

Disengagement from Gaza – The Right Move

August 19, 2005 / Tu B'Av 5765

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In our nation's capital, there is a confidence exuded by the timeless marble of the many memorials and monuments. The open spaces gracefully surrounding the worn steps lead to these markers of our history, the embodiments of our ideals and our strivings to reach them. Two days ago, with my family, we stood at the feet of the statue of Thomas Jefferson, looking down upon the blue waters of the Tidal Basin and surrounded by the words etched in marble and in the consciousness of our nation: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

The founders of this nation risked their lives for what they saw as right. They were not perfect, but they strove to match their ideals to their actions. So too, great moments in our nation's history were shaped by people willing to take risks for what they knew was right even at the cost of upsetting sensibilities of many, from abolition to women's suffrage, the civil rights movement to gay rights.

This has been a historic week not in our nation's life, but in the still young country of Israel. The ideals of distant Zionist dreams of some confronted the visions of others yearning for peace. The disengagement from Gaza beginning Sunday night came hours after Tisha b'Av, the 9th day of Av, the day commemorating the destruction of the Temple twice in Jerusalem and when subsequently all expulsions in our history took place, from England in 1291 to Spain in 1492.

How can we not feel sympathy for those whose lives have been upended? How can we not be torn seeing images of Israeli soldiers, tears in eyes, pulling women and men, teens and children, tears in their eyes, from synagogues and schools, from the homes that they have lived in for decades, from the cities where Jews have called home for millennia, where King David ruled, where King Herod redesigned Gaza City in the 1st century BCE, where large Jewish populations created beautiful synagogues in the 2nd century which remain to this day, where in the 17th century, Rabbi Israel Najara, chief rabbi of Gaza, composes "*Ya Ribon Olam*" a song still sung traditionally on Shabbat? How can we not understand their pain, when their lives being upended is a unilateral action with no assurances of peace, with no assurances that their leaving their homes will lead to security for all Israelis, with no assurances that the land being left will not become staging grounds for terrorism against their children?

And yet how can we not support the single most important event in the last number of years with at least a glimmer of hope for peace? "*Nachamu, nachamu* be comforted, be comforted" Isaiah consoles in the words of the Haftarah for this Shabbat, in the words that give this Shabbat a special name, Sabbath of Comfort, the first of seven Shabbatot leading to Rosh Hashanah. *Nachamu, nachamu, be comforted, be comforted* -- for we are a people of hope. How can we not seek what we know is right, with the hope of comfort and peace?

In this week's parashah, Ve'etchanan, Chapter 6, verse 18 of Deuteronomy states: "*V'asita ha'yashar v'hatov b'einei Adonai*,...And you shall do what is right and good in the eyes of the Lord." What is right and good? It would seem, after the exhortations of

the *shema* and *v'ahavta*, just a few verses earlier, which tell us to follow God's commandments, that this statement in verse 18 is redundant. What does it mean to do what is right or good in God's eyes if we have already followed the *mitzvot*, the commandments? Rashi interprets "doing what is right and good" in this verse to mean "*Lifnim mi'shurat ha'din*", "Going beyond the letter of the law."

In the Talmud, when this principle of "going beyond the letter of the law" is discussed, it appears that this principle stands on an equal footing with "love your neighbor as yourself." For example, when a discrepancy appears in analyzing a Torah law, the principle of "*lifnim mi'shurat ha'din*" is invoked to maintain peace between people. There are strict guidelines on how to invoke the law, but it allows compromise with laws such as settling the Promised Land when other values, such as peace, such as the existence of the State of Israel, are at stake.

The great 13th century Ramban taught: "And this is an important issue. It is impossible to list in the Torah every interaction of an individual with his friends and his neighbors, and all of his business dealings, and the various things needed to assure the proper development of all societies and nations. But rather, once many of them have been mentioned, such as (Vayikra 19:16) "One should not be a talebearer"; (Ibid. 18) "You shall not take revenge or bear a grudge"; (Ibid., 16) "You shall not stand by while the blood of your friend is spilled"; (Ibid., 14) "You shall not curse the deaf"; (Ibid., 32) "You shall stand before one who is elderly", etc., the Torah summarizes and states our Deuteronomy verse: "And you will do what is just and good in the Eyes of God..." in all matters, to the point where you enter into compromises and legal decisions that are beyond the letter of the law..."

We can witness and support the disengagement from Gaza standing on firm religious ground. This is something many of us have hoped to see for many years because of the need for peace, for coexistence with Palestinians, for the need for two states. "Doing what is good and right in the sight of God," seeking compromise, going beyond the letter of the law, derived from this week's *parashah* gives religious voice against the settler movement which only sees the letter of the law. Yes, we ought to be sympathetic, but we also need to know that this is right.

It is right because compromise is necessary. In discussing the disengagement, Rabbi Daniel Gordis, an Israeli, weighs the pros and cons. He states three reasons to oppose the departure from Gaza. "a. Israel's bedrock philosophy is never to withdraw under fire and without the prospect of peace. b. What will happen in September? Hamas fills power vacuum? c. Sticking it out in a bad neighborhood is part of Zionist ethos."

And yet Gordis notes, we cannot maintain the status quo. "What options, after all, do we have? a. Maintain 8,000 settlers in the midst of 1.3 million disenfranchised Palestinians? Certainly not in our or their interests. b. Make the Palestinians citizens of Israel? Also not in our interests. We can kiss the Jewish majority good-bye. c. Many Jews understandably do not want to leave Gaza – but staying may very well be worse. "

Our tradition understands taking risks for what is right requires at times dramatic change. Abraham was told to leave his country and start a new life and a new history. Moses led a stiff necked people into the desert, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai risked his life and gave up Jerusalem in order to save Judaism; early Zionist pioneers risked their lives to

help establish a Jewish state. Withdrawing from Gaza may be a small step by comparison, but it is a significant and perhaps a heroic and historic step, toward a state at long last for the Palestinians and a secure, Jewish, democratic Israel.

Personally, the most encouraging sign this past week was the speech given by Prime Minister Sharon, father of the settler movement, as the disengagement began. He recognized this move was necessary because of demographics, but he also made it clear that this was not a final step, as many feared it would be for him. He is waiting for the Palestinians reactions and for the first time uttered compassionate words for the other side: "They are crowded into especially densely populated refugee camps, in poverty and suffering, in hothouses of increasingly rising hatred, without any horizon of hope."

May our prayer on this Shabbat of Comfort be that those who lost their homes this week will find new lives of meaning and come to know that their sacrifices have led to a lasting and just peace for Israel and the Palestinians. And may that be what is good and right in God's eyes.