

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

D'var Torah for the Second Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5775

Rabbi Stanley Greenstein had been teaching for a number of years a course entitled "*A Jewish View of Marriage and Family*" at St. John's University when his sudden passing left Professor Vogt, the dean of the Theology Department with the imperative task to find a replacement. Rabbi Mayer Perelmutter, the Emeritus Rabbi at the Reform Temple of Forest Hills has been teaching at St. John's for a number of years as well, and when asked by Professor Vogt to recommend someone who could teach Rabbi Greenstein's course, he suggested my name. I met with Professor Vogt and after a short meeting he offered me a teaching position at St. John's as an adjunct professor, enticing me with a free parking pass and two free tickets to a basketball game.

Teaching a course as an adjunct doesn't take too much time once you put the course together, which is what I needed to do the last three weeks in August and the first week in September. It was this new "hobby" of mine which prevented me from attending the one-day AIPAC rabbinic seminar in Washington DC at the beginning of September.

There is an unspoken holy tradition among rabbis of different denominations to dedicate one sermon during the High Holy Days to Israel and the Jewish situation in the world. Given this well-known fact, AIPAC started putting together these one-day seminars before the High Holy Days to help rabbis with "talking points" for their Israel sermons. The AIPAC seminars are famous not only for their "talking points" but also for the good camaraderie and their superb *fleishig* luncheons. By missing the seminar this year, I was forced not only to skip lunch but to come up with my own "talking points."

So, the following dvar Torah is entitled: "Talking Points on Israel and the State of the Jewish World on an Empty Stomach."

The truth being told, there is a lot to be said about Israel and the state of the Jewish world this year.

This past summer was a rough one. Israel was under attack from Gaza and I was there to experience it. Israel was attacked with rockets from the air and from a complex system of underground tunnels. Furthermore, Israel was attacked by the world media. The fact that the free press was not free to report from Gaza was irrelevant at the end of the day. The reporters wrote what the Hamas leaders wanted them to write, and the world didn't need too much coercion to hear what it wanted to hear.

The "cherry on top," however, from this rough summer, was the open, unleashed, and rampant anti-Semitism we experienced all over the world.

"You shouldn't be surprised, Rabbi," you can say. "Anti-Semitism has always existed."

And yes, you are right; but nevertheless, I confess, it took me by surprise. The resurgence of Anti-Semitism this summer came from the right and from the left. It came from France and Germany, from Chile and South Africa, from Brazil and the United States of America. It came even from places where Jews never lived.

The resurgence of Anti-Semitism this past summer was embodied in a vast array of well-known forms and shapes: burning of synagogues, smashing of business windows, defaming of Jews and Jewish institutions in newspapers, cursing, spitting, and beatings.

This new-old Anti-Semitism hit home, literally, one month ago when *"a Jewish couple was attacked on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The assailants yelled anti-Semitic statements and threw a water bottle at the woman. When her husband retaliated against her attacker, he was punched in the side of the head. Police sources said that the victims might have been targeted because the man was wearing a yarmulke."*

It was this particular attack which prompted the following email from Mr. Paul Shaviv, the Head of School at Ramaz Jewish Day School, *which our son Ilan attends:*

"The recent incident involving abuse and harassment of a couple in the neighborhood has aroused comment. This seems to have been — thankfully — an

isolated incident. However, Rabbi Lookstein suggests that parents may consider advising their children to be discreet in wearing uncovered kippot, tzitzit, etc."

When Silvia and I read the email, we were appalled. Of course we are concerned for the safety of our children, but Rabbi Lookstein's suggestion didn't sound right, not in America, not in New York. For those who don't know of him, Rabbi Lookstein is the spiritual leader of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and principal of the Ramaz School.

Apparently, we were not the only ones shocked by the email. A sufficient number of parents might have written or called to complain because a few days later, Rabbi Lookstein, in a straightforward act of teshuvah, simply retracted his words:

"We have to stand up here in New York and say we are who we are, and this kind of behavior by people who try to terrorize others should never be allowed... Our answer to anti-Semitism has to be that we stand up like exclamation points and not bend over like question marks. We don't want this to become Paris. It's our job to educate the public and the leadership of this country that we cannot allow what's going on in Paris and London and Brussels to happen here."

Rabbi Lookstein soon realized that it was the bent-over Jew in him that was talking before. The Jew who grew up in Eastern Europe, or in Argentina. The Jew who grew up before the State of Israel, the Jew who was told to keep a low profile and not to make waves. The new proud Jew in him finally prevailed and reminded us to stand tall and unbent, like exclamation points.

The truth being told, we liberal Jews in America are the ones who taught everyone else how to stand like exclamation points. We were at the front of the civil rights movement during the 1950s and early 60s. We were pioneers in the feminist movement, in the gender equality transformation, and in the anti-war protests in the 1970s. We liberal Jews in America are among the world leaders in environment conservation and anti-climate change campaigns. The *Save Darfur Coalition* and the *Student Anti-Genocide Coalition* were both founded by Jews or Jewish organizations, and liberal rabbis, hundreds of them, made and continue to make upholding human rights throughout the world their top priority, from sweatshops in Malaysia, to villages in Rwanda, from displaced Mexican immigrant communities in Colorado to Palestinian towns in the West Bank.



Every good and just cause that exists in the world was our cause.

Because we were "slaves in the land of Egypt," because we stood bent over for 2000 years, we gained sufficient experience to become master teachers on standing straight like exclamation points.

We did it for everyone else. Now the time has come for us to stand like exclamation points for our own cause. For the Jewish cause. Now the time has come for us to stand straight like exclamation points for the right of Israel to exist as a sovereign Jewish state; a state with flaws and inconsistencies, but our only Jewish home, nevertheless. There are plenty of flaws and inconsistencies in the many movements we supported over the years, and yet, we still seem to find the energy and time for them.

Now the moment has come for us to find the energy and time for ourselves.

This past summer, we experienced not only the betrayal of Israel, which, sadly enough, we came to expect and to take for granted, but also, one more time, the betrayal of the Jews.

We knew about the fascist anti-Semitism in Europe. We were aware of the threat of skinheads and neo-Nazis in Germany, Belgium and France. We came to expect the resurgence of old anti-Semitic myths and blood libels in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

However many of us were stunned at the eruption of a virulent anti-Semitism among left, liberal, and so called progressive communities throughout the world. We Jews stood by everyone else, but it seems that not many are standing by our side, today. We are pretty much alone in our plea.

We have been betrayed many times in the past. It happened in Germany in the 1930s,ⁱⁱ it happened in the 1930s, 40s and 50s in the Soviet Union. As an aside, my father tells me how his close friends affiliated with the Communist Party in Buenos Aires couldn't come to terms not only with the fact that Stalin was trying to obliterate any trace of Jewish life in the Soviet Union, but that he was actually killing Jews as well.

Our deep desire to be loved prevented us from seeing the writing on the wall in the past. We don't have the luxury of allowing it to happen again. We who taught the world "You shall not forget!" shall not forget those who beat us this summer and those who betrayed us by standing idle at their side.

I am not advocating that we stop caring for others. We cannot stop. It is in our DNA. We were the underdogs for so long that we cannot help it; we will always side with the most vulnerable, as we should, as is expected.

However, it is time for us to love ourselves a little more.

There are many worthy causes in the world and Jews are usually among their foremost supporters. The time has arrived for us to take care of ourselves. Hillel said it very clearly over two thousand years ago: - אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי מִי לִי - *"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"* (Mishnah Avot 1:14). "Not many" was the sad answer we received this past summer.

We must indeed stand like exclamation points! As Hillcrest Jewish Center member, Sam Bahn, reminded me, "It is not a question of left or right. It is a question of being proud Jews."

We must strengthen our relationship with the State of Israel and we must strengthen our Jewish lives by filling them with meaningful content. Again: אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי *"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"*

As we usher in a new year, we renew our resolve to stand straight and proud like exclamation points. We pledge to find concrete ways to enrich our Jewish lives and our relationship with the State of Israel.

Master of the Universe, as we strive to do our share, we ask You to keep us safe, and to extend over us, our loved ones, our people, and the State of Israel, Your divine protection.

"Adonai Oz L'Amo Yiten; Adonai Yivarekh Et Amo Ba-Shalom." - "May God grant strength to our people; May God bless our people with peace" (Psalms 29:11).

Amen

ⁱ <http://forward.com/articles/204697/jewish-couple-attacked-on-upper-east-side>

ⁱⁱ See: Alexander Gelley : On the "Myth of the German-Jewish Dialogue": Scholem and Benjamin - <http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v3i12/gelley.htm>