

Rabbi Lewis' message for September 2006

Twelve years ago this past month, I gave my first sermon at the Jewish Center. I wouldn't have remembered a word of it had I not accidentally come upon it in an old file this week. It began like this:

Last week, I was taking a drive up to Massachusetts to brush up on high holy day music with one of my former cantors who runs a bed-and-breakfast up there. Dotted between the farms and the old empty mills were a series of quaint little towns lined with antique shops. One of them was called Stephenville; I remember because at the entrance to the town was a hand-lettered sign which said proudly, 'Stephenville – The only Stephenville in the world.' This is clearly a town which enjoys its uniqueness, I thought; perhaps its name is its only claim to fame. And it started me thinking about how we have that pride in common with Stephenville, for certainly uniqueness has always been a Jewish claim to fame...and yet there is something we don't have in common with Stephenville. And that is the price we have paid for our uniqueness.

I had been thinking about Israel's uniqueness when I found this old sermon, so the words had a particular resonance. Israel is the only Israel in the world and we continue to pay a price for that uniqueness. Israel is our only homeland. Israel is a religious state which is also the only liberal democracy in the Middle East. Israel is the only place where the exiles are welcomed home. As the Israeli satirist Ephraim Kishon famously wrote, "It is a country where every human being is a soldier and every soldier a human being." And, during these last long weeks, for the first time I can remember, I felt like Israel's very survival was at stake.

I have never considered myself to be an alarmist when it comes to Israel. When I realized how frightened I was, I actually surprised myself. Then I read and understood the words of my colleague Rabbi David Forman, an American rabbi who made aliyah 35 years ago and was an assistant Dean at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem when I arrived in 1975. He is the founder of Rabbis for Human Rights. He himself will tell you that there are few more to the Left on the political spectrum than he. And yet he writes: "The Arab nations can and have lost many wars. We cannot lose one war. If there is any war that satisfies the halakhic injunction for an obligatory war (milhemet mitzvah), it is this one.

Consequently, we liberals in Israel almost without exception understand that this could be the preliminary war for our ultimate survival. Faced with the practical and ideological commitment of Hizbullah, Hamas and Iran to rid the world of a Jewish state, we ask our liberal Jewish brothers and sisters in America to recognize that Jewish survival is no less an absolute moral value than is the protection of a Lebanese civilian population held hostage by our enemy."

And so that is what we must do, recognize that Jewish survival – Israeli survival, because I believe that the two are intertwined – is an absolute moral value that transcends political affiliations. Ephraim Kishon says that Israel is a country where nobody expects miracles but everybody takes them for granted. If we have been guilty of taking Israel for granted, we can't do so any longer.

We pray for Israel,

Both the mystic ideal of our [ancestors'] dreams,
And the living miracle, here and now,
Built of heart, muscle, and steel.

May she endure and guard her soul,
Surviving the relentless, age-old hatreds,
The cynical concealment of diplomatic deceit,
And the rumblings that warn of war.

May Israel continue to be the temple that magnetizes
The loving eyes of Jews in all corners:

The Jew in a land of affluence and relative peace,
Who forgets the glory and pain of his being,
And the Jew in a land of oppression whose blooded fist
Beats in anguish and pride
Against the cage of his enslavement.

May Israel yet embrace her homeless, her own,
And bind the ingathered into one people.

May those who yearn for a society built on human concern
Find the vision of the prophets realized in her.
May her readiness to defend
Never diminish her search for peace.

May we always dare to hope
That in our day the antagonisms will end,
That all the displaced, Arab and Jew, will be rooted again,
That within Israel and across her borders
All God's children will touch hands in peace.

(Nahum Waldman, Likrat Shabbat: Worship, Study, and Song, The Prayer
Book Press of Media Judaica, 1981)

Rabbi Ellen Lewis
September 2006