

REPORT FROM JERUSALEM

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, August 16, 2009, 6 pm
The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Ancient Reading

Psalms 122

I rejoiced when they said to me, "We are going to the House of the Lord."

Our feet stood inside your gates, O Jerusalem,

Jerusalem built up, a city knit together,

To which the tribes would make pilgrimage,

The tribes of the Lord, as was enjoined upon Israel,

To praise the name of the Lord. . .

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

"May those who love you be at peace.

May there be peace within your ramparts, serenity within your citadels."

For the sake of my kin and my companions, I pray for your peace and well-being;

For the sake of the House of the Lord our God, I seek your good.

Modern Reading

"Tourism"

Yehudah Amichai

from *The Selected Poetry of Yehudah Amichai*
(translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell)

Once I was sitting on the steps near the gate at David's Citadel and I put down my two heavy baskets beside me. A group of tourists stood there around their guide, and I became their point of reference.

"You see that man over there with the baskets? A little to the right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. A little to the right of his head."

"But he's moving, he's moving!"

I said to myself: Redemption will come only when they are told, "Do you see that arch over there from the Roman period? It doesn't matter, but near it, a little to the left and then down a bit, there's a man who has just bought fruit and vegetables for his family."

REPORT FROM JERUSALEM

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, August 16, 2009, 6 pm
The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

If you visit any of the many so-called “Christian holy sites” in Israel, as I did with a group of Boston-area clergy last month, you are likely to notice a sign at the entrance, aimed at preventing the many guides from disturbing worship within, and saying sharply: “NO EXPLANATIONS IN THE CHURCH!”

But the Middle East demands explanations. Constantly. I first visited Israel and the Occupied Territories in 1987. My last thorough trip was in 1990. This time I wanted not only to travel with good, thoughtful clergy colleagues, many of them African American church leaders from inner city of Boston, but also to see what has changed; what has not.

The changes, I am sorry to report, are not entirely for the better; indeed, far from it.

Gwen and I have for many years kept a cartoon on our refrigerator that depicts that mythical minister, the Rev. Will B. Dunn, down on his knees, praying. “Smite my enemies, Lord!” he says. “Smite my worst enemy with a plague of locusts!” In the final frame his head is now hidden in a swarm of insects, as he says, “Let me *re-phrase* that.”

Israelis and Palestinians often each consider the other to be their worst enemy on earth. But wiser heads know otherwise. The external enemies may be real. But the very worst enemy is more often internal. So it is for all of us.

Jerusalem-born Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi knows that. In his book about the long Palestinian quest for statehood,ⁱ he doesn’t just blame the Israelis. He *does* blame the Western powers – first Britain, then America – and Arab states that have all found their own reasons for keeping one pitted against the other. But mostly he examines the sad saga of Palestinians themselves being divided, and choosing corrupt, violent leaders.

Yassir Arafat may have finally renounced terrorism and embraced a two-state solution – at least in theory. For that he was given a Nobel Peace Prize, along with Rabin and Peres. But he was also personally corrupt, and led his own Fatah faction into such a culture of corruption that after his death the Palestinian people democratically voted for Hamas. Tragically. Because that religiously-based terrorist group, when denied real recognition, simply threw Fatah out of Gaza. That divided the Palestinian Authority into two entities. Israel was forced to deal with relentless rocket attacks from Gaza on cities like Sderot. We visited there. Last January nearly 1000 people were killed when Israel reinvaded Gaza. Which remains isolated, and suffering.

But Israel itself is now *also* more inwardly divided against itself than ever in its history. Jerusalem resident Bernard Avishai, who heads an international management consulting group based in Boston, discusses the five tribes that now make up the State of Israel.ⁱⁱ

20% of the population is not Jewish, but Arab. Many Christian Arabs, who had the capital to do so, have left the Middle East. Although citizens of Israel, Arabs find that much of the land of Israel is essentially under what we would call “restrictive covenant.” No non-Jews may live there. Though some non-Jews may serve in the army, most do not. They find less and less reason to vote for representatives in the Knesset, since no Israeli government coalition, however progressive, dares include them.

The oldest Jewish tribe is the Ashkenazim, Jews of European origins who founded the State of Israel and the kibbutzim, which have now largely lost their socialist components and been privatized. Well-educated, prosperous, secular, with many people in the high tech and biotech industries that now provide over 40% of Israelis GDP, some of this tribe has also left. Over 30,000 Israeli citizens now live in the California Silicon Valley for example.

A third tribe is made up of Jews who fled or were expelled from Arab countries in North Africa and the Middle East after 1948. Looked down upon by the Ashkenazim, this group has grown – with large families – and has fueled the rise of right-wing parties like Likud.

The newest influx of immigrants to Israel, however, is from the former Soviet Union. Over a million Russian speakers arrived in the 90s. Perhaps a quarter of them do not even really identify as Jews. But they are represented politically by a right-wing, nationalistic, secular party called Yisrael Betteinu (“Israel is Our Home”). Calling for Arab Israelis to take a loyalty oath or leave, their leader, Avigdor Lieberman, is now Foreign Minister.

Only a fifth of the 5.6 million Israeli Jews think of themselves as “religious,” meaning not only Orthodox, but observant. But the religious politics are also highly divided and divisive. Some so-called “modern Orthodox” rabbis, like my friend David Rosen, have founded groups like Rabbis for Human Rights and an interfaith coordinating council. Others, however, are leaders in the settlement movement, which now has over 300,000 people living in what they call Judea and Samaria. Settlements that international law has declared illegal, and that clearly are a barrier to a two-state solution. The fastest growing group are the *haredim* – the ultra-orthodox, or “black hats” now numbering over 600,000. They have large families. They don’t serve in the military. Many are on welfare, since most of the men devote themselves to Torah study. Their children go to yeshivas, not to regular schools. Demographers expect that by 2020 they will be 20% of Israeli Jews.

This increasing five-fold division of Israeli society is a deep problem for peacemaking. The fastest growing groups are the most resistant to territorial compromise. A decade ago a narrow majority of Israelis, according to polls, said that they might be willing to return the Golan Heights to Syria in return for a comprehensive peace with security guarantees. Now it is only about one in four.

The outlines of a comprehensive peace, by the way, are now clear to everyone involved. They are generally known as “the Clinton parameters.” Between Israel and Palestine, they call for a return to the Israeli borders of June 4, 1967. Israel may retain some large

settlements close to those borders but in exchange for an equal amount of land elsewhere. Most Palestinian refugees will have a right of return only to Palestine, but not to Israel – only a modest number, with cash compensation to the rest. Jerusalem will remain a united city, but under international guarantees and supervision, and simultaneously the capital of both countries. There is a gap between these arrangements and the offer of the 22 nations of the Arab League to grant Israel recognition and peace on the basis of the '67 borders, but even that gap is not insuperable, nor the details impossible.

Despite the deep political dysfunction within both the Palestinian Authority and Israel, there are even now some good reasons to be hopeful about negotiations. For one thing, the new Obama administration is actually *working* on peace talks, unlike its predecessor. Secondly, the rise of Shiite Iran as a regional power – an unintended consequence of our invasion of Iraq – has Sunni Muslim countries like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia more eager to make peace. As Middle Easterners say, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” And finally, every wise Israeli, including an increasing number from its own right-wing, realize that there is a stark choice facing the Jewish state: whether to stay a democracy, and retain a Jewish majority through a two-state solution, or military rule over territories in which a majority of the people will soon be Arabs and other non-Jews.

Under the universal group rule that insiders are allowed to criticize, but outsiders are not, the Kadima Party of Ariel Sharon and Tzipi Livni is allowed to point this out; but Jimmy Carter is not.ⁱⁱⁱ Especially when he uses the word “apartheid” to describe the “security barrier” or “Wall” which now cuts off Jerusalem from Bethlehem, surrounds Arab cities like Qalqiliya, Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and isolates Gaza.

Not that I much blame Israel for doing this. Each year hundreds of suicide bombers are stopped trying to cross into Israel. The barriers work. The trick is to transfer more of the responsibility for the checkpoints to the many Palestinians who don't believe in violence. They remain a solid majority, although you'd have difficulty convincing many Israelis, or American Jews, of that fact. And young Palestinian policemen have to be trained away from their corrupt clan/gang leaders and politicians – and that is also happening now.

Also there are young people on both sides forming a network called “One Voice;” Israeli-Palestinian, pleading for peace, please, roughly on the basis of the Clinton parameters.

So are many people. But the voices of resistance will also be strong. In Gaza and among many Palestinians and allies, there are already many voices interpreting “resistance” as a virtue – as resistance to “the Zionist entity,” to Western imperialism, etc. But make no mistake: such voices are also resistant to a just, reasonable compromise; resistant to moderation. There are many equivalent voices within Israel and its friends, like “Christian Zionists.” Just this week the Israeli consul general here in Boston, Nadav Tamir, was recalled, for daring to write a memo saying that Israeli intransigence threatens close ties with the US. The foreign minister demanded his resignation.

In the weeks ahead, there will be some who will say that the US is pressing Israel too hard to make compromises. Personally, I intend to ignore them. In my view, pressure is exactly what *should* happen. And NOW! For the sake of Israel and its own self-interest.

Because the next likely event is that Iran will say it has -- or will be discovered to have -- a nuclear capability. This already causes hysteria within Israel, and among its friends. Much talk about “a second Holocaust.” But let’s be clear now: Israel itself has long had a nuclear capability of its own. A deterrent. Some may think that the Shiite Iran is so martyr-oriented that it would launch a first-strike on Israel and incur the retaliation of Israel and the US, but I do not. The real danger of an Iranian nuclear capacity is the likelihood that Iran would sell fissile material for a ‘dirty bomb attack’ on New York or Washington or London to Hezbollah or Hamas or some other radical Islamic group, trying to disguise the source, saying it’s from Central Asia, where the Soviets left nuclear materials unaccounted for.^{iv} So when President Obama moves in the coming months to face down Iran, I would urge those who yearn for peace not to over-react to that either. It’s probably quite necessary.

In the meantime, I would urge those of all faiths to remember that resistance to peace is the opposite of submission to peace, which is the true goal set by the Creator of us all;

and that the word *islam* means ‘submission.’ For the goal of all true religion is never war, but rather *salaam, shalom*, the justice that makes for peace. And so I ask you to join me in three prayers for peace found in our hymnal at #509, 507, and 508, in that order:

And let us say together first the Muslim prayer:

Save us, our compassionate Lord, from our folly, by your wisdom,
From our arrogance, by your forgiving love,
From our greed by your infinite bounty,
And from our insecurity by your healing power.

Then the Jewish prayer:

Grant us the ability to find joy and strength not in the strident call to arms,
But in stretching out our arms to grasp our fellow creatures
In the striving for justice and truth.

And finally, a prayer from a Christian source:

Save us from weak resignation to violence,
Teach us that restraint is the highest expression of power,
That thoughtfulness and tenderness are the mark of the strong;
Help us to love our enemies, not by countenancing their sins,
But by remembering our own.

Amen.

ⁱ Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* [Beacon, 2006].

ⁱⁱ Bernard Avishai, *The Tragedy of Zionism: How Its Revolutionary Past Haunts Israeli Democracy* [Helios Press, 2002, especially “Epilogue: Tribal Warfare,” pp. 349-369.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jimmy Carter, *Palestine: Peace not Apartheid*, Simon and Schuster, 2006]

^{iv} Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, *Myths, Illusions and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East* [Viking, 2009]. Ross is now the principal White House strategist on the Middle East.