

Back in the 1960's, which for our children and grandchildren seems like ancient history, there was a TV program titled *That was the Week that Was* or TW3. First aired on BBC and subsequently on NBC, it had a short run of three years total and offered satirical commentary on current affairs. It is my practice to devote one of my High Holiday addresses to a review of events that occurred during the preceding year; in my mind I title the sermon *That Was the Year that Was*. It's a pity that I don't count a gift for satire or comedy among my talents; if I did, that might make reflecting on events of the present and recent past more palatable. Laughter sometimes serves to keep us from crying. But unfortunately tonight we'll have to take our dose of current and recent events "straight up."

The Chinese reputedly invoke the wish "may you live in interesting times" as a curse. I have lived in interesting times for the entirety of my adult life, and the times have become even more interesting for me ever since the advent of the 24/7 news cycle and the availability of what seems like limitless commentary, analysis, news and opinion on the Internet. A Sephardic Rosh Hashanah hymn expresses a sense of hope for the future: that the old year and its curses might conclude and the New Year and its blessings commence. I have often quoted those words at this season, but so many years of life experience have by now eroded my optimism. I no longer believe that we ever enjoy a year of unalloyed blessing. The forces of nature are too unpredictable, human nature too stubborn and set in its ways, and the problems and conflicts in our society and in the world community too complex and intractable. Whether we perceive them as blessing or curse, the realities and challenges with which we deal (shaped by the events of the past) are in large measure beyond our control. That is in no way meant to imply passive acquiescence but rather concerted effort to use our finite resources to improve and ameliorate, to make things better in whatever limited way we can.

We have had not a quiet but an "interesting" year. Recent weeks have witnessed volatility in world financial markets, frightening to those dependent on investment portfolios for security in their retirement. Racial incidents – clear-cut cases of police over-reaction and brutality caught on film, other instances where allegations of brutality were made, demonstrations and protest marches, and a horrendous massacre of worshipers at an African-American church perpetrated by a young man under the

influence of racist ideology – were lead stories in the news. With a Presidential election only 14 months away, candidates have been vying for attention and for campaign funding. Among the public, there is widespread distrust of and disillusionment with government, polarization between the conservative and liberal segments of the electorate, and deep divisions even within the ranks of our major political parties on such issues as immigration, entitlements, and foreign policy.

As Jews, we are linked to Jewish communities around the world by a feeling of shared destiny. We were outraged and horrified by the murder of four Jews at the Hyper-Cachere supermarket in Paris and by the murder of a guard and the shooting of several others outside a synagogue in Denmark where a young woman was celebrating her Bat Mitzvah. European anti-Semitism, emanating largely from disaffected Muslim immigrant communities but also rooted in leftist hostility to Israel and in far-right ultra-nationalism, has grown increasingly virulent and frightening. Over recent years we have witnessed numerous incidents of vandalism directed at synagogues and Jewish cemeteries and vile anti-Semitic slogans (including threats of death to the Jews) displayed on posters at pro-Palestinian rallies. The Hyper-Cachere massacre and the murders at the Charlie Hebdo satirical newspaper were not the first such incidents in France. French Jews in particular are scared, and the numbers making *aliyah* to Israel have increased dramatically. A global movement to boycott, divest from and sanction Israel has gained traction and is motivated not by criticism of particular Israeli policies but by the aim of delegitimizing the Jewish state.

Our commitment as Jews to the security and well-being of Israel tends to focus our attention on the Middle East, a region where turmoil and instability are endemic. Civil war continues to devastate Syria with the death toll in the hundreds of thousands and the number of refugees who have fled their homes and escaped to neighboring countries in the millions. Now, as large numbers of refugees attempt to leave the Middle East altogether and seek sanctuary in European countries, the world is confronted with a humanitarian crisis of immense magnitude. Iraq too is subject to terrorism and violent clashes between rival sectarian communities. In both countries, the Islamic State movement or ISIS, which seeks to revive the caliphate of the seventh century, has gained a foothold, wantonly destroying monuments to the region's ancient cultural heritage,

persecuting, murdering and enslaving members of religious minorities, and treating those whom it regards as enemies with a shocking barbarism. What truly astonishes and saddens me is the appeal of Islamic State to young Westerners who are seeking excitement and a sense of meaning and are recruited to travel to Syria and risk death fighting for this brutal and fanatical movement. Israel can not help but be concerned that some of the violence will spill over its own borders, particularly on the Golan Heights. The presence of Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Syria, fighting in behalf of the Assad regime, and of ISIS among the rebel groups opposing the government, both implacable foes of Israel, is especially troubling. Worrisome as well for Israel is neighboring Lebanon, where the Iranian-backed Hezbollah has thousands of missiles aimed at Israel. And then there is Iran itself, a regional mischief-maker and funder of terrorism, whose repressive and anti-Semitic regime is rightly regarded by Israel and its supporters with suspicion and mistrust. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the agreement between Iran and the P5 plus 1 powers, intended to block Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, was signed in mid-July. The U.S. Senate was given a two-month interval to review the agreement, during which time supporters and opponents had the opportunity to articulate their arguments pro and con and lobby their representatives in Congress. The Iran deal, as the Joint Comprehensive Plan is informally referred to, has divided and polarized American Jewry like no other issue I can remember.

There have been interesting developments as well **within** Israel this past year. Elections held in March brought Benjamin Netanyahu an unprecedented fourth term as prime minister. The coalition government that he leads is unquestionably the most right-wing in Israel's history. Reuven Rivlin, Israel's President, while a supporter of settlements and an opponent of the two state solution, has been a courageous spokesman for democracy, minority rights and toleration and has not hesitated to denounce anti-Arab racism. Israel's chief rabbinate, long ago taken over by the *haredi* faction of Jewish Orthodoxy, has been challenged on a number of fronts. Attempts have been made to set up independent supervision of *kashrut* and to establish a process for conversion to Judaism that would be independent of and more lenient than the rabbinate's courts.

I worry deeply about the future of Israel, not so much because of what her enemies on the outside intend (Israel has the military resources to deal with them) but

because of threats that arise from within. The vision I believe most of us cherish is of an Israel that is both Jewish and democratic, that does not seek to rule or dominate another people. Our hope would be for an Israel and a Palestine living side by side in peaceful co-existence, but that outcome seems totally unlikely at present. The Palestinian population resides within two political entities, Hamas-ruled Gaza and the PA (Palestinian Authority) which governs the West Bank. Leaving aside Hamas rejection of any agreement with Israel beyond a long-term truce, a three-sided negotiation would be, to say the least, unwieldy. On the other side, a significant number of the members of Israel's ruling coalition oppose the concept of two states for two peoples. The distance between the negotiating positions of Israelis and Palestinians, even when we listen to the most moderate voices on each side, seems too great to bridge at present. But if the two state solution is no longer a possibility, can we truly believe that one state for two peoples would be workable? Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs living between the Mediterranean and the Jordan (with rough parity in population now but a projected Arab majority in the near future) would enjoy equal civil and political rights within a single political framework, but could they resist vying for domination by all means at their disposal, non-violent and violent? Perhaps some creative way of resolving or managing the century-old conflict exists, but the prolongation of the status quo does not work in Israel's best interests and will only lead to its increased isolation in the world.

Particularly disturbing to me have been recent manifestations of extremist violence perpetrated by Israeli citizens: the stabbing of participants at a Gay Pride parade by a deranged ultra-Orthodox Jew resulting in the death of a teen-age girl, the price-tag attacks on churches and mosques, and the fire-bombing of a Palestinian home, which killed a baby and his father and critically injured other members of the family. Israel does not lack for extremists who extol what we in this country would readily label racism and advocate the rebuilding of the Temple and the replacement of the state of Israel with a Judean kingdom ruled by Jewish religious law. They are admittedly a fringe element but worrisome nonetheless. Violent deeds and words of incitement have been condemned by Israeli leaders and there appears to be a determination now to deal with Jewish terrorism in the same manner that Palestinian terrorists have been treated.

I mention what I have termed the internal threats to Israel, because I believe they impact her survival as a Jewish and democratic state. Otherwise I have tried to be faithful to my intention to speak with nuance and to shun politics during these Days of Awe. The mixture of religion with politics is particularly explosive, and I cite with approval the words of the great Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who wrote that “the tendency to claim God as our ally for our partisan value and ends is the source of all religious fanaticism.”

Niebuhr’s words, while relevant to Muslim jihadists, Christian Dominionists or theocrats, and extremist elements of the Israeli settler movement, are admittedly tangential to our own intra-communal debates, which have been largely shaped by concerns of a secular nature and conducted without reference to religion. But the warning regarding fanaticism is certainly timely. Let me note that our local Jewish Community Relations Council conducted a dialogue among Council members last month on the “Iran deal” that was a model of thoughtful and civil discourse. I sincerely commend those who spoke both in opposition to and in support of the deal. But too much of the discussion nationally regarding the deal has been characterized by incivility, bluster, exaggeration, name calling, demonization of opposing viewpoints, and impugning the motives of those who hold them. There is a division, a polarization in the American Jewish community that is tearing us apart and that mirrors what has occurred within the nation as a whole. I challenge you to read the Internet comment threads appended to any news story or opinion piece regarding either Israel or the Iran nuclear agreement. It is truly ugly. What people, both on the political left and right, both Jews and non-Jews will say under the cover afforded by the anonymity of an Internet moniker is sad evidence of the ease with which honest disagreement and difference of opinion can morph into self-righteous indignation and crude hatred. There are anti-Semites on the Net who cross the boundary between legitimate critical comment and religious/ethnic hatred. It makes me angry, but what really saddens and disturbs me is what Jews say to and about other Jews.

Jane Eisner in a piece that appeared in May in the weekly *Forward* noted a Pew survey published this year, which revealed that 22% of Americans now identify themselves as having no religion. The percentage among young people of the Generation X and millennial age cohort is even greater. A 2013 Pew survey of the Jewish community

likewise found a significant number of “Jews of no religion.” Eisner bemoans the phenomenon and expresses concern, because Jews who have a religious commitment and affiliation usually have a greater attachment to Israel and a greater sense of responsibility to fellow Jews than those who profess “no religion.” Religiously affiliated Jews also tend to be more generous to Jewish charities and more likely to provide their children with a Jewish education. Polarization occurs within the domain of religion as well as in politics. Among both Jews and Christians the center has eroded. Mainstream Protestant denominations have lost ground, while evangelicals have gained at their expense. Conservative Judaism, at the center of the Jewish religious spectrum, has sustained significant losses in membership in recent years. While it is hard to pinpoint any single factor in the growth of the “nones”, those who identify with no religious group or denomination, Eisner attributes it in part to young people’s aversion to religious politics and to the inflamed rhetoric and self-righteousness that often characterize it.

At this season, let us affirm the shared values that unite us: our commitment to the survival of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, to the perpetuation of the Jewish heritage as a source of spiritual sustenance and moral values, to alleviating poverty and hunger in our society, to healing the racial divide in our country that is the legacy of a long and shameful history of oppression and discrimination, to providing equality of opportunity, and to addressing the challenge of environmental change and potential catastrophe. In bringing about the realization of these values, politics can not totally be avoided. But let us remember that no one narrative adequately accounts for all of the causes that underlie our present-day challenges, and that no one can claim absolute certainty about how to resolve them. We aspire to a better world and a better society, but we differ on what needs to be done to get there.

Let us resolve despite our differences to show each other respect, to act with civility, and to become as a people what the High Holiday liturgy envisions – *agudah achat*, one fellowship united wholeheartedly in our values, our hopes and our aspirations.