

SHABBAT SERMON
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Obama and Israel; Does He have a Problem? Do we?

I must begin by telling you that I was uncomfortable writing this sermon. I wondered whether it was too harsh or not harsh enough. I asked myself if I should be delivering it or if I should have delivered it two years ago. So I'll leave it to you to decide.

This week Israel celebrates the 62nd anniversary of its rebirth ... the greatest event in modern Jewish history. You know by now how much Israel means to me. From my perspective, an Israel comes along once every 2000 years so it is to be cherished, protected and loved. In two weeks I will make my annual visit to that beautiful country, taking along my entire family, which means that for my oldest granddaughter – who is 7 years old – this will be her fourth visit but for my youngest granddaughter it will be her first. We are all excited for her! Israel is at the very heart of my family's existence.

It was with this feeling uppermost in my mind that I chose not to vote for Barack Obama for President. Although I felt he offered a measure of hope for our country, and although I felt the election of a black man as President of the United States would be one of the most positive and remarkable events to take place during my lifetime, and although I agreed with many parts of his domestic policies ... it was his foreign policy views that concerned me and proved decisive. I have a much more hawkish view than he does on foreign policy. I have always considered myself what is called a "Jackson Democrat" and I was genuinely concerned about Obama's perspective on Israel. My feeling was based on something he had said and something he didn't say.

What he said was said in February of 2008 in a meeting with a hundred Cleveland Jewish leaders. Here are his words: "I think there is a strain within the pro-Israel community that says: unless you adopt an unwavering pro-Likud approach to Israel, that you are anti-Israel and that can't be the measure of our friendship with Israel. If we cannot have an honest dialogue about how do we achieve these goals, then we're not going to make progress ... because of the pressure that Israel is under, I think the U.S. pro-Israel community is sometimes a little more protective or concerned about opening up that conversation."

What he said was not so terrible and I have to tell you that I respected him for having said it. He was very honest about his feelings. What he was basically saying was that he does not agree with the policies of a Likud government and that American Jews should be more prepared to debate those policies. Now, Mr. Obama is entitled to his opinion. It is just not my opinion! Does that make him an anti-Semite? Absolutely not! We have got to stop that kind of foolish talk. There are many Israeli Jews who agree with what he said ... there are many American Jews who agree with what he said! But I'm not one of them! And knowing that after years of Hezbollah and Hamas and suicide bombings and kidnappings and rocket attacks, a majority of

Israeli voters don't agree with his perspective, it seemed obvious to me that if he were elected President, there would be a clash between his policies and Israel's policies. Sad to say, I was right.

But as events have unfolded, even sadder to say unfortunately I think I was right in my concern about what Mr. Obama had *not* said. For 20 years he went to a church whose minister, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, spoke in terms that were both critical of America and of Israel. And Mr. Obama had never raised his voice in protest. He not only should have, he could have! Let me tell you about a man who, in similar circumstances, did! His name is Abraham Foxman, and he is the head of the Anti-Defamation League. Mr. Foxman was a member of a prominent Orthodox synagogue in Teaneck, New Jersey but he found himself in an uncomfortable position ... the rabbi of his synagogue is known to have very strong right-wing views when it comes to Israel; views so extreme that the rabbi not only criticizes the position of the American government, he was one of the severest critics of the position of the Rabin government, urging his congregants in one of his letters not to listen to "the blatherings of the Rabin judenrat." (A judenrat was a Jewish council set up by the Nazis to preside over Jewish ghettos early in World War II.) Mr. Foxman found such a comparison unacceptable and he left his synagogue. In his words, "I tried to have my rabbi change his views. I went to fellow congregants to see if they could have an impact on him. Only at a point in time where that didn't happen I resigned." And he went on to say, "It was a wrenching decision, this was a synagogue where my son was Bar Mitzvahed, this was a synagogue where every happy event and every sad event I celebrated ... this was my religious home." But he got up and left! And when Rev. Wright's words came out into the open, I asked myself: why didn't Mr. Obama do the same? And it wasn't just a matter of Rev. Wright's words and it wasn't just a matter of Mr. Obama's close relationship with him ... it was a matter of the whole church being enveloped with a "liberation theology" with its Bulletin reprinting pro-Hamas articles. Wouldn't all this have had an effect on Mr. Obama's thinking? I asked myself. James Tisch, the Manhattan billionaire and Chief Executive of Loews Corp. and long time activist in Jewish causes and philanthropies, thinks it did! In light of everything that has now been unfolding, Mr. Tisch recently said, "I think the President comes to this from Jeremiah Wright's church and there is no doubt in my mind that in Jeremiah Wright's church the Palestinians were portrayed as freedom fighters and not as terrorists." In light of Mr. Obama finding the time to visit Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey, but not Israel ... in light of his refusing to take a picture with Prime Minister Netanyahu after their recent meeting ... in light of so much emphasis being placed on the settlements ... in light of the recent resurrection of Zbigniew Brezinski ... in light of new talk about an imposed settlement ... in light of all this and more, I have to agree with Mr. Tisch.

I don't like what is happening, but that, in and of itself, is nothing new. There have always been conflicts between the United States and Israel. In 1956 the Eisenhower administration forced Israel to withdraw from captured territories despite Egypt's belligerency. In 1967 President Johnson warned Israel not to go to war and became the first American administration to condemn Israel's settlement activities. The Nixon administration tried to impose the Rogers Plan, forcing Israel back to the 1949 Armistice lines. Jimmy Carter ... well, Jimmy Carter was, is and will always be Jimmy Carter. Ronald Regan was a friend but he was a friend who withheld weapons from Israel in punishment for its attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor. I could go on and on ... there have always been conflicts; there have always been disagreements.

And one has to expect that! America is a global superpower ... Israel is a country of seven million people. America's view is of the woods and Israel's is just one of the trees! So, disagreements are to be expected amongst friends. But the disagreements that are now taking place between America and Israel are different than the disagreements in the past. They are different on two levels.

First, for the first time that I can think of, Israel is being accused of being the one that is the hindrance to peace. That's never happened before! Despite all the disagreements between Israel and the United States, it was always understood that after all is said and done, it is the Arabs and Palestinians who have resisted making peace. The Ford and the first Bush administration refused to negotiate with the PLO. Bill Clinton clearly stated that it was the Palestinians fault that Camp David fell apart. Bush the Second refused to even talk to Yassir Arafat, saying he was an impediment to peace. Now? Now Mr. Obama goes to Cairo and says the first step toward making peace possible is freezing the Israeli settlements. He asks nothing tangible from the Palestinians. The Palestinians refuse to even negotiate, but its Israel's fault! And then when the clash erupts over the Jerusalem housing, Secretary of State Clinton and the others insist that Israel has to do certain things to show it is committed to making peace. Mr. Obama calls on Israel to take "bold steps" for peace but again, nothing tangible is asked from the Palestinians! Israel should show that it is committed to making peace? Israel should take "bold steps?" What was Camp David, which the Palestinians rejected? What was the Gaza withdrawal, which the Palestinians responded to with rocket attacks? What were the Olmert concessions to Abbas, which only led to the Palestinians refusing to negotiate? What was Mr. Netanyahu's accepting a two-state solution and a partial freeze of settlements? And what was the removal of most of the check-points in the West Bank? And what were the "bold steps" the Palestinians took besides refusing to even indirectly negotiate, refusing to compromise on the right of return, refusing to accept a demilitarized state, refusing to accept Israel as a Jewish state, refusing to recognize any Jewish historic claims to Jerusalem ... All they really seem to have agreed to do is to name more of their streets and squares after terrorists and suicide bombers. And *Israel* should show that it is committed to peace? Sen. John Kerry goes to Damascus and proclaims that Syria is committed to the peace process. Really? But with Israel there's a question?

I don't like what's happening. This has never happened before! And to make matters worse, Israel is not only now being blamed for hindering peace with the Palestinians, talk has started to boil to the surface that Israel is to be blamed for the death of American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is a libel ... this is a blood libel! We've heard these accusations before, but they always came from the extreme fringes; from the Pat Buchanans and others of his ilk. Now the talk is becoming more mainstream. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, was quoted as saying that Israel's stubbornness makes the U.S. appear impotent. In a statement later denied, Vice President Biden was quoted as telling Prime Minister Netanyahu, "What you are doing here undermines the security of our troops who are fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan." U.S. Central Command General David Petraeus sends a statement to the Pentagon with a stark warning: "America's relationship with Israel is important but not as important as the lives of American soldiers." A member of the administration is quoted as accusing Dennis Ross of having a dual loyalty. And we're told that it's all "misunderstood" or "misquoted" ... it "doesn't mean anything." Well, I could read you quotes

from the *Palestinian Chronicle* and from the *Jordan Times* and from the *Middle East Online*, *Beirut's Daily Star* and many other pro-Palestinian papers that have taken these words very seriously and are emboldened by them. In fact, I don't have to quote from Arab sources, let me just read you the headline of a recent editorial in *USA Today*: "Our view on the Middle East: Israeli Settlement Push Hurts U.S. Interests, Peace Process" ... with the editorial including these frightening words: "... if Americans whose own family member's lives are at risk every day in Iraq and Afghanistan come to believe that Israel's action needlessly increase that risk, support would be jeopardized." Those words are true, you know. You know why our country has supported Israel these last 62 years? It's not because of Republicans or Democrats, liberals or conservatives; it is because of the American people. Every survey shows an overwhelming majority of American people supporting Israel, even during oil embargos, and that support is there because there is something about the American people that are able to distinguish right from wrong, good from bad, terrorists from innocent civilians and democracy from tyranny. The only thing that could change the feelings of Americans would be if our country's service men and women were dying because of Israel. And a mood is emanating from Washington that could lead people to believe just that! What else is one to make of Mr. Obama's statement this week that the Middle East conflict was "costing us significantly in terms of both blood and treasure." What a horrible thing to say! The truth is, the Middle East conflict is affecting the blood and treasure of *Israeli* boys – not Americans. No American blood has been shed for Israel but plenty of Jewish blood has been! A real friend would not say this is Israel's fault.

I know that some of my words are going to bother some of you, but please understand if I didn't say them it would bother me even more! The fact of the matter is, this administration has from day one made improved relations with the Muslim world a primary goal, going as far as to ban the use of words like "Jihad" and "Islamic terrorism." It is unfortunate that to date, America's outreach of a friendly hand has not been reciprocated, which leads some to blame it all on Israel. If Israel would only give up what it is entitled to, the women of Al Qaeda would take off their burqas and join the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Taliban would sing Hava Negilah around the campfire, Hezbollah and Hamas would join Hadassah and the Shiites and Sunis in the Middle East would say: after 1400 years of killing each other, let's co-sponsor a Kiddush at Beth Tfiloh! It's just little Israel that is standing in the way of all this!

Well, let me tell you: it has been pointed out that the Jews have always been in the way! Look in the Bible ... every time Babylonia or Syria wanted to invade Egypt, little Judea was in the middle. The Jews developed a unique set of rituals and beliefs; they couldn't offer sacrifices to the images of Roman emperors, they wouldn't work on the Sabbath and so to the Greeks and the Romans, they stood in the way of world domination. And then came another religion whose followers proclaimed that it was the fulfillment of the one the Jews practiced, but the Jews refused to go along. And so our people were portrayed as being the devil who were to be eternally dammed. And then came Islam ... Mohammed was eager to win over the Jews. After all, he was a monotheist ... why couldn't the Jews go along? And if they had, Mohammed would have a solid base from which to operate. But the Jews refused to go along. And so we were portrayed as being monkeys. In modern Europe, the Jews were in the way of middle-class Frenchmen and Germans who were seeking their jobs. The Communists found them in the way because Jews didn't fit into simple class categories. Eventually, Hitler came along and decided

to once and for all eliminate this universal inconvenience. It didn't happen then and it's not going to happen now!

Meir Dagan is the head of Israel's Mossad. Under his directorship the Mossad, in recent years, has rebuilt its reputation for lethal and successful operations. What motivates Mr. Dagan may become obvious to a visitor to his office in Tel Aviv, where on the wall there is a picture of an old Jew standing on the edge of a trench ... an SS officer is aiming his rifle at the old man's head. "This old Jew was my grandfather," Dagan tells visitors. The picture reflects his philosophy for Israel's survival. In his words, "We should be strong, use our brain and defend ourselves so that the Holocaust will never be repeated."

I don't fear that the Holocaust will be repeated. This is not 1938 all over again. In 1938 there was no Israel Defense Forces; now there is a mighty and majestic one. That makes all the difference in the world! But in some ways, it is 1948 all over again, when there were leaders in the upper most echelons of the American government including the Secretary of State, who urged the President not to recognize Israel, saying that such recognition would stand in the way of Arab friendship with our country. President Truman didn't listen to them. Instead, he listened to the words of his advisor, Clark Clifford, who told him, "In an area as unstable as the Middle East, where there is not now and never has been any tradition of democratic government, it is important for the long range security of our country – and indeed the world – that a nation committed to the democratic system be established there; one on which we can rely. The new Jewish state can be such a place." That's just what the new Jewish state has been for the past 62 years.

Sure, not every Israeli soldier acts like a saint, and not every Israeli policy is an act of genius. There is certainly room for criticism but that should not blind anyone to the fact that despite all the provocations and incitements, despite Palestinians using their children as human shields and their wives as suicide bombers, despite acts of barbarism and terrorism ... despite all this there is no country on earth more desirous of peace, more willing to compromise for peace than the people of Israel. And this too I know: that as American Jews we should take Meir Dagan's words to heart: "We should be strong and use our brains ..." And one thing more. We dare not despair. We dare not lose hope.

Barack Obama entitled his book "The Audacity of Hope" – a title he got from Rev. Wright. The truth of the matter is the history of the Jewish people could be entitled, "The Audacity of Hope," as expressed in Israel's national anthem, the Hatikvah, meaning "the hope." Its author, Naphtali Herz Imber, once said, "Kings, Earls, Cardinals will all pass away ... but I and Hatikvah will remain forever."

He was right! The hope remains forever ... "*L'hiyot am chofshi b'artzeinu b'eretz tziyon v'Yerushalayim*" – to be a free people in our land, in the land of Zion and Jerusalem. Amen.

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