

## Realistic Hope for 5775

Adam Stock Spilker, Rabbi

Mount Zion Temple, Rosh Hashanah Morning – I Tishrei 5775 / September 25, 2014

---

An old Jewish joke, “What is a Jewish telegram? It reads: Start worrying....Details to follow.”

A rabbi asks an elderly congregant if she saw a certain article in a Jewish magazine. “Oh, I don’t subscribe to it anymore,” she replies. “Which magazine do you read, then?” asks the rabbi. “I read the Klansman,” answers the elderly woman. “The Klansman!” blurts out the rabbi. “That hate-filled, vile, no-good rag? How can you bear to have that filthy thing in your home?”

“You should understand, rabbi,” says the lady. “I’m old and pain keeps me up at night. When I read our Jewish magazines, they tell me that anti-Semitism is on the rise, that arguments about who is a Jew are tearing our people apart, and that the loss of our younger generation is accomplishing the decimation that Hitler, *yemach shmo*, wanted. Oy, I stay awake all night with worry. But, when I pick up a copy of the Klansman and read that the Jews control all the media, that their power grows every year, and that banks and international finance are in their hands, I sleep like a baby.”

Last one, a favorite about the Jewish psyche: “A group of elderly Jewish men gather each morning at a café in Tel Aviv. They drink their coffee and discuss the world situation. Given the state of our world, their talks are usually depressing. One day, one of the men startles the others and announces, ‘You know what – I am an optimist!’ The others are shocked...then one of them smells something fishy...’If you’re an optimist, why do you look so worried?’ His friend replies, ‘You think it’s easy to be an optimist?’”

This is a sermon about how to be a troubled optimist, about how to manage our natural fears, and look to the future with a realistic hope.

This year, 2014, we commemorate a full century of living connected to the entire world. One hundred years ago began the Great War, World War I. After two world wars, the Great Depression, the Holocaust, the threat of nuclear mutual destruction, we ended the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the light of the 1990s with walls being torn down, age-old enmities ending from the Soviet Union to South Africa to Northern Ireland to Israel and the emerging Palestinian state.

How will history characterize our era? The global fight against terrorism, the Islamic State’s meteoric rise from the chaos of Syria and Iraq, the chilling winds of a new cold war, Israel’s fight for existence and legitimacy, rising anti-Semitism, Iran’s nuclear ambitions, and if that hasn’t quickened your pulse, add climate change and the widest gap between rich and poor in this country since 1928.

These real challenges in our world must be addressed with strategic action. Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his first inaugural address in 1933 stated what has become iconic: “... the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

Roosevelt understood what psychologists were beginning to teach: fear is part of our body’s natural fight-flight-freeze response. Our fears can lead us to unnecessary fights, irresponsible flights, and crippling freezes. We have to tame our fears and open our hearts toward trust in order to create possibilities of hope.

As Jews, we know the path toward realistic hope and we know the obstacles. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi was a master teacher who passed from this earth this summer at age 89 having pioneered a spiritual renewal in Judaism. His insight was that not all fear is the same.<sup>1</sup> In Hebrew, there are 3 different words for fear.

The first is *pachad*, real terror. *Pachad*. Think of the Hebrew words *po chad*, here is sharp danger. There are real things about which to worry: ISIS, Ebola, riots against Jews in the streets of Paris. There are real dangers we need to guard against.

The second word is *aimah*, deep anxiety. This comes from the Hebrew words, *ayeh mah*. *Ayeh* – where; where is it? *Mah* – what is it? *Aimah*. I don't know what the danger is, but I'm afraid. This fear only appears in Torah when God allows Abraham to see into the future and it was too much. A "fear of great darkness *aimah* fell upon him" (Gen 15:12). *Pachad* is a danger that I know; *Aimah* is a danger that I don't know, but I'm still afraid. Think about some of our worries about anti-Semitism, about the way some of our politicians speak of global jihad, generalized fears that can cause great alarm and overreaction.

The last fear is *yirah*, which comes from the Hebrew word for sight. In Latin, it is spect. As in spectacles or re-spect, to see again causing awe. Picture a room; you are inside. Then you realize that you are not alone. You are seen. You are being noticed. This causes caution. The way a person acts on her or his own is different from when being noticed. That consciousness is awe, healthy fear.

The fear we must fear is the middle one, *aimah*, the unsettled, deep anxiety. The first, *pachad*, is about real dangers we must prevent. The last, *yirah*, is an appeal to our higher nature, the awe that comes from knowing that we are seen. At the mountain top after the angel stops him, Abraham sees the ram hidden in the thicket, a solution that blind passion obscured, and then Abraham names the place, *Adonai Yireh*, *God will see*. Abraham is seen. Even at moments of horror, trust in the future is possible, and this trust gives us a sense of realistic hope.

2014 is not 1914 nor 1929 nor 1940 nor 2001. There are real dangers, some too familiar, but the past need not repeat itself in the same way.

This summer a few things became clear about being Jewish in our world. Whether we want to admit it or not, people are talking about us. Even if you want to see your Judaism as a faith or as culture and nothing more, the reality of our world and our history is that we are a people.

Our fate is inextricably bound to the lives of our fellow Jews around the world. Some of us feel this deeply, our responsibility to our people inculcated into us from an early age, or born anew from a Birthright trip, or some other formative experience. 70% of Jews in America feel very or somewhat attached to Israel, including younger generations though not as intensely.<sup>2</sup> Half of our small Jewish people now lives in Israel, about six million people. What Israel does or does not do affects us. We are expected to respond about Israel's actions in school, at work, on Facebook. Many at Mount Zion told me this summer about their exhaustion of correcting misinformation in print, video, and social media. All of a sudden, each of us was asked to be an expert.

People are talking about Israel and Jews and we are not immune to world opinion. In 2014, the conflict with Israel is more confusing than generations ago. How do you respond when your heart feels

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2OpBsz7GZM>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>

different things? Do you speak about the broader context of Israel's existence as a democracy in a sea of totalitarian and chaotic regimes, or as the one place in the world where Jewish life is normalized whereas Christians and Muslims have countries around the world where this is possible? Do you speak about Zionism as being misunderstood when it is equated with colonialism or oppression, that it really reflects aspirations of normalization, of safety, of renewal, of redemption, of being a light to the nations? Do you speak of the Arab-Israeli conflict or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the first has Israel seem like David, the second as Goliath? Do you speak about how terrorism should never be justified, that negotiations are the only way to a solution? Do you speak about frustrations with settlement building that solve internal Israeli politics but undermine Israel's legitimacy in the world? Do you speak about weak Palestinian leadership that is bypassing Secretary of State Kerry's peace initiative by going straight to the UN? Do you speak about our pain at seeing the awful pictures from Gaza and that our hearts are broken from the loss of life of all the Israelis and the many Palestinians?

Whatever we choose to emphasize, our hearts are big enough to hold multiple truths, to care about Palestinians along with Israelis, and to be clear that when we say Israelis we mean Muslims, Christians, Druze and others along with Jews in the democratic state.

Isaiah warned us thousands of years ago – “*Hoi haomrim laRa Tov v'laTov Ra* – Woe to them who call evil good and good evil.” (Isaiah 5:20) As the Gaza war unfolded this summer, it was clear that lies about Israel's intentions were repeated as truths, complexities were ignored, and context was not explained. Some criticisms of Israel were laced with an energy and rhetoric that borrowed from anti-Semitic playbooks.

In America, a slim majority of the Presbyterian Church (USA) leadership approved a boycott of three companies doing business in the West Bank. This vote of this mainstream, liberal denomination came after they distributed on their official website a report called *Zionism Unsettled*,<sup>3</sup> a dangerous and revisionist tract, which blamed Israel for all of the violence in the region, ignoring much history, focusing only on a narrow reading of the reality that Israel is a regional super-power, not the roles of the majority Arab states in the region nor challenges in Palestinian leadership.<sup>4</sup>

Some within the Presbyterian Church behind this report and the vote, said that the ideal outcome is the end of Israel as a Jewish state. They desire one state where, in a naïve vision, all will live in peace. Unfortunately, the Middle East does not have a good track record of different nationalities and religions living side by side within one state.

The truth is that Israel as a Jewish state is an anomaly in the modern world. Zionism as a political movement was born in the 1800s after recognizing that the Jewish people were never truly accepted in Europe. In the year of the French Revolution, the Count of Clermont-Tonnerre spelled out the terms by which Jews would be included in the new political order. “The Jews,” he said, “should be denied everything as a nation, but granted everything as individuals.”

The history of Europe in the 1800s proved how false this idea would prove to be in practice, convincing even the most secular of Jews such as Theodor Herzl that a nation-state was a necessary reality for Jews' survival. As Israeli author Amos Oz now tells it, Europe used to say to the Jews: “Go to Palestine; now it's, Get out of Palestine.”<sup>5</sup> This is the historic predicament of our Jewish people.

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.israelpalestinemissionnetwork.org/main/component/content/article/70/256-zionism-unsettled>

<sup>4</sup> Among many critiques: <http://www.icjs.org/featured-articles/open-letter-presbyterian-church-0> (The Presbyterian USA Church did remove “Zionism Unsettled” from their website after the vote.

<sup>5</sup> <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/s8|28.html>

To be Jewish is to hold onto paradoxes: universalism and particularism, self-defense and self-critique. That uneasy balance causes us to speak at times more from *aimah*, unsettled anxiety, than true *pachad*, rational fear.

There is a parable told in the Talmud about how fears can destroy even the strong. The rabbis teach that in five instances, the weak can terrorize the strong even though they shouldn't have that power. The mighty lion fears the gnat, the elephant fears the mosquito, the scorpion is tormented by the spider, the eagle by the swallow, and the whale by a small fish<sup>6</sup>. How could this be? The lion can be terrorized by the buzz of the gnat even though it can do it no harm. A mosquito can drive a huge elephant crazy especially if it is flying around its trunk. The lowly spider can get into a scorpion's ear, the swallow under the wings of the eagle preventing its flying high, and a large whale worries about a small fish closing up its blowhole. The smaller creature can do harm, but at times our fear is larger than the bite.<sup>7</sup>

Israel is a regional superpower, but how can it not worry about falling prey to one of its adversaries that resort to terrorism? What threats are real, *pachad*? What threats are overblown, *aimah*?

This summer after Mount Zion's successful, meaningful Israel trip, I stayed in Jerusalem for a couple weeks to study at the Hartman Institute. On Thursday, July 11<sup>th</sup>, I was in the Old City as the air raid sirens wailed and, finding no shelter, I watched above me in the blue sky as Israel's defensive Iron Dome missile intercepted an Iranian missile sent by Hamas from Gaza. I will never forget that moment. Strangely I didn't exactly feel fear, though my heart was beating quickly. My mind was more incredulous that this was really happening, and even rationalized that the missile surely would not pass the defenses because this was the Old City, and that would not happen...

The rockets were real threats even though Israel created with American financial support, the defenses against them in the past few years. So too were the tunnels real threats.

According to a report at the time, the thirty reinforced concrete tunnels dug by Hamas into kibbutzim and other communities of southern Israel were meant to be used today, on Rosh Hashanah, for a massive terror plot involving 200 Hamas terrorists entering kindergartens and dining halls all at once.

Some of our fears are not irrational; they are real and our *pachad* understandable.

What happens in Israel affects Jews around the world. This July in the Netherlands, one of the chief rabbis had his house vandalized for the fifth time.<sup>8</sup> There were several anti-Israel rallies in The Hague that featured chants about killing Jews. Similar calls were heard at a rally in Belgium, where the community is still reeling from the slaying in May of four people at Brussels' Jewish museum.

Jews in Belgium were denied professional services in at least three documented incidents, including one case of a doctor who advised a 90-year-old Jewish woman from Antwerp to seek help in Gaza.

---

<sup>6</sup> Shabbat 77b - Our Rabbis taught: There are five instances of fear [cast] by the weak over the strong: the fear of the mafgia' over the lion; the fear of the mosquito upon the elephant; the fear of the spider upon the scorpion; the fear of the swallow upon the eagle; the fear of the kilbith over the Leviathan. Rab Judah said in Rab's name: What verse [alludes to these]? That strengtheneth the despoiled [i.e., weak] over the strong.

<sup>7</sup> I first heard this text from Rabbi Michael Marmur's excellent talk: <http://huc.edu/news/2014/09/02/vision-mist-sermon-delivered-south-africa-mandel-provost-michael-marmur>

<sup>8</sup> These specific examples and quote come from a recent article, though reports have been coming out over many months from many sources: <http://www.jta.org/2014/09/16/news-opinion/world/5774-for-europes-jews-a-year-of-upheaval-and-uncertainty>

“This summer”, according to Roger Cukierman, the President of the French Jewish Community, “was a time of fear, which we shared with our Israeli brethren.” There was a mounting sense that public authorities could no longer be relied on to provide the community with protection.

Here in America, we did not see the same level of animosity as in Europe, but several faith groups have moved toward unabashed anti-Zionist positions, pro-boycott positions that are one-sided and counterproductive, straining some interfaith relations. Even with the Christian right, among Christian Zionists, a crack in support is emerging.

And though in Minnesota, we have a relatively small number of overt anti-Semitic acts, the numbers are rising.<sup>9</sup> And in Kentucky, a candidate for the US Senate right now is openly posting signs on lawns that say: “With Jews we lose”.

If these fears are real, then what is going too far? When does *aimah*, deep anxiety, cloud judgment?

As challenging as the real threats are, we must be mindful of how different our world is in 2014. Consider these few remarkable examples:

The largest pro-Israel demonstration this summer happened not in New York or Toronto but in a city without Jews – Calcutta – where thousands of Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs affirmed Israel’s right to self-defense. This summer in China, social media was reportedly overwhelmingly pro-Israel.<sup>10</sup>

A couple weeks ago, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and other prominent German political and religious leaders attended a rally in Berlin to express zero tolerance for anti-Semitism. Merkel said, “More than 500,000 Jews lived in Germany prior to the Holocaust but only about 30,000 survived. That far more than 100,000 Jews are now living in Germany is something of a miracle.”<sup>11</sup> Among those gathered in support at the rally were thousands of Kurds, Syrian Christians, and Africans.

In Russia, there is now an annual Chanukah party in the Kremlin. This is the same Kremlin that housed Stalin and a host of other famous anti-Semitic Soviet Communist premiers and Czars before the communists. Remember *Fiddler on the Roof* which opened on Broadway exactly fifty years ago? It takes place in the Pale of Settlement during the reign of the Czars. The poor Jews of Anitevka turn to their Rabbi and ask – Rabbi, is there a prayer for the Czar? And the Rabbi strokes his beard, thinks for a moment and then responds – “Yes – *meiner kint* – there is a prayer for the Czar: May God bless and keep the Czar — far away from us.” Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – in the lifetime of those very Russian Jews who fled the Former Soviet Union because of its persecution of Judaism and Jews – the Kremlin is hosting Chanukah parties.

How do we cautiously look to the future with hope? Yes, the past repeats itself, but not in the same way. Realistic hope emerges from seeing how things are different. Our numbers are small as a people in this world, but we have unprecedented strength. The state of Israel 66 years after its founding, despite real challenges, is not the beleaguered military power of '48.

Among all Americans, Judaism is the number one most respected religion according to the Pew studies, and the Jewish organized community enjoys access in the halls of power in this country far beyond our numbers.

---

<sup>9</sup> According to Anthony Sussman, Communications Director, Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas.

<sup>10</sup> According to Yosi Klein Halevi. <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/as-we-enter-rosh-hashanah/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/angela-merkel-pledges-solidarity-with-germanys-jews-after-recent-attacks-9732499.html?origin=internalSearch>

How do we to repeat the past differently? We must appreciate our strength, be proud of our Judaism, support Israel and the beautiful, inspiring history of Zionism along with its faults as author Ari Shavit reminded us so passionately this past March. We are not Israelis who must ultimately determine their own fate, but we are Jews and we are family, and families support each other and speak the truth to each other. Our Jewish tradition nurtured in long centuries of powerlessness, visions of justice that inspired the world. Now in possession of power, against the backdrop of real threats that cannot be minimized, Israel must still find ways to protect itself, accept its faults, and test our visions of justice in real time. In Israel, our Jewish people's honor is at stake. If we respond well, it will be because we have learned to live without *aimah*, without a deep anxiety that is ungrounded, so that we can inspire hope.

Yes there are real threats in our world today. We must guard ourselves from them, trusting our *pachad*, real fears. The Talmud declares, "During the time of the darkest night, act as if the morning has already come." Or as Albert Camus put it, "In the midst of winter, I found within me an invincible summer." Or in the understanding of Mussar, the ethical, spiritual, millennia old tradition we are exploring at Mount Zion this year, we counter fear with trust. We develop our capacity to trust the future even though we do not have all the facts, knowing that fear inhibits our better natures.

When we have tamed our *aimah*, deep anxiety, we can be unafraid to speak our values with confidence. We can know that our security as a people and our values of peace and justice are not mutually exclusive.

*Yirah* – we are seen. We are seen by us, by God, by the world. As we enter 5775, may our fears be calmed as we trust in the future with realistic hope.