

SHABBOS SERMON
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A Speech ... about President Obama's Speech

Today's speech is about "the Speech." It is not *the* speech about speech ... only *a* speech about the Speech. The Speech was so important that in the future I will have more speeches about the Speech. But for today here is a speech about the Speech.

The speech I am referring to is, of course, Barack Obama's "Speech to the Muslim World." That, in and of itself, was remarkable. Can one imagine a President of the U.S. delivering a "Speech to the Christian World," or "the Jewish World?" But in the world in which we live a "Speech to the Muslim World" seemed necessary. And if ever there was a President who was the right man to deliver this speech, it was Barack Hussein Obama. His name, his upbringing, his race ... all made him more qualified to deliver this speech than any other President our country has ever had. And make no mistake about it, the speech *had* to be delivered! The hostile relationship between the Muslim world and America cannot go on like this forever. And although one could argue, as I would, that the dangerous state of affairs is due, for the most part, because of the actions and the teachings of the Muslim world and not of American society, the fact of the matter is, there are one and a half billion Muslims in this world; nearly 25% of the world's population. We just can't be on bad terms with ¼ of the world! Barack Obama's reaching out to the Muslim world was certainly in the best interests of the Muslim people, and the American people. Unfortunately, the *way* he did it was not in the best interests of the Jewish people.

There was much in Obama's speech that I would applaud. He said what had to be said in relation to the Muslim world. I could point out to you a lot of things that he should have said, but didn't say, to the Muslim world ... it seems strange to speak to the Muslim world without mentioning the word "terrorism," or he could have pointed out that American soldiers put their lives on the line for Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo and the Balkans and Kuwait. But that's not my concern right now. That's for another speech about "the Speech!" My concern today is what he had to say about the Jewish world. That he seemed to equate the suffering of the Palestinian people with the Jewish people was bad. That he bemoaned the plight of Palestinian refugees from Israel without acknowledging the Jews who are refugees from Arab countries; I'll call an "unfortunate oversight." That he referred to Palestine when that country does not exist, I'll call a "Freudian slip." That he indicated his belief that the creation of the state of Israel was because of the Holocaust was historically wrong! But his seeming to place the onus for what has contributed to the turmoil in the Middle East as being not Iran's building a nuclear bomb, and not Hezbollah's having 40,000 rockets aimed at Israel, and not Hamas' vow to destroy Israel ... no, the major cause of the problem is the settlements! Israel has got to stop the settlements! The settlements are what enrage the Arabs! The settlements threaten the two-state solution! Indeed, the only solid, concrete, demand that

Obama expressed in the speech was to stop the settlements. All this is dangerous, very dangerous.

Now I have to tell you, I was not surprised by the speech. Much of what he had said, he had said before. He had said this in Washington, when Prime Minister Netanyahu visited. I must tell you that I suspected that when it came to Israel, I would not like the speech. The fact is, Barack Obama did not come to the Middle East to show his support for Israel. That he could have done without saying a word ... between his visit to Saudi Arabia and Egypt, he could have made a stop in Israel just for a few minutes, have a falafel, show his support. Do you know what an hour in Israel would have meant for that beleaguered people? There is no country in this world that faces the threats of annihilation that Israel faces. The United States is supposed to be Israel's best friend. When you are in trouble and best friends are in the neighborhood, don't you expect them to stop in for a few minutes? But President Obama did not come to the Middle East to express his friendship to the Jewish people; he came to the Middle East primarily to express his friendship to the Muslim people. And that's all right ... but he got it all wrong when he did it by putting the blame for the predicament on those settlements. The Associated Press headline told the whole story: "Obama's Islam Success Depends on Israel." In so doing, our President got it wrong from beginning to end ... from the beginning of today's Torah portion until its end.

Our Torah portion began with Moses telling Aaron exactly how to kindle the menorah in the Tabernacle. And then we are told: "*Vayaas ken aharon* – and Aaron did so." Our rabbis immediately wonder: why does the Torah have to tell us this? No place else in the Torah are we told that someone was commanded to do something and then we're told that he did so. Of course he did so!

There are lots of explanations given for this. But the Kabbalists provide a fascinating one in pointing out that the word for "so" – "he did so," – is "ken" which also means "yes." The Kabbalists go on to show that during the six days of creation, during most every day of creation, we find this same word, "ken," where we are told: "*Vayhi ken* – and so it was." But this word is not found at the first day of creation; the day in which light was created. According to the Kabbalists, this was the light of God, the light of peace and love and holiness. And this light was not meant to be fully given until the world was perfected with the coming of the Messiah. But Aaron, in kindling the light of the menorah, said that he wasn't willing to wait for the Messiah ... he was going to say light the light now, he was going to say "yes" to life, to the world, to hope. "*Vayaas ken* – and so he did" ... he said "yes."

In 1947 the United Nations voted to divide Palestine. Many people told Israel not to accept what it was being offered. There was no way Israel could make a viable country out of it ... but Israel said "yes!" The Arabs said "no!" There were no settlements then ... there were no settlements in 1967 when Israel captured the West Bank, offered to give it all back in return for peace. And the Arabs said, "no!" That Israel should stop building settlements? ... that Israel should be in favor of two states? ... that Israel should give back the West Bank? That is not only what Barack Obama says,

that's what a majority of the Israeli people say! At Camp David in 2000, Ehud Barak agreed to all that. It was Yassir Arafat who said "no!" Ehud Olmert ran on the platform of withdrawing the settlements from the West Bank and the Palestinians went and elected Hamas. The Palestinians acknowledge that during this past year Olmert, in his negotiations with Prime Minister Abbas, offered to return 97% of the land, trade for the other three and even divide Jerusalem. The Arabs said "No!" Don't blame this on the settlements, Mr. Obama! It has oftentimes been pointed out that the Palestinians are a people who cannot take "yes" for an answer. The problem is not that the Palestinians want the settlements on the West Bank ... the problem is the Palestinians still want the cities in Israel proper. That's the root of the problem! That's what President Obama should have focused on! Not on Israel's settlements, but on the Palestinians continuing to demand their "right of return." Return to where? To Israel!

And that is why, despite all the pressure, I hope that Mr. Netanyahu does not go along with Mr. Obama. Don't get me wrong: I believe that at some point Israel will not only have to stop the building of settlements. I believe that at some point Israel is going to have to give back most of the settlements. It hurts me to say it, because I do believe that *all* of Palestine – from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River - every last square inch of it, is the land God promised to the Jewish people! But God created a world where He doesn't call all the shots. He gave some of His power to groups like the United Nations and the European Union and Russia and China. Why He did this, I don't know ... but I can't possibly imagine how there can ever be peace without there being a stop and return of many, if not most, of the settlements. And I'm not the only one who feels that way. AIPAC advocates "for a viable Palestinian state living side-by-side, in peace, with the Jewish state of Israel." For that to happen is going to require difficult negotiations. But for Israel to stop the settlements without getting anything in return, would be to make the same mistake the Jews made linking the end of this week's Torah portion with the beginning of next week's portion.

Today's Torah portion concluded with the story of Miriam speaking badly of her brother, for which she was punished. Next week's Torah portion starts with the story of the spies who came back with a negative report regarding the land of Israel. And the Biblical commentator, Rashi, asks: What links these two stories? He points out: "*Rau v'lo lokchu musar* – the Jews saw what happens when you speak bad, and here they went and did it again." The worst mistake is not to make a mistake; the worst mistake is to make a mistake and not learn from it, and to do it again.

Israel should stop construction of settlements with no promise of anything in return? Been there, done that! That's just what Ariel Sharon did when he gave all of Gaza back to the Palestinians, asking nothing in return. In the interest and pursuit of peace, Ariel Sharon, who was seen as the godfather of the settlements, announced that he was going to uproot 8000 Jews and give all of Gaza to the Palestinians! The first time the Palestinians were ever given any land by anyone! Now they would have the opportunity to show the world how capable they were of building a Palestinian state. And what did Sharon ask in return? Nothing! Absolutely nothing! You remember what it was called? ... a "unilateral disengagement." And as if that wasn't enough, when Israel was

disengaging from Gaza there was a disagreement over what should be done with the “hot houses” which the Israeli farmers had used to grow vegetables and flowers. Should they be destroyed or should they be left for the Palestinians to cultivate? Do you remember what happened? Along came a group of wealthy American Jews and paid the Israeli farmers \$14 million to leave the hot houses for the Palestinians. Again, asking nothing in return! And do you remember what happened after that? The Israelis left, the Palestinians came in and burned down the synagogues, trashed and vandalized most of the hot houses and instead of the Palestinians exporting flowers to Holland or food to Norway ... the exported thousand of rockets and missiles into the land of Israel. And to top it all off, when Israel retaliated, Israel got the blame!

Lots of lessons were learned from this experience. But let the most important lesson be remembered: when dealing with your enemy, giving *something* for nothing gets you *nothing* in return! Israel’s “unilateral disengagement” came to be seen as a sign of weakness, not of strength. No one should expect Israel to make that same mistake again.

But that’s what Barack Obama is doing. Mr. Obama declared continued Israeli settlements are “illegitimate” and added, “It is time for these settlements to stop.” If he had followed that statement with the words: “In return, the Arabs must ... stop teaching their children hatred of the Jews ...” or, “must accept Israel as a Jewish state ...” or, start low-level diplomatic relations with Israel ...,” you fill in the blanks. Had he said any of this, I would be delivering a different sermon! But in putting his emphasis on the need for Israel to stop its settlement policies while not demanding something concrete from the Palestinian side, Barack Obama is asking Israel to make the same mistake it made before. That gives the Arabs the false hope that if they just sit tight, pressure will continue on Israel to give more and more ... while Israel gets nothing in return.

It’s not going to be easy for Israel to affirm this principle. But they are going to have to tell Mr. Obama what our grandparents used to teach: “*Gut darf min zein, ah shoteh tor mir nit zein* – good you have to be, stupid you are not permitted to be!” Israel showed so much good will to the Palestinian people when it withdrew from Gaza, and look what we got in return. Now, don’t ask Israel to be stupid and do it again. It’s not going to be easy holding firm when the President of the United States seems to be pressuring Israel. But that’s the way it’s always been with our people. Sometimes the world is on our side – not usually, but sometimes – and sometimes it’s not. These days it feels like everyone is against us. But we have learned that our survival depends not on international guarantees, not on the good will of Popes or Presidents, not on promises given by one administration that becomes meaningless when the next one comes in ... all we need is our faith in the God of Israel with the army of Israel. It’s very nice that Mr. Obama confirmed to the world that the Holocaust actually happened. But Holocaust denial is not the threat that the Jewish people confront today. Another Holocaust is the threat that he – the leader of the free world – must do everything humanly possible to make sure never happens again. That much he owes us. That much the world owes us.

It was very nice and very important that President Obama quoted in his speech numerous times from the Quran. That was a good way to show the Muslim people that

he understands them. Now let him also quote – to them and to us – the words from the Bible ... the Bible that is considered holy not just to Jews but to Christians and Muslims as well: “*V'shav Hashem Elokecha et shvuscha v'richamecha* - The Lord thy God will turn thy captivity and have compassion upon thee and will return and gather thee from all the peoples wither the Lord thy God hath scattered thee. If any of thine are dispersed be in the utter most parts of Heaven from thence will the Lord thy God gather thee and from thence He will fetch thee and the Lord thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed and thou shalt possess it.” That promise was made to the Jewish people 3000 years ago, and we are the generation blessed to have seen its fulfillment. No, Mr. Obama, there is a Jewish state of Israel not because of the Holocaust ... there is a Jewish state of Israel because our God – your God – promised it to the Jewish people! As long as we maintain our faith in Him, we can look forward to the “*geulah shleimah bimheiru b'yomainu amein* – the complete redemption speedily in our time.” Amen.

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