comes in the speech by President Abbas. He declares at the outset: “The Question of Palestine is intricately linked to the plight of Palestine refugees . . . who are victims of Al-Nakba (the Catastrophe) which occurred in 1948.”

Three additional times he refers to Al Nakba

“One of the worst operations of uprooting, destruction and removal.”

The “tragedy and the horrors of Al-Nakba.”

“After 63 years of suffering of the ongoing Nakba.”

What is “Al Nakba”? It is none other than the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948! A catastrophe!

Prime Minister Netanyahu picks up on this and says: “President Abbas said that the core of the Israeli Palestinian conflict is the settlements. Our conflict was raging for nearly half a century before there was a single Israeli settlement in the West Bank. I guess the settlements he’s talking about are Tel Aviv, Haifa, Jaffa, Beer Sheva. Maybe that’s what he meant when he said that Israel has been occupying Palestinian land for 63 years.”

For clarity, the Prime Minister reiterates: “ The core of the conflict has always been and unfortunately remains the refusal of the Palestinians to recognize a Jewish State in any border.”

For Abbas, the establishment of the State of Israel is a catastrophe .

For Netanyahu, the Arab concept of Al Nakba has made it impossible for them to accept Israel in any form and is the heart of the inability to come to terms of peace.

In his address, President Abbas twice levels the incendiary accusation that Israel is an apartheid state, and declares that Palestinians are enclosed behind a “racist annexation wall.”

Prime Minister Netanyahu counters that it is the Palestinians who want to enshrine total separation. He points to the fact that the Palestinians have made it clear that “the Palestinian state won’t allow any Jews in it. They’ll be Jew-free -- Judenrein. That’s ethnic cleansing.” In contrast, “The Jewish state will always protect the rights of all its minorities, including the more than one million Arab citizens of Israel.”

President Abbas contends that Palestinians have engaged in “peaceful resistance, renouncement of violence and rejection and condemning of terrorism.”

But Prime Minister Netanyahu counters by saying, “We withdrew from Gaza in 2005. We didn’t freeze the settlements in Gaza, we uprooted them. We even moved loved ones from their graves. But we didn’t get peace. We got war. Thousands of missiles have rained down on our cities.”

President Abbas announces that “I come from the Holy Land, the land of Palestine, the land of divine messages, ascension of the Prophet Muhammad and the birthplace of Jesus Christ, to speak on behalf of the Palestinian People.”

Something seems to be missing though. He apparently does not recognize or acknowledge that the Land is also Holy to the Jewish People.

It is Prime Minister Netanyahu who speaks of the ancient roots of the Jewish People in the Holy Land. In his office “there is an ancient seal found next to the Western Wall, dating back 2,700 years to the time of King Hezekiah. Name on the seal is Netanyahu. My first name is Benjamin . . . the son of Jacob, who was also known as Israel. Jacob and his twelve sons roamed these same hills 4,000 years ago, and there’s been a continuous Jewish presence in the land ever since.”

President Abbas: “The goal of the Palestinian people . . . independent state of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital.”

Prime Minister Netanyahu: “In 2000 Israel made a sweeping peace offer that met virtually all of the Palestinian demands. Arafat rejected it. The Palestinians then launched a terror attack that claimed thousands of Israeli lives. Prime Minister Olmert made an even more sweeping offer, in 2008. President Abbas didn’t even respond to it.”

So let’s summarize.

In the Palestinian Narrative, sixty three years ago, a catastrophe occurred.

In the Israeli Narrative, sixty three years ago, the Jewish State was established in fulfillment of prophecy. And the Palestinians have fought it ever since.

In the Palestinian Narrative, the settlements are the key impediment to peace.

The Israeli Narrative asks, If that is the case, what was the source of the conflict during the 19 years between the establishment of the State of Israel and the Six Day War?

In the Palestinian Narrative, Israel is following a policy of Apartheid, segregating the Palestinian People and isolating them as an oppressed nation.

In the Israeli Narrative, Israel is a democratic state where people of all religions and nationalities can be citizens and have their rights protected. It is the Palestinians who seek to engage in ethnic cleansing by making their state Judenrein, free of Jews.

In the Palestinian Narrative, Palestinians are peaceful and engaged in peaceful resistance.

In the Israeli Narrative, Palestinian violence has continued even after Israel has withdrawn from Palestinian territory and uprooted settlements.

The Palestinian Narrative omits Jews from the holiness of the land.

The Israeli narrative affirms a Jewish presence in the land from antiquity, and also recognizes that the land is sacred to Christianity and Islam, and will respect the religious shrines, and the practices, of all faiths.

In the Palestinian Narrative, the time for independence has come.

In the Israeli Narrative, Israel has been ready for Palestinian independence, on essentially the terms the Palestinians say they are seeking it, but it is the Palestinians that continue to turn away the hand offered in peace.

## *An Unbridgeable Chasm*

Which of these two narratives more closely approximates the truth? I am a Jew. It is hard for me to view the Palestinian narrative sympathetically.

Having said that, I believe that the compelling argument of history affirms the Israeli narrative.

But much of the world accepts the Palestinian Narrative. And it's not hard to see why. Sixty three years is a long time. And most people's eyes glaze over when you try to explain what to them is ancient history. In an *I'm OK, You're OK* world (I don't know how many of you remember that book from the 60's) no one is interested with establishing who is really at fault.

There are more Arabs than Jews.

There is more oil under Arab soil than under Jewish territory.

Moreover there has been a major geopolitical shift. With the rise of new economic powers like China and India, and an ambitious Russia eager to reclaim the global leadership it once had as the Soviet Union, Israel's identification with the United States is not always an advantage in the global village.

Despite the common language that united the Abbas and Netanyahu speeches, I believe that the gulf between them cannot now be bridged. And attempts to do it, while they may sound so tantalizingly credible, are doomed to failure.

I did not always believe this. I have spoken about Israel taking risks for peace. But now I do not see how Israel can take any risk that could undermine its security position in the current geopolitical climate and the uncertainty engendered by the Arab Spring.

At the same time, I fear, as I never have before, that time is running out. That diplomatically and militarily Israel's adversaries are becoming more dangerous . . . and

more patient.

Israel is in a very difficult place. Unable to make peace, and unable to be confident that its military superiority will guarantee its welfare indefinitely.

All the while, Israel is becoming increasingly isolated in a world unsympathetic to its narrative, and impatient with the conflict.

Unfortunately, Abbas's speech is clear. And ultimately dashes the hopes of reasonable men and women. As long as the establishment of the State of Israel is Al Nakba, and that is the foundation of the Palestinian national narrative, there is no hope for an honest peace.

As long as the Palestinians will never acknowledge that it is Arab and Palestinian violence and terror, that goes on to this day, which is at the heart of Israeli mistrust, there cannot be an honest peace.

### *Hope*

Is there no hope then?

Constitutionally, I refuse to give up hope.

The alternative to peace is not necessarily war. There is more cooperation between the Palestinian Authority and Israel than one would assume from the rhetoric.

There is an economic and political resurgence going on in the West Bank, and it would not be possible without the help of Israel and the United States. And the US aid to the PA would not be possible were it not, in part, for the advocacy of AIPAC, Israel's lobby, for Palestinian aid in Congress, and the influence of Prime Minister Netanyahu.

In many ways, Israel already lives side by side with a state of Palestine. It is a reality.

Palestine needs Israel for its growth and development.

Perhaps the de facto recognition, which already exists, and mutual cooperation, which one hopes will grow, will buy enough time for a generational shift that will allow for new narratives to emerge, which include, instead of omit, the other's understanding of their national identity, and acknowledge each other's formative tragedies, and aspirations.

One can hope.

One has to hope.

The alternative is just unthinkable.

### *Israel: A Vital, Vibrant Reality*

In that spirit, the spirit of hope, I want to tell you, before I conclude, more about our trip to Israel this past May. It was my first trip in over six years.

When we sit here in America, we tend to see Israel through the lens of the Palestine-Israel conflict as told by earnest reporters and diligent cameramen.

But when you are there, that is not what you experience.

Rather you quickly become immersed in an open, vibrant, colorful, diverse society that pulses with energy and creativity, that is historic and novel at the same time.

Israel is a place of science and technology, of cutting edge, modern agriculture and industry. An Israeli just won the Nobel Prize for chemistry.

We walked the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, Safed and Tiberias, even planted a kiwi tree at a kibbutz on the Lebanese border within sight of Hezbollah militiamen, and did not feel like we were in a dangerous part of the world, or a society bordering on

conflict, or a nation endangered.

We experienced a joyous, confident society, where the elderly are fulfilled, and the streets are full of children at play, just like Zechariah said.

It helped to have one of our own as a guide. Ian “Kobi” Cooper, son of our members Wendy and Leonard, who was Bar Mitzvah on this bima, shepherded us around the land. We met his lovely, then pregnant wife, Adrianna, who has since given birth to beautiful twin girls. What a thrill to feel the spiritual and kinship connection we have with the Land!

Cindy and I are already planning for a return next December, 2012. I have asked Kobi to lead it.

In May we spend a Friday morning in Kfar Saba, a town on the outskirts of Tel Aviv and along the Green Line, visiting our sister Masorti congregation in Israel, Congregation Hod veHadar. Moti Markowitz and his family are members of the congregation. Moti is the son of our member Ray Markowitz and his late wife Judy, of blessed memory.

Moti is here today, spending Yom Kippur with Ray and his wife Natalie. On our trip next December we will be spending two Shabbatot in Israel. One will be in Jerusalem. The other will be in Tel Aviv, and we will be coming to Hod veHadar to share Shabbat morning services with them.

There will be an interest meeting on November 17, and there is a preliminary flyer in the pews. It’s early. There is plenty of time to plan. To schedule. To save. I would love to see this the biggest, best AJ trip to Israel, ever!

Israel is not a foreign country. It is our homeland. And we are a part of it. Our destiny, not only as Jews, but as human beings, is intertwined with the Jewish state.

We must place Jerusalem above our chiefest joy, as the Psalmist sang by the waters of Bablyon.

## *Please Touch*

I want to close by sharing with you one of our most memorable experiences in Israel.

On our first evening in Israel we went to the NaLagaat Center in Jaffa. I had never been there. I was skeptical when Kobi and our tour organizer, Peter Abelow of Keshet, suggested it. Not because I knew anything about it. But because I knew we would be arriving in Israel from Prague at 4:30 that morning. It would be our second overnight flight in four days. And those days were packed with activity!

But when they told me about the Na Lagaat Center, I was curious. And excited. And that night was the only one we would be able to go.

Na Lagaat means *Please Touch*. It is a three part Complex. Two restaurants and a theater.

One restaurant is called Kapish. At Kapish, the waiters are all deaf.

The other restaurant is called Blackout. Here the waiters are all blind . . . and you eat in the dark.

Then there is the Na Lagaat Theater. The resident company is composed of actors, each of whom is both deaf and blind!

The center employs seventy people who are deaf, blind, or both, and they work with people who can hear and see in an original, creative way.

I want to tell you, despite our exhaustion, we came alive there with excitement and unexpected enthusiasm.

We went from visiting Terezin, built by a regime whose first victims, the first to be expendable as a drain on society, were the handicapped, to this NaLagaat theater complex where the handicapped are on center stage.

Where else but in Israel can the human spirit flourish and thrive?

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The Na Lagaat Center is a metaphor for the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Would that Israelis and Palestinians could touch one another, like the actors of the Na Lagaat Theater, and feel the human aspirations that each holds dear.

Prime Minister Netanyahu ended his remarks with a verse from Isaiah (9:1).

הָעָם הַהֹלְכִים בְּחֹשֶׁךְ רָאוּ אֹרֶן גָּדוֹל.

“The people who walk in darkness will see a great light.”

He concluded: “Let that light be the light of peace.”

To walk to that light, we and they, Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, will have to emerge from our silent darkness . . .

. . . from the darkness of our own limited narratives which loudly proclaim **our** national catastrophes but which are deaf to the hurt of the other . . . to the light of acknowledging that there is truth in each narrative;

. . . from the blind prejudice that diminishes each other with deaf stereotypes . . . to the light of acceptance, in which we listen for the humanity in each of us;

. . . from the darkness of doubt and the deafness of suspicion . . . to the light of mutual respect and deeds of genuine trust;

. . . from the darkness of falsehood and despair . . . to the liberating call of truth;

. . . from the darkness of forever being enslaved to our past . . . to the light of a

future blessed with hearing freedom's ring.

May God help the peoples of Israel and Palestine emerge from the darkness of contention, and the silence of contentiousness, to the light of mutual understanding and the thrilling sounds of peace.