

THE STORY OF ABRAHAM GELLER --
THE TRUTH ABOUT THE STATE OF ISRAEL

A High Holiday Sermon
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In the late 1930's, Hitler began a barrage of propaganda against the Jews which in time, after constant repetition, was swallowed by most of the German people. Hitler's technique, as explained in his book "Mein Kampf", was to project the big lie and to repeat it often enough so that people began to assimilate it and to believe it. The goal was to convince the German people that their current poverty and their defeat in World War One were due to the perfidious efforts of the Jews in their midst. Through his propaganda, Hitler was able to divert the attention of the Germans away from his stealthy conquest of German Democracy and towards an imagined enemy described as embodying all evil.

There is increasing evidence that the Arab nations of the Middle East, especially the P.L.O. and its chief allies, Syria, Iraq and Libya, have consciously embarked on a similar propaganda campaign against Israel and the Jewish people. If the Jews of America are not vigilant, if we permit the Arabs to succeed, we also may be victimized by this global strategy.

To measure the success of the Arab propaganda campaign, we have only to look at the U.N. vote on alleged Israeli racism. In spite of the fact that the Israeli nation consists of people of various skin colors, all of whom have equal rights under the law, the vast majority of the nations of the world swallowed this propaganda and voted in favor of the Arab resolution. Even the fact that Israeli Arabs have the right to vote and are full citizens in every respect, except for their eligibility to serve in the army, was ignored. Nor were contrary facts considered, like the Syrian retention of its few remaining Jews under virtual house arrest and the general policy in Iraq and Iran to persecute the Kurds and other minorities.

At various meetings arranged by Arabs in various countries around the world, as in South America, so called Arab information experts have contended that the Jews were killed by the Germans only because they refused to obey the laws of Germany. So once again, this time from Arab sources, Jews are charged with disloyalty and lack of patriotism towards fascists.

Hitler's purpose was to convince the Germans that the Jews were dirt. If a people is no better than dirt, it doesn't matter what happens to them. Arab propaganda is obviously intended to produce the same result. Jews are liars and cheats. The Arab propaganda reads, "Jews are murderers, racist, unpatriotic, international conspirators! Condemn them. Throw them out. Kill them!"

While all of this wild and irrational propaganda is being filtered to the nations of the world, the Arabs continue to offer more sophisticated charges at the U.N. The foremost of these charges is that the Jews invaded the land of Palestine by force of arms and ruthlessly threw out the peaceful law abiding native citizens of a long standing Arab nation. I have met some Jews who have a guilty conscience about this charge, so I would like to direct my remarks this morning primarily to the question - how did the Israelis get control of what is now called modern Israel? Are they really the usurpers and aggressors the Arabs make them out to be?

Perhaps the best way to understand how so many Jews got to modern Israel is to tell the story of one man, one family. I will tell you the story of Abraham Geller, Avraham Ben Yisrael, who happens to be my wife's uncle. Abraham Geller came to what was then called Palestine in 1928 under the British mandate established after World War One. The British were mandated by the League of Nations to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Palestine was the name for those lands which today include Israel, the West Bank and Jordan. # You might properly ask why the British weren't mandated to establish an Arab homeland in Palestine. The reason is that the Arabs fought against the allies in World War One, just as they assisted the Germans in World War Two. Jews, on the other hand, had established a Jewish legion which fought alongside the British in World War One helping to oust the Germans positioned in North Africa and in Palestine. Abraham Geller's brother, Samuel Geller (my father-in-law) was a fighting member of the so-called "Jewish Legion" in World War One.

At the end of World War One, there was no Arab nation in Palestine; indeed, there was no Arab nation in Jordan, which geographically was part of Palestine. The cities had pockets of settled Arabs, and many Arabs lived in the hill country, but relatively few Arabs were settled on farms, doing serious farming. Most of the Arab population were nomads, arriving with their sheep in the feeding season and leaving the area to the sun and the desert for most of the

year. By the end of World War One, however, the Jews were settling in increasing numbers in the coastal areas. By the time of the census made by the non-partisan American Palestine Institute in 1943, it was revealed that most of the established farms belonged to the Jews.

How did the Jews get to own these lands so that they could cultivate them? Did they get them by force of arms? On the contrary, Jews acquired their land in Palestine the same way anyone acquires land anywhere else. They paid good money for it. Your grandmother and mine had a blue "pushki", a little charity box, on her window sill. Whenever she could, she put a few pennies in it, and these pennies from grandmothers were sent to the Jewish National Fund in Palestine where they were used to buy land. Because of the successful Jewish farming, increasing numbers of Arabs came into Palestine to help work Jewish farms and orange groves.

Now Avraham Ben Yisrael, Abraham Geller, came to Palestine in 1928 from eastern Europe as a young man. He built for himself what you and I would call a hut, without running water and without a toilet, and he joined a Moshav, a group of cooperative Jewish farmers, who, with the help of various Jewish agencies, established a chicken farm. Within a few years, Abraham went back to Russia to bring back his sweetheart, Rivka. Rivka was reluctant to leave the relative pleasures of the big city, Kiev, where at least she had running water, but she loved Abraham, so she decided to join him in his pioneering effort. The Israeli sun was hot, the workday was long and hard, the mosquitoes were relentless, and the lack of facilities was much too indelicate for this city girl. After a few years of this suffering, Rivka couldn't take it any longer. She pleaded with Abraham to take her back to civilization. Reluctantly, Abraham took her to Kiev. The desert lands of Israel were no place for a city-bred lady, but within a few months Abraham was back in Israel, this time alone. Deep within his heart he felt that the Jewish communities of eastern Europe were doomed, and he knew that the place of the Jew was in a land of his own - in the land which had never been the national home of any people other than the Jews.

Abraham decided to try to improve the conditions on his small farm so that his wife might want to return. He added a second small room to his hut. Now there was a kitchen and a combination living room-bedroom. Economic conditions in the land improved because Jews were coming in ever increasing numbers during the 1930s. There were more and more neighbors and soon there was a small village. There even was an occasional store in which to shop, and lo and behold, soon there was plumbing in the bathroom, not completely efficient, but plumbing nevertheless.

With such good news, Avraham was encouraged to travel the long distance to Kiev, and once again he was able to convince Rivka to come to Israel. In time, he added a separate bedroom to his house and, still later, a second bedroom for the two sons born to them. I have been in this home which is in Nes Ziona, about thirty miles from Tel Aviv. The home would not quite pass the Dade County building code. I remember trying to take an afternoon nap lying on the couch in the living room. There was no air conditioning, of course, so the windows on this July day had to be wide open. The heat was almost suffocating, but the stench coming into the windows from the chicken coops was overpowering. It seemed to Selma and myself that the way to survive was not to breathe. Avraham and Rivka were not perturbed by the stench. For them it was part of the atmosphere in which they lived.

Today, the elder son of this pioneering couple is the principal of a high school in a nearby town, and he also has a house and a family in the Moshav. This son, Yosef, also owns a small orange grove in the Moshav which he supervises in his spare time. A second son, Zvike, is living in Canada as a college professor in Montreal. Such is the nature of the "aggressive" conquerors of Israel.

In 1948, when Abraham had been in Palestine twenty years, the United Nations declared the existence of an independent state of Israel. That same United Nations also declared the existence of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. The world has not yet unlearned the historical fact that it was the Arabs and not the Jews who refused to accept this arrangement. It was the so called peaceful Palestinian Arabs who invited their friends, the Jordanians, the Syrians, and the Egyptians to send their armies to throw out Abraham and Rivka and their two sons. Abraham was 45 years old at this time, but he still had to fight as a soldier.

Winston Churchill, Secretary for War at the time of the Balfour Declaration, spoke of both banks of the Jordan as being included in the Jewish State. (Palestine: Problems and Promise, Public Affairs Press, Washington, D.C., 1946, Page 60)

Josef was only 16 years old. He became part of the regular army. The only problem was, there were no guns. Can you imagine - the "aggressors" had no guns against a half dozen Arab nations!

You all know the result of that war. Somehow, the Abrahams and the Rifkas and the Yosefs held off the Arab armies. During the push and pull of the war, the Jordanians took over most of the land the United Nations had allocated to the Palestinian Arab state. The Jordanians also took over some of the land the U.N. had allocated to Israel. The Israelis, for their part, took over some land allocated to the Palestinians. There was an uneasy truce for almost twenty years, with many raids and terrorist acts performed by the Arabs upon the exposed farms and kibbutzim of the Israelis. The Jews defended themselves with increasing capability.

Almost twenty years later, in 1967, Nasser brought his armies into the Sinai desert and boasted of his intent to push the Israelis into the sea. At the same time, he blockaded and effectively prevented any Israeli ships from going to the port of Elat. You may remember Abba Eban's majestic speech in the U.N. when he spoke of Israel trying to breathe with one lung blocked. Abraham and his family had spent the years between 1948 and 1967 working hard on their farm. They expanded from chickens to orange groves. What had once been desert sand now blossomed into lush green orange trees and a new aroma of orange blossoms filled the desert air. Several Arabs were hired to help work the groves. The Arabs were invited to dinner in Abraham's house with their respective families present. The invitation was warmly returned. When Nasser initiated the 1967 war, Abraham and his Arab friends were all miserable. They remained friends. They vowed to help one another no matter what happened.

During these twenty years from 1948 to 1967, Israel had become more fully a nation. Its military force was now worthy of the name. This time, there were guns with which to fight and a first class air force. Within 24 hours, Nasser's planes were bombed as they lay on the ground, and the war was substantially over. The Jordanian army was driven out of East Jerusalem, and for the first time since 1948, Jews and Arabs could travel wherever they wished in that ancient city. The terrible thing that happened to the Arabs of Jerusalem was that now they could travel freely and now their teachers could get twice the pay that they received under Jordanian rule. One has only to observe the thousands of Arabs working on construction jobs in Israel at good pay to see how badly they have suffered under Israeli "aggression". Even Arabs from Gaza and the West Bank are taking advantage of the new found prosperity in Israel. #

During the 1967 war, Avraham Geller and his fellow Israelis drove the Jordanian armies out of the West Bank and risked their lives to get the Syrians out of the cement dugouts on the Golan Heights from which the Syrians had for years bombed the Jewish settlements below. Israel won a heroic and unexpectedly easy victory in this war and hoped that the Arabs would sue for peace. With a peace accepted by all sides, it would be possible to relinquish military control of the West Bank and Gaza and Arab and Jew could cooperate in battling together against the natural problems of life which beset this water starved area of the world.

Perhaps the Arab nations would have taken this constructive step, but they had one ace in the hole, one asset which encouraged them to believe that ultimately the world would help them in their effort to force the Israelis into the sea. The Arabs had oil, that source of energy which was essential to the operation of Western and Japanese industry. Further, the Arabs had the considerable help of the Soviet Union which was anxious to keep things unsettled in that region of the world, with the hope of endangering America's supply of oil.

Rearmed by the Russians, the Arab nations in 1973 completely fooled American and Israeli intelligence. With America and Russia supposedly cooperating towards a settlement between those two countries, both America and Israel felt the Russians would not support a war in the Middle East. They were wrong about Russia then, as they have since been wrong with respect to Afghanistan. The Arabs took a severe toll of casualties amongst the young Israeli soldiers who were posted as guards on the long strung out desert front. Once again, Yosef Geller, limping on a leg wounded in the 1967 war, was rushed into battle on Yom Kippur Day of 1973.

Some of you may recall that bitter 1973 war. I was standing in this pulpit, as I am now, when one of our young people brought me a note saying that he had heard on T.V. that Syria and Egypt had invaded Israel. Such is the nature of Israel's "aggression" on Arab countries. If one can call holding a prayer book in one's hands on Yom Kippur an act of aggression, so the Israelis were responsible for

The Arabs point to many refugees who are "victims" of the Israelis. They neglect to mention that both the Arab refugees and an equal number of Jewish refugees from Arab lands were the result of the war started by the Arabs.

the war of 1973. Thousands of Israelis were killed in that war, the equivalent of 150,000 Americans killed on a pro rata basis, and many more badly wounded. The casualties were so great that the Israelis vowed never to be caught sleeping again.

As a result, the Israeli operations on the Lebanese border today are much more active than they were on the border of Suez or on the Golan Heights in 1973. When the P.L.O. and Syria moved in to divide up Lebanon in 1978, the Israelis took steps to make certain that their Lebanese border did not become an easy way of Arab entry in the next war.

As some of you know, I am a member of the Jewish Peace Fellowship, a pacifist organization. A sermon I gave years ago on the traditional Jewish reluctance to use violence has received national circulation, yet I am not one of those who second guess Israel's military posture. It seems quite obvious to me that Israel has taken a great gamble by permitting Egyptian soldiers into the Sinai. I would think it suicidal for Israel to permit still another Arab army to be installed in the West Bank. An independent Arab state in the West Bank means still another Arab army positioned a few miles from Jerusalem and within cannon range of Ben Gurion Airport. The recent statement by the nations of western Europe that they favor statehood for the West Bank is everything Begin says it is. It is a callous surrender to the pressure of the oil producing countries. This statement has the smell of Munich about it. As the nations of western Europe hoped to appease Hitler by offering up Czechoslovakia as a sacrificial offering, so now many of these same nations hope to appease the Arabs by offering up Israel as the sacrificial offering.

The government of Israel senses what is happening, and for that reason it is taking increasingly bold steps, rather than making compromises that will lead to its overthrow. While the establishment of new Israeli settlements in the West Bank can be seen as a yielding to the demands of the super nationalists in Israel, the settlements can also be interpreted as attempts to bolster the defense of the West Bank. I am not one of Begin's greatest admirers. I would much prefer seeing the Labor Party in power in Israel, but I am not at all sure that Begin's policies are as unwise as some people in the U.S. State Department seem to think. With all of her former allies in the mood for appeasement, Israel, it seems to me, has the right to suspect that she is being sold for a mess of pottage, oil pottage.

Are Abraham Geller and his families aggressors? It would seem that they have been aggressive in combating the desert and forcing it to yield orange blossoms. They have also been aggressive against the Arab nations who attacked them. They drove those nations back until their armies were at a safe distance, and they want to keep those armies at a safe distance. They are outnumbered many times by soldiers and tanks and planes, so the Gellers and the other Israelis must be ever alert. The young boys walking the streets of Israel carrying guns, even when they are off duty, are a symbol of the state of siege in which the Israelis live. To carry a gun when you have been invaded so many times is hardly an act of aggression.

Abraham Geller is now in his late seventies and cannot be counted on to fight anymore. Yosef Geller is in his middle fifties with a very bad leg. He won't be able to do much in the next war. Yosef has two daughters, both in the Israeli army. They will be active if war again breaks out. No one in the Geller # family is about to surrender what Abraham Geller began in 1928. They will defend their orange grove and their little house with their lives.

In the days ahead, you will be hearing more and more of Arab propaganda about the Israeli aggressors. It might be well for you to memorize the story of Abraham and Rivka Geller and their family and to recite it to your friends.

Even better, of course, you ought to visit Israel and meet personally some of the wonderful people who are trying to make a go of things there. The Temple is arranging an Israeli trip in June. Join us. It might be the thrill of your life. As for Selma and myself, we are going there in June to spend a little time with a great Jewish hero, Abraham Geller.

The Gellers have changed their name to Galchen (Hebrew for "gracious waves".)