

If You Will It...

Israel Sermon Rosh Hashanah 5772

I've been writing this sermon since July. I've been writing and writing, in fact, to the point where by the last couple of weeks, I had written nearly 6000 words about Israel—almost twice as many words as my typical sermon. As I sat down most recently to figure out which words to keep and which ones to cut in hopes of keeping you awake and with me, everything suddenly became clear to me.

I could deliver those nearly 6,000 words to you, right now, if we had the time. Perhaps it'd be most appropriate if I gave you 5,772 words, one for each year we're celebrating today, about the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As I stared at those far-too-many words on my computer, I realized I had written over 1500 words in which I planned to recount for you the legitimate injustices and grievances of the past 63 years of Israel's history. I had another thousand words summarizing the op-eds I've read in left and right leaning newspapers in the past 3 months, all of which explain with convincing clarity whose fault it is that there is no peace agreement yet. But I've decided instead that I'm going to share with you the only words I've written that actually matter right now. Because all that matters is what Israel is facing in the here and now, and what I believe it must do in the coming months to help ensure its existence for the long term.

Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, had an aspiration for the Jewish people that he laid out in a pamphlet called "The Jewish State," published in 1896. In it, he outlined the powerlessness and alienation of the Jews of his time, and of his dream of a homeland for the Jewish people that would allow us to put the exile of 2000 years behind us.

I have to say, it's beginning to look a lot like 1896. Instead of enabling newfound normalcy as Herzl had hoped, the reality of Israel seems to fit the same old pattern to which we became so accustomed throughout our exile – us and them, alienation, aloneness, and danger. True, the players have changed, and some of those who were our greatest enemies are now our allies. But a new generation has arisen that is more than willing to take their place – Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic terrorists in other places. With its Cairo embassy ransacked and its ambassador to Turkey expelled, Israel has found itself increasingly isolated and grappling with a radically transformed Middle East where it believes its options are limited to stopping bad developments from unfolding.

In some Jewish circles, our sadness at this difficult time is coupled with the relief of at least returning to familiar turf, accompanied at times by, "I told you so." We know this world and this reality, and, so goes this thinking, at least we can stop pretending that it is different, stop pretending that we can do anything to change this reality, which seems, after all, to be a major and inevitable part of the Jewish peoples' destiny.

It is through these same lenses that many of us are viewing the unilateral Palestinian bid for

statehood at the UN. From the birthplace of modern Jewish sovereignty and the international authority that recognized the rights and legitimacy of a homeland for the **Jewish people**, the UN seems poised to extend some form of higher recognition to the Palestinians, providing a world consensus nearly seemingly against Israel's self interest.

The fundamental challenge we face today as lovers of Israel is how to respond, how to live within this existential reality that we know so well.

Out of a legitimate sense of anger and fear, some of us see the only option at this moment as defense. This line of thinking and feeling would advocate that, if the United Nations extends recognition to the Palestinians, Israel and the United States should punish them through sanctions, a cessation of financial aid, a cutting of power lines into the West Bank and Gaza. From this perspective, Israel's only option—the sole action it can possibly take right now—is to increase its defense budget and build more Iron Dome missiles. Some see this as the only rational and emotional response to the Palestinian's move at the UN.

We make, however, a profound error when we perceive this as a sufficient response to secure Israel's future. As I believe deeply and repeat often in my work as a pastoral caregiver, whether a reality was avoidable or not is one question. What you **do** about it is a second one, and herein lays the great difference. While we can view the reality of Israel through the familiar lenses of the narrative of 2000 years of exile, we are in fact no long a people in exile, and the gift of sovereignty and power provides new opportunities, new responsibility, and new resources to which we can avail ourselves. The question is whether we will choose to react to the present reality through our lenses of helpless exiles, or to be proactive with the tools we've gained through the experience of sovereignty.

As a test case for that question, we must first try to understand the answer to this one: What could a UN vote for Statehood mean on the ground for the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel itself?

Everyone from Israeli officials to the leaders of all the major Jewish organization here in the U.S. has used their power to try to block a resolution. Members of your congregation, too, sent several dozen signatures on a petition to the UN. Palestinian leadership, for their part, sees such a resolution as momentous, signaling that the international community would take responsibility for implementing a two-state solution. But interestingly, both Israeli and Palestinian experts, government leader after leader, analyst after analyst that we heard from this summer as we journeyed around Israel—they actually all agreed on one thing: If the United Nations votes to upgrade the international status of the Palestinians, no one can say with any confidence what effect it will have on daily life in the ostensible territory of the newly recognized state. And, both its proponents and those desperately trying to prevent it are certain it will alter Israeli-Palestinian relations—but neither can predict how. Listening to Israeli and Palestinian voices on the issue this summer, we came to realize that it's not just 2 JEWS who have 3 opinions—it seems to be two of anybody who traces their lineage back to Abraham.

Here's the part where we could, with justification, dwell together on an extended history of the peace process and the fact that there is no historical basis for Palestinian peoplehood, and on the fact the Palestinians have never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity. And, for that matter, we could flesh out the fact that the gaps between the Israelis and the Palestinians have been narrowed in every set of negotiations, and the fact that 1/3 of Israelis and 1/2 of Palestinians now living have been born since the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991 and most are sick of a transitional period which seems to have become permanent, and the fact that Israel has already made extraordinary peace offers in the past; and the fact that under Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayad and Bibi Netanyahu, the Palestinians and Israelis have already cooperated to cut terror drastically and begin to build the institutions of Palestinian statehood and economy. I could give you 5 pages on how we got to this point, but that's not what matters now; recounting all of that is critical to our history books and our Yom Ha'atzmaut celebrations, but it accomplishes nothing in terms of moving forward towards a kind of peace Israel could live with. All that matters right now is that the Palestinians have turned to the United Nations, and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu says he's ready to sit at the table to negotiate.

It's a wild gamble that the Palestinians have made. A vote in the General Assembly is, under UN rules, a mere recommendation, full of sound and fury, obligating no one. The day after the vote, Israel will not pull out of the West Bank; construction will not stop in the settlements, and the roadblock between Ramallah and East Jerusalem will in place. Palestinian security forces will most likely continue coordinating antiterrorism work with Israelis.

As a result of what happens in the UN, new acts of non-violence or worse **could** break out in the West Bank forcing Israel to respond. All hopes for diplomacy **could** ground to a halt, as some have predicted, pinning Israel further in to a corner. But there is another option.

Despite the panicked tones of Israel's government and the American Jewish community, a General Assembly vote recognizing a Palestinian state within the pre-1967 boundaries of the West Bank and Gaza could be regarded as a diplomatic victory for Israel.

If the General Assembly does vote, and even if it doesn't, what if Israel responded now by celebrating the recognition of Palestine as a political achievement for Israel itself? Think about it. If you are concerned for Israel's borders, consider that by recognizing a Palestinian State as defined by the pre-1967 borders, for the first time, the General Assembly would also be delineating the Palestinian's *maximum* claims. The 1949 armistice lines would finally gain the status of international boundaries, which Israel has always wanted. And if you feel that refugees are the sticking point, Israel could argue that by recognizing Palestinian self-determination in the West Bank and Gaza, the United Nations has implied that Palestinian refugees should find their homes in the new state, rather than being repatriated to Israel, as the Palestinians have wanted.

In short, a UN vote could be an opening that Israel can seize for its own benefit. This is a tense time to say the least-- a gamble for the Palestinians as well as Israel, an international game of chicken. Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel could avoid that gamble if he wants to complete the peace process rather than explaining why it can't be done. Or, the Israelis and the Palestinians can keep racing towards collisions unimaginable.

I do know that the Palestinians were **desperate** and **short sighted** in this plea to the UN. The UN was **foolish** to even entertain the idea that a unilateral declaration would result in peace. Today, as a lover of Israel, I pray that Israel will not respond in kind with similar desperation or short sightedness. I hope that the UN will reject this resolution, will reject unilateral recognition of Palestine. But the day after that hoped-for rejection, there will still be Israel, and there will still be the Palestinians. The wry joke we heard several times this summer with regards to the UN vote was, "what happens after September?" And the answer is, "October." With unilateral Palestinian Statehood accepted by the majority of countries in the world but deflected by a few friends, the only possible options will be a worsening stalemate with increased international pressure and isolation, or potentially explosive violence, or negotiations. And I believe that Israel can and must determine what happens next by how it responds. If it digs in its heels, **as it has every right to do**, we should expect stalemate and violence. If it takes bold and brave moves towards negotiations, then peace will be possible. There simply is no luxury in spending more time waiting for a solution to fall from the sky, from the United States, the United Nations, the EU or the Quartet. A further delay will only help extremists on both sides who seek to sabotage any prospect of a peaceful, negotiated two-state solution.

So much energy has been placed in preventing the resolution from passing the United Nations, in reacting to the Palestinian gambit, in waiting on the perfect speech in the General Assembly from our President, that I have been frustrated wondering whether anyone is thinking about what should happen next. The truth is, at this point, it **hardly matters** what happens in the United Nations. It is time for this fact to penetrate into the consciousness of Israel and all who love her. Whether tabled or postponed, voted on in the Security Council or the General Assembly, the Palestinian move at the UN has placed the reality of Palestinian statehood versus Israel's occupation on center stage, and refocused the attention of the world on the status of negotiations for the foreseeable future. That's the harsh reality. Israel didn't choose that reality and doesn't deserve it but, as my son tells me regularly, "it is what it is, Abba." Now Israel, like all of us, can and must choose how it wishes to react to that reality—whether to stay on the defensive or to take the lead in moving the narrative towards peace.

"So what will happen, Rabbi?" people have been asking me, and perhaps you're asking now, too. The rabbis say that after the prophet Ezra, prophesy was left to children and fools; I am too old to be the former, and I don't want to be the latter. Since I don't stand a post in the Israeli army or sit in a shelter in Sderot, I can only tell you what I hope for.

In my view, the sovereign people of Israel must begin to lead, must get out in front of the story,

must take charge of the narrative. The sovereign people of Israel must take a long view, must take an active, rather than a reactive stance in determining its destiny. We Jewish people must never give up hope, while at the same time, never allowing ourselves the naïveté bred by those who either deny reality or forget our past.

Now I know that a bold Israeli move towards recasting the future alone cannot guarantee an end to this decades long nightmare. The Palestinians have to come to the table without preconditions, to recognize Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people, to fight terror and hatred both in their streets and in their textbooks and to once and for all relinquish their aspirations to push Israel into the sea. They will need to stop turning their backs on a sympathetic American President and an Israeli Prime Minister with a big enough coalition that he could lead his skeptical people to peace. In short, as Michael Oren, Israel's Ambassador to the United States wrote in the Wall Street Journal this week, the Palestinians need to be prepared not only to seek a state, but to seek peace and accept a Jewish state of Israel.

Uncertainty with the Palestinians, however, must not be met with Israeli inactivity; rather, it must be the impetus for action, to seizing this moment to make bold moves towards a negotiated agreement. As Rabbi Donniel Hartman wrote recently, "it is time to bring to an end to the defeatist mourning for and incessant talking about what should have and could have been." Let Israel not lose the will that has brought it so far, against so many enemies and so many odds.

While Israel must always prepare for a robust defense, and must always remember the harsh lessons of the past, defense and memory alone will, I fear, not suffice in securing an Israel at peace with its neighbors. And an Israel in endless war with its neighbors and its own inhabitants will, I fear, be increasingly indefensible—militarily, politically, and morally.

If we want Israel to be in charge of its fate—in charge of ensuring permanently secure borders, it is time to be bold. It's time for Israel to make good on Prime Minister Netanyahu's consistent statements in support of a two-state solution by announcing its plan for negotiations. It's time to boldly and proactively and consistently and repeatedly declare that Palestinian statehood is also an Israeli interest as long as it can be accompanied by peace and security. It is time to take more deeply to heart that this Palestinian state will require significant compromises and even dangers when it comes to our aspired notion of defensible borders. Not only must Israel have no desire to expand settlements but it must recognize and declare that many of those settlements - in particular those not connected to Jerusalem or located in one of the three settlement blocs - have no future, and that Israel's political, moral and Jewish interests lie in dismantling them.

Pushing the United States government to maintain the unsustainable status quo will get Israel no closer to peace. If Israel is reticent to proactively determine its own fate, it seems increasingly likely that the nations of the world would be glad to do so.

It is time to see this messy and unnecessary diplomatic clash as an opportunity instead of a

disaster, because I believe that it is an opportunity that Israel cannot afford to miss. The winds of the Arab Spring are not blowing because of Israel, but Israel will increasingly be its target.

On the other hand, Israel is not helpless to assist in defining a positive future for the Middle East. Israel is too powerful, too bent on strength and self-determination, too accomplished and too important in the past, present, and future of the Jewish world. Its time for Israel to have a plan bolder than a “porcupine policy” that it feels leaves it no other options but to dig in to defend itself against aggression.

The window of opportunity is limited. Israel will not always find itself sitting across the table from Palestinian leaders like Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayyad, who have proven through their actions in recent years that they reject terrorism as a tool, and that they may in fact be the best partners for peace that Israel can hope for. Indeed, future Palestinian leaders might abandon the idea of two states and seek a one-state solution, making reconciliation impossible.

Tal Becker, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Middle East Peace, told us this summer that, in fulfillment of Herzl’s dream, in 1948, the Jewish people got rid of our physical statelessness. It’s now time, in Becker’s view, and mine, for us to let go of our psychological statelessness, as well.

Now is the time. There will be no better one.