

Sermon For Yom Kippur Afternoon
October 12, 2016 - 10 Tishri, 5777
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

In April of 1903, a Ukranian boy was found killed in the town of Dubossary. Soon after, a Ukranian girl committed suicide by poisoning herself and died in a Jewish hospital. The anti-Semitic newspaper *Bessarabetz* linked their deaths to the infamous blood-libel, claiming the children were killed so that their blood could be used to produce Passover Matzah.

At the urging of the Russian Orthodox priests on Easter Sunday, a mob poured out of the churches in Kishinev and over two days attacked the Jewish community with a viciousness that cannot be described. Dozens of people, including infant children, were hideously murdered. Dozens more women were gang raped and hundreds of houses destroyed.

The Hebrew poet Chaim Nahman Bialik was asked to visit Kishinev not long after and instead of submitting a report on the pogrom, he instead composed a poem called "The City of Slaughter." But Bialik's reaction was not what one would typically expect. Instead of saying that the victims died in the sanctification of God's name, he instead claims that their lives were taken in vain. Bialik rails against the Jews for what he saw as their cowering passivity, their refusal to stand and fight.

Come, now, and I will bring you to their lairs
The privies, jakes and pigpens where the heirs
Of Hasmoneans lay, with trembling knees,
Concealed and cowering – the sons of the Maccabees!
The seed of saints, the scions of the lions!
Who, crammed by scores in all the sanctuaries of their
shame,
So sanctified My name!

A young journalist named Vladimir Jabotinsky translated Bialik's poem into Russian and from that inspiration became one of the most influential Zionist voices leading to the creation of the State of Israel.

Jabotinsky was born in 1880 in Odessa, which at the time was one of the most sophisticated centers of Jewish life in Europe. As Zionist scholar Arthur Hertzberg explains, Jabotinsky "was raised much more on Russian than on Jewish

culture."¹ At the age of 18, he skipped his last year of high school to become a foreign correspondent for one of the Odessa newspapers. After a few months in Bern, he made his way to Rome, where he spent three years studying in the University. He became a skilled orator and a talented writer, and he balanced both talents in his journalism career and his support for the growing Zionist movement. Eventually Jabotinsky learned to speak eleven languages and could write in seven.

For Jabotinsky, Zionism represented the resuscitation of the Maccabees, the reclamation of the Jewish people's ability to defend themselves. The creation of a Jewish state, he thought, was necessary for the very survival of the Jewish people. During World War I, Jabotinsky foresaw that the Ottoman Empire would collapse, and so single-handedly pushed the British to allow the creation of three Jewish battalions, where he himself enlisted as a private and rose to the rank of lieutenant. Following the war and the periodic Arab riots and revolts of the 1920s, Jabotinsky lobbied for a rapid mass immigration of Jews to Palestine, a position rejected by Chaim Weizmann and the Zionist elite.

There was another young journalist named Theodor Herzl who built a very different vision of Zionism. Twenty years older than Jabotinsky, Herzl was a young foreign correspondent who had also been raised in an assimilated household. He was assigned to cover the trial of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain in the French military, who was framed on charges of treason. Covering the trial, Herzl was astounded when he heard cries of protesters outside the courthouse chanting, "Death to the Jews! Death to the Jews!" Despite all the claims of the enlightenment, Herzl had an epiphany that Europe would never accept the Jews. He believed that if the Jews could actualize their dream of a homeland, and become a "normal" nation among the family of nations, then anti-Semitism would disappear.

Herzl wrote a book called *Altneuland*, meaning "Old-New Land". The book begins with the main characters, Friedrich Lowenberg, a young intellectual from Vienna, and his friend Kingscourt, who tired from European bourgeois decadence, and decide in 1903 to retire to the Cook islands in the South Pacific. On their way, they stop in Jaffa, and find Palestine a pathetic, destitute, and backward land. Twenty years later, on their way back to Europe, they stop again in Jaffa and find a thriving utopia. The land is filled with technologically advanced industries, a booming economy and a growing, diverse population. The Arabs enjoy equal rights with Jews, and people

¹Arthur Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea*. New York: JPS, 1959, p. 557.

from all over the world live together in a free, sophisticated, harmonious society.

Building this utopian Jewish society, in Herzl's imagination, would erase anti-Semitism. The Arabs and the Jews live together in harmony because the Jews brought them a prosperity they never imagined they would enjoy. As my teacher this summer Micah Goodman explained, in Herzl's mind the Jews will want Zionism because it will allow them to leave Europe. The Arabs will want Zionism because it will bring them the richness of Europe.

Herzl died on July 3, 1904. Jabotinsky died on August 4, 1940. Neither lived to see the birth of the State they both worked so hard to create. But each of their voices continue to echo throughout the land.

Tal Becker is the principal deputy legal adviser at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and is a senior member of the Israeli peace negotiation team, including in the last round of talks mediated by US Secretary of State John Kerry. I had the privilege of studying with him during my weeks at the Hartman Institute this summer. He explains that Israel sits in a Middle East today that can be divided into four groups:

- 1) There is a growing Shia Crescent, led by Iran and includes Hizbullah, Iraq, Lebanon, Assad, and now has a partner in Russia.
- 2) There are the Global Jihadists - the Sunni extremists like ISIS and Al Qaeda, each of which hates the other but both believe in an anti-Shia global agenda.
- 3) There are the Political Islamists, which include the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and their sponsors in Qatar, which have a nationalist character to their ideologies
- 4) Then there are the Old Guard Sunni countries which have not yet fallen - Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, who spend their time shoring up their own defenses against the threats they perceive from each of the first three groups.

Israel, he says, is essentially a Jewish old guard sunni country. Looking around at the violent chaos and convulsions in the Sunni / Shia Islamist struggles, which have claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, Israel's senior objective seems to be to do whatever is necessary to prevent the rise of extremists from within and on Israel's doorstep.

This is the echo of Jabotinsky. Jabotinsky believed that the key to the saving the Jewish people was to build an army that would make us strong. He believed that Zionism was about restoring Jewish honor and pride by promoting self-sufficiency and an ability to defend ourselves. As Micah Goodman taught us,

Jabotinsky believed in Isaiah's vision of a world where the wolf would dwell with the lamb, but he believed it's far better if you are the wolf.

But Becker asks a fundamental question: if your agenda is only prevention, is that enough to inspire people to send their children to the army? Don't we need a more expansive vision of what Israel should be than simply the largest Jewish ghetto in history?

This is the vision of Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum. Raised in a religious Zionist home, during her time in the army, Tamar came to appreciate the books that could be found on a different bookshelf in a Jewish home. While studying philosophy at Hebrew University, reading the works of the great thinkers Buber, Rosenzweig and Heschel, she pondered the fact that the great voices of Jewish thinking were all dead and gone. It was at that time that Tamar told her teacher Professor Eliezer Schweid: "I want you to know that I am dedicating my life to the renaissance of the Jewish community in Israel." Tamar studied for the rabbinate with the Masorti movement, the parallel to the conservative movement in Israel, and after a short stint as an associate rabbi in Westchester, New York, returned to Jerusalem to create Tzion: A Native Israeli Community.

Tamar speaks with a prophetic voice that is riveting and inspiring. She shared with us this summer that her deepest pain is to see an Israel that focuses solely on its survival. Like Herzl, she laments that "what should have been the habitat for the renewal of the Jewish soul is a place focused solely on survival." She implored us to re-read the words of the great Israeli statesman Ahad Ha-Am, who warned that if we save the Jewish body without saving the Jewish soul, we will create the scariest Jewish ghetto in history." Israel, she says, must be a body that is strong enough to survive with a soul that is still hopeful enough to dream. Israel, she says, is a test for Jews and Judaism. "A Jewish national project with ... no imagination or dream will result in our children turning their back on this project."

I spent the better part of two months in Israel this summer, two weeks touring with members of our congregation and four weeks in study at the Shalom Hartman Institute. And throughout my time in nearly every conversation I could feel the tension and the pull of the dreamers and the skeptics, the descendants of Herzl and the descendants of Jabotinsky.

On the one hand, I found a state of Israel at its most cynical. The government negotiated a plan to build an egalitarian section of the Western Wall that would be open to

all who wanted to pray in Judaism's holiest site free from the restrictions of the Haredi rabbinate, only to see the administration renounce the deal they had negotiated because of pressure from the Chief Rabbinate and the ultra-orthodox. I saw so many friends I admire shrug their shoulders in despair as they lamented the fact that Mahmoud Abbas, who is now in his 11th year of a five-year term as President of the Palestinian Authority, will not negotiate a peace agreement, and even if he would, has no power or ability to deliver it. I saw an Israel that seeks to understand how 19 families control 60% of its wealth, how the small minority of ultra-orthodox dictate the religious lives of the larger Jewish majority, and who struggle to imagine a future in the world's most dangerous neighborhood.

There is a painful irony in Israel today. Goodman explains that 70% of Israelis think that we have to leave the West Bank because the occupation not only threatens Israel's future demographically but morally as well. And 70% of Israelis think we cannot possibly give up the West Bank because that will return Israel to indefensible borders and will invite the horror and chaos of the Middle East into the heart of the State.

But just when we feel overcome with a sense of despair, we can be inspired by what Herzl and Jabotinsky and all my teachers at Hartman share as their primary value - Emunah - faith. They believe in the future of the Jewish people. They believe that in strengthening Israel's body, we can redeem Israel's spirit. They believe that as Tamar taught me, Emunah will be the spiritual training system that will empower us to rebel against the natural stress of survival to find meaning and reason to survive.

And here is where I found that faith come alive. Last summer I visited the City of Lod, which lies adjacent to Ben Gurion airport and was once an Arab city whose Arab population was mostly expelled during Israel's war for independence. Today, Lod is a mixed city of Israeli Arabs, working class new Ethiopian and Russian immigrants, and a growing number of religious Jews.

There is a community center in a depressed area of town, adjacent to a rutted field and the ruins of an 19th century inn. The community center is run by two women, a Muslim woman Faten and a Jewish woman Yafit, who despite all that divides them, have built a close friendship. In the roughest section of the city, they have not only built a model of coexistence, but of collaboration and integration. "We don't agree on most things," Faten said, "but I'm not going anywhere and neither is she. So we have to deal with each other, we have to know each other, we

have to figure out how to understand each other so we can live together in peace.”

It is the same faith in the future for Israel we find in Faten and Yafit that I also found in my extraordinary teachers at Hartman this summer. It is the same faith that drove Herzl and Jabotinsky in years gone by, and is the faith that will sustain Israel in these turbulent and difficult times. It is a faith that despite all the obstacles we face, we are strong and resolute, idealistic and hopeful. We still believe we can plant in that rocky and arid soil a sapling of hope that will sink deep roots and grow tall and strong, a living and vibrant Tree of life that will not only blossom with the wisdom of Torah and tradition, but provide shade for all who seek to sit together in peace. Im Tirzu, Ayn Zo Agadah - as Herzl said, If you will it, then it is no dream.