

SHABBAT SERMON
JANUARY 24, 2009
RABBI MITCHELL WOHLBERG

A Farewell Address for George Bush

Someone once pointed out that a rabbi has a twofold responsibility: One is to comfort the disturbed. The other is to disturb the comfortable. I think it's true to say that in my years as your rabbi I have focused more on comforting the disturbed. But not today! Today I am going to disturb some of you, perhaps many of you. I know some of you will find my words disturbing because when I have spoken on the subject in the past, some of you didn't like what I had to say. But in speaking of the subject today I can offer you some comfort in knowing that I don't think I'll be talking about the subject again. Today I want to talk to you about George Bush.

George Bush is no longer President of the United States, and most Americans were happy to see him go. From Katrina to Iraq to the economy, the American people have found George Bush wanting as a President. But what of the Jewish people? How are we to view this man? The fact is, most Jews did not vote for him ... most, like me, voted for Al Gore in 2000 and most, not like me, voted for John Kerry in 2004. This wasn't necessarily a reflection on their feelings about George Bush. The fact is, irrespective of who is running for President, generally speaking, _ of the Jewish people vote Democratic (this despite the fact that a recent Rasmussen poll indicated that 62% of the Republicans in America were in favor of Israel's operation in Gaza, while only 32% of the Democrats were. I told you I was going to disturb the comfortable!) But be that as it may, Republican or Democrat, supporter of Bush or opponent, as Jews I strongly believe that we owe this man a debt of gratitude. Not only that, but I believe Jewish tradition demands that of us. And if we don't do it, we had better watch out because in 120 years when we get to heaven, our tradition teaches that George Bush is going to be there and he's going to wonder why we never said 'thanks.'

Our Torah portion this morning focused on one of the greatest enemies of our people, a man named Pharaoh. Pharaoh sought to enslave and destroy the Jewish people, so God brings a series of plagues upon the Egyptians. How many plagues? Ten! But our sages noted a remarkable difference between the first five and the last five. In each of the last five, we are told "*Vayichazek Hashem et lev Paroh* – and God hardened the heart of Pharaoh and he would not let the people go." These words have puzzled every Biblical commentator. It seems as if Pharaoh was ready to let the Jews leave but God stopped him from doing so by hardening his heart. Whatever happened to the concept of free will? There are many answers but one of the most significant is given by Maimonides who tells us that God hardened Pharaoh's heart because He didn't want him to let the Jews go. To let the Jews go would have been simply because he was overwhelmed by the plagues, not because he had changed. And given how wicked Pharaoh was, God didn't want him to repent because, says Maimonides, there are some people who are so wicked they don't deserve to ever be forgiven.

This shows you just how wicked we considered Pharaoh. And yet, this isn't the end of the story. There is a Medrash that tells us that eventually Pharaoh did repent ... that in fact when the Jews left Egypt, Pharaoh went with them and he asked Moses to pray for him. And based on this, some of our sages make a remarkable connection. In the Torah we are taught that some tribes were so bad to the Jews that we were never to have anything to do with them, like the people of the tribes of Amon and Moab and Amalek. But when it comes to the Egyptians, the Torah specifically commands us: "*Lo titaev mitzri*" – we are prohibited from despising an Egyptian. Why? Well, one of the reasons given is because we owe a debt of gratitude to Pharaoh. As bad as he was, at one moment he turned pretty good, and for this we have to be grateful.

Now I don't mean to compare George Bush to Pharaoh, but I think it's fair to say that if our people have been told to express gratitude to Pharaoh, we Jews owe a deep debt of gratitude to George Bush. And it all began at one moment in time. It goes back to the year 2002 when, after a series of suicide bombings, leading to the horror of the bombing of a Pesach Seder in Netanya, Ariel Sharon ordered the IDF to recapture the West Bank. The reaction of the world, of course, was condemnation; it was disproportionate, created a humanitarian crisis, it was a war crime ... you know the routine. When the Palestinians continued to kill us, and right when the nations of the world continued to blame us, and right when all of us as Jews were confronted with the words of the Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Anan, who said, "Is it possible that Israel is right and the whole world is wrong?"

... right at that moment, one man stood up and said: Yes, Israel is right ... and the world is wrong. And that man happened to be the President of the United States, George Bush.

For months, pressure had been building on the President to turn against Israel and Sharon in his announced major address on the Middle East. And then it happened. On June 24, 2002 – that glorious moment in time when the President declared that as a pre-condition for Palestinian statehood, Arafat had to go. The Palestinians had to change their tune. And then came these words to the people of Israel: "You have lived too long with fear and funerals, having to avoid markets and public transportation and forced to put armed guards in kindergarten classrooms. The Palestinian Authority has rejected your offer at hand and traffic with terrorists. You have a right to a normal life; you have a right to security."

Those words changed everything. That was the beginning of the end of Yassir Arafat. In the previous administration, Arafat has been a frequent visitor to the White House. With Bush's words on June 24, 2002, the U.S. cut off all communication with Arafat. With Bush's words, he showed the world that the U.S. not only would not condemn Israel, and not only would not try to win Arab friends by being even-handed when it came to Israel ... George Bush showed that the U.S. would stand with Israel in its darkest moments. On June 24, 2002, George Bush showed the truth of Rabbi Judah the Prince, the codifier of the Mishna, who taught; "For some men it takes a lifetime to gain salvation while others own it in one slight moment."

George Bush's support for Israel continued right up to the current crisis in Gaza where again, it seemed as if the entire world was accusing Israel of acting disproportionately, killing innocents, creating a humanitarian crisis ... you know the routine. But let us remember what George Bush said, "This recent outburst of violence was instigated by Hamas, a Palestinian terrorist group supported by Iran and Syria that calls for Israel's destruction. Since Hamas' violent takeover in the summer of 2007, living conditions have worsened for Palestinians living in Gaza. By spending its resources on rocket launchers instead of schools and roads, Hamas has demonstrated that it has no intention of serving the Palestinian people." It was statements like these that have led many Israeli leaders to believe that George Bush was the most supportive President of the United States in Israel's 60 year history. It was the kind of support that George Bush gave Israel these past eight years that led Israeli's President Shimon Peres to call Bush this week and tell him, "You made a historic contribution to the entire world and to the Jewish people in particular. We will treasure this forever and never forget it." And we are not going to thank him?

Especially when you consider that it didn't have to be this way. In many ways George Bush was going very much against his nature in the support he gave to Israel. Just think of who this man is and where he comes from:

- He was nurtured and raised as part of the whole Texas oil culture, for whom Israel is an impediment to America's global interests.
- He has a brother, Neil, who has traveled through the Arab Middle East trying to cut multi-million dollar business deals, and while in Saudi Arabia spoke at an international business forum and talked about the role of "public opinion" in shaping U.S. mid-East policy.

- And I'm sure you all remember George Bush's father – Poppa Bush. He was no friend of Israel, to say the least. Old man Bush fought against Israel when it asked the U.S. to co-sign as guarantors on loans to help re-settle Soviet immigrants. And when he was asked about this at a press conference, do you remember how he responded? He pounded on the table and went on to say that on the issue of the loan guarantees, he was not going to give in to “powerful political forces.” He had me and you in mind – the American Jewish community.
- And do you remember old man Bush's Secretary of State, James Baker? You remember what he said about the Jews? I can't repeat it in the synagogue, but he uttered a disgusting expletive and went on to say about American Jews: “They didn't vote for us anyway.”

We didn't vote for Poppa Bush and we didn't vote for his son. It would only be natural for him that in our time of need, we would not be able to depend upon him. But he went against his nature and he was a dependable friend.

For this, our Egyptian experience teaches us how important it is to extend our gratitude. This time we learn it not from Pharaoh but from the dogs in Egypt.

You know that one of the basics of the Jewish dietary laws is that every animal we eat must be slaughtered in a prescribed manner. We are prohibited from eating an animal which either died a natural death or was killed or torn apart by another animal. And what should we do with a dead animal that wasn't slaughtered properly? The Torah goes on to tell us, “*La-kelev tashlichun oto* – you shall cast it to the dogs.” Meat which hasn't been slaughtered in the manner prescribed by Jewish law should be given to the dogs.

Now our sages were quick to note that only Jews are required to eat meat that has been slaughtered in the prescribed manner of Shechitah. Non-Jews may certainly eat it. And yet the Torah specifies that such meat should be given to a dog. Why is the dog given this special attention? Explains the Biblical commentator Rashi: this meat was given to the dog as a reward for the good things that dogs did at the time of the exodus from Egypt. What did they do? Its midnight and the first born of all the Egyptians are about to be slain, a great outcry is about to take place. But God tells the Jewish people, “*U'lchol b'nai Yisroel lo yecheratz kelev l'shono* – but against the children of Israel no dog shall snarl.” The dogs didn't bark then, they kept their mouths shut. So now and forever more, as a reward, they get first claim at all non-kosher meat.

Cute concept, but a sage asks: “Why reward the dogs for this – for not barking, for keeping their mouths shut. They were simply fulfilling the will of God. What merited a reward?” Answered one of the great sages of the 20th century, the Chafetz Chaim, the reason dogs were rewarded was because their nature is to yelp and bark at tragedy. And despite their instinct, they went against their nature and held back. Sure they were doing the will of God, but it wasn't something that came natural to them. It wasn't something they were used to – that wasn't the way they were raised. And yet they did it! And this merits praise and reward!

Now I certainly don't aim to compare George Bush to a dog, but this lesson of the dog is an important one for us as American Jews to take to heart in regard to our attitude toward George Bush. Yes, he went against his nature in his support for Israel. Many of us, like myself, who love Israel thought that the election of George Bush as President in the year 2000 would be a disaster for Israel. We thought for sure he would turn against Israel. But he proved to be a great friend. Why did he do it? There is no way of knowing for sure, but perhaps ... just perhaps, it is found in the words that Mr. Bush addressed to Israel's Knesset this past May, on the day Israel celebrated its 60th anniversary, when he declared that the U.S. was proud to be the “closest ally and best friend in the world” to a nation that he described as being “a homeland for the Chosen People.” I don't know of any other world leader who has referred to Israel that way. Indeed, there are many Jewish leaders who are reluctant to refer to Israel that way!

The words “Chosen People” make some of us uncomfortable. The words “George Bush” also makes some of us uncomfortable. As indeed the words “Barack Hussein Obama” makes some of us uncomfortable. But let us remember George Bush surprised the Jews, and Barack Obama will hopefully do the same. And let us remember: we are God’s Chosen People ... and for George Bush to recognize that and acting accordingly, I thoroughly believe that the words I said to him are true. It was at last year’s White House Chanukah party when Sherry and I were guests and stood in the receiving line to shake hands and be photographed with President Bush and his wife. Before taking the picture, I said to him, “Mr. Bush, I don’t know how American history will look upon you, but I can tell you that in the history of the Jewish people, you will always have a special place.” He thanked me ... but it is we – the Jewish people – who should thank him.

So let us ring out the old and ring in the new. Let us be thankful for the President that was ... and hopeful for what will be. And let us echo the words of the prayer we recite every Shabbat: “O Lord, bless thou the constituted offices of government in this land, set in their hearts the spirit of wisdom and understanding to uphold peace and freedom.” Amen.

© copyright 2009 by Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg. All rights reserved.