

PURIM 2013

While I have been giving these talks annually since 1986, their true origin dates back to my stay in Jerusalem in 1981. That's the year when I spent the eve of Purim in one yeshiva, and the day of Purim in another.

My recollections from both yeshivas remain vivid. I recall being at Aish HaTorah after the sun went down, listening to rock music and moving to the beat. Everyone in attendance, including the Ultra-Orthodox rabbis, seemed to be getting drunk and having a blast. It might have been a college party, except that there were more beards, more hats, and no women. I couldn't possibly have known that only a week later, Aish HaTorah would tell me that I was no longer welcome; I was viewed as a bad influence on the yeshiva students, or "buchers" as they were commonly known, because when I came over, the philosophizing didn't stop ... but neither did the drinking. It was one thing to drink on Purim, the celebration of good and evil, and another to play with inebriants on an ordinary evening.

Then there was the second yeshiva, Ohr Somayach. That's the one that housed and fed me, and asked nothing in return except for a willingness to attend class with an open mind. Throughout my stay there, I remained a skeptic. Oh sure, it was at that yeshiva that I came to believe in God for the first time since my early childhood, and in that regard I've never looked back. Kind of a big deal, right? But that wasn't all the rabbis were looking for; they didn't just want a *lifelong believer*, they wanted a community member – a member of the Orthodox Jewish family. And in that sense, I was a failure. I was tempted, but never could cross the Rubicon.

Ohr Somayach did a whole lot better with some of the other students. One, in particular, comes to mind. On the afternoon of Purim, I remember sitting at a table with a rabbi, a group of students in their early 20s, and an ample supply of kosher wine. Each person would talk about what was most meaningful to him -- *in vino veritas* must have been the idea. The alcohol was the same as the beverage of choice at Aish HaTorah, but the mood was different at Ohr Somayach. It was more emotionally intense and less celebratory. It bothered me that on Purim afternoon, people were getting so damned serious. Then, after I left the table and walked into another room, I came upon a lone student sitting on a chair weeping. He was literally sobbing to God, begging forgiveness for his inadequacies. It was as if God was the lover he jilted, but he had seen the error of his ways and was asking to be taken back.

On Yim Kippur, seeing that lone bucher would have been an inspiring sight. On Purim, though, it seemed sad and disturbing. That's not what this holiday is about, I thought to myself. On this day, we see both the good and evil in the world, and we celebrate them! If ever there were a day when we don't lament the absence of the Moshiach, if ever there were a day when we are allowed to accept ourselves and our world, including the warts, it is Purim.

It is with that admonition in mind that I've set before myself a challenge. The topic I've chosen to address tonight is, by all accounts, a depressing one. Jews know it simply as "The Conflict," and not because we live in a world with only a single conflict, but because, for Jews, one present-day war towers above the others in importance. That's why some Jews ignore it. But tonight, I'll neither ignore it, nor treat it as a vehicle for depression.

Allegedly, when it comes to The Conflict, to be hard-headed is to be broken hearted. And yet, this is not a day for broken hearts. It is a day to contemplate the evil Haman -- the forerunner of Hitler -- and laugh in his face.

I'm not sure how to turn the mess in the Middle East into a laughing matter. But I'm a long way from losing hope. One source of my inspiration is a friend who lost his battle this past spring to melanoma. George kept his dreams alive until the very end, until he had exhausted all the traditional cures, as well as some excruciating and experimental alternatives. By contrast, those who fight for Middle East peace find themselves in just the opposite situation. In that context, we haven't even scratched the surface of our potential to find a solution. And that's what gives me so much hope. Tonight, I will take us down what I consider to be a path for peace. And I'll try to keep the hand-wringing to a minimum.

Before we begin, though, I must warn you that this talk can be best introduced by the old expression, "if you don't like the weather, just wait five minutes, and if you *do* like the weather, just wait five minutes." That will surely describe the reactions to what I'm about to say by any of you who typically fall on one side or the other of the Middle East Peace debate. Personally, I'm less interested in picking sides than in picking solutions.

Let's focus on the notion that for decades has been synonymous with the term "Middle East Peace." I'm referring to the so-called "two-state solution." When I was growing up, it was seen as inevitable. Pundits would say that "we all know what the end game is; the only questions are how we're going to get there and when." That attitude allowed us to believe that we could retain our people's nation-state and maintain our self-image as a community guided by Torah values -- like compassion, generosity, and love for our neighbors. Sure, we'd have to give up some land in the process, but most Jews haven't been greedy about land. All we wanted was a peace of *oith* where our people could express our talents and our values autonomously. Make no mistake, Zionism was and still remains a dream rooted in justice. Why should Jews not possess what the French have, or the Spanish, Russians, Chinese, and yes, the Arabs? Are we not also a great people? Is there a reason we must always be in the minority? Can't the world spare us a morsel of land -- nothing big, but enough to be a viable state? We're happy to live side-by-side with Palestinians, Egyptians, and Syrians; we don't mean to harm them. But we will protect ourselves. We've seen what happens when we let down our guards to hostile neighbors.

The two-state solution was all about justice, security, peace ... and inevitability. But gradually, that last word started to disappear from the list. And now, just this year, its opposite has emerged. For the first time, I sense a number of my Jewish friends giving up the dream. Perhaps they have been listening to the drumbeat of mass media messages about the death of the two-state solution. To me, that sort of defeatism isn't just poisonous; it's a load of bull. Nietzsche once proclaimed God dead, Fukuyama said the same about history, and both were wrong. Now, Chicken Littles from hither and yon are announcing that the two-state solution has suffered the same fate. But has it really? One thing you won't hear anyone say is that the Palestinians will be satisfied with significantly less land than they had in 1967. For them, the only sane alternatives are either two states based on the 1967 borders with land swaps, or one democratic state that will ultimately be predominately Arab. Most Palestinians I know would prefer the latter, but that is not acceptable to more than a small minority of Jews.

We Jews demand our own state. And Palestinians refuse to live sheepishly under occupation. So, if there is to be a lasting peace, the two-state solution is the only option. And for that reason, I expect it will come to pass. If history tells us anything, it's that even the most intransigent conflict will ultimately get resolved. Our species has seen a 30 Year War, a 100 Year War, and cross-border feuds that lasted for centuries. But ultimately, they do end. Sooner or later, peace will prevail in the Holy Land. The question is: will it happen after a blood bath that will dwarf all previous violence in the region? That's what I don't know.

We've all heard the arguments of the doomsayers. They generally rest on a simple set of assertions: once West Bank land is settled by Jews, it can never be given back because the Settlers wouldn't permit it; the Israeli Government is set on building more and more settlements east of Jerusalem; these settlements will make it impossible to have a contiguous Palestinian state; and a non-contiguous Palestinian state is simply not viable. Supposedly, the Settlements' construction has been like a ticking time bomb. Once it reaches critical mass, the two-state solution will vanish. Most would probably agree that we haven't reached that point yet, but they also can't see a peace treaty happening in the near future. And by the time the "moderates" of both sides could possibly reach a deal, the Settlements will have grown to the point where the extremists would be in control. The Settlers would say "Hell no!" to giving up their land, the Palestinians would say "Hell no" to peace without that land, and the Jewish State would be forced indefinitely to occupy and subjugate a large, hostile population. That's the argument from doom that students of the Conflict keep reading about in the press.

But let's leave aside what the doomsayers are saying and consider the voices of the Israeli public. Have the Israelis themselves given up on the two-state solution? Hardly. Recent polls show that they overwhelmingly continue to *support* it. To be sure, they too are increasingly pessimistic that it will ever come about, but that doesn't mean they won't be periodically willing to give it a shot.

The Israeli mainstream is represented well by the current "rock star" of Israeli politics, Yair Lapid. Lapid is the moderate who placed a strong second to Netanyahu in the recent elections. Does he believe in the two-state solution? Absolutely, he says, and he will look for opportunities to work for that solution. But Lapid is also a pragmatist, and his proclamations on the topic have hardly endeared him to the left. He opposes dividing Jerusalem. He has supported certain controversial settlements. He has even been quoted in saying that "I don't think the Arabs want peace." And for him, as for most Israelis, the expressed goal is a "decent divorce," not a "happy marriage."

The same folks who would tell you that the two-state solution is an impossibility because Israel is too entrenched to make the necessary concessions were also likely predicting that Bibi would win the last election in a walkover. It didn't work out that way – the moderates and progressives won as many seats as the conservatives. Israel is truly a democracy, and like other democracies, its citizens' views swing back and forth like a pendulum. Right now, it appears, most Israelis are ready for the two-state solution, if only their leaders and the leaders of the Palestinians could deliver one.

Here in America, we have limited power over public opinion either in Tel Aviv or in Ramallah. What we can influence is the way American Jews see the Conflict – and believe me, that matters. America is Israel's wingman, and Jews represent the fulcrum of her American

support. I would even go so far as to say that *progressive* American Jews represent the fulcrum of Israel's support outside her borders, for progressives dominate the American-Jewish landscape. Just look at the Jewish vote in American elections. Even when the Republicans win in a landslide, they still lose among Jews. On domestic politics, our liberalism is unmistakable.

But for some reason, many of us shift our values when it comes to Israel. And that means that when Israel is led by a guy like Bibi, who is to the right of most Israelis, many progressive American Jews reflexively refuse to criticize her conduct. If we in America were to take on a more confrontational stance, we might begin to see Israel take the peace process more seriously. Plus, we might find the United States more relevant in shaping Palestinian opinions, for then, we'd be seen more as an honest broker and less as Israel's loyal-to-a-fault protector.

It's time progressive American Jews apply the same values to our dealings with Bibi that we would apply to our dealings with George W. Bush. For starters, we can stop asking the Palestinians to make the next set of unilateral concessions, even though it is the Israelis who hold most of the power. Imagine taking that attitude with respect to America's poor and saying that we don't have to make any strides to help them until they reach out with strides of their own. That's not the way progressives talk. It's the language of staunch conservatives. Yet, that might well reflect mainstream Jewish sentiment concerning the Palestinians.

The key to applying progressive values to this context is indeed the willingness to make unilateral concessions for peace – not too many, of course, but at least enough to get the process rolling so that the other side realizes that the ball is in its court. This willingness begins with the recognition that neither side has a monopoly on claims for justice.

Most Jews, whether here or in Israel, continue to view the Israelis as the central victims in this story, the victims of a belligerent, stiff-necked people who “never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity,” as was famously said about Yassir Arafat. This is why many of my tribespeople, including otherwise progressive Jews, have thrown up their hands and said “We give up. Those Palestinians have only themselves to blame. They can't live in peace with a Jewish State. So let them be stateless. And if they want a state, they can overthrow the king of Jordan and join their countryman there!”

It's that attitude that has given rise to all this talk of the “inevitable” death of the two-state solution. I'm just not buying into it. And my hope is that the recent Israeli election is at least an indication that Israelis are starting to get fed up with such a defeatist attitude when it comes to peace work. That is a needless capitulation to endless war, one that rests on a basic fallacy of Jewish logic: that our problems can only get worse, they can never get better.

I remember having that mindset several years back when I was diagnosed with pre-diabetes. My path seemed so inevitable – I was thin, exercised regularly, ate a vegan diet, and yet my blood sugar still topped 100. Clearly, I was doing everything I could do to help, and my sugar level would only get worse with age, right? Wrong. I went to a nutritionist and realized that being the world's most prodigious carb eater was probably not the best plan, even if those carbs were vegan. And the next time I checked, the blood sugar level had dropped. So there you have it – progress is possible. Who knew?

Unbeknownst to me, I wasn't doing my best to live a healthy lifestyle. Nor are we American Jews doing our best to *support* Israel. Israel doesn't just need money, weapons and international respect. It needs a kick in the pants. And as Israel's closest friends, we would be the most effective community to do the kicking. Here's the message: we get that you need the Wall, at least temporarily. We get that you may even need some land as a security buffer. What you *don't* need are West Bank settlements – unless this two-state stuff was all just a sham.

Like the Israelis who sent a strong rebuke to the policies of the Netanyahu regime, it is not enough for American Jews to say “We oppose the Settlements.” We must *demand* that their construction cease. Am I advocating some form of boycott or other economic sanction? No, because I have never advocated inflicting economic pain on either participant of the Conflict, and I don't see the point of starting now. But if we're not going to ratchet back with money, we had better ratchet up with rhetoric. And here's one mantra: *pro-Israel means anti-Settlement*. Our pro-Israel organizations must take a stand on that fundamental topic, and we must air our views in public. I want our leaders, in and out of the government, to stand up to the right-wing of the Israeli society on this issue. Theirs is a vision of a “Greater Israel,” one that has come to symbolize imperialism and subjugation. They are the custodians of the Jewish State, and we all must thank them for serving in that capacity, but we too have a stake in the venture. All Jews do. And if we believe that the custodians are behaving in a way that is inconsistent with the highest teachings of our faith, we have a duty to speak out on the topic.

Being anti-Settlement doesn't mean being anti-security. As I indicated, Israel can take the land it needs to maintain its security. Just don't *settle* it. We Jews must proclaim as clearly and as publicly as possible that it would be better for Israel to keep West Bank land and do nothing with it than to encourage Jewish efforts to colonize that land. The first approach signifies that Israel is holding the disputed land strictly as a short-term caretaker, so that it can later turn it over to the Palestinians once the Conflict is truly resolved and in the meantime use the land as a security buffer or bargaining chip. The second approach, the approach of the Netanyahu regime, suggests that Israel's real concern isn't just its security, but also its prosperity, which it is willing to bolster at the Palestinians' expense. In seizing the disputed lands for settlement purposes, Israel makes a statement: “Let 'em eat cake.” That's what I call a toxic message.

As long as we're talking about mantras that the Jews here and in Israel can easily adopt, here's a second: *The Palestinians have a legitimate claim to the Holy Land*. We can't just grudgingly acknowledge that point. We must proudly proclaim it, as if we were proclaiming our own rights. You can say what you want about the fledgling nature of Palestinians as a defined “people,” but there is no mistaking that for centuries, Arab peoples have been the majority residents of the disputed land and that Palestinian families that have been rooted there for decades, if not centuries, were forcibly extracted to make room for European Jews.

We Jews were once booted from that same land in a millennium gone by and have pined for it ever since, but whether that gives us the “superior” or “inferior” claim is hardly worth arguing. We both have a powerful claim to that land, and we find ourselves with a dilemma as a result of it: should we respond to this predicament through compromise or through military conquest? To me, that's just another way of asking us to identify the highest values of our tradition. I don't know about you, but I see us as a people of doves, or at least I used to. We who call ourselves religious Jews – hell, we who call ourselves committed *ethical* Jews -- have a

stake in this outcome. And if we as individuals still support the two-state solution, like most of our Israeli counterparts, it's about time we blew the whistle on anything that gets in its way.

But here's the rub: we can't just blow the whistle on our own people. Jewish intransigence or greed is not, in my opinion, the primary cause of this Conflict. If you're looking to assign blame here, you can look in any number of directions: to the Europeans, who for centuries treated us like pariahs or vermin and made it difficult for us to trust our neighbors; to the non-Palestinian Arabs, who rather than helping their brethren, preferred to stoke the flames of war by delegitimizing the Zionist project; and finally, to those Palestinians who view themselves as nothing more than blameless victims who share no responsibility for this continued conflict. It is that last attitude – one that I commonly see among peace activists -- that desperately has to change.

We progressive Jews can talk until we're blue in the face about the need to make concessions to the Palestinians. But there is little we can accomplish until the critical mass of Palestinians are ready for peace. A peaceful resolution will, in fact, require two peoples who are willing to assert each other's legitimate claim to the land, followed by an agreement permanently to divide that land and peacefully respect that division. At present, however, few Palestinians publicly voice their respect for the legitimacy of a Jewish state in the region. When you listen to the Palestinian narrative, you'll hear about how, for the most part, the Jews are a European people who have no claim to their own state outside of Europe. Any claim to the Land of Zion based on the events of thousands of years in the past is widely seen among Palestinians as absurd. And as for any claim to Israeli sovereignty that might otherwise have been conveyed by the United Nations in 1947, Palestinians frequently speak as if that were washed away the moment that Israeli military forces engaged in unspeakable atrocities to cleanse the land of its native people.

Yes, I know that there are those in the peace community who believe that this narrative is perfectly understandable, if not spot-on correct. But they need to realize that as long as this remains the dominant Palestinian narrative, Israelis will legitimately fear that a large segment of the Palestinian community will not rest until *all* of pre-48 Palestine is under Arab control. In other words, the more the peaceniks serve as enablers to the Palestinian sense of pure victimization, the more that the Palestinians will feel free to de-legitimize Israel, and the more this will encourage Israelis to circle the wagons. Many Palestinians are willing to live in peace under a two-state scenario, but many others remain militant in their desire to undermine that "illegitimate" scenario, and Israelis have every reason to question how they can survive in the face of such militant opposition just kilometers from their border.

Yes, this will be a tough nut to crack. But crack it we can. And once again, Americans can make a difference. We will need Arab-Americans and peace activists – those who care most about Palestinians – to present the predicament in the clearest possible terms. Hoping for the Jewish State to wither away is a fantasy. Israelis feel every bit as victimized and entitled as do the Palestinians, and that is precisely what will keep Israel from imploding, as many imperialist empires have done in the past. Besides, even if you take Israel's boundaries to include the entire area protected by the West Bank Wall, have you ever seen an empire anywhere near as tiny as that one? You could fit that little piece of land several times over into any number of Arab states. So, I say to the anti-Zionist voices of the world, go ahead and compare Israel to the

British Empire, the Nazis, or any other imperialist power in history. Then look at a world atlas. Your rhetoric doesn't pass the laugh test.

In short, just as we American Jews must send a message to the Israelis, we also need the peace community to send another message to the Palestinians: "Stop complaining about the problem and show us a viable solution!" The next time the Palestinians feel like embracing the one-state solution, remind them that the only plausible one-state solution is the situation we have now – where the state is controlled by the side with all the military power. If the Palestinians want their own state, they're going to have to show the Jews that they're willing to respect a state for the Jewish people. In other words, the mantras go both ways. To be pro-Israel is to be anti-Settlement. And to be pro-Palestinian is to be anti-Right of Return. And why? Because both sets of Abrahamic cousins have a legitimate claim to the same land, and the cousin with the military power is asking to find an equitable way of dividing that property into two states. No matter what division is made, some Palestinian families simply would not be able to return to their pre-1948 towns. That's the reality if we're going to have two states for two peoples.

I don't like the divorce metaphor. I think the Jews and Palestinians *are* part of the same family and shall always remain so. But we are not husbands and wives. We are first cousins. And for multiple reasons, the Jewish cousins want their own house and yard. If the Palestinian cousins want peace and prosperity, they had better respect that. As for those peaceniks who are fueling Palestinian disrespect of the Zionist project, they're just poisoning the well of peace, and they're screwing the Palestinians most of all.

Truly, once we realize that this is a family dispute, and that both parts of the family are entitled to respect, we can get this resolved. The path is clear. It's called the willingness to send unilateral pro-peace messages with the stated goal of a two-state solution based on '67 borders with land swaps. It's called embracing Palestinian Nationalism *and* Zionism. It's called respecting the legitimacy of both peoples' claims to autonomy in the Middle East. Sooner or later, it will happen. Sanity, ultimately, tends to prevail.

But how can there ever be a two-state solution, you may ask, if Israeli governments continue to build settlements eastward from Jerusalem, thereby cutting into the contiguous nature of the future Palestinian state? I guess they'll just have to build another wall to the west of the current monstrosity, let it form the new border, and tell the Settlers who live in the area to the east of that wall that they are no longer residents of Israel. I bet most would return to the Jewish State. And if some want to stay, that's fine by me. Lord knows, we have plenty of Israeli Arabs, so what's wrong with having some Palestinian Jews?

The bottom line is this: the family of Abraham needs to stop treating this problem as either hopeless, or one that has already been solved to the extent it can be. The problem is plenty solvable, as long as we keep working at it, building a community of "Pro-Israel, Pro-Palestine" forces of moderation, and recognizing that the time has come to give both sides *tough* love. If either side says they can't make unilateral concessions because they need to retain their leverage, tell them that hoarding leverage makes no more sense here than burying ourselves with bars of gold bullion. This isn't the time to hoard anything. It's the time to embrace, to reclaim our family connections, to get involved in the fight for peace, and to realize that in the name of our common ancestor Abraham, intra-family war can no longer be tolerated. We can and will do better. And we who fight for a two-state solution will deal with this Conflict in a way that only a

true peacemaker can understand – we're going to enjoy the ride. We're going to have fun as we work.

That, after all, is the dirty rotten secret about peacemaking. It can be emotionally and intellectually stimulating. It is a lot like runner's high: when you spend enough time doing it, you actually start enjoying the hell out of it. Besides, this is Purim, and on this night, even a decades-old, supposedly never-ending conflict has to be confronted with a relish and rum. So for Haman's sake, drink up in the name of peace.