

NIGHTMARE IN BEIRUT

A High Holiday Sermon

by *Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard, DHL, DD*

5243 (1982)

Temple Beth Am

South Miami, Florida

NIGHTMARE IN BEIRUT

All of us are heartsick over recent events in the Palestinian camps in Beirut. Reports on the number of innocent civilians killed increase daily, but even one civilian killed under the circumstances was one too many. It seems clear that members of the Christian militia shot the civilians, but it is also clear that the Israelis admitted them into the compound. The Israelis claim that they admitted the Christians to weed out members of the P.L.O. hidden still in the camps. The Israelis claim that they are shocked, that they could not possibly have anticipated this kind of action from the Christians. The Christian leaders claim they are shocked, that they could not have anticipated this from their men.

What happened in the Palestinian camps in Beirut is an unthinkable tragedy. The heart of every Jew overflows with remorse at the thought that Jews were in any way involved with what took place. It is fitting, therefore, that we try to find our way back to the source. How is it possible that Jews could become involved in such a barbarous deed?

Let us step back one step. The Israelis sent their forces into West Beirut to try to maintain the peace in that area after the cruel murder of General Gemayel, the man nominated by the Lebanese parliament to be its next president. Gemayel, while chosen by the Lebanese as the strongest person with a chance to unify the nation, was also the nominee of Israel. His murder, the Israelis assumed, was a message to them. They had reason to believe that his murder was by the hand of those most opposed to Israel, the P.L.O. in precisely this fashion has murdered every leader the Israelis have attracted in the villages and cities of the West Bank. As soon as an Arab cooperates with Israel, he is killed.

With Gemayel slain, chaos could have erupted again in Beirut. Who would try to stabilize the situation? Would the Lebanese militia go into the P.L.O. camps to find the murderers? No - they refused to do so, just as they had shown themselves incapable of controlling the P.L.O. before. The Christian militia was willing to undertake this difficult task. Unfortunately, some of the Christians had their own agenda against the P.L.O., and apparently it was this agenda that took priority in their eyes.

Let us go back another step. How did the Israelis and the Christian militia become allies? The partnership began when the P.L.O. invaded southern Lebanon and captured villages and cities that had been populated by the Christians for several thousands of years. The Palestinians complain about the loss of territory in Israel, but they did not hesitate to displace the Christians of southern Lebanon. On the contrary, the P.L.O. ruthlessly attacked innocent civilian populations, destroying Christians by the thousands and taking over their villages and cities in their entirety. When I was at the Lebanese Israeli border a few years ago, our guide stopped to talk to a weeping Lebanese Christian who had just come across the border to receive medical aid. The Christian told our guide what the P.L.O. had done to his daughter. They had severed both of her breasts and split her vagina by inserting a huge object. All told, in the P.L.O. rape of Lebanon and before the entry of Syria into the war, 50,000 were killed and a quarter of a million wounded. Perhaps the Christian militia had burning memories which prevented them from being dispassionate in the discharge of their duties in the Beirut camp. I don't know if this is sufficient to forgive them, but it may help us to understand what they did. As for the Israelis, perhaps they were guilty of not understanding the great emotions under which the often victimized Christians were laboring.

What happened in the Palestinian camps in Beirut was horrible, beyond the comprehension of detached civilized people. It was, however, but one small part of an ongoing barbarous scenario that the P.L.O. has set in motion. If the Palestinians seem to be the victim of the violence in Lebanon now, it is only because its military arm no longer holds the power to be the cruel victimizer.

1800 Years of Pacifism

Now let us take some giant steps backward. When the Jews of Europe fled the clutches of Adolph Hitler, they came to Israel as the heirs of 1800 years of pacifism. For 1800 years after the Roman defeat of the Bar Kochba rebellion, the Jews turned the other cheek when they were attacked in the various countries in which they lived. Because they were always in the minority and because they seldom had the full protection of the law, Jews had perfected the art of bowing low whenever they encountered violence. If the Jews in Russia had organized resistance against the Cossacks, the Cossacks would have destroyed many thousands in a program instead of just a few hundred. By not resisting their attackers, the Jews managed to survive in the main, and in spite of rampant anti-semitism, their numbers increased over the years. For 1800 years, the doctrine of pacifism was a survival technique for the Jewish people. It worked wondrously!

But then came Hitler. The Jews could not have anticipated the blood lust of this madman. They thought surely that at some point his murderous instinct would be satiated. Sadly, they were wrong. The non-violent doctrine that had worked for them for 1800 years made them sitting ducks for Hitler. On the whole, the Jews of Europe did not use force against Hitler, because there was no tradition amongst their people for almost 2,000 years of fighting force with force. Until quite late in the game, force was simply not one of the thinkable alternatives for the European Jews.

The Jews who managed to get to Israel, however, had learned their lesson. They knew now that no one would protect them, if they did not protect themselves. You all are familiar with the story. In 1948, the United Nations divided Palestine into two countries, a Jewish state and an Arab state. The Arabs, now called Palestinians, refused to accept their limited state. Instead, they attacked the Jews with the intent of driving them into the sea. All the major Arab nations joined the Palestinian Arabs in this war. In spite of their lack of experience, and in spite of their lack of efficient arms, the Jews managed to hold off the Arabs. In this 1948 war, Jordan, a recently proclaimed Arab nation just east of the Jordan River, seized the so-called West Bank area, which had been allotted to the Palestinian Arabs. The Palestinians did not protest this conquest for twenty years.

In 1967, the Egyptian President, Nasser, closed the waterways available to Israeli shipping and marshalled his armies in the Sinai, prepared for war. Israel pleaded with King Hussein of Jordan not to join in the war. If Jordan had not joined its Arab neighbors against Israel, the West Bank would belong to Jordan today, and none of the problems that have developed in that area in the last fifteen years would have happened. But Jordan quickly joined the Arabs in still another attempt to force the Israelis into the sea. This time, the Israelis were more prepared and better trained. They drove the Jordanians out of Jerusalem and across the Jordan River. They drove the Syrians off the Golan Heights, from which overlook the Syrians had been bombing the Israeli settlements below, in what was supposed to be peacetime. The Israelis also drove the Egyptians out of Gaza and the Sinai.

Had Israel concentrated on its military lessons, it might have prevented the next Arab invasion, but the Israelis felt that they had enough of war, and they assumed the Arabs felt the same way. Their mistake cost them many Israeli lives, for on this very day, Yom Kippur, in 1973 (5734) the Arabs attacked on all sides, and the unprepared Israelis suffered tragic losses. Although near to defeat, the Israelis managed to reverse the tide of the war and at the end had the Arabs reeling. The military hero created by that war was General Sharon.

Inside Israel, the Prime Minister, Golda Meir, and Moshe Dayan, the Defense Minister, had to accept responsibility for the lack of suspicion they had held towards the Arabs. Having suffered severe casualties, the Israelis determined to take a more watchful and militaristic stance. Henceforward, they would no longer be surprised by the Arabs. If any surprising were to be done, they would do the surprising. Progressively, the leadership within Israel moved from

Golda Meir, whose homespun philosophy endeared her to everyone, to Gen. Rabin, to Menachem Begin. The shift can be compared to a shift in this country from a peace minded Pres. Carter to a strong militarily oriented President in Ronald Reagan. Begin's position is clear. Before the Iraqis can make an atomic bomb to destroy us, let us destroy the reactor. Before the P.L.O. can use its enormous stockpile of weapons against us, let's capture the stockpile. Before Syria can use its SAM missiles in Lebanon against us, let's destroy the missiles. And so the people which had been pacifistic for 1800 years and was unprepared to resist, in any broad sense, the inhumanity of Adolph Hitler was steadily moved, as the result of repeated invasions, to a preventative type of military orientation.

There is no question but that the Israel image has suffered a great deal because of its incursion into Lebanon. During the early days of the war, some of the news announcers in America seemed actually to be angry at Israel and did not hesitate to pour forth their feelings to an international audience. Statistics on Lebanese casualties were released from the mouth of Arafat's brother and repeated on T.V. as if they were the gospel truth. News commentators acted as if they knew nothing of the previous record of the P.L.O. Arafat was permitted to stage his appearances on T.V. wearing a big smile and kissing a baby held in each hand. A baby with merely a broken arm was presented on T.V. by the P.L.O. and accepted eagerly by the photographers as a baby which had been the victim of indiscriminate bombing and which had been turned into a paraplegic. Later the same baby was discovered to be perfectly whole. Even today, now that there has been time for more objective and sober study, the media, on the whole, has not attempted to present the story of the P.L.O. for what it is. It is noteworthy that N.B.C. recently revealed that the man who tried to murder the Pope was trained by the P.L.O. in Lebanon.

What is the P.L.O.?

It is important for us as Jews, however, to know the P.L.O. story well. The P.L.O. is the hard line militaristic army of the Palestinian Arabs. The charter of the P.L.O. states quite clearly that the Palestinian Arabs will not tolerate the idea of a Jewish state. Every public statement that the P.L.O. has made has reinforced that intent. Even while the Israelis surround Beirut, I heard the American representative of the P.L.O. say on T.V. that the P.L.O. would let the Jews stay in Israel as part of an Arab state but not as part of a Jewish state. When many Palestinian Arabs fled to Jordan after the Nasser induced war of 1967, the P.L.O. organized armies that eventually threatened Hussein's government, and there ensued a vicious war in which tens of thousands were killed. Failing in that war, the P.L.O. moved into Lebanon and progressively took over much of that country. In many areas of Lebanon, the only courts were the P.L.O. courts, and the only government was P.L.O. government. Fifty thousand people were killed and a quarter million wounded in the P.L.O. induced wars in Lebanon, and as many more were killed when Syria decided to prevent the P.L.O. from taking over more of Lebanon. It must be remembered that Syria, too, was afraid of the P.L.O. and the Syrians invaded Lebanon in order to try to stabilize things in that country to their satisfaction. The Israeli incursion into Lebanon was thus the third such invasion, the first being the P.L.O. invasion, and the second being the Syrian invasion.

It ought fairly to be said that the number of casualties in the Israeli incursion was far less than in the P.L.O. or Syrian invasion. Even if we accept the figures now presented by Moslem sources, deaths caused by the P.L.O. were four of five to one when compared to deaths caused by the Israeli invasion. Yet the public does not hear of the great pain and turmoil caused by the P.L.O. and Syrian invasions, and the media was not there to take pictures of every incident, and John Chancellor was not there to pour forth his anger at the invaders.

Now let me say a word about Prime Minister Begin. Begin is not my idea of an ideal Israeli prime minister. He succeeds amazingly well in presenting an image of an arrogant and uncompromising man; yet Begin is not merely that. The cartoon on the Miami Herald editorial

page of last Wednesday showed Arafat and Begin in one pea-pod, and the slogan was, "Two of a kind." I do not for one moment believe that Begin is to be compared with Arafat. Begin has shown that he is capable of compromise, and that he will give up a great deal for peace. Let us remember that of the three leaders who negotiated the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, only one of those leaders gave up anything. Sadat was uncompromising and insisted that Israel give up every square inch of the Sinai that Israel had taken after the Egyptian induced war of 1967. Not only did Sadat get the huge Sinai area and the modern airfields which Israel had built there, he got the oil fields in the Sinai which Israel had helped to develop and which were essential to Israel's economy. It is obvious, in view of the Egypt-Israeli peace treaty, that Begin is capable of broad compromise. True, he does not smile as well as Arafat. He does not kiss babies as well as Arafat, but neither does he travel with a gun in his holster, nor does he authorize the murder of Arabs who sit down to talk with the Israelis; nor is Begin guilty, as is Arafat, of destroying the entire population of Christian towns.

The kind of mistake that the Israelis have made with regard to the Palestinian camps in Beirut is tragic indeed, but it is the kind of mistake that seems tied to so many military endeavors. We Americans were shocked to learn what some of our soldiers did in Viet Nam. The story of My Lai, which involved the deliberate attempt of American soldiers to slaughter non-combatant men, women and children, is just one of many brutal stories to come out of the Viet Nam War. At that time, some Americans thought our army was worse than the Viet Nam army, but as time went by, the North Vietnamese proved that they were capable of slaughtering hundreds of thousands of innocent people in Cambodia and elsewhere.

It would be better, of course, if there were no wars, and we Jews are pledged to work for the kind of world envisioned by the Prophet Isaiah, when all peoples will lay down their arms. But in a world where there are constant wars, and in a world where the Jews have been victimized not only by others, but by our own commitment to pacifism, it would not be wise for us to act as if we were the only people to have been involved in a military atrocity. We should do penance, yes, but we do not have to accept the castigations of our enemies that we are as brutal as the Arafats or as uncaring as others committed over the centuries to the philosophy of the sword.

We Jews have the right, as all peoples have the right, not to be judged by one event but rather on the basis of our actions over the long haul. A people which lost six million to the Nazis because of its tradition of non-violence can hardly be fairly described in the vicious tones directed its way recently by enemies just waiting for us to make one slip.

Beirut in Perspective

For example, some commentators have condemned Begin for presuming to bomb that part of Beirut where Israel's avowed enemies were dug in, but what the Israelis did to West Beirut is as child's play when compared to what Russian planes did to cities in Afghanistan, or what American planes did to German cities or to Hanoi. The great powers have never hesitated to bomb population centers when it suited their interests. And whatever the Israelis have done in total in their Lebanese war is not in the same league with what Assad of Syria did only recently in the city of Hama to his own countrymen. Where was the world's outcry when Assad's soldiers systematically killed 20,000 Syrian Moslems who dared to oppose his regime? And what does any of this mean compared to the 100,000 killed when America dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima? As Americans, we ought to have a great deal more on our conscience about Hiroshima than we should have as Jews concerning Beirut.

As most of you know, I am a borderline pacifist to this day, and I have an innate suspicion about all wars. I believe that fighting a war is like trying to steer a rudderless ship. Once you set sail in a war, you are at the mercy of unsuspected storms and events. Judaism teaches that he who kills one person is as if he has destroyed the world. I find it hard to justify even the most just war, because I believe this teaching to be true; but I feel that we have to look at all events in historical

perspective. Who is to blame for recent events in Lebanon? Were they set in motion by the Christians who attacked civilians in the Palestinian camps in Beirut, or were they set in motion by the P.L.O. which slaughtered tens of thousands of innocent Christians last month or last year? Who is to blame for the presence of the Israelis in Lebanon? Would they be there at all if the P.L.O. wasn't using Lebanon as a base from which they were terrorizing Israel and from which they were already preparing to launch a future war of gigantic magnitude?

How sad it is that the people which practiced pacifism for 1800 years should find its armies at the door of Beirut in 1982! How sad it is that the descendents of Isaiah and Zechariah should have to become the best fighting force in the world in the 20th Century in order to survive! I share the feeling of Golda Meir who was asked by a journalist several years ago, "Mrs. Meir, how do you feel about the Arabs? Can you ever forgive them for their repeated invasions?" Mrs. Meir answered sadly, "In time I think that I can forgive them for killing our boys, but I don't think I can ever forgive them for making us kill their boys."

Is there a way out of the Arab-Israeli quagmire? Suddenly everyone has the solution. President Reagan, who has done little about pressing on with the Camp David formula, suddenly has a multi-point plan. The Arab summit meeting, which has always rejected any idea of peace with Israel, suddenly has a multi-point plan. Begin, assuming that others are trying to dictate to Israel, brushes all of these plans aside as something others are trying to impose on Israel. In spite of his lack of the social graces, what Begin seeks is what Israel has always sought. Israel wants the Arabs to sit down as Sadat sat down with the predisposition to make peace. Where there is the predisposition for peace, Israel has long held, there will be a peace settlement, even if Israel has to make sacrifices. Israel proved this, **Begin** proved this, at Camp David.

One thing all American Jews have to understand. After so many wars against the Arab nations, Israel cannot afford to assume that the Arabs are suddenly changing their mind. This means that Israel must have defensible borders. In a time when guns can shoot 45 miles and when jet planes can negotiate 100 miles in twenty minutes, there must be a no man's land broad enough to insure the peace of Israeli and Arab citizens. This means that the West Bank cannot have the right to such long range guns and to such an air force. Any Arab plan which insists on an independent Arab army in the West Bank cannot be considered a plan made in good faith. Peace was reached with Egypt precisely because there is the Sinai, a large expanse of land which is essentially demilitarized. Sadat understood this and achieved his control of the Sinai. We must understand that the Israelis are not being intransigent when they insist that the West Bank be a demilitarized zone in that sense.

The Psalmist sang, "Sadness may reign at night but joy cometh in the morning." It may be that the night of the Lebanon war will be the shocker needed to arouse the Middle East nations to peace. Ken y'hi r'zon. May it be so. May it be so.