

“Or Lagoyim - A Light unto the Nations”
Kol Nidre 5770
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In 1942, during the Indian struggle for independence, Mahatma Gandhi taught his followers, “Strength does not come from physical capacity. Strength comes from an indomitable will.”

On January 20, 1961, at his inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy utters the immortal words, "And so my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country."

On August 28, 1963, in Washington D.C., in his address at the march on Washington, Martin Luther King Jr., roused the crowd of thousands with these words, “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”"

Astronaut Neil Armstrong's first words from the surface of the moon on July 20, 1969, stirred the imagination of a country when he said, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

On June 12, 1987, President Ronald Reagan, as a symbol of his desire for increasing freedom in the Eastern Block, challenged Gorbachev, then the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, to "Tear down this wall!" Reagan wanted the Berlin Wall destroyed.

A few weeks ago, President Barrack Obama was speaking at the UN and said the following about the growing threat of Iran. “The technology we harness can light the path to peace, or forever darken it" and "the magnitude of our challenges has yet to be met by the measure of our actions."

At each of these moments, a leader, a statesman, and a visionary stood before us as witnesses of history and proclaimed, “Game on.” So we begin. We stand now at such a moment. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave us the language to connect our actions with our determination. You see, there is another Hitler in the wings.

As Diaspora Jews, I fully understand the complicated relationship we have with the land of Israel. It is the place I long for every day. I continually hear the voice of Yehuda Halevi in my ear. He said, “*libi b’mizrach, v’ani b’maarav,*” my heart is in East while I am in the West. We also struggle, we too, are torn.

In an expansive and incredibly insightful comment in our Humashim, Benji Segal clearly explains our relationship with the land of Israel. Although he is describing the Jews of the desert experience, he could have easily been describing our American Jewish experience when he wrote that we experience “the centrifugal and centripetal forces created around the center.” (Etz Hayim Humash page 1377) We are pulled toward and pushed away at the same time. We want to be there while enjoying the life we have created and nurtured here. I long to say the words of the prophet Isaiah, *ki b’simcha tezeioo, u’v’shalom too valoon* – leave our exile in joy and return home in peace.” (55:12) At the same time, I sing the words, “I am proud to be an American.”

Unfortunately, some of us aren't even torn and, in fact, research has shown that some of us have totally lost interest in Israel and her plight. Tonight, I stand before you pleading that you never lose our connection. Tonight, on Kol Nidre, I stand before you and ask that you make a promise, a promise you won't have to annul next year because you were not able to fulfill it. Tonight, I remind you that Israel, both the land and the people, have been an *or la'goyim*, a light to the nations.

When the world has lost its way, Israel reminds us of the path; when the world has confused its priorities, Israel realigns them and when the world is threatened by tyranny, it is Israel that fights that oppression. This week and these times are no different because we cannot be torn on the issue of the terrorist state of Iran and their proxy for violence throughout the world. Iran is not just an Israeli problem, they are not just a Jewish problem, they are a world problem and, thankfully, now the world is on notice. The cat is out of the bag, Iran has been called to the carpet, this week the gloves came off and today I say, "Game on...."

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu began this week at the United Nations with these words,

"Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Nearly 62 years ago, the United Nations recognized the rights of the Jews, an ancient people, 3500 years-old, to a state of their own in their ancestral homeland.

I stand here today as the Prime Minister of Israel, the Jewish state, and I speak to you on behalf of my country and my people. The United Nations was founded after the carnage of World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust. It was charged with preventing the recurrence of such horrendous events.

Nothing has undermined that central mission more than the systematic assault on the truth. Yesterday, the President of Iran, stood at this very podium, spewing his latest anti-Semitic rants while just a few days earlier, he once again claimed that the Holocaust is a lie.

The primitivism of the 9th century ought to be no match for the progress of the 21st century. The allure of freedom, the power of technology, the reach of communications should surely win the day and ultimately, the past cannot triumph over the future, and the future offers all nations magnificent bounties of hope. The pace of progress is growing exponentially.

However, if the most primitive fanaticism can acquire the most deadly weapons, the march of history could be reversed for a time, and, like the belated victory over the Nazis, the forces of progress and freedom will prevail only after a horrific toll of blood and fortune have been exacted from mankind. That is why the greatest threat facing the world today is the marriage between religious fanaticism and the weapons of mass destruction.... We want peace."

The speeches are now over, Ahmadinejad spoke and there were boycotts and protests, Netanyahu spoke and there was encouragement, Obama spoke and there was applause. Now the meetings have ended and new information has been disseminated about the real threat and the imminent threat upon us. Now is the time to act. Every nation has retreated to the safety of their sovereign borders and to the seemingly safety of their own lands. Now there is quiet.

Tonight I stand before you asking that you never lose our connection because we are Jews. We understand, better than anyone, that the plight of our small nation is woven into the fabric of humanity. "History has shown us time and again that what starts with the Jews eventually ends up engulfing many others." (Netanyahu) Tonight, on Kol Nidre, I ask you to make a promise, a promise you won't have to annul next year because you didn't fulfill it.

There are four things you can do for Israel this year. I implore you to do all four:

- 1. Attend the AIPAC policy conference March 21-23.** The AIPAC Policy Conference is the pro-Israel community's pre-eminent annual gathering. The event attracts more than 6000 community and student activists from all 50 states, and more than half of the Senate, a third of the House of Representatives and countless Israeli and American policymakers and thought leaders.
- 2. Give to Federation's United Israel Appeal.** Our dollars are leveraged with others throughout the Jewish world in a dramatic contribution to Israeli development and sustainability.
- 3. Invest in Israeli companies.** There are 660 companies, 180 exchange-traded funds (ETFs), 60 government bonds, 500 corporate bonds, and more than 1000 mutual funds on the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange. Investment opportunities abound.
- 4. Finally, visit Israel yourself.** There is nothing more that cements your connection to Israel than walking the land yourself. As God instructed Abraham, *Koom hitalech ba'aretz*, get up and walk the land. (Genesis 13:17)

For more than 2500 years, from the time of the Babylonian Exile, and since the conquest of Jerusalem and its destruction, longings for Zion and Jerusalem have accompanied the Jewish people in their exile. Longings for Jerusalem are mentioned more than 1000 times in the Bible as well as in the Talmud, and in daily and holiday prayers. They are summed up in vision and hope in the promissory words, *Im eshcacheich yerushalayim tishkach imini* "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither." (Psalms 137:5).

Tonight, on this night of vows, we too must make the same promise. We must never lose the connection, the eternal bond and the necessary alliance with our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land, for if we do, the world cannot survive. This is not just about Jewish survival, this about humanity and its march forward; not to self-destruction but to perfecting the world.