

PESACH YIZKOR
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*Barack Obama and the State of Israel;
The Audacity of Hope*

The title of today's sermon is: Barack Obama and the State of Israel; the Audacity of Hope. I think you're going to be disappointed because it's not going to be what you thought it was going to be!

When we announced the title of my sermon, many people expressed interest because they thought I would be discussing a question that many in the Jewish community have discussed: If Barack Obama were to become President, what would his position be in regard to Israel and the Arab/Israeli conflict? That is an important question and I certainly have an opinion on the subject. But I can't discuss it with you from the pulpit ... you see, I have to be very careful with what I say. Some day Ben Cardin is going to be running for President, and when he does the media is going to go through all of my sermons – as they've done with Barack Obama's minister. From now on I have to watch what I say so not to be an embarrassment to Ben Cardin.

But I do want to talk about Barack Obama. Most everyone in the country, both Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, have been talking about him. Seemingly from out of nowhere, he has become the most talked about Presidential candidate since John F. Kennedy. What is it about him that has made him so attractive to so many people? What is the key to his success? After all, his political resume is very limited. While serving in the Chicago State Legislature he was distinguished for frequently voting "present" rather than taking a stand. And as a U.S. Senator, his name is not associated with any major legislation. So what is it?

Well, there are all sorts of answers. His youth? Yes, there is something refreshing about him. His color? Yes, there are many people who feel that the election of a black person to be President of the United States would send a powerful message throughout our country and throughout the world. And that is true, although I think it's fair to say that there are also many people in our country who would vote against him because of his color. His charisma? Yes, he does seem to have magnetism to him. His oratory? Yes, he is a great speaker. But I know some pretty good speakers ... I have one in mind who, if he became President, it would be a disaster for this country!

So what is it? It's a combination of a lot of things. And one thing more: Barack Obama has come up with a message that people want to hear. It's a message encapsulated in a four letter word: HOPE. In our post-9/11 era, people are attracted to a message of hope. We've had enough bad news: 9/11 itself, the war on terrorism, the Iraqi war, and now the challenges to our economy. People are not feeling good about their condition ... about the American condition. More than 80% of the American people feel our country is on the wrong track. And so, a message of hope resonates in the heart of the American people. It's a message which first received national attention when Obama addressed the Democratic National Convention in 2004 and proclaimed: "Hope in the

face of difficulty, hope in the face of uncertainty, the audacity of hope;” a phrase taken from his minister and used as the title of his book.

The attractiveness of such a message is reflected in the fact that there was another political leader in recent years who proclaimed a similar message that the American people were excited to hear. He, too, was a young man with not much of a political resume. He, too, won over the American people with a message that was encapsulated in the name of his book. If Barack Obama’s book is entitled, “The Audacity of Hope,” this man’s book was entitled, “The Man from Hope.” And it was this message of hope that got Bill Clinton elected.

If there is any people who best understand the power of hope, it is the Jewish people. For us, “hope” is not simply a concept; it is part of Jewish law. Did you know, halachakally, you are not supposed to tell a patient that he or she is dying. Why? Because it is robbing them of hope. Yes, “where there’s life there’s hope.” But even more, in Judaism, “where there’s hope, there’s life!” And in a few weeks when we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the rebirth of the State of Israel, we will be reminded of just how powerful a force hope can be. Barack Obama had a minister named Jeremiah who we have to hope he learned nothing from! But we had a prophet named Jeremiah who taught us the message of hope. It was Jeremiah who prophesized and witnessed the destruction of the Temple and the exile of our people. Other countries had experienced similar tragedies ... they never returned to the world stage. For them all hope was lost. But while Jeremiah was prophesizing the destruction of the Temple and the exile of our people, do you know what he did? He bought a piece of land in Jerusalem. People must have thought that he was crazy! He’s saying we’re going to be exiled, and yet he purchased a piece of land. And indeed, the very same Jeremiah who never married because he was so saddened by the Temple’s destruction and the exile, was the one who expressed the prophetic dream, “Od yeshama b’orei Yehudah – there will yet be heard in the cities of Judah and in the outskirts of Jerusalem.” “Kol sassoon v’kol simcha kol chatan v’kol kallah – the sound of rejoicing, the sound of happiness, the sound of the bridegroom and the bride.”

Yes, Jeremiah maintained the dream ... the dream that we have seen fulfilled in our day. But remember, he didn’t just dream it, he didn’t just hope for it. He purchased a piece of land. Hope means little if you don’t act on it. I remember reading that when the lottery jackpot was at \$12 million, the chances of winning were 175, 711,536 to 1. Those are not very good odds. But the odds are even worse if you don’t buy a ticket! The Jews in the ghettos of Eastern Europe didn’t simply hope for the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, they fasted every year on Tisha B’av to keep the dream alive. And the Jews didn’t just mourn for what they lost. Every year sacred moments at the Pesach Seder and the conclusion of Yom Kippur they cried out, “Next year in Jerusalem!” They put monies in pushkas to help Jews in a far off country in the Middle East that they had no reason to believe they would ever see.

All those Jews never gave up hope for Israel, despite how distant that dream seemed to be. Are we, who now have Israel, going to lose hope in her? I keep reading how more and more American Jews are distancing themselves from Israel. I keep hearing Jews saying that with Hamas on one side and Hezbollah on the other and Iran getting a nuclear bomb ... 60 years after its rebirth, I don’t know if Israel will make it. Jeffrey Goldberg, a real friend of Israel, writes in the cover story for the month’s Atlantic Magazine: “Is Israel Finished?”

I think back to a speech delivered in 1991 by Avrum Harman, former Ambassador to the United Nations and President of the Hebrew University, a distinguished and eloquent spokesman for our people. Dr. Harman said, “If I have one regret in all that I have done for this country, it is the many times over the years that I addressed Jews and said to them: this is the most challenging time in Israel’s history. This is the most dangerous time in Israel’s history. This is the most exciting time in Israel’s history. I’ve said that so many times over the years, in ’48 and in ’67, with the PLO and Lebanon and the Intifada, I regret having ever said it. Because the truth is, right now is the most difficult, exciting and challenging time in the history of the State of Israel.” That was in 1991! That’s the way it is with our people! We always think that today is the worst when compared to the past. “Those were the days, my friends.” So let me remind you: Israel survived its war of liberation where it lost 6000 people; one percent of its population – comparable to America today losing 3 million people in a war. We survived Scud missile attacks during the Gulf War when Israelis had to lock themselves in rooms with gas masks. We survived a Yom Kippur War where we lost 2522 of our best and finest. We survived terrorist attacks in Munich and Maalot and in Kiryat Shemona and countless other places. We survived airplane hijackings and a Japanese Red Brigade attack at Ben Gurion Airport that killed 21. We did all that in the “good old days.” We’ll do even better now – now that we are stronger than ever. We are the people who truly have the “audacity of hope.” Long before Barack Obama, it was expressed in Israel’s National Anthem, The Hatikvah, meaning “the hope.”

The words of the Hatikvah are based on a poem written by Naphtali Herz Imber, written in 1878, published under the name of “Tikvatenu - Our Hope.” This Naphtali Imber was quite a character. He was once described as someone who “would have been a great man - had he not been Naphtali Imber.” Imber was born in 1856 in a little town in Austrian held Poland. He was a penniless poet who traveled from Eastern Europe to Palestine by reaching Constantinople where he was a street peddler. In 1882 he settled in Jerusalem and lived in a small room the only furniture was a bed, table, chair and a bottle of alcohol. Imber, it seems, always had a bottle of alcohol with him. He claimed that like Edgar Allan Poe, he needed wine to write well. But perhaps because of his drinking, he had trouble getting along with people. He stayed in Palestine just five years then lived in Europe before moving on to New York in 1892. He married a non-Jew, dreamt of returning to Jerusalem, but did nothing to implement this dream. He died from an overdose of bad whiskey and malnutrition in October 1909 on a lower East Side street corner. But he died with the feeling of confidence that he would be remembered because of this one work, the Hatikvah. He once said: “Kings, Earls, Cardinals will all pass away, but I and Hatikvah will remain forever.”

He was right, you know. The intermarried, poor, alcoholic, unacknowledged poet while he lived, is remembered much longer than others who were wealthy, famous, but now gone and forgotten. It’s something to keep in mind in these moments before Yizkor. We often think it is the rich and famous, the Presidents and Prime Ministers, who have the greatest impact on our lives. But that is not really so. No one comes to say Yizkor for them ... it’s our parents, our loved ones, who are remembered long after the “rich and famous” are gone. Sometimes, like Naphtali Imber, they were not appreciated while they were alive. Sometimes, like Naphtali Imber, they appeared to be failures when they were alive. But now we know better. Now we can appreciate them more. They are the ones who gave us hope for the future. Let us remember them not just for what we *had*, but for what we *have*.

And at this Yizkor service, on the eve of the 60th anniversary of the rebirth of the State of Israel, let us remember Israel ... let us remember what we had when there was NO Israel. Let us

remember and appreciate what we HAVE now that we have an Israel! Israel is our dream ... Israel is our hope. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, the Chief Rabbi of England, has put together two CDs of Israeli music and his commentary in honor of Israel's 60th anniversary. You can listen to it on your computer. The website, most appropriately, is: www.homeofhope.co.uk. Rabbi Sachs speaks for all of us when he says, "Judaism is twice as old as Christianity, three times as old as Islam. Yet there are 82 Christian nations, 56 Muslim ones but only one Jewish State; a country smaller than the Kruger National Park, less than ¼ of 1% of the land mass of the Arab world. Israel is the only place on earth where in 4000 years of history Jews have formed a majority ... the only place where they have been able to rule themselves and defend themselves ... the only place where they have been able to do what almost every people takes for granted: live as a nation shaping its own destiny and create a society according to its own values. Only in Israel can a Jew speak the Jewish language, see a Jewish landscape, live by the Jewish calendar, walk where our ancestors walked and continue the story they began ... yet still, it has to fight for the right to be."

We are part of that fight. But that's alright. For thousands of years we kept the faith in the future. We never lost hope and here we are:

- - Almost thirty five hundred years after an Egyptian governors letter reported "Israel is destroyed."
- - Almost twenty six centuries after Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon destroyed the temple of Solomon.
- - Nineteen hundred years after Titus, general of the armies of the Roman Empire burnt the second temple declaring "Jerusalem has perished."
- - Nine centuries after the blood bath of the Crusades
- - Five hundred years after Torquemada and the Inquisition.
- - Six decades after the demise of Hitler and his Third Reich . . .

The Zionist Revolution has outlived the Russian Revolution. "Od lo ovda tchvateinu" – we never lost hope! The Jews have a homeland in Israel. Am Yisroel Chai, the people of Israel live ... forever and ever. Amen.