

## HONORING GOD'S PEOPLE

Rabbi Harold Kushner, Rosh HaShanah 2016

I did the math the other day and I realized that I have spent two-thirds of my life conducting religious services. I'm 81 years old and I've been a Rabbi for 54 years, four in Long Island and the last 50 here. That's two-thirds of eight-one. And over the course of those fifty-four years, there has been one issue I've never been able to reconcile – What does it *mean* to pray? That would be useful for a Rabbi to know, wouldn't it? That's ostensibly what we're here for, but I'm not sure we're clear about what we're supposed to be doing. The problem is, we use the word "prayer" interchangeably to refer to two very different activities. Sometimes it means joining with others, with a congregation, to share words that somebody else wrote and put in a book, because only by sharing the same liturgy do we bind ourselves to the values that Judaism stands for, and only by sharing the same prayers do we become something greater than ourselves. We become a congregation.

Sometimes the word “prayer” refers to our pouring out our hearts to God, saying things to Him in the privacy of our hearts and minds, thoughts too personal to say out loud, telling God what we need, what we hope for, what worries us about the coming New Year.

But every now and then, there comes a sublime moment when the two kinds of prayer become one, when the words printed in the prayerbook capture what is in our hearts and express it in idioms more eloquent than any of us could have thought of ourselves.

We had an example of that earlier this morning, in the Amidah for Rosh HaShanah. Right after the opening blessings, which are the same as they are throughout the year, we come to prayers specific for Rosh HaShanah, things we hope will make the coming year different from and better than the year that just ended. We ask for, we yearn for three things. The first, *uv'chen ten pach'dcha al kol ma'asecha*, asks that this be a year in which everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike, will recognize that God has given human beings the ability to know the difference between Right and Wrong.

The third and final line, *uv'chen tsaddikim yir'u v'yismachu*, asks that this world be one in which good, honest, generous people will feel at home, that they will never have to see themselves as different from others because they insist on being kind, honest and charitable.

But it's the middle of the three lines that interests me this morning: *uv'chen ten kavod l'amecha*, Bestow honor on Your people, O God, joy to Your land and gladness to Your city of Jerusalem.

If I could have one wish for the coming year, I don't think I could phrase it any better than that. It doesn't bother me when outspoken bigots and paid propagandists denounce Israel while claiming that Jews control the banks, the stock market and the economy. I ignore them. It doesn't bother me when representatives of the Arab states get up at the United Nations and accuse Israel of poisoning the wells on the West Bank and murdering Palestinian babies. They're just doing their job, living up to the definition of a diplomat as someone who is sent out to lie on behalf of his government.

But when Jewish liberals like Bernie Sanders, when the children of people I marched with in the 1960's for black voting rights, when people I rallied with in the 1970's to end the war in Vietnam, when I hear them defaming Israel and calling for a reassessment of our Middle East policy, that saddens me. When I get reports about the best and brightest of our children and grandchildren on college campuses being seduced into defaming Israel, lending support to the BDS movement, Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions, that hurts. Don't they understand that Israel is the most redemptive thing that has happened to the Jewish people in the last hundred years?

Our Rosh haShanah prayer asks *Uv'chen Ten Kavod L'Amecha*, Grant honor to Your people and to the country that bears Your people's name. What is *kavod*? What is honor? You may recognize the word from the fifth of the Ten Commandments, *Kabed et avicha v'et imecha*, honor your father and your mother. And the essence of honoring your parents is more than speaking politely to them and remembering their birthdays. The essence of honoring parents is loving them even when

you disagree with them, even when you're convinced that they are wrong. That's what love is, between parent and child (and I would ask you to remember all the times you hurt and disappointed your parents when you were growing up but they continued to love you anyway), between a husband and wife (a marriage in which two people move in together but don't entirely unpack, one in which one or both parties have in mind "if I ever feel I'm not getting what I need, I'm out of here," isn't really a marriage). And I would ask you this morning as Jews to give Israel the right to be wrong in your opinion but love it anyway even as you give that right to your children and your own parents. As Jews, we love Israel the way we love our parents and our children, not because it's perfect (though I could make a case that when it comes to issues of social justice and the equality of women, it is not only clearly better than its neighbors but on some issues, it could teach the United States how to be a model society.)

What are the complaints of those idealistic young and not-so-young people about Israel? That Israeli policy makes life difficult for

Palestinian families, that the Palestinians are the only people who don't have their own country. (That's not true, by the way. There are any number of others. But I concede the point that life is difficult for the average Palestinian through no fault of his own.) But whose fault is it that they don't have their own state? I don't think it's Israel's. Israel has, over the years, offered the Palestinian Authority statehood in 90% of the West Bank and a share of Jerusalem, in exchange for recognition of Israel's right to exist in peace as a Jewish state. And the Palestinians have repeatedly been betrayed by their leadership, who have said "We won't pay that price. We would rather suffer and hold on to the dream of destroying Israel."

Some years ago, I had the privilege of being in a small group with President Clinton (the first President Clinton), at which he spoke, among other topics, about his frustration at not being able to solve the Arab-Israeli dispute. He told us of how he said to Yasser Arafat after the Camp David summit in the year 2000, "Ehud Barak has offered you control over 90% of the West Bank and shared rule over Jerusalem.

You'll never get a better deal than that. How could you turn it down?"

And Arafat, the hero of the Palestinian resistance, said to him, "Because if I accept the right of Israel to live in peace, my people will kill me."

Mahmoud Abbas recently gave the same answer to John Kerry after another failed peace conference, "If I accept Israel's right to live in peace on the shores of the Mediterranean, my people will assassinate me."

Whose fault is it that the Palestinians don't have their own state, that law-abiding, peace-loving Palestinians suffer all sorts of indignities at the hands of border guards and police? To all those liberals out there (and I still think of myself as a liberal even if I see Israel as the good guys in the Middle East conflict), I would remind you that for almost twenty years, from 1948 to 1967, the Palestinians had a state of their own on the West Bank and half of Jerusalem, including the Old City and the Temple Mount. When I lived in Israel for a year in 1957, doing graduate work at the Hebrew University, I would walk down Mamilla Road in Jerusalem to have lunch at the University cafeteria and

about ten yards past the cafeteria, there was a massive wall with Jordanian soldiers armed with rifles atop the wall to make sure no one from the Israeli side tried to enter the Old City. But in June of 1967, the Palestinian leadership ignored the pleas and warnings of the U.S. State Department and joined with Nasser's Egypt, Jordan and Syria, declaring war on Israel with the aim of destroying it. It's what we remember as the Six-Day War. When it was over, Israel had gained control over the entire West Bank and the Old City of Jerusalem. I would ask those compassionate critics of Israel, "Can you give me one example in all of human history of a country starting a war, losing the war and expecting to be compensated territorially for losing it?" Did it happen to Germany after World War Two? Or to Japan? But that's what the Palestinians are demanding, and America's enemies in the Third World are supporting them, and too many kind-hearted young and older Americans echo their demands.

All those starry-eyed idealists, all those sensitive college students who protest mistreatment of gays but demand the creation of a state

on Israel's border that at best imprisons gays and at worst executes them, all those idealistic students who demand a greater role for women on their college campus but want to picket and boycott Israel on behalf of a culture that sells twelve-year-old girls into marriage and puts to death teen age girls who become pregnant after being raped—you have to wonder what is really motivating them.

And so we pray on Rosh HaShanah, *uv'chen ten kavod l'amecha*, Don't just accept, don't just tolerate, celebrate the existence of a Jewish state in the land where Judaism was born. Where it deserves to be celebrated for what it has done in the field of medical research, celebrate it. Where it deserves to be admired for what it has shared with struggling societies around the world, teaching them to make better use of their water, their harvests, their educational systems, admire it. When you realize that in your lifetime or in your parents' lifetime, we were privileged to see the rebirth of a Jewish nation in the ancestral Jewish homeland, be grateful that you were privileged to live in the age of the Third Jewish Commonwealth. And should you find

yourself disagreeing with it, compelled to criticize it for not being perfect, I would ask you to recognize that insofar as being Jewish is an important part of your identity, recognize Israel's claim on your love. Criticize it as you would criticize someone or something you love, because even though it's not perfect, it's ours, and for us who come to synagogue on Rosh HaShanah painfully aware of our imperfections, that should be enough to make it special.

*Uv'chen Ten Kavod L'Amecha.* Lord, grant honor to Your people. Seeing that basic Rosh HaShanah prayer in another context, I would submit that in an astonishing and totally unexpected way, that prayer has come true in my lifetime and in the lifetime of most of us sitting here. There has been a revolution in American Jewish life, and I'm not sure the implications of it have sunk in, because it's so different from the way things have always been. I can summarize the revolution in four words: Being Jewish is in.

Seventy-five years ago, that was not the case. I recently read a history of the Second World War. For me, the most painful part of the book was not what Hitler did to the Jews of Europe, but what America's leaders did not do when they learned about it. Franklin Roosevelt knew about the gas chambers and the extermination camps, but it was never a priority, but Jews continued to vote for him. I was nine years old during the election of 1944 and I remember asking my father, "Why is somebody running against Roosevelt? He's the President." The State Department knew and all those top-level bureaucrats from their wealthy families and their private school educations, knew what was happening but didn't care about what happened to Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. Why should they? They didn't care about what happened to Jews in their home towns.

Two generations later, look at how much has changed. Both presidential candidates have Jewish sons-in-law and nobody makes a fuss about it. It's no longer remarkable when a Jew is elected to the Senate, when a Jewish congressman chairs a key committee. Today

everybody's doctor, everybody's accountant, everybody's favorite comedian is probably a Jew, and nobody gives it a second thought.

Being Jewish is in. I'll tell you where this shows up most unexpectedly. In the first thirty years of my rabbinic experience, if a young man from the congregation became romantically involved with a non-Jewish girlfriend, it wasn't only because 97% of the eligible young women out there were non-Jews. It also represented an escape from the prejudices and limitations of being Jewish. It was his admission ticket to a wider world. That was then. Today, when a young man or young woman from our community becomes romantically involved with someone who is not Jewish, in nearly every case something virtually unprecedented happens. The non-Jewish partner confesses that he or she, usually she, has always been fascinated by Judaism, drawn by its intellectual emphasis, by its absence of dogma, by its emphasis on making the world a better place for everyone, not just preparing the individual to leave this sinful world behind. It's no longer surprising when the non-Jewish partner is open to the prospect of

joining the Jewish people. More than that, it's no longer surprising when the non-Jewish partner confesses to me that even before she met the love of her life, she felt that she was on a trajectory to become part of the Jewish people.

Some of you may remember a guest speaker we had here some years ago. If you were here, I can't believe you don't remember it. If memory serves, the speaker was president of the Sisterhood of a Reform Temple in Lexington. She told us that she was a Jew-by-choice but that she had considered becoming Jewish even before she met the man she would go on to marry.

She told us that it was not by chance that she fell in love with a Jewish man and took on his religion. Growing up in the mid-West with no Jewish friends or relatives, she always had this feeling that she was supposed to be Jewish. In college, she sought out Jewish friends, and no one in her family could understand why. I remember hearing the same story from my friend Rabbi Rachel Cowan, who has become the spokesperson for Jewish meditation and mindfulness, that when she

fell in love with her eventual husband, a Jewish man, something inside her told her that this is what she was meant to do.

The speaker from Lexington told us a similar story, that when she made the decision to become Jewish and enrolled in a class for prospective converts, many of her classmates shared similar stories: no family links to Judaism but a compelling sense that this was what she was supposed to do with her life.

And she had a theory about it. I don't believe it and I don't accept it, but I feel obliged to share it with you. Why are all these young women from non-Jewish families drawn to Judaism? The speaker believes that she and all these other Methodist and Episcopal young women are the reincarnation of Jewish girls from Eastern Europe who were killed by Hitler before they could grow up and found Jewish families. For her to become Jewish was to fulfill her soul's original destiny.

Personally, I have trouble believing that. I don't believe in reincarnation. I don't believe God is in the used soul business. I tend to

suspect that the non-dogmatic nature of Jewish theology, the emphasis on family closeness, the celebration of learning and the struggle for social justice have more to do with it. But I am profoundly grateful that our community is enriched by these Jews-by-choice. I see them as the answer to our Rosh HaShanah prayer, *ten kavod l'amecha*, Let the nations of the world honor the Jewish people for what we have to offer the world.

Now I will state outright that it is always easier when two Jews marry. You don't have in-laws feeling somehow betrayed or abandoned. You don't have to deal with Christmas party invitations. You don't have pressure to name one of your children after Uncle Christopher. And yet, our congregation, our community has been significantly enriched by the presence of people who, by one route or another, found their way into Judaism. We welcome you, we cherish you, we commit ourselves to making you feel at home in our midst.

I will confess that a generation or two ago, I worried about the future of the American Jewish community, worried that one day there

would not be enough of us to be a community, that those of us who cared would have to move to Israel as so many of the Jews of Europe are doing. Today I feel better about the Jewish future, not only because of the number of non-Jews who choose to become Jewish but because of the level of acceptance, more than acceptance, the level of admiration, even envy with which our neighbors regard us. We have learned to be proud of being Jewish, to see it as a gift, not as a burden, and America has come to admire us for it. Our Rosh HaShanah prayer has been answered : *Ten kavod l'amecha*, Grant honor to your people, the Jewish people, so that all who regard us, from within and from outside the Jewish community, will be able to say "This is a people whom the Lord has blessed."

*Amen, L'shanah tovah tikatevu.*