

ROSH HASHANAH EVE
Sunday evening, September 13, 2015

A sermon by
RABBI LEONARD A. SCHOOLMAN

Over the years, I have assembled a small collection of DVDs of old, classic movies. They are fun to watch on cold, winter nights. In this collection are films by Alfred Hitchcock and others, set in the south of France in the 1950's.

But I have some others, which are not so sunny. Such as "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" Looking at this Edward Albee film, it called immediately to mind the level of vituperation in the debate about the Iran nuclear treaty.

It was uncivil. It was hurtful. It laid bare some of most distasteful elements that abound in the Jewish world today.

I will not discuss the Iran treaty tonight. The matter is closed. It is what it is.

But what I do want to consider with you this evening the idea that the arguments for and against the treaty revealed that the real Jewish world is filled with misconceptions about who we are.

It felt to me that we were living in a world that might have existed 50 years ago, and not in 2015.

I. WHO ARE WE AMERICAN JEWS?

I think that my life story is pretty much the same as yours.

Even the most elderly among us were born in the United States of immigrant parents. Our parents may have been born here, but their parents were immigrants themselves. The immigrant experience was very vivid for them. It is not for us.

For most of us, World War II was learned about in history classes. There are very few of us who actually remember the war or actually fought in it.

The Depression was something our parents experienced and told us about. We were aware of how anxious the depression made them about money and security. We personally know little of an era without Social Security and Medicare.

We are the products of America in the Fifties and the Sixties. We are products of an age when the idealization of personal freedom became sanctified, when anti-Semitism was something that happened in a different time and place.

We are, for better or worse, different from our parents and grandparents, because our worlds are different from theirs. We are fully and totally Americans, whose religion happens to be Judaism.

But more than this, most of the Jewish organizations of today were formed in response to a different America and a different world. Most of the leading American Jewish organizations were founded in response to anti-Semitism in America (the ADL or the American Jewish Committee) or the crying need to

support Israel as a home for displaced Jews, whose economic and political support depended on us American Jews.

The issues, which concern American Jews, are different issues today from the issues, which prompted the formation of Jewish organizations then.

American Jews are not really worried about an imminent new Holocaust, or an Israel in danger of destruction by anyone.

Our issues, as Americans, are about racism, poverty, inequality. These are very Jewish concerns, which happen to coincide with the very things which are tearing America apart today.

In an important sense, we have become more American. We have cast aside our European view of the world.

A DIFFERENT ISRAELI LEADERSHIP

We have, as the head of government in Israel, for the first time a leader whose life experience was not in Europe. Benjamin Netanyahu was born in Tel Aviv after the establishment of the State of Israel.

All previous prime ministers of Israel were born in Europe and were deeply influenced by the pogroms of the late 19th century and the early 20th century. This even includes Golda Meir, who lived part of her life in Milwaukee. Each of them carried with them the destruction of European Jewry during World War II. Each of them was, in one way or another, a survivor of one of the worst centuries of Jewish history.

Benjamin Netanyahu is different. His father, the great scholar BenZion Netanyahu, while born in Europe, came to Palestine

with his early Zionist pioneer parents. He came at the age of 10. He never personally experienced Europe as an adult.

BenZion Netanyahu lived in the United States for many years until his death in 2012 at 102. He earned his doctorate at Dropsie College in Philadelphia, now a part of the University of Pennsylvania, and he taught for many years at Cornell University. His son Bibi speaks perfect American English, because he grew up in Philadelphia and attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and worked with Mitt Romney at the Boston Consulting Group.

Benjamin Netanyahu grew up in America in the sixties and seventies. But his view of America then was through the eyes of a right wing Zionist ideologue father and conservative business glasses.

BenZion Netanyahu was the personal secretary to Zev Jabotinsky, the right wing founder of the present Likud party, which espouses the notion of a Greater Israel, with no accommodation possible between Arabs and Jews.

Bibi Netanyahu's view of America is of someone who was always an Israeli patriot living here in exile

Both we, and Mr. Netanyahu, are confused by the fact that he speaks perfect, unaccented American English. This leads us, and him, to both believe that he really understands America. But his America is not the America of the twenty-first century. Netanyahu is a Zionist ideologue. The essential Zionist notion of Shelilat HaGolah, the denigration of the Diaspora, is at the core of Mr. Netanyahu's thinking. All Jews belong in the Jewish homeland, Israel. Everything is subjugation to that essential Zionist value.

NEW UNDERSTANDINGS ARE REQUIRED

As many of you know, I worked at the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Now called the Union for Reform Judaism) for 18 years. The Union where I worked was built in the 50's and 60's, when hundreds of new synagogues were being formed in the heady post World War II period. That was, as if I needed to remind you, before the era of easy air travel, the Internet, e-mail and Skype.

And now, the Union has undergone essential changes, as appropriate. I cannot begin to count the phone conversations that I had with former colleagues which began, "Have you heard what THEY are doing to the Union?!" I do try to be polite when I point out that change is appropriate.

There is a new generation of leaders and a new generation of needs, which need an appropriate response.

By the same token, I believe that Israeli leadership needs to hear the voices of a new generation of American Jews, whose support of everything that an Israeli leader says is not automatic

Their issues are not the same, and the response cannot be the same as yesterday.

I must admit that I was floored when the Conference of Presidents of American Jewish Organizations refused to admit J-Street to membership. There is no faster growing, more relevant Jewish communal agency than J-Street. Why were they not admitted? Because they are not echoes of antiquated Israeli leadership, who expect conformity from equally antiquated American Jews.

Israel is no longer – if it ever was – the singular issue that engaged the attention of American Jews. If Mr. Netanyahu, who is a very smart man, only listens to elderly billionaires, his standing with the American Jewish community will continue to plummet. Jews will not change their value systems merely because he is invited to speak to Congress by a Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives.

CONCLUSION

America today is different from the America of the 50's and the 60's. And we American Jews are different. The organizations and agendas of the past are no longer appropriate. This is what the debate about the Iran nuclear treaty laid bare.

What worked yesterday will no longer work today.

We American Jews are proud. We are successful. We are living in a world without anti-Semitism, except for a few crackpots.

Warnings of new Holocausts to promote causes will not work. Nor will automatic appeals to loyalty to Israel.

We are living in a new age, and if our leaders want to continue to lead, they will need to recognize this.