Rosh Hashanah Day 1 - 2015/5776
Making Peace With the Enemy

I can remember the moment as if it happened yesterday. It was Shabbat afternoon November 20, 1977. My parents and I had just finished eating lunch. We turned on the TV to watch a remarkable moment in Israel's history unfold before our eyes. President Anwar Sadat of Egypt was about to arrive in Israel. With tears in our eyes we watched as his plane touched down - imagine a plane with Arabic writing landing in Tel Aviv! We watched Prime Minister Menachem Begin shake Sadat's hand and embrace him. We watched as Sadat shook hands with Golda Meir and then listened as Israel's army band played Egypt's national anthem. No one in their wildest imagination just 4 years before could have ever imagined that such a moment could arrive. Surely the messiah would arrive too!

Even though I was only 15 at the time I still understood the context for that remarkable moment. I had followed the Yom Kippur war as a 6th grade student in my Jewish Day School and I had the assignment of summarizing the course of the war in class every day. I vividly remember watching the news, writing the summary and being excited along with everyone else that Israel had miraculously turned the tide and been able to win the war. I knew that Sadat and his predecessor Nasser had vowed to wipe Israel off the map and drive the Jews into the sea. I remember Golda Meir saying "We can forgive the Arabs for killing our children. We cannot forgive them for forcing us to kill their children. We will only have peace with the Arabs when they love their children more than they hate us." I also knew that Egypt had been trying to defeat Israel in the wars in 1948, 1956 and 1967.

Egypt not only fought several wars with Israel but they also treated their own Jews miserably. Jews had been living in Egypt for over 1500 years. They had a relatively comfortable life and the community thrived. Even until 1948 the Jews of Egypt could obtain wealth, achieve a high degree of education and rise to the highest levels of government. But when the state of Israel was established that all changed. Life became more difficult to the point that by the early 1960s a great majority of Egypt's Jewish population fled to France and many then moved on to the United States. We have members of our own congregation who experienced that migration first hand.

With that history in mind it was clear in November 1977 how truly amazing it was for the President of Egypt to make such a trip and for the Prime Minister of Israel to welcome him with open arms. Sadat spoke to the Knesset the next day and just 16 months later I watched on TV at an assembly at my Jewish day school as Sadat and Begin signed a peace treaty on the White House lawn.

Had Golda Meir's quote about the Arabs proven correct? Had the Arabs now had a change of heart in their cultural attitude to Jews and Israel? And if not what enabled Israel to attempt to make peace with its mortal enemy? How was it possible to ignore the public statements and the history of the treatment of Jews in Egypt and accept a handshake and hug with sincerity and hope?

Perhaps Begin and the Israeli government had Jewish tradition on its side. The last two sections of today's Torah reading - comprising just 13 sentences - focus on an

agreement that Abraham reaches with the Philistine leader Avimelech. We are told, “At that time Avimelech and Phichol chief of his troops said to Abraham, ‘God is with you in everything you do. Therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my kith and kin, but will deal with me and with the land in which you have sojourned as loyally as I have dealt with you.’” (Genesis 21:22-23) The next several sentences describe the arrangement that was reached including Abraham giving 7 sheep as a gift to show his peaceful intentions.

As readers of this text every year on Rosh Hashanah we don’t focus very much attention on this passage. If we pause to reflect on it we are left with the impression that Abraham is a magnanimous, wealthy man. He is respected by his fellow tribal leaders and perhaps even feared. As the midrash - the rabbinic commentary - suggests, Avimelech had just heard about the miraculous birth of Abraham’s son and must have thought that Abraham was truly blessed and a powerful force to be reckoned with. Abraham himself must have felt blessed and confident and as if he was in a position to reach agreements with neighboring tribes assuring that he and his family could live in peace in this new land.

Yet if we are familiar with the entire Jewish Bible, reading about the Philistines is supposed to raise a red flag. Later in the Bible, in the books of Judges and Samuel, we read about the Philistines and the ongoing battles the Israelites have with them. As the Israelites settle the land of Israel under Joshua (after leaving Egypt and wandering in the desert for 40 years) and are led by various judges, they struggle with the indigenous Canaanite city states and the Philistine nation. The Philistines lived in the southern coastal area essentially between Ashdod and Gaza today and extending inland to the Judean foothills. They lived in a strategic area, part of which was promised by God to the tribe of Judah.

There are three famous battles that are supposed to come to mind when we read this section from the Torah this morning. The first concerns the famous Samson who had superhuman strength. He led his people in several skirmishes. The Philistines sent their own Delilah to seduce Samson and reveal the source of his great strength. She succeeded and the Philistines captured him. As he is led in chains into the great Philistine temple in Gaza, God gives him back his strength so that Samson can push on the pillars to which he is shackled and knock down the temple killing thousands inside.

The other famous battle is between the Philistine giant Goliath and the young and future king David. Goliath challenges any Israelite to a duel and David with only a slingshot manages to kill Goliath and behead him. David then becomes the most popular man in all of Israel.

Yet it is the third story which provokes the most angst among the traditional rabbinic Bible commentaries. In one of the battles the Philistines somehow manage to capture the holy ark. The Israelites always had the ark with them when they engaged in battle to ensure that God’s presence would lead them to victory. In this battle the Philistines - the idolatrous and pagan Philistines - capture the ark and it is the future king David who manages to recapture it and bring it to Jerusalem.

Though these stories occur 500-600 years after Abraham and Avimelech, we still can’t help but think of them. The rabbis understood the entire Bible - the Torah and the later books - to be one cohesive religious text. Whatever occurred in one part of the

Bible has to be connected with another part. And even more so, the characters described in one story - Abraham for example - know about future events as well. Because if we the readers know about all the biblical stories and events, then the characters themselves must know about them too.

Now that we are aware of the context of who Avimelech is and the people he leads we can ask deeper questions about Abraham's motives. On the surface Abraham seems to be magnanimous and generous, willing to work with anyone and everyone. He seems to be a truly humble and righteous man. But shouldn't someone so righteous hesitate before negotiating with pagans? Shouldn't Abraham be wary if not opposed to even talking with someone like Avimelech? Shouldn't Abraham be concerned about the idolatrous practice having an affect on his family and household? What then was his motivation, the rabbis ask, and how should we really understand the implication of the agreement he reaches with the Philistines? And by extension how can we apply that Torah reading to making peace with the Egyptians 36 years ago and making peace with our arch enemies today?

Not surprisingly there are 2 conflicting rabbinic teachings about taking the initiative to make peace with our enemies. In a lengthy section in the collection known as Leviticus Rabbah (9:9) we find statements by many rabbis as to the power of peace in our lives. The best example of one of those statements is the following. Rabbi Hezekiah quoting the verse from Psalms (34:15) בקש שלום ורדפהו - Seek peace and pursue it - says that we should *seek peace* where we are and *pursue it* in every location. Nowhere in those 3 pages of "midrash" are we given any limitations or qualifications to making peace. It doesn't say "not with your mortal enemy" or "not with a pagan". All the rabbis quoted simply and profoundly say that we should make peace and pursue peace to the ends of the earth.

It seems then we have a historic and religious tradition of seeking peace. It would seem that Abraham - the first Jew - and Menachem Begin were in good company in representing this foundational Jewish principle. Perhaps this model can even be used today as we have debated these past few months the merits of the proposed Iran Nuclear Agreement. Though we can debate the details of the agreement - the ability to inspect the facilities in Iran, the amount of enriched uranium Iran will have to destroy, etc. - I only want to discuss today the motivation to make a deal with Iran. Was President Obama right to pursue such a diplomatic agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran? The Iranian leaders have publicly stated and repeated often their intention of destroying western civilization. They boast of their ability to have built a missile that could carry a warhead to reach all parts of Europe. They claim that the values of western civilization are heretical and that only their form of Islam should be the law and values by which the world should run. And of course we should also be very concerned with the Iranian leaders' almost daily reiteration of their plan to wipe Israel off the face of the earth with whatever means possible. How is it possible then to even manage to entertain the notion that diplomatic negotiations should be conducted with such cruel and evil people?

It would seem that our midrash states unequivocally that peace should be attempted at all cost. Our religious values force us to rise above our human emotions of hatred and revenge and instead show our pure and religious ideals of peace and

harmony. In order for the world to be a safer place we have to try to make every attempt no matter how distasteful it may be to make peace with even the most despicable of tyrants.

As I have thought about the Iran Nuclear Agreement I have been conflicted. At times I have the naive and idealistic view that we should try to reach peaceful agreements with our enemy. As Abraham showed us in the Torah reading and Rabbi Hezekiah taught us in the midrash, we must pursue peace in every location. No matter who our enemy is and what they may publicly say we have the religious obligation to take the initiative and attempt to make peace.

But at times I also feel myself being opposed to the agreement. How can we allow our mortal enemy to have access to the most dangerous weapon on earth? At its annual gathering of rabbis in Washington a few weeks ago, AIPAC provided many speakers - pundits and experts - who spoke passionately against the nuclear agreement. One - Yossi Klein Halevi - was extremely persuasive. We should know of Yossi Klein Halevi's work through his writing for the New Republic and other such magazines and his books such as Like Dreamers about the Israeli soldiers in the iconic picture at the KOTEL during the Six Day War. He is a fair and passionate reporter of Israeli life and I always am swayed by his arguments. In his talk to us - American rabbis of all denominations - he reprimanded us for abandoning Israel. It is clear, he says, that the agreement plays into the hands of the Iranians and it's no peace deal at all. Once the sanctions are lifted Halevi says, money will flow into the Iranian nuclear facilities and Israel's survival will be threatened. We should all be united in opposition to the agreement for if it passes there will be grave repercussions for the Western world.

It was Halevi's speech that led me to think of the other side of the argument. Though pursuing peace is a great ideal we also have to be realistic. Sometimes religious ideals can't realistically be carried out because lives would be at risk. In fact there is another midrash that seems to support that position. In Genesis Rabbah (54:4), the same collection as Leviticus Rabbah, we find this commentary on Abraham's actions. The rabbis focus on the gift he presented to Avimelech - 7 female sheep - and say: "God said to Abraham, 'because you gave 7 sheep to Avimelech, his descendants will slay 7 righteous men of your descendants….Because you gave him 7 sheep, 7 sanctuaries of your descendants will be destroyed….You gave him 7 sheep and therefore My Ark will spend 7 months in Philistine territory.'" According to this midrash not only was Abraham wrong in making this peace agreement with Avimelech he should have known that it would have profound repercussions for his descendants. Abraham should have known that people would die, sanctuaries would be destroyed and even the holy ark would be held captive in pagan hands. Peace with the enemy was not to be pursued for it would bring great calamity on future generations.

Not only do we have the religious ideal to rise above our emotions and strive to be idealistic, we also have the religious ideal to recognize the impact of our negotiations. On the one hand we want there to be peace in the world and we want to try to support the agreement with Iran but on the other hand we can't fathom giving legitimacy to a regime that sponsors terrorism. What are we to do? Which Jewish perspective on peace are we to follow? Which will have lasting and positive developments for us and our children?

If only we could know for sure which approach is right. If only we could be guaranteed that making such an agreement with Iran is the right course of action. The machzor presents the traditional view which may be comforting at times of crisis namely that all is in God's hands. We may try to avert the decree by doing teshuvah - repentance, by praying and by performing acts of justice but ultimately according to the machzor our future is in God's hands.

Though it is tempting to leave it to God, I prefer to focus on the equally strong rabbinic idea that we have free will and to focus on the statement in the Torah in which God says that we have life and death before us therefore we must choose life. Instead of being passive and putting our lives in God's hands and praying for the best, we must be proactive and work for the best. We were created in God's image with the capacity to be good and do good, to be compassionate and to make the world a better place. We must do all we can to advocate for peace and security for everyone on earth. That is how we live up to our religious mission.

When Menachem Begin hugged Anwar Sadat he did so with sincerity. He knew that Jewish history was on his shoulders and that he was responsible for the fate of the people of Israel. Yet just as he hugged Sadat he knew that all options would still be on the table to do whatever he must to protect and defend the State of Israel. We must do the same today. I applaud President Obama for attempting to make peace and I support the nuclear agreement. If one less nuclear weapon is trained on us then it's a good deal. But I am also realistic and want to ensure that we will do everything in our power to protect and defend the State of Israel. Like Begin, we can support the ideals of making such an agreement but we do so with constant vigilance, proactively ensuring the safety and security of Israel and America. May we do all we can this year to seek peace and pursue it and may this year be one of health and safety for all of us. Amen.