

Sermon Shabbat HaGadol

10 Nisan 5766

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Last week I was asked to give the invocation and benediction at the annual convocation of the American College of Physicians. It was an extraordinary gathering of approximately 6000 doctors. During the course of the evening the words of “healing,” “compassion” and “integrity” were coupled with ideas of “contribution” and “achievement.” In an age of modernity-induced decline in the physicality of the human being, doctors continue to elevate the standard of care and that convocation gives them *hizuk*; the necessary encouragement to go on when they are exhausted and feel besieged by the insurance industry. These are people who want to help others. These are people who want to care for others and who want to heal others so this was an evening devoted to the preservation of life. It was an evening that stood in stark contrast to the bloodshed that takes place daily around the world.

I have never fought in a war, I was never threatened by the draft and I have never had a thought that my life was endangered by forces that seek me harm because I am an American. Yes, there have been terrorist attacks in the United States such as Oklahoma City and the World Trade Center, but honestly I have never felt threatened. It has never crossed my mind that someday I would have to fight for the ideals that our country has stood for - or for our survival as Americans. Therefore, the comments I make this morning must be tempered by my inexperience with the realities of war.

As an American who is extremely proud to be associated with this great nation, I have listened as our President explains the moral imperative that drives him as to act as Commander-in-Chief. He was very convincing. So, now we sit back and watch as the politicians scramble to either give unconditional support for our troops or condemn war of any kind. And we watch. We read the newspaper and are exposed to the images of caravans being blown up on the roadways of Iraq while the death toll rises. We recognize war is terrible.

No one can deny the senseless nature of mass killings. No one can deny the pain that is wrought on this world through weapons of mass destruction, be they actual or imagined, real or not yet realized. Weapons that the entire world has invested millions of dollars in over the course of the past century. Maybe we have become numb, and maybe pictures don't effect us anymore because gratuitous violence is ever-present in our society. These pictures should not make us numb and we should not forget that war is ugly.

No matter the reason or the outcome, whether we are the winners or the defeated, wars leaves both parties with many losses.

I must apologize. Normally by this point in the sermon you have listened to at least one humorous comment, or maybe even a joke. However, I can't seem to find one today. As an American, as a Jew and as a human being, my heart is heavy. My thoughts are preoccupied with the young men who now risk their lives. I am distracted by the irresponsible assessment of Professor John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago, and Professor Stephen Walt of Harvard's Kennedy School, tried and true scholars who are misguided and blinded by their hatred of Israel. They write in the London Review of Books that Israel has a "stronghold" on U.S. foreign policy and they maintain that Washington's pro-Israel lobby played a "decisive" role in fermenting the war in Iraq, and it is now to be repeated with the threat of war on Iran. I am disgusted and concerned. This is no laughing matter.

The last hundred years has been a hundred years of dictatorship with Mussolini, Stalin, Qaddafi, Saddam Hussein and the most torturous of all, Adolf Hitler. Hey, Mearsheimer and Walt, you are way off base. You may have the credentials and a solid educational background but this time you have been enticed by the world of academia to create another assault on Israel. The world reads your writings because of your past insight into foreign and domestic policy, but this time you are wrong. We are unquestionably the world superpower. We are undeniably the leader of the Free World and we must do what is right. China is a problem but I am confident our government is acting in the most prudent way to solve those problems. Force isn't necessarily the proper course of action. Hussein knew no bounds, just as his neighbor, the President of Iran, knows no bounds.

This week in the Torah once again we read of the ritual whereby Aaron and his sons were anointed as priests. Again we read of the exact same ritual to which we were introduced a few weeks ago. Moses is to kill an animal and take it's blood and place it on their ears, hands and feet. At that time I suggested the reason for this ritual was to show that, through all the killing in which they would participate, blood would stain them. The stench would not escape them and the blood would not come off easily. I am reminded of the scene in Macbeth, when Lady Macbeth has done her killing and looks down at her hands and tries to wash away the blood but it just won't come out. She cries "out damned spot" (Macbeth V:I) but she can't seem to remove the blemish that has remained behind. So, too, Moses realizes that it is true of the killings Aaron and his sons must carry out on behalf of the Jewish people. Blood will stain their hands. Just like the mechanic who can't wash away the grease from underneath his fingernails after a long day at the shop, both Aaron and his sons will not be able to wash away the blood on their hands. It

is a gruesome business and although we reject the idea of animal sacrifice today, in the days of the Bible it was common practice.

I believe we are moving away from conventional warfare. We have seen the cloud of the nuclear holocaust begin to dissipate as the reality of nuclear disarmament comes to fruition. We must make sure Iran isn't able to re-ignite that escalation in their play for power.

We must be vigilant in setting the record straight. When we engage in conversations around the water cooler or in supermarkets we must make sure the facts are known and the enemy is clearly identified. I believe this at the very core of my being.

Someday we will learn to live with one another in peace and then healing will become our goal. I know this is hard to imagine when there are some 20 different wars raging throughout the world even as we speak; however, this morning's lesson still applies. The blood of this war will stain us and I believe the President loses a lot of sleep over our soldiers who are in harm's way. We must ask our leaders and our potential leaders what their plan is for extraction. How are we going to get out? I would certainly prefer to lose face rather than to lose lives.

The Torah instructs us, "Do not stand by idle while the blood of your neighbor flows." (Lev.19:16) We must not just watch as ethnic cleansing and mass murder are perpetuated. We must support our government in its convictions and see this through and we must pray for our young men and women who now risk their lives.

Edmund Fleg, the poet and playwright, wrote in the late 19th century:

"I am a Jew because my faith demands no abdication of the mind.

I am a Jew because my faith demands all the devotion of my heart.

I am a Jew because wherever there is suffering, the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew because whenever there is despair, the Jew hopes.

I am a Jew because the promise of our faith is a universal promise.

I am a Jew because for the Jew the world is not completed; people must complete it.

I am a Jew because for the Jew humanity is not fully created; people must complete it.

I am a Jew because the faith of the people of Israel places humanity above nations, above Judaism itself.

I am a Jew because the faith of the people of Israel places above humanity, image of the divine, the Oneness of God."

We are all created in the image of God and we must do everything in our power to preserve life. In this world we have extremes - we have those who are filled with care and concern and those who seek loss and destruction. This is a bonafide war against evil and we must stand behind our government and our soldiers. We must pray for them and their families. So in your prayer books I ask you to turn to the middle of page 149 and let's read together:

A Prayer for Peace

May we see the day when war and bloodshed cease, when a great peace will embrace the whole world.

Then nation will not threaten nation,

And mankind will not again know war.

For all who live on earth shall realize we have not come into being to hate or to destroy.

We have come into being to praise, to labor, and to love.

Compassionate God, bless the leaders of all nations with the power of compassion.

Fulfill the promise conveyed in Scripture: I will bring peace to the land and you shall lie down and no one shall terrify you.

I will rid the land of vicious beasts and it shall not be ravaged by war.

Let love and justice flow like a mighty stream.

Let peace fill the earth as the waters fill the sea.

And let us say: Amen.