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*The Voice from Moriah*

Yehuda Amichai, the brilliant Israeli poet, wrote:

An Arab shepherd is searching for his goat on Mount Zion  
and on the opposite mountain I am searching  
for my little boy.  
An Arab shepherd and a Jewish father  
both in their temporary failure.  
Our voices meet above the Sultan's Pool  
in the valley between us. Neither of us wants  
the child or the goat to get caught in the wheels  
of the terrible *Had Gadya* machine.

Afterward we found them among the bushes  
and our voices came back inside us, laughing and crying.

Searching for a goat or a son  
has always been the beginning  
of a new religion in these mountains.

So it was this summer, Arab and Jew – a widening valley of destruction and death between them.

Amichai's *Had Gadya* machine recalls the Passover story about the stick beating the dog, biting the cat; the song wherein one killing follows another until butcher, ox, and kid all are dead. The image of father and son on the mountaintop recalls Rosh Hashanah's poignant tale: the Binding of Isaac.

"And it came to pass...that God tested Abraham, and said to him: 'Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest...Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the heights which I will show thee.'"<sup>1</sup>

Hundreds of generations have wrestled with this story. Why would God test Abraham, loyal servant, in so cruel a fashion, asking the sacrifice of his beloved son, and in the end demand, "Lay not thy hand upon the child?"<sup>2</sup>

It is our tradition's protest against human violence. In ancient days, the ritual slaughter of children was commonplace. Our Torah repudiates it: "Lay not your hand upon your children!"

God's voice echoes from the mountain top in the darkness of our own time. The war between Israel and Hamas began with the binding and slaughter, the abduction and

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 22:2.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 22:12

murder of three Israeli teens, and then in an atrocious act of vengeance, the killing of one Palestinian teen.

Those kidnappings came to encapsulate this latest conflagration. Terrorists emerging out of tunnels into *kibbutzim* and villages are the stuff of every Israeli's nightmare.<sup>3</sup> How can a country permit such a threat to the safety of its people, its children? How can any other nation condemn Israel for attempting to eliminate it? "It cannot be that the citizens of the state of Israel will live under the...threat of missiles and infiltration...death from above and death from below," insisted Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.<sup>4</sup> Indeed it cannot be!

I will not rehearse the tragedy. You read the news and watched the footage which in too many instances failed to portray the hostilities accurately or fairly.

### *Reporting with a Moral Compass*

In *The Jewish Week*, editor and publisher Gary Rosenblatt decried the frequent portrayal by journalists of the Israeli and Hamas narratives as "parallel stories of frustration," an injustice which in his words maintains "the fiction...that the IDF and Hamas operate on some kind of equal moral footing when one side uses Iron Dome rockets to protect its citizens and the other uses citizens as human shields to protect its rockets." To assert a moral equivalency, he goes on "when Israel mourns the deaths of innocent Gazans in harm's way and Hamas deliberately places them there...is more than a dereliction of one's journalistic duties. It is an obscenity that must be exposed and condemned..."<sup>5</sup>

By their own admission and editorial policy some international outlets are veraciously biased against Israel. But other journalists were victims of intimidation by Hamas and feared for their own lives. They could not portray the terrorist organization in action and needed to wait to be home and safe before they finally acknowledged that Hamas *was* firing rockets from mosques, hospitals and schools which tragically but knowingly resulted in their own citizens' deaths.<sup>6</sup>

But as my Israeli friend and colleague Rabbi David Forman of blessed memory always said of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, "it's complicated."

We understand. This war that left more than seventy Israelis dead, killed more than twenty-one hundred Palestinians, many of them innocents caught in the cross-hairs. And because the IDF commits to every reasonable precaution to minimize civilian casualties, it has acknowledged the responsibility to investigate some of those deaths, including the killing of four Palestinian children playing soccer on a beach and the shelling of a UN school. If we believe that every human being – Jew or Muslim, Israeli or Arab – is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, "in God's image," and we do, then we must indeed acknowledge the suffering of Palestinian civilians as a moral issue.

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<sup>3</sup> Jodi Rudoren, "Tunnels Lead Right to the Heart of Israeli Fear," *The New York Times*, 7/28/2014.

<sup>4</sup> Jodi Rudoren, "Tunnels Lead Right to the Heart of Israeli Fear," *The New York Times*, 7/28/2014.

<sup>5</sup> Gary Rosenblatt, "When Journalists Lose Their Moral Compass," *The New York Jewish Week*, 8/25/2014.

<sup>6</sup> "Journalistic Jihad," Editorial, *The New York Jewish Week*, 8/27/2014.

But at the same time we must insist that the terrorizing of Israelis is also a moral issue and not just the self-interested concern of the Jewish community.<sup>7</sup> Israel has every right to defend itself. What Abba Eban said years ago is true today: “The moral responsibility of Israel does not extend to its own suicide.”<sup>8</sup>

While the complexity of events may defy headlines or sound bites, the ethical questions they raise must not be ignored. And so this congregation shall not. On the evening of November 5<sup>th</sup>, the Temple Emanu-El Skirball Center will host “Israel in the Eyes of the Media.” And Gary Rosenblatt will moderate a discussion on this very topic between author Dr. Daniel Gordis and Ethan Bronner, deputy national editor of *The New York Times* and formerly the paper’s Jerusalem bureau chief.

### *Public Perception and the New Anti-Semitism*

For the Jewish community, the conflict triggered other terrifying alarms: in Europe’s capitals where support for Israel now wavers; and on Europe’s streets where a spate of anti-Semitic activity exploded as frightening as any since the Holocaust.

Fortunately the majority in America backed Israel in its efforts against Hamas.<sup>9</sup> But not so in Europe. In England, Italy, Belgium, France, Austria: boycotts, hate speech, swastikas, synagogues firebombed, Jewish businesses burned. Even in Germany – where “never again” are national watchwords – again, calls to “gas the Jews.”

Every Shabbat we welcome visitors from around the world. They tell me what they warn their children back home: “Don’t tell people you are Jewish; hide your Star of David inside your shirt on the metro; take down your mezuzah.” The Central Council of Jews in Germany reports hundreds asking whether it is safe to remain. People are afraid! “When calls for Jews to be gassed, burned and murdered are bawled on the streets,” said the council president, “that no longer has anything to do with Israel’s politics and Gaza. It is the most abhorrent form of anti-Semitism.”<sup>10</sup>

To this, European governments appear somewhat more responsive. The foreign ministers of Italy, Germany and France jointly condemned the tide of anti-Semitism rising even before the Israel-Gaza conflict. But the surge has not abated. French Prime Minister Manuel Valls justifiably labeled it a “new,” “normalized” anti-Semitism,<sup>11</sup> so acceptable has it become to condemn Israel and then to obliterate the boundary between Israel and all Jews. Anti-Israel has become interchangeable with anti-Jewish.

Some argue that this is a Muslim phenomenon: that angry Muslim youth are instigating most of the vitriol and violence. Certainly we would never deny the threat of Islamic extremism, against which America just this week entered a new phase in an ongoing struggle. Nor would we deny the reality of anti-Semitism in some Muslim

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<sup>7</sup> Based on Rabbi Jack Stern, “A Plea for Peace,” *The Right Not to Remain Silent*, p.162.

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Jack Stern, “A Plea for Peace,” *The Right Not to Remain Silent*, p.162.

<sup>9</sup> Pew Research Center.

<sup>10</sup> Melissa Eddy, “Anti-Semitism Rises in Europe Amid Israel-Gaza Conflict,” *The New York Times*, 8/1/2014.

<sup>11</sup> Melissa Eddy, “Anti-Semitism Rises in Europe Amid Israel-Gaza Conflict,” *The New York Times*, 8/1/2014.

quarters. But too many of Europe's cultural and academic elites have condoned it with their silence.<sup>12</sup>

Recently I received a letter from one of our congregants: "Dear Rabbi Davidson," it began. "Not long ago I met some Jewish people on a trip. They were from France and they could only talk about moving to Israel because France is so anti-Semitic that it is hell for Jews to live there." Perhaps when one inhabits a society where living a Jewish life comes with risk, one better understands the importance of a Jewish homeland for Jewish survival.

But the danger to us exists not only in those "other" countries. It threatens here at home too. Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, director of NYU's Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life believes "this is going to be one of the most difficult semesters for Israel on [college] campus[es] in a long time...not just because of the war over the summer, but...also because the BDS [boycott, divestment and sanctions] movement [which blames Israel for the failure of the two-state solution] has been gaining steam...and the war...provides the fodder for the momentum to continue."<sup>13</sup>

Anti-Israel bias already pervades radical campus groups and has seeped into Middle Eastern Studies and other academic departments. Pro-Palestinian associations will point to recent photos portraying Israel as the aggressor and liken it to South Africa under apartheid.

Most students are ill-prepared to respond. Earlier I shared with you the good news that most Americans supported Israel against Hamas – fifty-three percent over fifty years of age. But now the bad news: according to Gallup, among Americans ages eighteen to twenty-nine, only twenty-five percent do. And too many of those are ours.<sup>14</sup> Experts predict it won't be long before Jewish BDS associations operate on all college campuses<sup>15</sup> – groups like Jewish Voice for Peace which not only advocates BDS but has called for the suspension of the US military aid to Israel so vital in protecting millions of Israelis from Hamas rockets. Can you imagine what would have occurred in Israel without the Iron Dome? Over this summer alone, JVP gained fifty thousand supporters.<sup>16</sup>

And yet another battleground I addressed in a recent article: the Presbyterian Church (USA). In brief, for the last ten years at its biennial denominational gatherings the PCUSA has debated selective divestment from corporations it claims further "Israel's occupation of Palestine." Until this past summer, the resolution had been defeated. But last year the denomination promoted a congregational study guide titled *Zionism Unsettled*, not just anti-Israel but anti-Semitic. It is horrific. And then in June, at the most hurtful moment imaginable, as world Jewry was holding its collective breath praying that the three kidnapped Israeli teens would come home alive, the Presbyterian Church's general assembly narrowly voted to divest from Israel. Now understand this: the vote of the general assembly by no means represents the views of every churchgoer.

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<sup>12</sup> Deborah Lipstadt, "Why Jews Are Worried," *The New York Times*, 8/22/2014.

<sup>13</sup> Amy Sara Clark, "Campuses Hone Tactics as BDS Wars Loom," *The New York Jewish Week*, 8/22/2014.

<sup>14</sup> Linda Scherzer, "The Campus Wars To Come," *The New York Jewish Week*, 8/22/2014.

<sup>15</sup> Hannah Dreyfus, "From BDS to Beastilization: The Campus Wars Are On," *The New York Jewish Week*, 8/27/2014.

<sup>16</sup> Amy Sara Clark, "Campuses Hone Tactics as BDS Wars Loom," *The New York Jewish Week*, 8/22/2014.

To the contrary: the leaders of New York's largest Presbyterian congregations have been vocal in their opposition to the divestment resolution. In July they convened a meeting I attended with the denomination's national leadership so that our local Presbyterian clergy could express their frustration. I shared with the moderator, the church's highest elected official, my own resentment compounded by the church's biased, blatantly inaccurate statements blaming Israel for the Gaza conflict. In writing he assured me that such errors would be corrected. So I do believe that what has been a critically important interfaith partnership between the Jewish and Presbyterian communities can be repaired.

And I also believe in this, as in many other areas, we have a role to play.

### *Our Task*

With regard to the PCUSA, my local colleagues and I have committed to working with the denomination's leaders to broaden their understanding of the history and complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But there is more you and I must do. Even as we defend journalistic and artistic freedom, we must denounce any expression of it in the media or in the opera house which confuses terrorists with their victims. Similarly, we must defend Israel against the "new" anti-Semitism that masquerades as anti-Zionism. The repugnant mangling of history likening Israel to Nazi Germany reeks of anti-Jewish hatred. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us, "Criticism of Israel is not anti-Semitism, but demonization is."<sup>17</sup> Israel's policies can be legitimately criticized by fair minded observers, but the criticism must be legitimate and it must be fair. And in conversations with our friends or coworkers or college-aged children or grandchildren, we must insist on it.

Now, we who love Israel and who must not stand on the sidelines while Israel is slandered should nonetheless be willing to acknowledge that Israel does need to do more to end this conflict. It took a courageous first step toward easing border restrictions last week allowing the import of rebuilding materials into Gaza. Now Israel needs vigorously to promote greater economic and educational opportunities for its own citizens of Arab descent. It needs to investigate the claims of its intelligence officers who last week alleged the "political persecution" of innocent Palestinians. And Israel must take seriously the criticism of the Presbyterian Church and others across the religious and political spectrum who condemn settlement expansion. The recent seizure of one thousand acres of West Bank land, even if that land ultimately will belong to Israel in a permanent agreement, seems incompatible with serious aspirations toward peace. For far too long the government's support of the settler movement has undermined the prospects of a two-state solution, and the window for such a solution is closing fast. We must confront our own fundamentalists who, blinded by their vision of a Greater Israel, bury their heads in the sand, and refuse to see that peace represents Israel's last hope to remain a democratic Jewish state. The story of the Binding of Isaac was written as a polemic against fundamentalism of every stripe, Jewish fundamentalism included.

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Sacks, "The Hate That Starts with Jews Never Ends There," *The Times of London*, 8/16/2014.

*“Because There Must Always Be Hope”*

So yes, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is complicated – so complicated noted an article in Monday’s *New York Times* that many congregations and rabbis prefer just not to talk about it. But we will not bend its complexity into an excuse for walking away from Israel or giving up on peace.

In mid-July, Nicholas Kristof captured a moment of great poignancy in the conflict: “In the carnage of Gaza and the Middle East, the most unlikely people have stepped forward from their grief to offer moral leadership,” he wrote. “The family of Naftali Fraenkel, a 16-year-old Jewish boy who was one of [the] three kidnapped and murdered, said...after the...revenge killing of...[Muhammad Abu Khdeir]: ‘There is no difference between Arab blood and Jewish blood. Murder is murder.’ Likewise, the father of...the Palestinian boy, said: ‘I am against kidnapping and killing. Whether Jew or Arab, who would accept that his son or daughter would be kidnapped and killed? I call on both sides to stop the bloodshed.’”<sup>18</sup>

In the end, Abraham does not sacrifice his son. “Lay not thy hand upon the child,” calls the Voice from the mountaintop.  
How we yearn to hear Moriah’s voice today!

There is so much wrong in the world: beheadings in Syria, Ebola in West Africa, Russian tanks in Ukraine, American tanks in Ferguson, anti-Semitism in Europe, war in Israel. One congregant recently lamented: “I can’t help thinking that the world is coming apart at the seams, that the end is near.”

Indeed it sometimes appears to be. But we Jews, especially on this Holy Day, affirm the need for hope.

In a beautiful lesson from the Quran, Muhammad teaches that even if the world is coming to an end tomorrow, each of us must plant a seed today. And if someone asks us, “Why are you planting a seed when the world is coming to an end,” we are to answer, “Because there must always be hope.”

We can plant seeds: Seeds of Peace, supporting the organization of that very name which nurtures relationships between the next generations of Israelis and Palestinians, and youth from other regions in conflict. We can plant seeds of tolerance within the Jewish community and repudiate zealots like Pamela Geller whose American Freedom Defense Initiative just last week purchased more billboards equating all Islam with terror and hate. We can plant seeds of understanding within the American Christian and Muslim communities building awareness of the existential dangers Israel faces. And we can plant seeds of commitment within our children and grandchildren to the centrality of Israel to Jewish survival and Jewish identity.

Some you may know, that story from the Quran is paralleled in the Talmud: One day Honi went walking and came upon an old man planting a carob tree. “How long until this tree bears fruit?” he inquired. “Seventy years,” the man answered. Whereupon

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<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Kristof, “Leading Through Great Loss,” *The New York Times*, 7/16/2014.

Honi asked, “Do you believe you will live to see it?” The man replied, “As my ancestors planted for me, so I plant for my children.”

A beautiful message, but the story doesn’t end there: Honi sat down and fell asleep...and he slept for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw a man picking fruit from the tree, and asked him, “Are you the same man who planted this tree?” “No,” the man responded, “I am his grandson.”<sup>19</sup>

Yehuda Amichai understood: no war can last forever. Our failure is temporary. Peace will come. One day we too will awaken to a new reality. Until that day, we will stand with our people the world over and with Israel, the cradle of our history, our spiritual home.

And we will keep planting seeds...because there must always be hope.

Amen.

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<sup>19</sup> *BT Ta'anit* 23a.