

Rabbi Michael A. White

Temple Sinai of Roslyn

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There is an exciting rhythm to the holy day season here at Temple Sinai. We eagerly anticipate your arrival, filling this beautiful space with the sound of your voices, the warmth and the security of community we know as we sit shoulder to shoulder with family, with friends and neighbors.

The world, we know, is change, constant ever-accelerating change. And so we come to this sanctuary at the edge of each New Year to be reminded that even midst the torrential and unpredictable careening of time and life, there are comforting constants that can anchor us. We see the Holy Ark's vibrant colors and the Eternal Light's subtle glow and they reaffirm that Temple Sinai is our haven, our steadfast home.

But for our Judaism, as beautiful as they are, even the most beautiful of our sanctuary's holy items are not what are most important. Other religions teach that the glory of architecture, stained glass, towering spires and beautiful altars are all you need to lift the heart toward God. But not us.

Judaism teaches that it is not the room or the accoutrements. It is us, each one of us. It is the human heart and human action that matter most. Our ark and prayer books and Torah scrolls and our sanctuary are not the end, but rather the means to a very sacred end; for inspiring us to do what we are called to do, to heal this cold and often brutal world, sometimes haltingly and imperfectly.

This summer while enjoying the majestic Berkshire Mountains, I reread some of Henry David Thoreau's beautiful prose, and I came across this passage:

*"It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look..... To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts."*

That is what makes Judaism so compelling. We Jews have always sought to carve and paint the very atmosphere of this world. To ask: how might we affect its quality, layering it with justice and compassion.

Today we ask this question from a position of power and security unknown in all of Jewish history. This past year has been a banner year for the Jews. Three Jewish Supreme Court justices now. The daughter of a president even married one of us. We Jews have arrived. We

are part of the elite in this country; there are no doors closed to us. Not even the Supreme Court; not even becoming the son-in-law of a former president.

But it wasn't always thus. Think back now to the story of another famous intermarriage, one borne in entirely different circumstances. I'm referring to the story of Purim, the story of Esther and her gentile husband King Ahashverosh. Haman, the king's prime minister, decided to murder all the Jews of Persia, and Esther had hidden her Jewish identity from her husband. Now, the king, upon learning that his bride Esther was a Jew, annulled Haman's evil decree and ordered that Haman hang from the gallows instead. We celebrate this story's happy ending each year with costumes and groggers and cheers and schnapps.

But think of all that could have gone wrong: What if Mordechai hadn't overheard Haman's evil plan and been able to tip off Esther? What if the king refused to see Esther? Or if she hadn't had the courage to reveal her Jewish identity? What if Esther hadn't been the prettiest maiden in all the land? What if the king refused to change his decree? What if Esther caught him on a cranky day? Most of our history, of course, is a study in "what if's", in what went wrong, not happy endings. Our history has taught us that having power, having security, is good. It's why our tradition never glorified victimhood. Why our rabbis have taught that there is no glory in being on the wrong end of a sword, or a rifle or a rocket.

It was the logic that led to Israel's birth in 1948: That we Jews were no longer willing to be subject to the whims of despots and dictators, no longer willing to face the horrific fates of powerlessness, expulsion, isolation and crematoria. No, we built our state to put an end to all that. And we have. Israel has among the fastest growing economies in the industrialized world, and the fiercest and most threatening military in the entire Middle East. Come with me this February to Israel and see for yourself, and be inspired beyond anything you can imagine. An extraordinary country, alive and creative, melding ancient history with phenomenal technological advances. Its universities and high tech start-ups are at the pinnacle of innovation and invention.

Alas, Israel has also had to learn that power creates its own set of challenges: How to respond to aggression; how to balance the use of force with the ultimate commandment to preserve life. How to maintain security while at the same time protecting the rights of the minority communities among you, especially in the face of insidious enemies. Israel enters peace talks this month as make-shift rockets continue to be smuggled into Gaza. Hizbollah has thousands of short and mid range missiles that could land in Tel Aviv, and Iran's nuclear program is progressing.

And Israel also faces a barrage of terrible publicity; international leaders condemning her, academics and political commentators too. Nationally recognized columnist Richard Cohen has written in the Washington Post that *"The greatest mistake Israel could make at the moment is to forget that Israel itself is a mistake."*

Nicolas Kristof writes frequently in the New York Times about Israel's shortcomings without seriously acknowledging its enemies' evil and barbaric goals. And they are not alone. Leaders of the EU, France, Belgium and elsewhere all are quick to condemn Israel, again forgetting that Hamas and her allies all consider the murder of civilians, even children, completely defensible.

But then again, if you do not think Israel has a right to exist in the first place, if you believe that Israel's demise would actually be a good thing, then it becomes easy to dismiss Jewish blood as expendable because, really, the Jews are just in the way.

That's not to say that Israel is blameless. Demolishing homes in East Jerusalem, rendering whole Arab families including children homeless in order to expand ultra-Orthodox settlements is just plain wrong. That we Jews, who throughout our history have so often been the victims of this kind of government treachery, would do this is a stain on our identity. As is the continued expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank, confiscating land and water from Arab villages. Lord knows sometimes the decisions of Israel's political leaders actually make our politics seem mature and thoughtful---if that's possible.

But that's the way it is with democracies, especially transparent ones like Israel's where there is true accountability. Israel is the most openly self-critical country on earth. Every serious decision is put under a public microscope and analyzed and criticized and reanalyzed. When you are in Israel and read the papers and watch the news, or even just talk to cab drivers, you realize Israel is a country on psychoanalysis-steroids.

Just over a month ago, Israel's prime minister and defense minister testified under oath before a commission of the government to answer for their actions as the flotilla attempted to break the Gaza blockade. And they were raked over the coals publically. Former Prime Minister Olmert was also formally called before a government commission to answer for actions taken during the war in Southern Lebanon. All in public. And Israelis want peace. Polls show that, by wide margins, Israelis are prepared to make enormous and very risky sacrifices to end the conflict with the Palestinians and the Arab world, as Israel has tried to do so many times already.

Can you imagine a president or a vice president of the United States being called, under oath, and in public, to be cross-examined...for....say...their actions leading up to the invasion of Iraq? Or their decisions in prosecuting that war in the succeeding years? That would never happen.

And so, what are Jewish ethics as they relate to the contemporary political challenges that Israel, and that we here in Roslyn, face? This question dominated the public debate in Israel

this summer, especially after the flotilla incident. And one of my teachers there, a brilliant scholar named Donniel Hartman put it this way: Jewish social justice in Israel or for us here in Roslyn begins with self-protection. It begins with the belief that that you deserve the right to life, to dignity and to security. You care about yourself and your own family, your own community, first. In one of the most famous and honest teachings in our tradition, the great sage Hillel begins: If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

But that's not the end of the matter, because Hillel's teaching continues, "If I am only for myself, what am I?" You see because it's primitive to ONLY care about yourself; it's what animals do, not us, not Jews obligated to heal this world, not human beings created in the image of God. So you care about yourself in part to transcend the self, so you can care about others. But you cannot know what others need and what others deserve until you begin with what you need and what you deserve. You ask: what are the basic requirements that I must have, that my family must have, that my children must have, in order to lead a life of meaning, of dignity, of security, and of promise? You face the stranger's fears and pain, and you ask: how would I respond, if they were my fears and my pain? And once you connect with a core sense of what you legitimately need and deserve---- then you work to ensure that others have it too. You care about yourself, so you can transcend yourself and care about the other.

And transcending the self, caring about others, always involves some sacrifice, some leap of faith. Some faith in the goodness and in the good intentions of the other. Not crazy and self-delusional faith, but the risk that maybe they just want what we want: peace and security, a good life for their children, dignity. That is a crisp definition of Jewish politics. Understanding that what I legitimately deserve, the other deserves, too. Balancing my own needs against the needs of others.

Easy to say, not always so easy to implement. It was so predictable that Hamas would murder Israelis just as Prime Minister Netanyahu and Palestinian President Abbas arrived in the US for peace talks. 4 people, including a pregnant mother, died in Hebron and 6 children became orphans that day. The forces of evil never want reconciliation and peace. It takes away their *raison d'être*. We have to pray that all parties in that blood torn part of the world have the forbearance and the courage to pursue peace in the face of such maddening obstacles. Obstacles that won't go away. And that we here in this country won't descend into irrational hatred or cavalier discrimination just because the loud voices that benefit from such garbage encourage us to.

Take the Muslim Community Center to be built in lower Manhattan. According to recent polls, nationwide 38% of Americans have an unfavorable view of Islam. Those numbers, I imagine, are driving the public discussion about this contentious issue.

But my friends in New York tell me that Imam Rauf, the leader of this center, has been at the forefront of interfaith relations for decades, that he wants to comport Islam with American

values, and that the FBI in the Bush Administration hired Imam Rauf to assist with counter-terrorism efforts.

They tell me that rabbis will be on the board of this center and that all contributions will be transparent. But people are afraid, and fear tends to cloud things. It can cause us rush to judgment, and to make decisions based on raw emotion.

So how about this example: this past January, Neil Malhotra, an assistant professor at Stanford School of Business, and Yotam Margalit of Columbia University set out to determine just how much blame for the current economic woes Americans were assigning to history's favorite scapegoat, the Jews. "Among non-Jewish respondents," Malhotra told *The Jewish Journal*, "a strikingly high 24.6 percent of Americans blanketly blamed 'the Jews' for the great recession, and 38.4 percent attributed at least some level of blame to us." So, one could argue, plenty of Americans don't always have such a high opinion of the Jews. Fear can create nasty, terribly unfair perceptions which can drive public policy, if we let them. And once you let that genie out of the bottle, you can't know who it will touch next.

So whether we are talking about Israel's struggles for peace with her neighbors, whether to build a Muslim community center in lower Manhattan, or how we treat the illegal immigrants among us in this country, how our laws treat women and gays and lesbians, or any of the other innumerable challenges we face at the edge of this new year, we begin by asking: How should my family, my children, my community be treated? And then we fight, persistently and with patience and courage, against the obstacles and the bullies, in the face of evil and even danger, to ensure that others are treated with the same measure of justice. If I am not for myself, who am I? But if I am only for myself, what am I? Jewish ethics on one foot, the Jewish definition of what we owe to another human being, there you have it.

I conclude with a story. For the past 25 years I have ended our Confirmation service with the same prayer. It's a prayer that I've always felt captures what I've wanted to teach our students during our year together. I never knew its source or author, and never really thought about it. This summer while a student at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, one of my fellow classmates, Rabbi Lavey Darby, introduced the same prayer to us as one of his favorites, and he told us its name: The Prayer of St. Christopher. You can imagine my surprise upon learning that I had unwittingly included, as the climactic Jewish message of our Confirmation service, Catholic prayer.

Here it is:

Oh God, make me a channel of Your peace:

That where there is hatred, I may bring love;

That where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness;

That where there is discord, I may bring harmony;

That where there is error, I may bring truth;

That where there is doubt, I may bring faith,

That where there is despair, I may bring hope,

That where there are shadows, I may bring light;

That where there is sadness, I may bring joy.

Just goes to show you that all religions, at their best, ask us to make the same pledges and commitments, and teach the same hopes and aspirations for us and for this world: to carve the very atmosphere of this world, to affect its quality. At the beginning of this New Year, when the voices of hatred and fear and selfishness seem to dominate all public discussion, a world that desperately cries out for compassion and genuine justice:

Where there is despair, I may bring hope,

Where there are shadows, I may bring light;

Shanah tovah.

