

Give Peace a Chance

For Rosh Hashanah evening
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By Rabbi Stuart Weinberg Gershon
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Abstract: "In light of the dangerous prospects for another catastrophic war between Israel and one or more of her neighbors, the Jewish ethic of nonviolence compels me to stand up and to speak up for a reinvigorated commitment to the principles of nonviolence on all sides."

So, my friends, here we are...the glorious New Year of 5767 has begun. The candles are burning brightly. The kiddush cups are gleaming. The yummy tastes of apples and honey still linger in our mouths. The sweetness of this New Year brings a welcome respite from a terrible summer of violence. Almost everywhere we look there is war. War in Iraq. Afghanistan. Darfur. Congo. And of course, war between Israel and Hezbollah. All over the world we find the legitimization of violence to resolve human conflict and the use of force to produce political changes. Why doesn't our political discourse include the lessons learned from the successful resolution of the conflicts in Bosnia, Rwanda, Northern Ireland or South Africa? None of these wars, none of the violence between these peoples brought peace, addressed grievances, or brought the political reforms they most wanted. In the end, only justice, truth, and reconciliation brought about peace.

What we learn from these conflicts is that no enemy can be completely obliterated. At some point you have to negotiate peace. We learn that when you kill one militant, two more take his place. That collective punishment and collateral damage of civilians are morally bankrupt. That intimidation does not win hearts and minds. We learn that violence does not win peace but begets only more violence and incredibly more hate. Understandably, some of us will consider a commitment to the renunciation of military force to be naïve or dangerous. Unquestionably, such a path is not easy. "The surrender of hatreds passed on through the generations...the capacity to relinquish fantasies of vengeance, these are excruciatingly difficult."

Nevertheless, breakthroughs can and do happen. The end of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon was brought about neither by military force nor western pressure. Remarkably, the "cedar revolution" was brought about by the overwhelming non-violent protest of the people of Lebanon. So too, conflict resolution has produced positive developments in Northern Ireland, in Bosnia, even in Rwanda. South Africa's process of truth and reconciliation is a famously successful example of how much can be accomplished without violence.

If war and militarism lead to suffering and stalemate, if peace and security for Israel and national self-determination for the Palestinians will never be secured by force, why not try another path: the path of non-violence, of reconciliation, of constructive diplomacy to bring a permanent end to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? Why not give peace a chance?

Jewish ethics is not pacifist. Jewish ethics certainly affirms the right to self-defense. But our ancient wisdom tradition, like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, also esteems non-violence. In the book of Deuteronomy we are taught, “Justice, justice you shall pursue.” Why is justice repeated? Jewish tradition teaches: because a just cause must be pursued with just means. Jewish ethics not only calls upon us to seek peace but to actively and rigorously pursue it. Our great rabbi Hillel taught, “Be like the disciples of Aaron, the high priest, loving peace and pursuing peace...” (Pirkei Avot 1:12). There is no higher virtue than to be a *rodeif shalom* – a pursuer of peace.

Leonard Fine wrote a famous essay in which he said there are two kinds of Jews. One wants an Israel that is militarily strong, capable of defending itself and strong enough to defeat any enemy, an Israel that is tough enough to do what has to be done for its survival. The other Jew wants an Israel that is a beacon of justice and righteousness that affirms the humanity of all, friend and enemy, and which prides itself on its civility and its compassion.

“I hope that we are all strong enough and honest enough to be both kinds of Jews. I hope that we have not become so caught up in our justified concern for Israel’s safety that we no longer feel the anguish of Lebanese civilians who have been killed or wounded or bereaved” (Rabbi Danziger). And I hope we have not become so troubled by the terrible deaths caused by Israel’s actions that we forget that Israelis have also suffered tragic loss and devastation, bereavement and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Let us also keep in mind that Hezbollah’s attack was perceived by the Israelis as an unprecedented new front in a much larger international struggle with Iran and Syria, and that Israel’s campaign was undertaken in part to please Israel’s greatest patron – the United States of America. In light of the dangerous prospects for another catastrophic war between Israel and her neighbors, the Jewish ethic of nonviolence compels me to stand up and to speak up for a reinvigorated commitment to the principles of non-violence on all sides. The absolutely haunting televised and digital images of the brutality perpetrated by both Hezbollah and Israel renders meaningless any discussion of who won or lost the war. Both sides lost the war.

In the words of the late prime minister Yitzchak Rabin, “enough of the blood and tears enough” on both sides. Enough of making fair game the targeting of missiles or bombs upon innocent men, women, and children. Moral ends do not justify these means. The path to peace must be a path of peace. If we cannot conceive of reconciliation between Israel and her neighbors, then we are not doing Israel any favor. For there are only two solutions to Israel’s security: negotiation or endless war. And the more wars, and the more enemies with even more high-tech rockets and destructive capabilities, the more chances that Israel will someday lose. Ultimately, the choice of endless war is a path that may lead to Israel’s self-destruction.

And if we cannot conceive of reconciliation between Israel and her neighbors, that is due to our failure of vision. Our country has turned many an enemy into a friend. We have fought wars with Britain, with Spain and Mexico, with Germany and Russia, Italy, Japan, and Vietnam. At one time, we demonized each of these countries. And yet we made peace with all of them. Now we have diplomatic and economic relations even with Vietnam, and the former countries are among our closest friends and allies.

If the United States can turn so many enemies into friends, so can Israel and Palestine. I believe that peace, justice, and reconciliation between Israel and Palestine is still possible. It is still possible because every poll demonstrates that the majority of Israelis and Palestinians do not want an endless war. They want a normal, peaceful life and are willing to coexist. Most tellingly, harsh views of non-coexistence emerge only when either side feels threatened by the other or despairing of the other's intentions.

Peace is still possible because all sides sketched out the broad outlines of a just settlement in Taba in 2000 immediately after the collapse of the Camp David talks, six year ago! But neither side has demonstrated the political courage to implement its terms. Peace is still possible because the majority of Palestinians and Israelis are still open, despite the most recent war, to a two state solution – but that window of acceptance, on both sides, is quickly closing. It is admittedly difficult to feel optimistic after all that has happened. Right now the hatred of the Arab street toward Israel is huge. And the rage of the Israeli public toward Arabs is vast.

Paradoxically, however, a tremendous opportunity now exists to stop the violence once and for all. Indeed, it is the very stalemate of this war -- not unlike the 1973 Yom Kippur war that led to a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt – which holds out the potential for a political settlement.

The Israeli public, if not the Israeli government, now understands that the Sharon policy of unilateralism created a power vacuum in both Lebanon and Gaza that was quickly filled by extremists. Israel now sees the necessity for bilateral negotiations and the support that comes with internationally recognized boundaries.

So too, Hamas and the Palestinian Authority are on the verge of forming a national unity government that would accept all previous Palestinian-Israeli agreements, thereby implicitly recognizing Israel's right to exist. Devastated by European and American economic sanctions, the Palestinians appear ready to stop the violence and resume negotiations for an independent Palestinian state outside of Israel's pre-1967 borders. Meanwhile, the Arab League is dusting off the 2002 Saudi initiative that proposed peace and full normalization of relations with Israel in exchange for an Israeli withdrawal to those borders.

Much like the 1991 Madrid conference that started Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, the time is ripe for the United States and the European Union to facilitate a new international Middle East peace conference to negotiate a permanent settlement between Israel and all the other parties to the conflict -- with the Palestinians, with Lebanon, and with Syria.

Why must the United States and the international community urgently and quickly engage in intensive constructive diplomacy? Because the Israel-Hezbollah war was unprecedented in its carnage. "For the first time in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, a conventional war was directly waged on each side's civilian population" (Joel Schalit). Without significant diplomacy, there is nothing to prevent civilians from suffering even more terrible horrors in the next war.

Thus the most important task of American Jewry is to help both Israelis and Palestinians liberate themselves from an unending cycle of retaliatory violence. We must do everything we can to contribute to a climate of reconciliation. We must reject the Palestinians' demonization of all Israelis. We must reject the Israelis' demonization of all Palestinians.

While the media never report it, there are many Palestinians and Israelis who are committed to the principles of co-existence and nonviolence. Did you know, for example, that tens of thousands of Israelis have engaged in acts of rebuilding Palestinian homes, of protesting the separation wall, of providing food and nourishment to the families of malnourished Palestinian children. While the media never report it, both Israelis and Palestinians have shown incredible generosity to the other despite the conflict. Not government to government. But person to person, human being to human being. Our generosity should be no less. We must help the orphaned, the wounded, the bereaved – Israeli and Lebanese -- to put their broken lives back together, emotionally and financially.

If you have not already done so, please show your concern and caring for our Israeli brothers and sisters by making a donation to the Israel Emergency Campaign sponsored by the Metrowest Jewish Federation or the Union for Reform Judaism.

How do we create a climate of reconciliation? All conflict resolution between enemies begins with the capacity of each side to recognize the humanity of the other and to acknowledge the legitimacy of the other's historical narrative. The Palestinians must understand how they helped to shape this conflict by their armed resistance to Jewish immigration to Palestine in the years when Jews were the victims of mass murder and the survivors were fleeing for their lives. The Palestinians must understand that the intifada and suicide bombings have been completely counterproductive to their aspirations for national self-determination. The Israelis must understand how they have helped to shape this conflict by denying the Palestinians their fundamental right to a homeland of their own on even less than half of what was historic Palestine. The Israelis must understand that Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the often brutal aspects of maintaining that presence have been wholly counterproductive to their aspirations for peace and security.

Among Palestinians and Israelis alike, we must hope that hearts closed by hate can be turned with compassion; that minds bent on revenge can be turned toward reconciliation. The famed archbishop Desmond Tutu writes, "Our South African experiment is going to succeed because God wants us to succeed...God wants to show us that there is life after conflict and repression – that because of forgiveness, there is a future."

Let us all take seriously the magnificent words of our prayer book: We pray with all our hearts: let violence be gone. Let the day come soon when evil shall give way to goodness, when war shall be forgotten..."

Let's give peace a chance.