

Rosh Hashanah Drash 2023

Shabbat, September 16

Larry Garber

1. Shabbat shalom, vshana tova!
2. As we reflect upon the last 12 months, we are certainly justified in worrying about what is happening around the globe: a horrific conflict in Ukraine; an ever-growing population of refugees and displaced persons; a serious backsliding in terms of economic development and respect for human rights in too many countries; and a seeming never- natural disasters as evidenced most recently by the fires in Hawaii, the earthquake in Morocco, and the floods in Libya, with consequent loss of lives. And I have not even mentioned the threats on democracy here in the United States.
3. All these subjects warrant our attention as we look ahead to a new year and are worthy of a Rosh Hashanah drash.
4. But as we begin the year 5784, I find myself preoccupied with what is happening in Israel – just this week, for example, we marked the 30th anniversary of the famous day in 1993 when Yitzchak Rabin and Yasser Arafat shook hands at the White House. I was fortunate enough to be on the White House lawn for the ceremony and remember feeling tremendously excited and hopeful on that brilliant morning. Yet thirty years later, the prospects for peace seem ever more distant and fingers are pointed in every direction to assign blame for the failures.
5. This past week, we also watched as the entire Israeli Supreme Court heard a case challenging the Knesset's adoption of a new basic law that would deprive the Israeli constitutional system of an essential tool for protecting democracy in the country. As many analysts have noted, the arguments were both enlightening and frightening for those who care about Israel's future.
6. Like many, I was particularly troubled by the casual dismissal of Israel's Declaration of Independence by the government's attorney – I reminded myself that Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address opened with "Four score and seven years ago," drawing solemn inspiration from the US declaration of independence in a time of civil war. The Israeli Declaration has served a similar purpose as a touchstone for the values that we expect Israeli governments to respect.
7. Israel will also be on our minds next week during Yom Kippur, which marks the 50th anniversary of the Egyptian and Syrian attack on Israel. The war ended with an Israeli military victory and many view the war as a necessary step for the

subsequent treaty between Israel and Egypt, which for all its problems has kept the peace for 44 years. But we ask – was the death of so many young Israelis, Egyptians and Syrians necessary for the peace that followed.

8. I am also watching with fascination the Biden Administration's efforts to facilitate diplomatic and economic relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. There are many questions about the costs and benefits of such an arrangement, including what will be required from the United States in providing to what until recently had been viewed as a pariah state. We will have to wait until we see the actual details of whatever agreements are reached.
9. With these current events as background, I want to direct our attention to the portion of the Torah that we read this morning from: Bereshit Chapter 21. In summary, the chapter presents two seemingly disconnected narratives.
10. The first deals with the exiling of Hagar and Yishmael from the house of Avraham. Sarah's goal in urging their removal is to protect her son, Yitzchak, and with God's help, she convinces Avraham that this is a necessary step to fulfill God's promise to Avraham.
11. What happens next is that, even as Hagar is in a state of despair, God informs her that Yishmael's offspring will form a great nation.

12. קוּמִי שְׂאִי אֶת־הַנָּעַר וְהַחֲזִיקִי אֹתוֹ בְּיָדְךָ בְּכִי־לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל אֲשִׁימֵנּוּ:

Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

13. The text seems to provide contradictory messages: on the one hand, Isaac must be separated from the pernicious influence of Yishmael; on the other hand, Yishmael too will grow into a great nation. But will these two nations compete or collaborate?
14. The second narrative describes a series of interactions between Avraham and Avimelech, the king of Gerar, which lies in the land of the Philistines. First, Avimelech requests from Avraham:

15. וְעַתָּה הַשְׁבַּעָה לִּי בְּאֵלֵהִים הַזֶּה אִם־תִּשְׁקַר לִי וְלִנְיָוִי וְלִנְכַדִּי בְּחֹסֶד אֲשֶׁר־עָשִׂיתִי עִמָּךְ תַּעֲשֶׂה עִמָּדִי וְעִם־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־גֵּרְתָּהּ בָּהּ:

"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."

16. Avraham agrees, but then reproaches Avimelech for the wells of water that Avimelech's servants have apparently stolen. Avimelech does not deny his servant's actions, but claims that he personally was unaware of the matter.

17. What happens next is that they agree to sign a “Brit” – a formal pact that establishes their respective rights, but more important their mutual commitment to maintaining peaceful relations. The text closes on a positive note: Avimelech departs and returns to the land of the Philistines and Avraham lives in the land of the Philistines for a long time.

18. There is a similar positive coda to the Isaac and Yishmael story provided in Genesis, Chapter 25, verse 8, where it describes how, after Avraham’s death

19. וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ יִצְחָק וְיִשְׁמַעֵאל בְּנוֹי אֶל־מְעַרְתַּת הַמַּכְפֵּלָה אֶל־שֵׂיף עֶפְרָן בֶּן־צֹחַר הַחִתִּי אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי מַמְרָא:
His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre.

20. What lessons do these narratives offer for us today as we consider the challenges facing Israel? Here are my, perhaps simplistic, offerings.

- a. First, the Torah reflects a “realist” perspective of the world, recognizing that conflict between groups does happen.
- b. Second, some form of physical or political separation may sometimes be necessary, but not to the point of eliminating the other or of denying their dignity.
- c. Third, as reflected in Yishmael and Yitzchak coming together to bury their father, reconciliation over shared interests is possible and, importantly, not only through violent conflict.
- d. Fourth, as illustrated in the story of Avraham and Avimelech, sometimes there is a need for more than just the swearing of an oath, but a “brit,” or formal pact or treaty, is necessary to define the rights and obligations of the respective parties.

21. It is my prayer on this Rosh Hashanah that both within Israel and between Israel and its neighbors, these principles are taken seriously.

22. Let this year bring a powerful reaffirmation of the commitment to democratic principles within Israel and to formal agreements between Israel and its neighbors.

Shabbat shalom and shana tova umetukah!