

Community Risking Change in Uncertain Times:

A message for the Annual Meeting of the UJFC

Temple of Aaron, September 18, 2011/19 Elul 5771

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It is an honor to be able to share some reflections this evening. On the one hand, this is an auspicious moment, the time of potential renewal of our New Year. On the other, this is a time of great uncertainty, with our country's economic woes and the shifting sands of Middle East politics both of which undoubtedly has or will affect each one of us.

I would like to begin personally. In a week and a half, I will help lead *yamim noraim* services for the fifteenth time since I was ordained as a rabbi. Fifteen times standing before God and *adat yisrael*, a congregation of our people Israel, attempting to give voice to moment that is inherently meaningful.

Fifteen is the number of steps leading up to the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. It is the number of psalms that begin with a Song of Ascents; it is the number of stages to freedom in our Passover seder; it is one of the names of God through the Hebrew letters *yud and hey*.

And each one of these fifteen High Holy Day services since my ordination have been with Mount Zion Temple.

When Rachel and I came to Minnesota, I was one of those easterners who had never been to the Midwest except ironically to Minneapolis because my parents had moved there for a brief time while I was in rabbinic school. We had no idea at that time that this "Far West City" -- as the early Jewish settlers in the 1850s called St. Paul -- would become home.

Our St. Paul Jewish community is a *kehilah* with such strength, unique gifts, with grounded yet inspiring people. I felt this the moment our plane finally arrived here for our interview on a snowy March day in '97--that is, after a Minnesota winter storm welcome diverted our plane to Sioux Falls for the night --and I have known this as I have spent time with so many of you who have grown up here, built up our institutions and synagogues, generously endowed our programs with the service of your hands and spirit and time and for those who have the means significant gifts. There is a special quality to our St. Paul Jewish community.

Yes, things are changing. There are many who have moved south ... to Eagan or further south, or west, but the pull of St. Paul often brings you home because our community represents values, stability, *gemilut chasadim*, acts of genuine *hesed*. And that kindness and the grounded, modest values of St. Paul stay with you, even as folks follow children to

Minnetonka, or spend winters in Scottsdale or Palm Springs. There is a tug of the heart that recalls what our community has always been, and with ingenuity and creativity and working together, will continue to be for generations to come.

Let me illustrate with a story about Rabbi Meir, a disciple of Rabbi Akiba who lived some 1900 years ago. Meir was a sofer, a scribe. In his Torah, he would copy each letter with ultimate care. But Rabbi Meir's Torah didn't look like anyone else's. In Genesis, chapter 3, right after Adam and Eve sinned and God cursed them, the Torah tells us: "God made coats of skin for Adam and for his wife...(Gen 3:21)." But in Rabbi Meir's Torah, it says: "God made coats of light for Adam and his wife..." (*Bereishit Rabbah 20:12*).

How could Meir have changed the Torah, clothing Adam and Eve with light instead of skin.

In Hebrew, the word for skin "or" sounds identical to the word for light "or". The only variance is they each have a different silent letter. That one letter is what Rabbi Meir switched in his Torah. Instead of writing "or" with the Hebrew letter ayin, he wrote it with an aleph. And that one letter makes all the difference! Not only did it change the word from skin to light, it changed the very fabric of what it means to be part of community. In Hebrew, each letter has a numerical value. Ayin, the first letter of "skin," is 70. Aleph, the first letter of "light," is 1. Rabbi Meir switched from many to one. 70 is a metaphorical number in Torah suggesting totality just like 40 suggests a really long time. According to Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, the executive director of Mechon Hadar, "... 70 is the ultimate symbol of dis-unity. The world is filled with 70 nations. People speak 70 languages. But the real goal is to unify—to return to the light, to the one... In his Torah, [Rabbi Meir reminded us]...that dis-unity is only skin deep. The opportunity to renew, to respond to curses with light, to yearn toward a world of one, is the real blessing of human life."

That sense of purpose, of ultimate significance, does not happen when we are fractured, each in his or her own home, or even in her or his synagogue, or his or her organization. Our lives are so clearly interconnected and our potential light so great when we come together in community.

This is a critical moment for our St. Paul Jewish community, as it is for America; as it is for Israel. Changes are happening all around us. There is too much darkness and so much need for light. And our Federation is the one umbrella organization that brings us together, that offers common ground for deep conversation and planning, that offers a vehicle to pool our resources to distribute to those in need, to our aging elders, those who find themselves out of work; as well to educate our youth, to connect us culturally, spiritually, and historically to Israel, to help fund vibrant Jewish theater that is unique and remarkable for any community let alone one our size; to put Jewish books in the hands of

hundreds of young families through the PJ library, to distribute funds to Jewish communities the world over, to reach out to non-Jewish communities in need, to foster relationships with our brothers and sisters in Israel and fund significant projects, and the list goes on and on.

But these days, it is not nor can be business as usual. As we face the changing demographics of the Jewish community, whether the numbers are just shrinking or also shifting Jewish last names from Schwartz to O'Conner in a way we have not yet tracked; as our institutions face funding cuts from the government & United Way and are also eliminating programs in line with changing realities; as we are caught internationally between the Scylla of the Greek economy and the Caribides of Israel's daunting security challenges, there are seven words we cannot say: "that's the way we've always done it."

We need to be better than we have ever been, more professional, more creative, and more innovative. The UJFC is not perfect. Neither is Mount Zion, nor Temple of Aaron, nor Beth Jacob, nor the JCC, Talmud Torah, JFS, JCRC, Hillel, Sholom. Have I offended everyone yet? As the waiter says to Mrs. Schwartz, Is anything ok?

But in a nod to Gary Eichten, nevertheless, we're all doing a heck of a job. And, my friends, in the words of Pirkei Avot, The day is short, the work is heavy, the workers lazy, the wages high, the master of the house insistent. (PA 2:15.)

Each one of us has a role in the future success of our community. Moses powerfully exhorts: *Lo tuchal l'hitaleim*. (Deuteronomy 22:3) "You must not remain indifferent." But Onkelos a famous convert to Judaism who translated the Torah into Aramaic in the 3rd century admonishes more emphatically: "You have no right to hide yourself."

And truthfully we cannot hide ourselves. We need each other and we need the vital link the UJFC provides for us all to plan for the future, to align our community resources in a way that addresses the changing realities, and at the same time doesn't lose sight of our aspirations and our Jewish values that ground them.

We also need the UJFC for standing together for and with Israel.

Israel's Ambassador Michael Oren said on Wednesday in a phone call with rabbis across the country that we are approaching hard days akin to '48 and '67. He addressed all the recent events that have changed the landscape: from the Arab spring with one symptom being the last minute rescue of the Israel embassy in Cairo with credit given to President Obama's decisive intervention, to the deteriorating relations with Turkey; to of course the constant threat of Iran including the 50,000 missiles smuggled to Hezbollah that can reach any corner

of Israel; and now to the impending vote of Palestinian statehood at the United Nations. While planned protests in the West bank after the vote are meant to be peaceful, it is not too hard to imagine Hamas hijacking these protests. This will be a week of some of the most complex, diplomatic maneuverings that we pray will avert any catastrophic result. It is hard to see what good will come from this for the Palestinians let alone the Israelis. It makes sense that the Palestinians are frustrated being asked to return to a negotiating table without any of the understandings from previous Israeli administrations.

And it makes sense that Israel cannot sanction any action in the United Nations as proxy for direct negotiations for this would make future Palestinian concessions to Israel harder for the Palestinian leadership to have their populations accept. The stakes are high. And unfortunately but necessarily, in moments such as this, the remarkable memories of hundreds of thousands of Israelis setting up their *tzedek* tent cities this summer, demanding social justice, will fade somewhat in the days ahead.

It has been 18 years since Prime Minister Rabin reluctantly extended his hand to Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn agreeing to the Oslo Accords. This November will be the first year with no planned memorial for Rabin in the square where he was shot in Tel Aviv.

Let us pray that the leadership within the Palestinian and Israeli governments will find ways to get through the brinkmanship of the moment and find ways to make a two state solution a reality soon before it is too late. And most importantly, here tonight, even if you disagree with my assessments, what I hope we all know is that fundamentally, existentially, we stand with Israel and together we will be a source of strength and support for Israel in the days ahead.

We live in days darkened from the uncertainty of what the next week will bring in Israel's security, by economic stress in global markets, but there is light we can find here, much to be grateful for in our community. Whatever challenges face us, we will address them stronger in a way that sustains, when we do so together. In the words of Moses in this week's parashah: *Atem nitzavim hayom* – all of us stood together. Let us continue to do so.

Tonight is in part about recognizing the financial investment we each make in this future and the present. With appreciation to an anonymous gift, any increases over last year's gift to the UJFC will be matched dollar for dollar up to \$25,000. As we commit -- each of us -- to the best of our abilities, we need to commit our good will as well, and our skills, and our leadership to envision our community not only this year, but in five years, in a decade, in a generation.

In the words of Rabbi Eric Yoffie outgoing president of URJ, we need to stop our global whining. Our best days are yet to come.

Friends, as we enter this new year of 5772, may this be the year of stepping back, seeing our community's blessings *and advertising them*, and doing our part to inspire and build a future of moving away from the disunity of 70 toward the wholeness of community, a community we can be proud of and in which we would imagine our kids and grandkids living in.

L'Shana tova t'kateivu v'tchateimu.

This is a hard time, akin to '47 and '67 – *Michael Orren*.

Madrid conference of '91 peace process; 18 years since hand shake on white house lawn. Gershon Gorenberg. Settlers 116,000 to over 300,000 in west bank (not including Jerusalem) since. Abbas/Fayyad are in fear b/c of Arab revolts.

Is the UN vote a potential disaster? The only way to establish Israel as a democratic Jewish state is to have a Palestinian state. This ends its ruling over , end international isolation,

Until '67 this would be seen as greatest Israeli victory.

Sept 20 to Security Council for vote at some point after; General Assembly – (maybe skipping step of Security Council); EU is pushing for compromise on language – maybe as an observer status; improve position but not state. Perhaps.

A GA vote is advisory.

Israel should recognize the positive; 49 amistice lines as beginning of negotiations. This is a two state solution; implied solution of refugees; each state would take care of refugees.

Israel Tzedek – shared civic identity but it becomes a shadow in light of security

In a poem called, “Miracles,” Yehuda Amichai explains:

From far away, everything looks like a miracle,
But up close, even a miracle doesn't look like one.
Even a crosser of the divided Red Sea
Saw only the sweating back of the walker in front of him
And the movement of his large thighs . . .

(*Modern Poetry in Translation*, New Series, no. 4, winter 1993–94) Often, we are just too caught up in the demands of the hour to perceive the miracle of which we are a part. Only later does understanding dawn and we realize that, in the words of our patriarch Jacob, “Truly, the Eternal is in this place, and I did not know it” (Genesis 28:16).