

ZIONISM AND THE DOUBLE STANDARD

*Sermon by Rabbi Schulweis, January 2009*

*Transcribed*

He was waiting for me there at the threshold of the synagogue. He took me aside and he said, *“The trouble with you, Rabbi, is that you ask too much of us. You set the bar so high. We Jews are not angels, and we ought not to be angels, because angels on earth are incinerated in the crematoria.”*

Now, what did I say that gave him such agitation? It was the Sabbath before Passover, and I had told the congregation with pride that the reason the cup of wine is diminished was because of the empathy for the sorrow and tragedy of the Egyptians, the ten plagues, and their drowning in the sea. And I quoted the celebrated midrash which speaks of the angel who gloated over the victory of the Jewish people and the drowning of the pursuing Egyptians. And God chastises them — *“My children are drowning in the sea, and you dare sing songs?”*

And then I went on to say “Open the Bible, and you will see this remarkable slave people who were kept in anguish and bondage, and were instructed in Deuteronomy (Chapter 23) — *‘You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were strangers in their land.’*”

How remarkable. On the last six days of Pesach, I went on to explain, how remarkable that you don’t even recite the entire Hallel, all of the Psalms, but you have to excise them because you cannot possibly rejoice at the defeat of the innocents. So the rabbis diminished the cup of wine and they cut out part of the Psalms. Because which Jew, in the sight of such tragedy, can taunt the enemy and say to them, as the Psalm does say, *“Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have a mouth and cannot speak, eyes and cannot see. They cannot make a sound in their throat. Their makers all who trusted them shall become like them”* ? Which Jew can rub salt into another’s wound? Which Jew can recite on the last days of Pesach, *“Be at ease, my soul, for God has dealt kindly with you”* ? And with them?

My friend was not impressed:

*“Rabbi, that kind of talk, that kind of compassion, that kind of softness is exactly what I have in mind. Because you fall into a perilous trap. You raise an ethical bar for Jews that is so high that you foster a double standard. Look what the world does with your high standard? If Israel does something to protect itself, it’s immediately attacked. If it destroys the deadly missiles, the Kassam rockets, the launching pads of those who devastate the city of Sderot, they are called “murdering Fascists.” But if the Hezbollah or if the Hamas or the Jihad terrorists do something truly egregious like the bombing of yeshivas and wedding halls, they are told “Well, look, it is due to their poverty, or our occupation. If Israel build’s a barrier to protect themselves from the Jihad, they are accused of provocation. Or else by the self-righteous priggishness of Jimmy Carter, who compares Israel to South African apartheid. For God’s sake, Rabbi, don’t you understand this is an existential question? We are dealing with matters of life and death. Survival is at stake. So,*

*there, Rabbi, is the vicious double standard, and it is all over on the campuses, it's among the student body, it's among the teachers, the faculty. It's all of that. Don't you hear the voice of anti-Semitic, anti-Zionism all throughout Europe?"*

I feel his grief. His frustration, and his anger. And it penetrates my peaceless sleep. He's right. Since 2001, more than 7,000 rocket missiles have rained over Israel from Gaza, destroying good parts of Sderot — wounding, killing, maiming, traumatizing its citizens, its children unable to leave their homes. And when Israel, in self-defense, builds barriers, fences, walls, it is condemned for over-reacting.

In 1981, you will recall that Israeli planes destroyed a nuclear reactor in Iraq that was aimed to devastate Israel, and the world pounced on Israel for their overreaction.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad reveals the installation of 6,000 nuclear centrifuges at Iraq's main uranium enrichment complex and declares Israel as the main target. And the world blames Israel, because it has publically admonished Iran, warning them that their destruction will not destroy them with impunity.

*"So you, Rabbi, asked that we should diminish the cup of wine? Not in my house. Not in my house and not at my seder table. I will recite full-throatedly and without spilling a drop of wine — 'Dam, tzfardea, inin, arov, devr, shchin'... 'Pour out My wrath upon the nations that do not know you.' I will not do what Rabbi Feinstein, and you, Rabbi Schulweis, put in your Haggadah. You cut that out. And instead you put in "Pour out Thy love upon the nations of the world who show loving kindness to the seed of Jacob," and then you include Shifrah, and Schindler and Sugahara. You bless when you should curse. And that's your weakness. And you mislead your people."*

And I am caught in the headlights of ambivalence. And there's a great wrenching quandary within me. What should I do? How do I answer him? Should I then recite, "*Pour out Thy wrath upon the nations of the world*" ? Should I recite the full Hallel on the last six days in the presence, in the sight, in the memory of the fall of mine enemy? Should I abandon the history of the moral sensitivity of the Jewish people, founded on the notion of *K'vod Ha-brioth* — on the honor and respect for the dignity of the human being?

Still. Still, he is right, of course. There's an angry man out there. And that angry man is in me. And I recognize it. He has history on his side. Millennial history has taught us the immorality of impotence. To chose weakness after the slaughter of a third of our people is to choose suicide. We are mandated to fight, to defend, to be strong, and destroy those who come to destroy us. We dare not act like passive, acquiescent, subservient, timorous people who are, as we ourselves accused ourselves once, like sheep being led to the slaughterhouse.

We take it all for granted. Sixty years ago, when Ben Gurion declared Israel's independence, the Israel army had just 29,000 soldiers, no tanks, four Messerschmitt fighters and no Navy. In fact, it was told that when Ben Gurion was told that he should bless the Israeli Navy, he looked out and he saw two tattered rowboats and declared in Yiddish, "*Aza Navy? Oif*

*unser sonim gezojt gevoren.*” “May our enemies be blessed with such a navy.”

Seven Arab armies pounced upon Israel, and the expert, the renowned British General Montgomery, predicted that the Jews would not be able to hold out for more than a few weeks. A people that was ground to the ashes of crematoria, a people totally unschooled in the military, untrained in matters of strategy and tactics rose, an uneducated people. A people constantly in fear, and constantly in fright, girded its loins and resurrected itself. A graveless people resurrected itself on its land.

And today, sixty years after this decimated and effete people were in the land, it has a standing army of 187,000; an estimated 450,000 reserves; hundreds of front-line tanks; and state of the art aircraft. They have built a military bigger than that of Great Britain, considered by most experts to be the strongest by far in the Middle East. My son Etan, he of Kibbutz Beit Hashita, and my four grandchildren served in the Israeli Defense Forces, all honor to them. And all honor to those tonight, who have served in the IDF with such distinctions. And all honor to the weak who have become strong, and the defenseless who have become armed, and to the hemorrhaged people, that has received from its own a transfusion from the plasma of hope and courage.

And still, I am caught. I am caught between the sword and the book. There is a wonderful legend in which there is revealed a voice from Heaven that says to the people, “Either you choose the sword or you choose the book. You’ve got to choose.” And I reject that choice. I reject it because it is not only “split thinking,” but it destroys the very essence of Jewish life. To break the sword, to cast it away is irresponsible, as I said, and suicidal. But what am I gonna do with a book? Should we cast it away? All of this remarkable, soft, empathic, intelligence, this ethics, this grandeur of moral purpose from Genesis to Malachi? Should I excise the heroic wisdom from the biblical book of Proverbs? Listen, should I teach this to your children, or not: “*If your enemy falls, do not exult, if he trips, let your heart not rejoice, lest the Lord see it and be displeased.*” And it goes on, in the same chapter, in the same book: “*If your enemy is hungry, give him bread. If he is thirsty, give him water to drink.*”

What do you mean, I must choose the sword or the book? I must choose to split Judaism and Zionism? Zionism from Judaism? That I fall into that “either-or” trap? Absolutely not. I ask for “both-and.” I ask for “both-and.” I ask for the sword and the book, and the rifle and Rambam, and the tank and the Torah, and the missile and the Messiah, and the dagger and the dream.

And I cry when I’m victorious. Because I am not going to sever the body from the soul, or the soul from the body. Do I want to be like them? Do I want my children to fire rifles in the air after there’s an explosion of a Muslim mosque or a madrassa? Do I want to be like my enemies? Do I want to praise God and behead my enemy? Do I want to aim my missiles directly at civilians? I do not want to be them. I do not want my children to be them. I do not want my grandchildren to be them. I do not want to teach hate in sorrow, and must kill the hooded predator ... but at the same time I cannot rob them of the great sense of Jewish tragedy. I read in the Talmud — sages understood it — Once you give the angel of death a sword, that angel will not distinguish between the good and the bad, between the righteous and the evil.

I may not be able to defeat the vicious double-standard of society, but I have to defend the Jewish standard for the sake of heroic history, because it is our cosmic *raison d'être*. Because Isaiah the Prophet lives in all of us: *"I created your covenant people, a light to the nations. Open the eyes deprived of light, rescuing prisoners from confinement from the dungeons of those who live in darkness."* That's my birthright. My father, Abraham, was told, *"You go out and be a blessing, and I will make your name great and you shall be a blessing, and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you."* How can we be a light unto the nations, and blow out the light in ourselves? Have we climbed the mountain of Sinai just to sink, to dwell in the hellish underground of Hezbollah and Hamas? I do not want to turn the dreams of heaven into hell on earth. Every Shabbos in this congregation, and many congregations, we pray differently: *"We have not come into being to hate or to destroy. We have come into being to praise, to labor and to love."*

So, you won't force me to choose between the book and the sword. Didn't we once sing, when we were young, "The land of Israel without Torah is like a body without a soul"? And a Torah without Israel is a bodyless ghost. That's the spirit, the religious underlying spirit of the Zionist revolution. Don't sever the body and the soul. It's like t'fillin. When you put on the phylacteries you bind the head and the heart and the arm. You have to know and to feel and you have to act. And you have to know the whole genius of Israel. And there's a part of the genius of Israel that's left out. We know about the universities, we know about the technology, we know about the industry. But what we don't know about is the heart of Israel. And our children don't know about it. And on the campuses they don't hear about it. And they don't hear about it on YouTube, or in the New York Times, or whatever.

But let youth, let our children know:

There is an Israeli medical delegation now in African Swaziland to teach local teachers the techniques of surgery, and how to intervene and reduce the risks of HIV transmitters.

There is a small hospital in Israel, which opens the talent and skills of its physicians for a handful of seriously ill from Gaza.

There's a surgery hospital funded by "Save a Child's Heart," an Israeli humanitarian organization founded by Amir Cohen ten years ago. And it was Amir who answered after the question, *"If there is an Israeli child and a Palestinian child, whoever is in a more dire condition will get treatment first."*

The heart of Israel? The compassion of Israel?

The government of Israel has donated 2.5 tons of medicine to flood victims in northern and eastern Uganda. Israel —not the largest country in the world, now known for its demography — offers temporary residence to 602,000 Eritreans fleeing the threat of persecution.

Tens of thousands of refugees from Darfur fled the country, and were not accepted by a single Muslim country. But they chose Israel, because they knew the heart of Israel. In Israel,

there is a Bialik-Rogosin School — I hope when you next go to Israel you visit that — it's a school that absorbs children at the margin of society — new immigrants, children of migrant workers, minorities and child refugees of Darfur. My heart bursts with joy and pride that Israel, and that the Jewish World Watch, provides two hot meals a day for these beleaguered children.

The “Save a Child's Heart” founded in Israel provides heart surgery for children in developing nations, regardless of race, ethnicity or religion. This Jewish Israeli organization has treated 1,700 children from twenty-eight countries like Ethiopia, Zanzibar, Rwanda, Moldova, Vietnam, Chad. Children who are treated are Jordanians, and Iraqis, and Arabs, and Palestinians.

So, who are they? Who are these people from Africa, Zanzibar? What has Zionism to do with Zanzibar? They're not members of our congregation. They couldn't even function as part of our minyan. They're not of our theology, they're not of our ritual, they're not of our language, they're not of our ethnicity, they're not of our race. But the Torah, the book has taught us something that we much remember: They are God's children — the poor, the shelterless, the wounded, the maimed, the sick, the stranger.

And it's not known. The heart of Israel is not known. Your kids do not know these things. Because you didn't find it in the Jewish media, neither did I. I had to do a lot of research. Why is that? Why is it so unsung, so unreported, so untaught the heart of Judaism?

My friend, do I ask too much of our people? To ask less is to betray the sacrifices of our people, and their meaning. We will not allow Pharaoh's hardened heart to enter our own.

Today, we hold the book and the sword in one hand, in our grasp. And neither the sword or the book may be allowed to fall. But tomorrow, we will break the sword into ploughshares, and the iron spears into pruning hooks, because they will not be our enemies forever. They cannot be our enemies forever. We know the greatness of our people, the genius of Avot ha rebbe Natan, who said, “*Who is strong, who is a hero? He who makes out of our enemy our friend.*” We will fight them, we will not let them destroy us, we will not let them kill our children. But we will not forget who we are and who we are meant to be.

Look at you here. Look at all of us. Look at our brothers and sisters in Israel. How do they manage to do it under the barrage of constant threats? Under the effort of the enemy to disrupt the normalcy of life, to break their will to live. To cast us into the darkness of despair. You remember, not long ago, they bombed a wedding hall and a disco dancing place, and on the next day Hebrew placards emerged with the same message: “We will not stop dancing. We will not stop singing. We will not stop laughing. We will not stop hoping. We will not stop dreaming.”

This is the great Jewish Zionist revolution. You want to celebrate? Then learn a dance, sing a song, dream a dream, and fill up the cup of Elijah and rejoice.

*Am Yisrael Chai* — We live. We live. We live.