

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A YEAR MAKES!

A High Holiday Sermon by Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard

Temple Beth Am, Miami, Florida

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What a difference a year makes! Last year at this time the Israelis were attacking PLO strongholds in Beirut. Our TV screens graphically described this combat. Network news programs featured PLO sympathizers telling gory tales of Israeli cruelty and quoting grossly exaggerated figures for those dead and homeless. Many a veteran news commentator accepted this propaganda as the truth and condemned Israel out of hand.

That was last year at this season. This year the Lebanese are busy killing each other with the help and stimulation of Syria.

Last year the United States was urging Israel to stop its fighting and to end this nasty invasion of Lebanon. Strongly critical statements issued from the White House while conflicting statements came from the Secretary of State and the foreign diplomatic corps. Today the United States is blaming Israel for withdrawing from Beirut and urging it to stay longer. Last year, Israel was asked to stop fighting. This year Israel is asked by American leaders to stay and fight a little longer.

Last year Israel was depicted as a war-monger. This year columnist Joseph Kraft writes that Israel is losing its nerve and ought to be willing to stay and take additional casualties until Syria backs down from its current aggressiveness.

Last year Arik Sharon, the Israeli Defense Minister, was riding high as the architect of a plan to destroy the PLO and to transform Lebanon into a country that, like Egypt, would make a formal peace with Israel. This year Sharon is trying to rebuild his reputation, having been named by an Israeli investigating committee as the officer in command who should have moved sooner to stop the massacre of Palestinians in the Beirut refugee camp.

Last year at this season I attended a meeting of the Presidents' Conference in New York where the leaders of Jewish organizations in America were invited to meet with Prime Minister Begin. Begin spoke confidently and enthusiastically of a great Israeli victory, the winning of peace for the Galilee, and an end forever to Arab threats from the north. This year Begin is depressed and plans to resign as Prime Minister because of mounting Israeli casualties in the conquered areas.

What a difference a year makes! But some things have not changed in the past year. I would like to be able to say that Israel has lost some of its critics and that some of them have tempered their negative attitude towards the Jewish state. With the important exception that the U.S. government is now supporting Israel strongly, the old enemies of Israel have sharpened their fangs. We are currently witnessing Arab attacks on the U.S. Marines stationed in Beirut. Two weeks ago, the New York Times, which has never been able to accept the concept of a Jewish state, sounded off once again on Israeli policies, which, according to the paper, made this attack possible. I happened to be in New York when this editorial appeared. I was being installed as the First Vice-President of the Synagogue Council of America, and the Israeli Ambassador to the U.S., Meir Rosenne, was the key speaker at the installation luncheon. Ambassador Rossene had to scrap his scheduled speech to make a case for the right of American Marines to be in Beirut and the importance to America of a pro-western Lebanese government.

Some things have changed drastically from a year ago, but some things have not changed at all. During the past year the United Nations has continued its drum-beat attacks on Israel, and the World Council of Churches, which is dominated by delegates from Arab and Third-World countries, has mimicked all of the charges made in the U.N. While continuing to condemn tiny Israel, the World Council of Churches, at its recent conference, refused to pass a resolution criticizing the Soviet Union for the invasion of Afghanistan.

As we might expect, the Soviet Union has not changed its policy in the Middle East either. In spite of the unprecedented destruction of Syrian planes, tanks, and anti-aircraft batteries in the recent war with Israel, the Soviet Union has pumped two billion dollars worth of new equipment into Syria. This time the Soviets have sent large numbers of Soviet specialists to man the equipment. They do not want to risk another blow to their pride such as the Israelis administered in last year's encounter with the Syrian forces.

The United States had hoped that its other ally in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia would not continue to help a Syria bent on building up military pressure, but during the past year the Saudis have sent hundreds of millions of dollars to their fellow Arabs in Syria. Current Syrian intransigence is due in large part to Saudi support.

In Lebanon itself there have been some positive and some negative changes. In the past year, PLO power from Beirut south has been snuffed out, and the Lebanese have been given the opportunity to establish an independent government, where they had once been hostages of the PLO. Syria, however, is opposed to an independent Lebanese government. For thousands of years, the rulers of Syria have considered the territories now called Lebanon and Israel as part of greater Syria. In fact the historian Toynbee so identifies these areas. Modern Syria now controls a strong section of the PLO which has revolted against Arafat, who was seen to be leaning towards cooperation with Jordan and Israel. Syria has urged the Druze and Moslem Lebanese to insist on a reorganization of the current Lebanese government. The Syrian inspired fighting in Lebanon today has as its objective the weakening of the existing Lebanese government and the formation of a new government which will be pro-Syrian and which will repudiate any agreements made with Israel by the present government.

I am not a prophet but it seems to me that the Syrians have the upper hand in this matter, and the present Lebanese government will likely fall in the future. It may well be that Lebanon will then remain divided as it is now, with Syrian forces gaining increasing strength in the Beirut area and the Israelis controlling the South.

Turmoil and killing has been a constant in the Mid-East this past year, but many things have changed inside Israel. Even though the Israeli attack on PLO strongholds in Beirut is now seen as a very limited and pin-pointed attack, many Israelis were shocked at the idea of a Jewish air-force attacking in any way a major city. Peace movements inside Israel have gained strength. The armed forces which has always been viewed as the gallant protector of the people has for the first time been cast in a nebulous light. Some Israelis now speak of mistrusting the army, as Americans have spoken of mistrust of McArthur and Patton. For the first time in the history of modern Israel, some citizens are resisting Army assignments and reserve duty. Sharon may have squelched the PLO, but he has created a new definition of what an Israeli military leader can be like.

It seems to me, as it does to others, that part of the reason for Begin's depression is his realization that he might have given Sharon too much trust, that he might have been victimized by Sharon's promise of an easy victory and few casualties.

Is this the end of the Israel that we have known and loved? Is the glamour story of modern Israel at an end? Is the nation to become just another Middle-East nation mired in conflict and suffering? I think not. If Israel has made a military blunder, and school is still out on that question, it is certainly not as major a blunder as America has made in recent years. We can still remember, all too vividly, the dispatch of American troops by the hundreds of thousands across five thousand miles of water to beat back Communism in the rice fields of Viet Nam. The Israelis only sent their troops 40-50 miles across their border to sap the strength of a sworn enemy. We Americans took extravagant steps to attack a people who had no claims against us and who were nowhere near us. America has suffered from its Viet Nam faux pas. It has paid a heavy price for it, but we are still America, perhaps more sober, more concious of the difficulties military schemes can cause. So it will be with Israel. The Lebanese War has caused Israelis to examine their foreign policy.

to question the leaders of their armed forces, to be more cautious about their political leaders. The effects of the Lebanese War are not over in Israel, but the primary character of the nation and its people will remain the same.

The problems within Israel today are the kinds of problems most nations have. There are the "haves" and the "have-nots". The "haves" are for the most part the early settlers and their descendents, most of whom came from Europe and who have tried to fashion the Israeli government after certain European democracies. The "have-nots" are those who came to modern Israel somewhat later and mostly from Arab countries. Their education has not been up to western standards and their ability to compete in the Israeli schools and professions has not been equal to the ability of more westernized Jews. Begin and his party have managed to convince the "have-nots", mostly Sefardim, that they will best represent their interests. Whether Begin's successors in the Likkud Party can maintain this allegiance and be able to rule is not certain.

The curious fact in Israeli politics is that the Labor Party, originally an advocate of idealistic experiments in farms and villages, has been identified as the aristocratic party representing the "haves". Certainly the Labor Party, as the dominant force in Israel for these early decades, is guilty of developing a bureaucracy that is in need of revitalization. The party also suffers from a lack of charismatic leadership. Shimon Peres, its titular leader, is not popular even with the majority of the laborites.

Israel has some extremists, just as America has its extremists. Rabbi Meir Kahane, who was feared in America as the militaristic leader of the Jewish Defense League, has moved to Israel and leads a small group of fanatics there. As America has its John Birch Society which would limit the rights of non-Christians and non-white Protestants, so Israel has an extremist religious group which wonders why the Arabs have the audacity to remain in a land obviously divinely ordained for Jews. These extremist groups will have to be closely marshalled and curtailed. They do the reputation of Israel no good, and they make for increased hatred between Arabs and Jews. The great bulk of Israelis, however are looking for a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the militants amongst the Israelis have suffered a dilution of their power since the casualties have mounted in Lebanon.

Some American Jews have reacted to the invasion of Lebanon and to their dislike of Begin by reducing their contributions to Israel through the Combined Jewish Appeal. That is like refusing to pay your taxes to America because you don't like the policy of a particular administration. I call this kind of reduced giving a cop-out. My wife and I have not reduced our giving. As critical as I have been of some of Begin's policies and techniques, we like many others have increased our giving this past year, and we intend to increase our giving this year. American Jews have to continue their substantial giving to Israel because the Israelis are part of our mishpacha. Any American Jew who is not a fool knows that but for historical accident, many more of us would be Israelis or in the Nazi incinerators. After all, what country other than Israel would freely accept Jews when we were trying to escape Hitler?

Israel still remains the haven for Jews who even today are under fire in an increasing number of countries around the world. It is still the land of miracles - the place where swamps were drained and the desert made to yield the treasure of fruit and vegetables. It is sad indeed that the Israelis have been forced to become expert at military ventures, but it ought to be clear that this has been their alternative to death in Europe or oppression by the Arabs. There ought to be no doubt in the mind of any American Jew as to his responsibility to help Israel stay afloat, and we ought always to remember that the total amount raised by the CJA in behalf of Israel each year is less than the income that Saudi Arabia has for one day's oil production. If our contributions help Israel to hold off its many enemies, those contributions are a small price indeed to pay for Israeli independence and Jewish survival.

Having said all that, I now want to say one more thing. Reform and Conservative Jews are the biggest fund-raisers for the CJA. We are the major defenders of the reputation and interests of Israel in the U.S. It is we who do the most to educate and influence American political leaders; yet it is also true that because of the political structure in Israel, the minority of Orthodox Jews there control the administration of religious policy in Israel. In a practical sense what this has meant is that Reform and Conservative Rabbis are not officially recognized in Israel, and their congregations are not given full support. Reform Jews who want to influence Israeli policy with respect to religious pluralism there must organize to have our viewpoint properly expressed and felt. The organization we have created is called ARZA, the Association for Reform Zionists in America. Each one of you should be a member of this organization because every member means an added voice for our delegates in the WZO.

Two years ago 900 of the members of Beth Am joined ARZA. It costs only \$15 for the year. Last year most of you didn't understand that you were supposed to rejoin. The reason is that we didn't put a note on your Temple registration forms. We think your joining ought to be a voluntary matter, so we have placed the membership form in our program brochure. Please take a moment now to open that brochure to page 8. Take the brochure home and clip out that form, write a check for \$15 to ARZA, which is tax deductible, and mail it and the form to Beth Am. We will see that it gets to national headquarters. I would be proud to say that all of my members are in favor of religious pluralism in Israel. If you are one of those who wants to do something about it, please send us your check for \$15.

On Yom Kippur we will have other forms distributed so that you can easily pledge to buy a Bond of the State of Israel. Many of us buy at least one Israeli Bond every year. After you hold a bond for a year, you can give it away to charity and not pay the tax on the interest that has been earned. ARZA, Bonds, and CJA - these are the three easy ways to express your concern about Israel.

But don't let your interest stop there. Visit Israel. It is an heroic and unique land. It has its problems, but these are more than offset by the human drama that goes on there every day. In Israel Jews are about the process of trying to save Jews from extinction. That is a cause that ought to make our hearts beat faster and our eyes light up. For as Eric Hoffer, a non-Jew, has said, "If the Jews make it in Israel, there is hope for all the rest of us who believe that human suffering has meaning."