

Sermon. January 9, 2009

There's no question that we Americans like our arts, our politics and our sports to be clean cut. We do not tolerate ambiguity or muddiness very well. We like to know whose songs, whose videos and whose films were the high scorers at the end of each weekend, by measuring the box office sales and profit taken. We can't stand wishy-washy political results be it the contesting of the last 47 votes in Minnesota Senate race or the slow two-step process of Illinois politics—we want to know who's in and who's out. And, when you get a clear sports result like the Florida Gators with Tebow over the Oklahoma Sooners, you don't want to hear sportscasters nitpicking the next morning over the questions of how the college rankings and slotting are done.

Unfortunately, not all of life works so cleanly. As Keifer Southerland, better as Jack Bauer, said concerning the 8th season of the television show, “**24**”:

“Sure, people like it because he lives in the grey, in the muddy parts of life, the ambiguous parts, where there's good and bad and a lot of compromises that have to be made...and that's why we want a hero who can just decide, this is right...this has to be right”...

As an actor, Sutherland can see our wishes for what they are—we wish for someone who can cut through the ambiguity or muddiness and make good quick sense of it all—while the clock is running down.

There's little question that the story of King David in tomorrow morning's Haftarah is just like that: the clock is running down, the elderly king is dying with an unfinished agenda—he still has enemies in his court and a short hit list of those who opposed him on the battlefield. And so King David takes his *favorite* son, not the eldest son, to be King. David takes Solomon into his trust...urging him to dispatch these enemies. But there is a catch: Solomon must act recklessly to fulfill the command and still act with caution—for the wise young Solomon realizes that the wars that would result would have to be managed with care; the battles would have to be purposeful, the end result just, or else his kingdom and the Jewish people would be ruined. Solomon did not rush to complete the request, and the rabbis of old deliberately edited the story for public reading as a Haftarah so that it ends ambiguously—frustrating our desire for a clear cut decision. Realism trumps fiction. That's the way fiction and fact goes among the Jews—even in prayer.

Our prayerbook is filled with metrical poems and prayers, edited by a real warrior, whose hands were quite literally stained with blood. That particular poet was part and parcel of wars that plagued the Jewish community of the Iberian Peninsula—where the Jews chose to fight with the Berbers against the Christians and then even more strongly against the Muslims to guarantee their own survival. Shmuel Ha Nagid (993-1056) was the first poet of the great Spanish era, and was also in his youth, a Talmudist and then a warrior. He

was appointed by the Berbers as vizier/ commander of armies – and took on the nom de plume of Ismaela ibn Nagrael. And thus he waged vicious hand-to-hand war against the Muslims of Seville, where he was victorious in long sequences of battles. He sent his favored son poems from the battlefield, poems that influenced his son to take on the same role later in life. But alas, ten years after his death, this favored son, serving as the leading army commander, lost his life and those of all the Jews of Grenada in a battle against the Muslims of his day. So, to return to the point, listen to the short reflection on war by Shmuel Ha Nagid:

“War is at first like a beautiful girl with whom all men long to play, but in the end like a repulsive hag whose suitors all weep and ache.”

Isn't that a brutal realism among Jews about the allure and power of war—with all of the regret and sorrow that comes from seeing civilians die and populations deprived? That is why there are no rallies in Israel filled with banners and no mass chanting in Israel of slogans against the enemy; there is no glorification of the losses to the Palestinians; no posting by Israeli soldiers of battle photographs to humiliate the enemy. There is just a sober and hard realism.

We, living a lifetime away, have to be ready to explain to ourselves the nature of that realism. It is not enough that we agree that the charge that war has to be proportional is ludicrous and baseless. As Benjamin Netanyahu, who once served as Prime Minister and may likely, in February, be the next Prime Minister of the State of Israel, wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* this week:

“In launching precision strikes against the Hamas rocket launchers, headquarters, weapon depots, smuggling tunnels and training camps, Israel is trying to minimize civilian casualties. But Hamas deliberately attacks Israeli civilians and deliberately hides behind Palestinian civilians—a double war crime. Responsible governments do their utmost to minimize civilian casualties but they do not grant immunity to terrorists who use civilians as a human shield.”

That point would seem obvious and known to all, but just go home and read the front page first person account in *The New York Times* of today by a Palestinian surgeon whose family bore the sad, brute force of battle because of his apartment neighbors who shot rockets and grenades—without his protesting their presence-- at the Israelis. No one, absolutely no one, but the Hamas fighter quoted at the end of that article, takes any joy at the loss of life of civilians.

The reason we need to keep our eyes focused on such matters, including worrying about the morality of the execution of a necessary war, is that by doing so, we maintain the moral clarity and resourcefulness that the Haftarah wanted the new King Solomon to attain during times of ambiguity.

Whether or not the greater world understands at this time that the cessation of war cannot be a cease-fire for re-arming and re-deploying; whether or not others take note of the

convoys of supplies that the Israelis are sending in for the civilian populations, whether or not the pundits and letter writers grasp the lack of a rush to war that reflected the realism of the Israeli government. We must bear these sentiments in mind and act with purposefulness-- precisely because the end result of this war will most likely be a gray matter —not black and white; a negotiated truce—because Israel will not endorse carpet bombing and total blockades that mark other countries' successful subjugation of an enemy—and, because we will see a limited victory that is not a deterrent. It is likely that by next Sabbath there will be a withdrawal, a negotiation, but not the result that would guarantee an end to the missiles shot at Israel.

And so, once again, there are three actions which you should consider: Last week I urged you to write, email or call your representatives' offices to let them know that you are concerned that in this interregnum your support is known. This week's activities start Saturday night.

There will be a community gathering at the Scotch Plains JCC of the MetroWest and Central area Jewish communities for a rally in support of Israel with a live linked-in presentation from Israel and report. The flyers and address for the rally are on the table outside.

Secondly, the United Jewish Communities –the umbrella movement of Jewish federations in America is committed to raising \$10 million despite all of the local economic woes. These funds would go immediately to the Joint Distribution Committee for specific needs outside of the immediate state budget of Israel: including caring for the 25,000 elderly and disabled residents in the south of Israel; expanding emergency preparedness; expanding trauma prevention and relief for children; reinforcing networks of emergency volunteers; and, fortifying security structures for the elderly. These are costly and necessary short term programs.

And finally, one of my most trustworthy and resourceful neighbors, Naomi Eisenberg, who has run Jewish Tzedakah projects for 28 years, established a program called www.apackagefromhome.org. that supplies Israel's fighting men and women at the front with care packages—complete with notes from American adults and b'nai mitzvah. The packages are assembled in Israel and delivered to the rest and re-supply depots near the front lines as well as to the wounded in hospitals. Along with cold weather gloves, hats and sweaters, the packages include deodorant, men's short sleeve round necked T shirts, boxer shorts, lip balm, toothbrush and travel size toothpaste, and individual kosher M&M's or Mike & Ikes. 97% of all funds received are used to pay for the goods that are included in the packages. All of the packers are volunteers. Their packing place is made available to us without charge by Beit Knesset Hanassi in Israel –the synagogue annex to the President's office in Jerusalem, and the fundraising office is in her home in Millburn on Wyoming Avenue. ALL the printing and postal charges are paid by a donor who wishes to remain anonymous. For more information about “A Package from Home”, please visit their website at www.apackagefromhome.org.

In a week, when the world demands absolute moral clarity and a black and white resolution of the matter, it will seem simplistic to say that our internal moral clarity is what matters most. A war of attrition; a war without full deterrent power; a set of Western governments who seek peace in this time without regard for how the stage will be set for a replay...all of these will likely be the result of those who push for the black and white, who's in and who's out, who won and who lost, way of looking at a complex world. But it is these factors which demand of us that we regard Solomon's dilemma; Shmuel HaNagid's realism, and our linkage to the soldiers as our keys to obtaining and maintaining moral clarity.

Shabbat Shalom

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