

Rosh Hashanah Evening 5775 Rabbi Sanford R. Kopnick, The Valley Temple "Now What?--but Now!"

A few weeks ago, the President of the Ohio University student body in Athens, Ohio was challenged by the University president to the ALS Ice Bucket challenge. This democratically elected young woman took advantage of the audience that a student body president would generate on her Facebook page, and changed it to a blood bucket challenge to draw attention to what she called "the genocide in Gaza and the occupation of Palestine by the Israeli state." She urged economic and academic divesting of the Israeli state.



That same week, Robert Randsell's write-in campaign for Kentucky's seat in the U.S. Senate became more widely known because of his anti-Semitic signs stating, "with Jews we lose.." Some of these signs were posted around the state, and one in Union, KY found its way to the evening news.

Earlier in the summer, I received a phone call from one of our members who could not believe the anti-Israel tirade which appeared on a relative's Facebook page. Something about the war in Gaza had ignited something in the relative's soul. What seemed to be a tirade not encumbered by the facts, the posting stated that she felt her Jewish acquaintances lied to her about Israel and the Palestinians.

On June 12, three Israeli teens from a settlement in the West Bank were abducted and killed by Palestinians under the auspices of Hamas. Most authorities in Israel now agree that a major terrorist event was being

planned for tomorrow morning, Rosh Hashanah, in Israel. Israeli authorities determined that by Rosh Hashanah, armed militants were expecting to emerge from a vast tunnel system that had been dug with outlets in Israel proper. Once emerging, the goal was havoc for a time—in order to knock Israel's confidence and begin a divisive debate about Israel's place in the Middle East.

As horrifying as it was for Israelis to get their heads around the idea that children, not yet of military age, were kidnapped, a right-wing Israeli and some young followers retaliated by capturing and killing a Palestinian boy. The Palestinian boy was killed, and an Israeli man-hunt caught and jailed the murderers, while the news of the death of the three kidnapped Israeli youths created dancing in the streets of Gaza. Civilian Israelis do not kill Palestinians--it is certainly not celebrated. I understand having sympathy for a people living in squalor and despair, with leaders that provide little hope for the future. And while they may be underdogs, that OU student body leader's comments are as dangerous as they are absurd.

Tomorrow morning we will again read about Abraham and his journey to show the world that he would be willing to sacrifice his son, Isaac, but God would never require such an act. Human sacrifice would never be an expectation to enter into a covenant with God. That others pervert belief in God and suggest that human sacrifice is required for their religion is obscene. We had Valley high school and college kids in Israel this summer. Some of their parents were wondering whether they were in harm's way, and not at all sure if

their kids were becoming inadvertent sacrificial lambs. It seemed this summer and now, that this war has created many casualties. Palestinians in Gaza will now suffer more, due to the destruction that comes when a country defends itself against rockets launched from residential areas. Israelis will now suffer more, because not only did three children die, but they will suffer also because this conflict has now sunk to a point where an Israeli influenced teens to kill a Palestinian youth. And we Jews throughout the world may be suffering more, because anti-Semitism which hadn't boiled over in years seems to returning in the form of anti-Israel hate.

Everyone loves an underdog and the media trains us to love the underdog. When Israel was taking on Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia all at the same time, Israel was the underdog. Since the Palestinians have fewer resources, and Israel is an established nation, Israel is being characterized as an oppressor without regard for the lives and well-being of the Palestinians. And, sadly for those who would like to oversimplify the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the history would suggest that there is a lot more to the story.

I actually admire any young person with a passion that results in working to make the world a better place, and that OU student president likely had her heart in the right place. Her love of the Palestinians is admirable; her wanting to draw attention to the conflict is also impressive. Her right to free speech is one I'll fight for. Yet, her ignorance is appalling, and her choice of words is totally irresponsible. She, like that woman who posted her ire at the Israelis and her Jewish friends because she claimed they misled her about the Palestinian situation need to get their facts straight, and so do we.

Just as Israelis took up arms to uncover this vast tunnel system, the bombs that dropped into Israel through a massive

and ongoing bombardment were real. The Iron Dome system supplied to the Israelis saved many lives--and was, thank God, very effective. Hamas has been preparing for this fight for years. And the Israeli response was far more limited than would likely have happened were the U.S. attacked in a similar way. Far less. It is a tragedy that so many Palestinians died, and yet, what is the appropriate Israeli response when rockets come from residential facilities, schools and hospitals? What is the way a targeted country should respond in their self-defense? What about the bucket that is filled with the blood of children of three Israeli teens?

It seems that we Jews have many opinions about just how far Israel should go to secure its space. But there are some facts that are basic to the story, and it would be great if Jews and gentiles alike would acknowledge that the current story is not the only story. There are lots of reasons why this situation even exists today, and answers are difficult to find in a conflict where acknowledging the other's right to exist is part of the problem.

Here are some things that I try to remember, and hope others will, too, when I contemplate the Palestinian and Israeli conflict:

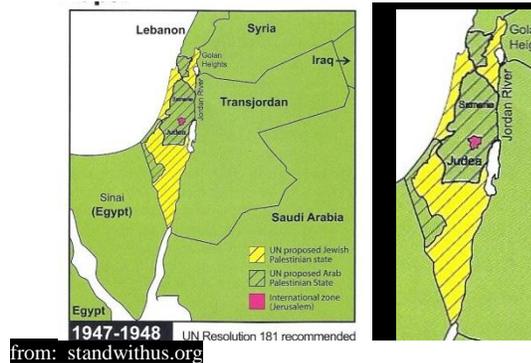
Jews trace residency in Israel and Jerusalem as long as Palestinians do--and depending on the way it is traced, even longer.

The British were the rulers of Palestine prior to 1947 and not the Palestinians. And before that, it was the Ottoman Empire. Both ruled over Jews and Arabs living in Palestine.

Then, Palestine was a sparsely populated land, with villages and towns, no central government, and it was very underdeveloped.

The 1947 Partition Plan of the United Nations granted a Palestinian

Homeland and a Jewish state. David Ben Gurion and others grabbed the chance, and the Arab world rejected it. The land that David Ben Gurion agreed to had the Negev desert as a significant piece of the land, and the Palestinians were offered far better real estate.



It is true that Israelis cleared some Arab villages during the war of Independence. It is also a fact that the Arab world enticed many Palestinians to leave with the promise of conquering all of Israel, which resulted in brutal wars in 1956, 1976, 1973 and more.

When the Egypt Israeli Peace Accords were signed in 1979, Egypt refused to take responsibility for the Gaza Strip.

We also learned this past summer that cement which was intended for construction in Gaza for schools, homes, and hospitals was largely diverted in order to create tunnels that would open in Israel, thus depriving a desperate population of needed infrastructure, in order to create additional threats to Israel.

It cannot be denied that Israel has made mistakes in the process of occupying the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Israeli settlements incite problems, and Israelis do not agree about what to do about the occupied territories, settlements, and even the security fence constructed a few years ago. But a majority of Israelis agree that there should be a Palestinian state. Palestinian negotiators do not recognize Israel's right to exist--especially officials of Hamas, the ruling party of Gaza.

The truth is, Gaza is as miserable of a place as one can find--overpopulated, poverty-stricken, and now even further battered by war. The solution for Gaza is going to be very difficult to find. Hamas has no ambition for coexistence with Israel, and no patience for moderate Palestinians. And while it is easy to side with the underdog, I am so curious as to what those who take the blood bucket challenge see as the solution when there is no plan put forward, no demand other than the total destruction of the Jewish state. It is easy to wish the underdog success, but perhaps we should demand that the underdog have a plan that doesn't make them as bad or worse than their so called oppressors.

One Friday night during the summer, we were reading the weekly Torah portion from the book of Deuteronomy where the Israelites are about to seize the land promised by God. The Hittites, the Jebusites, the Amorites, and others were to lose their land, and God commanded the priests to encourage them to go and dispossess the land. Remember, Palestinians are not the Hittites, the Jebusites, or any other "ites" descendants. And the command to the Israelites was to rid those areas of their inhabitants. Modern Israel relates to the Biblical promise of the land and our strong tie to it, but lives in a modern world where simply going in and cleaning house, while once a standard practice, is not acceptable.

Toward the end of our discussion of that Shabbat's portion, I suggested that in the absence of Palestinians who would be able to deliver on negotiations, it is up to the Israelis to determine something truly fair and workable. That solution needs to allow a moderate group to emerge with a real economic plan, a strong sense of security, and an outrage for those radicals who would derail the possibility for rapid improvement of the lives of Palestinians. It needs to have

a plan for a Palestinian future where Israel respects its neighbor and creates sincere and substantive relationships with the many aspects of Palestinian life that can emerge as a peace dividend. And I believe that with all of the ingenuity that allowed our people to survive these millennia, we are certainly bright enough to figure out how to get out of this mess.

Until that happens, we in America and throughout the world may have to brace for a difficult time with our neighbors until they embrace fact over fiction when describing the plight of the Palestinians. Jews are responsible for each other—it is a basic Jewish value, and so it is appropriate to defend the state of Israel, even when some policies run counter to what we think is right. But we Jews are part of the human race where we learn that we were all created in God's image, there is no one lesser or greater. We learn that we are to love our neighbor as our self. We learn to welcome the stranger, and we learn to seek peace and pursue it. And we continue to be inspired by Golda Meir's philosophy which said,



Golda Meir

"We can forgive the Arabs for killing our children. We cannot forgive them for forcing us to kill their children. We will only have peace with the Arabs when they love their children more than they hate us." It is important to know the facts so we can gently share them should we find our neighbors wanting to know what we know, rather than fanning some anti-Israel tirade.

This year, Rosh Hashanah begins amid a changing Middle East landscape. Just days ago, U.S. planes started bombing the new threat housed in Syria. But it also comes after a summer of war where the perspective about the Palestinian/Israeli conflict has become more anti-Israeli among

a few more of our neighbors. The result may be a greater comfort zone for those wishing to spout hate talk about Jews in general. And, regardless of your or my position on Zionism, it is important that we remain informed and ready to talk to those who really want to understand.

When hearing that I thought that Israel must accept full responsibility for creating a real and viable solution to the Palestinian's situation — which the Palestinians would come to find beneficial, someone interrupted and asked, "why us?" I blurted out this answer, which after a lot of reflection, I still think is right: Why us? Because we're the Jews, and who else is there to do it? We're the Jews who figured out how to make a desert bloom and how to change a swamp into Tel Aviv; certainly we can figure this out, too. And as Hillel said, "if we are for ourselves alone, what are we, and if not now, when?"

L'shanah Tovah