

## **ROSH HASHANAH 5776: REPAIRING ISRAEL-US RELATIONS**

**This has been a year of serious breakdowns in important group and personal relations:**

**for months the strain between Israel and the United States has deepened;**

**since the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO. and because of many other acts of violence, white Americans and African Americans have been at odds;**

**in many Jewish communities including Washington, specific rabbis have acted in untoward ways leading to the eroding of trust in rabbis in general;**

**on a more personal level, many members of families have been distanced from other family members;**

**and when individuals become mourners, the key relationships within their families are severed.**

**Because of these and other breakdowns, I want to share with you today, during Kol Nidre and before yizkor on Yom Kippur some of my thoughts on restoring, repairing, rebuilding relationships in three areas: US-Israel, African American and white Americans and the bereaved person. My goal grows out of a passage in the haftarah for Yom Kippur (Isaiah 58:12):**

**“You shall restore foundations laid long ago. And you shall be called repairer of fallen walls, restorer of lanes for habitation.”**

**I challenge you to listen to my ideas and suggestions and to offer your own suggestions in response. I hope that our collective thought will result in strategies for repair and rebuilding.**

**Without doubt, everyone here knows that the governments headed by President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu**

have struggled mightily this year. Some would point to the Netanyahu speech before Congress as the tipping point. At the invitation of the Speaker of the House John Boehner, Netanyahu made his case against the Iran nuclear deal that at this date seems to be locked in place. Despite the most vigorous campaign against the deal, it appears that the President has the votes to maintain the deal.

My question for our consideration today is what happens the day after the deal is ratified? How do subsequent Israeli and American administrations close the breach created this year in Israeli-American relations? More specifically, what role do we American Jews play in facilitating a rapprochement?

Permit me to suggest a folksy, homey image that I think might help us to frame this discussion.

Many of us here have experience as machatunim. Through the marriage of our children, we have become entwined in the lives of other people. I think it is true that in Korean and in Spanish there is a similar concept, machatunim. In Korean the word is sa-doon and in Spanish consuegras. In our Jewish cultural milieu, the word has many applications.

Here is a not unfamiliar setting in which machatunim discuss splitting holidays. (One set of parents insists on Rosh Hashanah, Sukkot, Thanksgiving, Chanukkah, Purim, Pesach, Mother's Day, Shavuot and Father's Day. They offer the other parents Tishah B'Av.)

I think the essential feature of machatunim is that they and we love the same people, our child and their child. In some situations, that is the only point of contact. In other, more pleasant situations, the parents of the two spouses share much more.

Debby and I have wonderful machatunim. Some of you know them. They are intelligent, hospitable people who love Israel, celebrate Jewish learning and living and share their resources with noble Jewish and general causes. In the years that our son Ezra and their daughter Nicola have been married, we have shared many milestones

and enjoyed each other's company at ordinary moments as well. Many of our values are identical with theirs. Most significantly, they love our son and we love their daughter.

Inevitably, they and we are not always of the same mind. Often we can attribute our different points of view to the fact that we grew up in the United States while they grew up in South Africa. While it is true that we share the same first language, it is also true that our intonations are different. I submit that this relationship of machatunim might be helpful in rebuilding the US-Israel bond.

Let me explain. Without doubt, Israel and the United States hold many of the same sacred beliefs. These two nations cherish democracy and encourage a vigorous airing of divergent points of view within their halls of power and in their press. Both have stood up to the many forms of terror that threaten their peace and security. As Israel has moved away from a socialist economic model to embrace a market economy, it has joined the US in encouraging innovation and creative problem solving to strengthen its economy. I could lengthen the list of commonalities between US and Israel, but I know that you understand.

These two nations, brought together by so many common values and approaches, inevitably diverge at some point. Like machatunim, they come to the marriage of their children, i.e. American Jews, with some different understandings. While the US recognizes Israel as its one steadfast ally in the dangerous Middle East, it seeks to form additional allegiances with some of Israel's neighbors. For its part, Israel depends on the annual aid it receives from the US and on the partnership with the US that began with President Harry Truman, has continued with every subsequent administration and continues to this day. Nevertheless Israel's security concerns are not identical with those of the USA.

Because of these differing perceptions of the Middle East region and of the threat posed by Iran, the President and the Prime Minister and their advisors have been sharply divided. I for one felt that Netanyahu made his case very effectively when he spoke to the United States

**Congress in early March. It was necessary to delineate the existential threat that Iran poses to Israel. Sadly, that speech was made at the wrong place and under the wrong circumstances.**

**For his part, President Obama has labored to craft a deal that he feels will prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear nation. I for one am not convinced that this is a good deal for the United States and certainly not for Israel. I am afraid that it opens the door to the escalation of nuclear weapons throughout the region. Adding nuclear weapons in this tinder box endangers every nation in the region and will likely lead to additional armed conflict. But it appears that that point of view will not prevail in the Congress.**

**And that leads to the most important question that I will repeat. On the day after the Iran deal is confirmed in the United States Congress what will we American Jews need to do to restore the seriously bruised hearts and minds within the US and Israel? I think that we, the children of these two sets of "parents"/machatunim, are tasked with the responsibility to bring the two nations closer together. How do we do that? What steps should we take?**

**At this moment I do not want to concentrate on the deal itself. I want to move to discuss the healing process that is needed in the aftermath of this highly contentious debate.**

**First we all need to take individual and collective deep breaths; perhaps even meditation would be helpful. The rhetoric has been out of control. Both sides used heightened if not inflammatory language in characterizing the supporters of the other side. I disagreed with Representative Jerold Nadler's decision; but calling him a kapo is out of bounds. Senator Chuck Shumer's decision to oppose the deal resulted in name calling and the suggestion that he and those who supported his point of view would lead us into war. That is out of bounds as well.**

**In our age of social media, where every thought can go viral, we all need to be guided by the admonition of the Rabbis, "Be careful with your words." Debating ideas, YES. Attacking personalities, NO.**

**Secondly, as lovers of the United States and Israel we must work devotedly to secure Israel's future and be prepared to find points of cooperation with American allies in the region like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Colbert King ("Mending the D.C-Jerusalem Divide, 5 September, 2015) correctly focused our attention on the designs of Iran that have not changed because of negotiations, when he wrote:**

**"Blocking Iran's path to nuclear weapons for at least 10 years will not halt its aggressive intentions in the Middle East. Iran will still support proxies to destabilize opposing regimes . . . It will continue to pose a threat to Israel. 'Death to America' remains the slogan of choice at Iranian rallies."**

**We all need to sharpen and update our knowledge of today's Israel. It is a vibrant, multi-faceted 21st century society brimming with technological advancements and struggling with contemporary challenges. American Jews who know Israel from first hand experience and especially you and I in Washington, DC can be Israel's ambassadors to the rest of America. We can laud its many accomplishments while we acknowledge that Israeli society has not become the Garden of Eden. Many or even most Americans see Israel favorably. They will appreciate our open presentation of the small country we love.**

**Because we are American Jews in the capital of the free world, we have the unique opportunity to work to re-establish bipartisan support for Israel in the Congress and to assure that every future administration, Democratic or Republican will support Israel. We can speak to the many Israelis whom we know in this city urging them to rebuild the bonds of friendship and mutual understanding that have been frayed during this debate. They and we should**

- a. emphasize what we share;**
- b. acknowledge where we differ and why;**
- c. listen to other points of view, especially to the many uncertain or disaffected young Jews. They did not experience The Six Day War or Entebbe. Even if they have visited Israel with**

**Birthright or other tours, their reality of Israel is vastly different from ours.**

**We can recognize that there are several/many ways to support Israel within the American Jewish populace.**

**Know the positions and the spokespeople;**

**provide a forum for responsible if differing points of view on Israel;**

**insist on serious debate that respects the dignity of the persons with whom I disagree.**

**We must model those debates on the debates recorded in the Talmud, differing vigorously for the sake of heaven while preserving the personal dignity of each participant. Toward this goal, I want to invite many of you to become active members of the Ohr Kodesh Israel Committee. Your involvement in this committee will help us approach many of the goals I am presenting.**

**We must disseminate within and beyond the Jewish community the good news from Israel:**

**scientific developments that I spoke about last year,**

**humanitarian efforts in connection with the Syrian refugee crisis, after the earthquakes in Nepal, after the hurricane in Haiti, even in Gaza — a humanitarian effort that spans Israel's history**

**Nobel prize winners,**

**the heroism of Israelis in response to terror attacks despite the many lives lost (e.g. Dr. David Applebaum, always the first MD to reach the scene of bombings, who was killed in 2003 along with his daughter Nava on the eve of her wedding.**

**We need to work against the BDS movement (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) recognizing its threat to the US and Israel.**

**Is civil conversation about Israel possible in synagogues? Many say no. Many North American rabbis fear to raise the subject of Israel in their pulpits. I am not afraid to speak about Israel. I hope and believe that civil discourse is possible. It is also necessary.**

**I expect many of you will criticize my comments today. Some of you will say:**

**“Why on Rosh Hashanah? I came for quiet reflection not cheerleading?”**

**Some of you will say, “You were too strong” while others will think, “You were too conciliatory to the position with which I disagree.” I want you to share your criticisms with me. I will thank you for your criticisms and take them seriously. I will also quote the prophet Isaiah who championed the Israel of his time with the stirring words, “For the sake of Zion I will not be silent . . .”**

**And to those who feel I was too strong or not strong enough, know that I am trying as hard as I can to create the atmosphere for civil conversation about Israel to prevail in our community. Toward that end, I want to close with a brief story about civility or derekh erez in Hebrew.**

**The messiah was poised to come to the world. The only question was to which group of Jews would the messiah come.**

**Perhaps to mitnagdim? No they don't respect hasidim who oppose them.**

**Perhaps to hasidim? No they don't respect their opponents the mitnagdim.**

**Since the Jewish community was hopelessly divided, the messiah did not come at all.**

**We will differ on many subjects, perhaps especially about Israel. Until we learn to embrace each other even when we disagree, we block redemption.**

**May we articulate our positions about Israel intelligently, passionately and respectfully.**

**May we love the United States and Israel with full hearts even when they differ with one another. Without the blessings of the United States and the opportunities Israel has offered me, I would not be here as your rabbi.**

**May we successfully bring those two nations, the mechutanim, closer together in this dangerous world.**