

D'var Torah

SINAI TEMPLE, SPRINGFIELD
SHABBAT EVENING, 16 SEPTEMBER 2016

Important Jewish Messages from the Media

Many years ago and in Chicago, I, the same as Sumner and Shoshana in SPFTY here, was president of my Temple Youth Group. It was then that my rabbi, Hayyim Goren Perelmutter, *alav hashalom*, suggested that our TYG, for one of the semi-annual Shabbat services we youth-groupers conducted for the congregation, do a creative service with a very curious theme. The theme was "God in the Newspapers." Now I know it's difficult to imagine that in those days you could find God in the pages of the *Chicago Daily News* or the *Chicago Sun-Times* (As for the *Chicago Tribune* back then, forget it altogether!), but we did. "Read between the lines," he taught us, "and you'll find God there."

I wish I had saved a copy of the service. It was, if I'm not mistaken, quite good. And from articles, such as one from the early days of the U.S. space program which gave birth to a prayer about "reaching for the stars," a message pretty important to high-schoolers, we did, at least in that exercise, find God in the newspapers!

But there was more. There was the text from Isaiah that Rabbi Perelmutter taught us when we were putting the service together. דַּרְשׁוּ ה' בְּהַמְצֵאוֹ, "Seek God where God may be found."¹ That was important. I learned then and there to keep my eyes open for religious messages, not just in the newspapers but wherever the messages might pop up. And yes, they are often in the media.

Two such messages jumped out at me in a news piece this week. It was a piece caught my eye because it was about Israel. If I see something about Israel, particularly if the headline suggests it's important, I read it. This time the messages came from the content.

The article dealt with the final agreement on the \$38 billion US military aid package for Israel, and the 10-year pact accompanying it, that was shortly expected to be signed. Various media carried it, albeit in slightly different versions. But the first one I read, the one from the *Jerusalem Post*, raised two pre-High Holy Day issues.

First, from the article, this is the biggest pledge of US military assistance ever made to any country, but to get it Netanyahu made some major concessions. Among them, Israel agreed not to seek additional funds from Congress beyond what will be guaranteed annually in the new package. And second, Israel will also phase out a special arrangement that has allowed it to spend part of its US aid on its own defense industry instead of on American-made weapons.

¹ Isaiah 55:6.

That's big. Israel's weapons technology program, some of which has been picked up and utilized by the American military, is part what has made Israel's military capability what it is. Continuing to develop that technology costs money.

So the question arises, why does Netanyahu agree to such a deal? From the Jerusalem Post article, "But Netanyahu decided it would be best to forge a new arrangement with Obama, who leaves office in January, rather than hoping for better terms from the next US administration...A deal now allows him to avoid uncertainties surrounding the next president, whether Democrat Hillary Clinton or Republican Donald Trump, and to give Israel's defense establishment the ability to plan ahead."²

And then there is the second issue. Given the less than good relationship that exists personally between Netanyahu and Obama (Barack Obama is not exactly someone whom Netanyahu will bring home for Shabbos dinner), and given Obama's lack of support for Israel (contrary his oft-repeated line to the contrary), why did Obama agree to such a deal?

Again, quoting from the same article, given with "Republican critics accus(ing Obama) of not being attentive enough to Israel's security, which the White House strongly denies,"³ "Obama's aides want a new deal before his presidency ends, seeing it as an important part of his legacy."⁴

And now let's look at the Jewish issues, especially relevant at this, the time of the approach to the High Holy Days.

There is a major lesson for us all in Netanyahu's agreeing to enter in the agreement now rather than to wait. It's a High Holy Day lesson: don't put things off that should be attended to today because we don't know what tomorrow will bring...or even if there will be a tomorrow.

There is a curious Talmudic passage on this. In it, our sage, Rabbi Eliezer, teaches, "Repent one day before your death."

At this his disciples ask him, "How does one know on what day he will die?"

He replies, "All the more reason he should repent today, lest he die tomorrow."⁵

Or as Abaye put it, "A young pumpkin [in hand] is better than a full-grown one [in the field]".⁶

Last year, in connection with the bereavement work I was doing, I heard more than once in a funeral intake that the great plans that were made for trips to be taken or plac-

² <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/US-agrees-to-military-aid-deal-with-Israel-worth-at-least-38-billion-467613>. Article dated 13 September 2017

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Shabbat 53a

⁶ Sukkah 56b and Ketubot 83b

es to be visited or vacation homes to be used never came to pass because someone, sadly, had passed away “altogether too soon.”

And I’m not so sure that the fact of Yizkor services on Yom Kippur, or, in more traditional circles, of wearing of a kittel on Yom Kippur that will one day serve as a burial shroud, isn’t to remind us that today *is* the only day that we own. Says Judaism, if I understand the spirit of our tradition correctly, make today count and grab today’s opportunities today.

And now for the message of President Obama’s concern with his legacy: how will his presidency, how will *he*, be remembered?

Back home on Boston’s North Shore last year, I spent a significant amount of time out at many cemeteries there. And during every visit, I learned something new. But that is a continuation of something that has been going on in my life for a long time. I have always gone out of my way to visit cemeteries, particularly Jewish ones, because they are great places to do research. But the trick is to be able to read the “stones,” which is the slang term we Jews use for *matzeivot*, which is what others call tombstones.

I’m very much interested in what is written on *matzeivot*. Typically today, there is very little. Beyond, “loving father/mother, grandparent, etc.,” and the grave symbol that denotes that someone was a kohen or a levi (water pitcher), and the two Hebrew letters at the top that stand for the Hebrew words meaning “Here lies,” and the five Hebrew letters at the bottom that stand for the Hebrew words meaning “May his/her/their soul(s) be bound up in the bond of life,” you rarely see anything that amounts to an epitaph. Of course, occasionally you do. And when you do, sometimes they are written in Hebrew, though sometimes in English too. By the way, I’ve even seen some in Danvers written totally in Ladino!

I find the lack of real epitaphs to be sad. Is there nothing we can say about a person that we want remembered for the 25,000 years that granite, cut to a depth of ¼ inch, will be readable? Nothing for this generation? Nothing for future generations. What do *you* want your *matzeivah* to say? (I’m not going to deal with that now...it’s a subject though that I’m sure we’ll consider sometime this year) The point is – and this is High Holy Day stuff – how do *we* want to be remembered? What of our lives, beyond our material goods, do we want to continue on? What of our values? What of the kind of things we live for and are about?

Two themes, coming straight out of a news piece: living for today, and being remembered for tomorrow. My rabbi was right. Judaism doesn’t only draw its messages from our sacred texts. It draws them too from the *inyana d’yoma*, the matters of the day. And to them and about them it has much from our sacred tradition to say.

May these High Holy Days coming give us pause to consider our lives. And too may the Holy Days inspire us to create a legacy, one that literally will be part of the process of *tikkun olam*, of fixing the world, now and into the future.

-- *Howard A. Kosovski*