

KOL NIDRE 5771: WHY ISRAEL IS IMPORTANT TO US
RABBI ERIC POLOKOFF, B'NAI ISRAEL OF SOUTHBURY

IT'S AN OLD STORY, A WELL-KNOWN FOLKTALE, AND AN OFT-QUOTED BIBLICAL VERSE. AND TONIGHT IT BEARS REPEATING... AND DEMONSTRATING. I HAVE HERE THESE SKEWERS. AND I HAVE A VOLUNTEER, A PERSON OF PHYSICAL STRENGTH... SAY, BILL ZULLO. (WAVE BILL FORWARD.) NOW GIVEN THE SIMILARITY OF BILL AND MY PHYSIQUE'S, YOU'RE PROBABLY CURIOUS WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT ... AND WHY. WHILE YOU'RE DELIBERATING LET ME BEGIN THE FOLKTALE.

SHORTLY BEFORE HE DIED A CERTAIN KING SUMMONED HIS CHILDREN AND COURT. HE SAID TO THEM, "THE CREDITOR HAS COME TO COLLECT HIS DEBT. SO NOW I WILL AND BEQUEATH THE WAY OF LIFE TO YOU AND INSTRUCT YOU TO YOUR BENEFIT." THE KING CONTINUED TELLING HIS FAMILY AND PEOPLE: JOIN TOGETHER, HELP ONE ANOTHER, BAND AS ONE, MAKE EFFORTS... LET THE ONE WITH KNOWLEDGE TEACH THE ONE WITHOUT – AND LET THE ONE WITHOUT ACCEPT THE WISDOM; LET THE WEALTHY GIVE TO THE NEEDY, AND LET THE NEEDY THANK THE ONE WHO HELPS; LET THE SINNER CONFESS TO THE ONE WHO HAS BEEN HARMED – AND LET THE ONE WHO HAS BEEN HARMED ACCEPT THE PARDON AND ATONEMENT. FOR KNOW THAT YOU WILL LIVE UNITED AND PERISH IF YOU ARE DISPERSED."

WORDS ARE USEFUL, BUT DRAMA IS MEMORABLE.

SO THE KING TOLD ONE OF HIS ATTENDANT KNIGHTS. "FETCH ME TEN ARROWS." AND THE KNIGHT BROUGHT THEM. "GRIP THEM IN YOUR HAND," SAID THE KING. AND THE KNIGHT DID SO. BILL, CAN YOU PUT THE SKEWERS IN YOUR HAND. THEN THE KING ORDERED: "USE ALL YOUR STRENGTH AND BREAK THEM TOGETHER." BILL, GIVE IT A SHOT. AND THE KNIGHT USED ALL HIS STRENGTH BUT COULD NOT BREAK THEM. (BILL TRIES...)

THEN THE KING SAID, "THROW THEM TO THE GROUND." AND HE DID SO. BILL, JUST PUT THEM ON THE READER'S TABLE. THEN THE KING SUMMONED ONE OF HIS SMALLEST ATTENDANTS AND TOLD HIM: "TAKE THESE ARROWS ONE BY ONE AND BREAK THEM." AND HE DID SO, AND HE SNAPPED THEM ALL. FOLKS MIGHT BE CLOCKING THE LENGTH OF THIS SERMON. CANTOR, (BECKONING CANTOR) COULD YOU BREAK JUST ONE OF THEM. (SHE DOES)

THEN THE KING TURNED TO HIS SONS AND MINISTERS AND SAID, "YOU HAVE SEEN WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THESE ARROWS AND HOW THEY COULD NOT BE BROKEN WHEN THEY WERE UNITED BUT WERE EASILY SNAPPED WHEN SEPARATE. LET THIS BE A WITNESS FOR YOU AND A PARABLE IN YOUR MOUTHS." THANK YOU BILL AND CANTOR. (THEY EXIT) YOU'VE DEMONSTRATED HOW EASY IT IS TO SKEWER THE RABBI.

HERE IS A JEWISH TAKE ON AESOP'S FABLE, "THE BUNDLE OF STICKS," TO BE TAUGHT THROUGH THE GENERATIONS. "UNITED WE STAND, DIVIDED WE FALL," WASN'T ONLY PREACHED BY THE ANCIENT GREEKS, BIBLICAL ISRAEL COUNSELED: *A PERSON MAY PREVAIL AGAINST ONE ALONE, TWO SHALL WITHSTAND HIM, BUT A THREE-FOLD CHORD IS NOT QUICKLY BROKEN.*

A RECENT ANECDOTE FROM *THE NEW YORK TIMES* METROPOLITAN DIARY ALSO SPEAKS OF UNITY. *DEAR DIARY: WE WERE RETURNING TO THE UNITED STATES FROM EUROPE, AND THERE WERE SEVERAL LONG LINES IN CUSTOMS AT KENNEDY AIRPORT. WE DID OUR USUAL THING. I STOOD IN ONE LINE. HE STOOD IN ANOTHER. THEN, WHEN I SAW THAT HIS LINE WAS MOVING FASTER, I ASKED THE SUPERVISING OFFICER IF I COULD JOIN MY HUSBAND. "YES, OF COURSE," HE SAID. THEN HE MADE A LOUD ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE WHOLE ROOM: "FAMILIES MUST STAY TOGETHER... NO MATTER HOW THE TRIP WENT!"*

AN ENTIRE BOOK OF THE TORAH, *SEFER BEMIDBAR* – THE BOOK OF NUMBERS – LIKEWISE CONCERNS THIS THEME. IT CHRONICLES MANY HARD TRIALS AND DIVISIONS JEWRY ENCOUNTERED EN ROUTE TO THE PROMISED LAND. TORAH WARNS US: *AM ECHAD*, ONE PEOPLE, DO NOT BE DISINTERESTED OR SELFISH; WE SEPARATE AT OUR OWN PERIL.

THIS TIMELESS INSTRUCTION IS, OF COURSE, TIMELY FOR US. I OFFER AS “EXHIBIT A” ISRAEL’S CONSIDERATION OF THE ROTEM BILL. SOME BACKGROUND. A CONSEQUENCE OF THE HUGE IMMIGRATION OF JEWS AND THEIR FAMILIES TO ISRAEL FROM THE FORMER SOVIET UNION, AN ESTIMATED 300,000 ISRAELIS WHO WISH TO BE JEWS ARE NOT RECOGNIZED AS JEWS. THEIR STATUS DOES NOT MEET THE CRITERIA OF TRADITIONAL JEWISH LAW, AND THE ULTRA-ORTHODOX CHIEF RABBINATE REFUSES TO CONVERT THEM, UNLESS THEY AGREE TO PERMANENTLY MAINTAIN AN ULTRA-ORTHODOX LIFESTYLE. THESE CONVERSIONS CAN ALSO BE ANNULLED RETROACTIVELY. TO BREAK THIS LOG-JAM A RIGHT-WING RUSSIAN ISRAELI POLITICAL PARTY DECIDED TO CUT A DEAL WITH THE ULTRA-ORTHODOX. THEIR BILL, INTRODUCED INTO THE KNESSET BY DAVID ROTEM, ACTUALLY GIVES THE CHIEF RABBINATE MUCH *MORE* AUTHORITY TO DETERMINE WHO ISRAEL WILL RECOGNIZE AS JEWISH. IN RETURN, HOWEVER, THE RUSSIANS RECEIVED ASSURANCES THAT THEIR CONVERSIONS WOULD BE FAVORABLY ADDRESSED.

WHEN AMERICAN JEWS LEARNED OF THE BILL’S FINE PRINT THAT WOULD CONSOLIDATE ULTRA-ORTHODOX POWER DIRECTLY AT OUR EXPENSE WE CRIED FOUL. ONE OF THE ROTEM’S PROVISIONS IS TO NEGATE AND BYPASS ISRAEL’S SUPREME COURT, WHICH HAS RULED TO RECOGNIZE THE STATUS OF THE REFORM AND CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENTS. *LET THE ONE WITH KNOWLEDGE TEACH.* SOON HIGH LEVEL DELEGATIONS FROM JEWISH FEDERATIONS AND OUR MOVEMENTS WERE ACTIVELY LOBBYING THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT TO STOP THE BILL. THIS EFFORT WAS BACKED BY TENS OF THOUSANDS OF EMAILS, SOME FROM B’NAI ISRAEL CONGREGANTS. FOR GIVEN THE GRAVE THREATS ISRAEL FACES FROM IRAN AND ITS PROXIES, THE INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN OF DELEGITIMAZATION OF ISRAEL, AN IFFY PEACE-PROCESS, AND ALARMING SIGNALS OVER A POTENTIAL LAPSE IN SOLID, BI-PARTISAN AMERICAN SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL, IT WOULD BE SHEER MADNESS FOR ISRAEL TO DISAVOW ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE VAST MAJORITY OF AMERICAN JEWS. TO WELCOME US AS FAMILY ON NFTY, BIRTHRIGHT OR CONGREGATIONAL TRIPS, AND THEN, JOCKEYING FOR POSITION, TO CYNICALLY DISOWN US, WOULD BE HEIGHT OF FOLLY. *LET THE NEEDY THANK THE ONE WHO HELPS.* ISRAELI PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU BROKERED A COMPROMISE, ACTUALLY A SIX-MONTH COOLING OFF PERIOD, BETWEEN AMERICAN JEWS AND HIS COALITION PARTNERS. STAY TUNED.

THIS INCIDENT STRUCK A DEEP CHORD IN NORTH AMERICAN JEWRY. EVEN IN SOUTHURY NORMALLY EASY-GOING CONGREGANTS PLEDGED TO PROTEST IN FRONT

OF THE ISRAELI CONSULATE. MY SISTER GAIL, WHOM IN NEARLY A HALF-CENTURY HAS NEVER SENT ME A SINGLE WORD ABOUT ISRAEL, LEFT HER TELENOVELAS TO FORWARD ME AN ON-LINE PETITION AGAINST THE ROTEM BILL! WHAT SO UNNERVED US ALL WAS THE BLATANT DISREGARD OF SAGELY GUIDANCE: THAT WE ARE EASILY SNAPPED WHEN SEPARATED; THAT OUR FAMILY, OUR PEOPLE, MUST STAY TOGETHER.

THE FOLKTALE CAUTIONED, "*LET THE SINNER CONFESS.*" IT'S YOM KIPPUR, A GOOD TIME FOR DOING SO. I KNOW MANY EYES START TO GLAZE OVER WHEN I DISCUSS ISRAEL ADVOCACY. THE ISSUES ARE COMPLEX, AND OFTEN SEEMINGLY DISTANT. HOPING TO SIMPLIFY THINGS FOR BUSY PEOPLE OUR ISRAEL ADVOCACY COMMITTEE HAS CULLED THE MEDIA TO POST "THE BEST-OF-THE-BEST" ON OUR WEBSITE AND ON FACEBOOK. LAUNCHING THE INITIATIVE WE SENT OUT TWO MASS EMAILS. BUT TO DATE WE HAVE ONLY 15 IAC FACEBOOK FRIENDS. CLEARLY, THERE'S ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT... AND ATONEMENT – AT ONE MENT. FOR IF THE PAST TEACHES US ANYTHING, IT'S THAT ISRAEL ADVOCACY IS ALSO IN OUR OWN DIRECT INTEREST. THE DEMONIZATION OF ISRAEL LEADS TO A CONCOMITANT INCREASE IN ANTI-SEMITIC BEHAVIOR. WHY? -- BECAUSE PEOPLE WITH NO SYMPATHY FOR A *JEWISH* STATE INVARIABLY FIND LITTLE SYMPATHY FOR JEWS THEMSELVES.

SEPTEMBER 13TH'S *TIME MAGAZINE* COVER IS ENTITLED: "WHY ISRAEL DOESN'T CARE ABOUT PEACE." *TIME* PROPOSES THAT ISRAELI JEWS ARE TOO FOCUSED ON MAKING AND SPENDING MONEY TO CARE ABOUT PEACE. THEN IN A SEGMENT THIS WEEK ON NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO, THE *TIME* ARTICLE WAS ECHOED PRACTICALLY VERBATIM. FORGET ISRAELI SKEPTICISM FROM CONTINUED PALESTINIAN REJECTION OF TERRITORIAL COMPROMISE. FORGET THAT ISRAEL IS THE ONLY DEMOCRACY AND DEFENDER OF INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY IN THAT AREA – FORGET THAT TEL AVIV HOSTS GAY PRIDE PARADES WHILE IN CONTRAST A GAY SAUDI DIPLOMAT BEGS FOR ASYLUM, LEST HE BE KILLED UPON RETURNING HOME AFTER COMING OUT. FORGET THAT OVER THE LAST DECADE MORE THAN 1,000 ISRAELIS WERE KILLED BY TERRORISTS, THE PROPORTIONAL EQUIVALENT OF 43,000 AMERICANS; *TIME MAGAZINE* AND NPR WOULD HAVE US BELIEVE THAT THE REAL OBSTACLE TO PEACE IS *JEWISH* INDIFFERENCE. FRIENDS, IT'S NOT AS IF ISRAEL CAN DO NO WRONG – WE *KNOW* ISRAEL'S SHORTCOMINGS. THE PROBLEM IS THAT FOR HUGE SEGMENTS OF WORLD OPINION, ISRAEL CAN DO NO RIGHT. ISRAEL ALONE IS TARGETED WITH FREQUENT, HIGHLY SELECTIVE BOYCOTTS. ISRAEL WAS EVEN FALSELY ACCUSED BY SWEDEN'S LEADING NEWSPAPER OF HARVESTING THE ORGANS OF PALESTINIAN YOUTHS. OF COURSE SUCH CHARACTERIZATIONS COULD NEVER GAIN TRACTION HERE. NO ONE IN AMERICA WOULD EVER PERPETUATE CLAIMS OF *JEWISH* AVARICE.

MAYBE... JUST MAYBE THE RECENT MANIFESTATIONS OF BIGOTRY AGAINST MUSLIMS WILL BE A WAKE-UP CALL TO US, TO BE ESPECIALLY ATTUNED TO PREJUDICE AND INJUSTICE. IN A CHARGED ATMOSPHERE UGLY STEREOTYPES CAN APPEAR, OR BE MENACINGLY DENIED. FOR INSTANCE, THIS SEPTEMBER 11TH EDITORIAL FROM OUR LOCAL DAILY, BRANDED THE VERY DISCUSSION OF ISLAMOPHOBIA "A LIBEL AGAINST THE AMERICAN CHARACTER." YET MUSLIMS DO FACE HOSTILITY; IN MANY QUARTERS THEY ARE GUILTY UNTIL PROVEN INNOCENT, AS THEY ARE CHARGED WITH HARBORING TERRORIST LOYALTIES. THIS SUMMER AN INNOCENT CAB DRIVER WAS STABBED IN MANHATTAN FOR BEING MUSLIM. THIS WEEK THE HARTFORD CITY COUNCIL WITHDREW ITS INVITATION TO AN IMAM TO OFFER A CIVIC PRAYER.

THE BIBLE INSTRUCTS: “*EIT MILCHAMA V’EIT SHALOM*. THERE IS A TIME FOR WAR AND A TIME FOR PEACE.” IN WARTIME IT’S IMPORTANT TO KNOW YOUR ENEMIES – AND WE SURE DO HAVE THEM. ACROSS THE GLOBE MEMBERS AND FELLOW TRAVELERS OF ISLAMIST GROUPS WAGE *JIHAD* AGAINST US: *HAMAS*, *HEZBOLLAH*, *AL QAEDA*, THE *TALIBAN*, THE *SHEBAB*, *AHMADINEJAD* AND THE IRANIAN SECURITY SERVICES. EXTREMIST *WAHABIS* FUND ISLAMIC ORGANIZATIONS IN OUR OWN COUNTRY, AND A PLOT WAS HATCHED AT A MOSQUE IN NEWBURGH TO BOMB OUR SISTER REFORM TEMPLE IN RIVERDALE. TODAY WE LEARN A CARTOONIST IN SEATTLE HAS GONE INTO HIDING OVER HER PROPOSAL TO DRAW MOHAMMED.

BUT THERE ARE *OTHER* MUSLIMS, MANY OTHERS. I THINK ABOUT THE TWO LEADERS OF CONNECTICUT’S PAKISTANI COMMUNITY WHO HAVE TRAVELED WITH ME ON ADL MISSIONS TO ISRAEL, AND NOW WORK WITH ME ON PROJECTS OF UNDERSTANDING. I THINK ABOUT THE TWO IMAMS WHO HAVE SPOKEN FROM THIS VERY *BIMA* ABOUT OUR SHARED VALUES, OR OF THEIR PRIDE IN THE JEWISH LIVES SAVED BY MUSLIMS DURING THE *SHOAH*. IMAM GAZI OF WATERBURY’S ALBANIAN COMMUNITY, FOR INSTANCE, HAS TAUGHT OUR CONFIRMANTS AND ATTENDED MIA’S BAT MITZVAH CEREMONY. UNLIKE, SAY, THAT FLORIDA PASTOR READY TO BURN A *QURAN* IMAM GAZI AND HIS PREDECESSOR AND THOSE PAKISTANI-AMERICAN LEADERS I MENTIONED ARE NOT MARGINAL FIGURES – THEY REPRESENT SIZEABLE AND GROWING CONSTITUENCIES; THEY DESERVE OUR RESPECT AND FRIENDSHIP. TO EXTEND THE FOLKTALE METAPHOR, INDIVIDUAL STICKS MAKE FOR EASY KINDLING WOOD. WE MUST NOT PERMIT THE FLAMES OF INTOLERANCE TO JUMP FROM HOUSE TO HOUSE, SCORCHING THEIRS AND PERHAPS OURS.

THE BIBLE ALSO TELLS US TO GAIN WISDOM BY STUDYING THE ANT. IT SAYS, “STUDY THE ANT, YOU SLUGGARD.” SO WHILE ON VACATION I DID JUST THAT. ANTS ARE THE WORLD’S LARGEST SISTERHOOD. INDUSTRIOUS AND SELF-SACRIFICING, THEY EMBODY THE VERY QUALITIES EXTOLLED IN THE FOLKTALE. YOU CAN DROP AN ANT ANYWHERE IN HER EXTENDED COLONY OVER HUNDREDS OF MILES, AND SHE WILL IMMEDIATELY ASSIMILATE INTO THE GROUP. BUT ANTS ARE ALSO FIERCELY NATIONALISTIC. DROP THAT SAME ANT A FEW INCHES ACROSS THE BORDER INTO A RIVAL COLONY, AND QUICKLY SHE’LL BE TORN APART LIMB-FROM-LIMB. ANTS DON’T RETREAT OR EVER MAKE PEACE. RATHER, THEY FIGHT TO THE DEATH IN THE WORLD’S LONGEST ONGOING WARS. NO ANT WILL EVER EMERGE AN ANWAR SADAT OR KING HUSSEIN, TURNING TO PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE.

HUMANS, HOWEVER, ARE FASHIONED DIFFERENTLY. WE ARE CREATED *B’TZELEM ELOHIM*, IN GOD’S DIVINE IMAGE. WE HAVE THE CAPACITY TO REASON, AND TO *RODEF SHALOM*, TO REACH OUT TO MODERATES AND TO PURSUE PEACE.

LET THIS BE A WITNESS FOR YOU AND A PARABLE IN YOUR MOUTHS. LOOKING TO THE NEXT GENERATION, AND TO OURSELVES, WE SIMPLY MUST REMAIN ENGAGED. LIKE ALAN DERSHOWITZ, WHOSE FILM WE’LL SHOW IN A FEW WEEKS, WE MUST MAKE “THE CASE FOR ISRAEL.” LIKE MY SISTER GAIL, WE MUST AFFIRM CRITICAL TIES. ISRAEL IS IMPORTANT TO US BECAUSE IN A WORLD WHERE BIGOTRY CAN BE FICKLE AND PERVERSIVE, OUR WELLBEING IS LINKED TO HERS. HENCE CHOOSING LIFE AND INCLUSIVENESS WE MUST SHARE KNOWLEDGE AND PROMOTE AT ONE MENT. FOR AS BILL AND THE CANTOR’S STRENGTH HAVE DEMONSTRATED, AMIDST A CHALLENGING

JOURNEY WE MUST STAY IN LINE TOGETHER,LEST WE PERISH. THE GOOD NEWS... WE HAVE THE CAPACITY TO ACCEPT THE INSTUCTION THAT HAS BEEN WILLED AND BEQUEATHED TO US. HERE IN SOUTHBURY WE REMAIN BLESSED WITH VIBRANT, CREATIVE LEADERSHIP. THUS WITH RENEWED DETERMINATION LET US EMPLOY NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND CLASSICAL TEACHINGS, MUSIC AND SONG, TO THE EFFORT OF SUSTAINING THE INTERTWINED FUTURE OF BOTH ISRAELI AND NORTH AMERICAN JEWRY. IT IS A JUST, SACRED AND WISE ENTERPRISE. AND AS MODERN ZIONISM'S FOUNDER, THEODOR HERZL, ONCE OBSERVED, "*IM TIRZU EIN ZO AGADAH*. IF YOU WILL IT, IT IS NO FABLE." AND FOR THIS, IN THIS HOUSE OF GOD, *SAMACHTI B'LIBI* – I REJOICE IN MY HEART.

CAIN YEHI RATZON. BE THIS GOD'S WILL.