

Shabbat Shalom,

It's great to be together. This is an unusual week for us without a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. There is always something nice about that, however. We realize the depth and power of worship at B'nai Torah. It is great to have Magda with us on this Shabbat. It will increase the spirit after the Hanukkah lights have gone out. Although there is always a great spirit here and we know that. I want to welcome everyone. A special welcome to all of our guests, the families of our members who are visiting; B'nai Torah welcomes all of you. If you are here as a seasonal visitor, we invite you to join the synagogue. We have all sorts of memberships available. You can see one of our officers or clergy or call the office during the week to join.

Anyway, it is post-Hanukkah. We think we knew the Hanukkah story. Did any of you read David Brooks last week? As you saw, it's complicated...Popular telling informs us that we celebrated a miracle. The holiday of Hanukkah commemorated those eight days during which the Temple was rededicated. But it is post-Hanukkah now. And we realize the Hanukkah story doesn't end. I want us to look at the story, rather look at the history and see if

there is something that we can learn from it. If David Brooks was the Scrooge of pre-Hanukkah, I'll be the Scrooge post-Hanukkah.

One of the great mythologies perpetuated by the old UJA was in the slogan, "We are one." We know the community of the people of Israel has always been quite divided. There were always different approaches to living in the world, living a Jewish life. Chasidim, Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, Orthodox, Chareidim. There were always different responses to the meaning of Judaism and to the outside world.

In the case of the period of after the Maccabee victory some of the local Jewish Hellenizer's actually joined forces with the Syrian soldiers and they continued to harass Judah Maccabee. In 160, four years after victory, the Syrian's returned enmass. They killed Judah and they defeated the Jews. Two years later Judah's brother, Jonathan Maccabee, emerged from a desert hiding place and initiated a second rebellion. He succeeded in winning a measure of Jewish autonomy, but after a few years the Syrians returned again and he too was murdered. His brother, Simon, now took over the battle. In 142, that's twenty years later, the Maccabee's finally achieved an enduring victory. The book of Maccabee's tells us that the people of Israel began to write in their agreements and

contracts, “the first year of Simon, the great High Priest, the General and the leader of the Jews.”

Something very important happened then. And I believe from it there is a very important message for us to learn. The Maccabees were apparently more noble in opposition than they were in power. They had grown very accustomed to fighting. They seem incapable of working with anybody who disagreed with them on anything. Simon’s grandson, King Alexander Yanai, executed 800 of his opponents, fellow Jews, after first forcing them to witness the murder of their wives and children! And while the slaughter was going, Yanai was hosting a Greek style drinking party. For the Jewish people the episode was doubly tragic. It was if the descendants of the Morano’s had later become the leaders of the Spanish Inquisition. The Maccabees terrible, immoral and religious decline explains something that we struggle with. That has to do with the dual nature of Hanukkah.

Remember – A few weeks ago we asked the question *Mai Hanukkah*, what is the miracle of Hanukkah? We wondered if it was about the victory the Maccabees as we read in the *Al HaNisim* prayer. Or was it the miracle of the lights which we read from the Talmud, the Mishnah, which comes to us at least 200 years later.

We note, and it is very important to note, that the rabbis make no mention of the Maccabees at all. Thus they ask: *Mai Hanukkah?*

Today when we think about the miracle of Hanukkah we think about the Maccabees and that undoubtedly is due to our current historical situation. We see Israel as being the modern day Maccabees. After 2000 years a return to power. But when we look at what happened with the Maccabees and their return to power, it must force us to ask some very important questions. What did it mean to this band of fighters to gain power? How is power used? How easily is it abused?

There is a term used in Jewish history and in our literature, the term is “Hasmonean” and that is interchangeable in Jewish sources for the Maccabees and their descendents. It is the term by which the historian Josephus called the Maccabees, even though it is not found in the Book of Maccabees. In 63 B.C.E. during a civil war that erupted between the two Hasmonean brothers, the Romans came to adjudicate and they ended up occupying Jerusalem. So, the tragedy was now complete. The original Maccabees had freed the Jews from foreign rule; their corrupt descendents returned the Jews to subjugation under an alien and pagan power. The Maccabees themselves had become a kind of Jews that their great-

grandfather Mattathias had killed as traders. After King Yanai, the battle continues. When his queen Shalom-Tzion died in 67, the kingship should have passed on to her eldest son, Hyrcanus II. But his younger brother Aristobulus commanded support from the army and he was ousted. Then there was a full scale civil war. At the time that this conflict was going on Rome was in the process of annexing Syria. So the two brothers decided to submit their dispute to Pompeii, the Roman General. He ruled in favor of Hyrcanus, apparently believing him to be more pliable. No match for the Roman army, Aristobulus then surrendered to Pompeii. Hyrcanus' ability to rule depended entirely on Roman support. So he invited, mind you, the Jewish leader invited the Roman army to occupy Jerusalem. It is no wonder then when Jerusalem fell to the Romans; the rabbis later say it fell because of "Tzinat Chinam," because of the hatred between brothers. The inability for the people themselves to get along and the inability of the people to deal with power...

The corruption of power that took place from the time of the Maccabees and the Hanukkah story until the time of the Romans is the reason that the rabbis ask 200 years later *Mai Hanukkah*, What is Hanukkah?

It seems that the rabbis were uncertain as to what Hanukkah was about! That may not be the case. The rabbis saw the people observing a Greek Festival and they rejected it. They wanted to know why and so they brought a mythological reading into the story. It was the story of the Miracle of Lights. It is no wonder that when we come to Shabbat on Hanukkah we read the Haftarah from the Prophet Zechariah, “It is not by might or by power, but by God’s spirit.”...lest we think it was the corrupt Hasmonians!

So far you might be thinking...this is truly the Hanukkah scrooge! I want to tell you that the questioning of meaning is a very important component of the Jewish condition. I like Judaism because we do this. There are no simple answers. Life doesn’t exist with simple answers. Jewish existence like human existence is quite complicated. So, the question in our time is *Mai Hanukkah*, What is Hanukkah? It has greater implications...and the question may really be: What does it mean to be a Jew? We have come to learn that it is not easy to identify exactly what Judaism is. There is no place in the world that the question is more essential than the State of Israel today. On so many different levels that question is being played out. It seems to me the just as the role of Judaism, the role of a religious tradition, the essence of the values inherent in our connection to our spiritual tradition

became so terribly challenged in those years from the Maccabees when we had political and military power. I think in many ways we face those issues again. It is a challenge because of the great dichotomy between power and values.

As I speak we know that there is a great deal of attention being focused on Gilad Shalit. The case of Gilad Shalit may illuminate in our own time this challenge. You know Gilad Shalit. He is a 23 year old, bookish young man who was captured about three years ago in the Southern Front near Gaza by Hamas. He has remained in captivity and is a cause célèbre for all the Israeli people. His face is on posters and in newspapers and magazines and on the internet and his story is constantly being told on television. His family has become recognizable national heroes. Gilad Shalit represents more than a single soldier who has been in captivity. He represents every young Israeli boy. There is a negotiation taking place and the negotiation includes an exchange of prisoners, not too unlike that which we saw a few years ago with the exchange of political prisoners and terrorists and criminals. In that case it was for a few dead bodies. This time in exchange for Gilad Shalit, the reports say, Israel is going to release hundreds, if not a thousand Palestinian prisoners; political prisoners, terrorists, and criminals including Marwan Barghoutti is who will become the focus of Palestinian national aspirations; a political leader, a

thinker and murderer...BUT, Barghoutti is responsible for the murder of at least twelve people! And everybody asks: At what cost will this exchange take place? It seems that the tension that is inherent in this issue and in this question is the very tension that lies at the heart of the question of Jewish identity, the sovereignty of the state of Israel and the role of Judaism, the role of religion, in the state... The challenge of power in the light of religious values.

Why should we trade so much for Gilad Shalit? All of you understand the question. Every Israeli has children in the army. Gilad Shalit is the son in a particular family, but he is everyone's son. Israel is like a big family. When a young man or young woman goes into the Israeli Army, the army makes a pledge, "we will never leave you behind," they say. That is what all parents know. The army will never leave you behind. It is an essential component of the value system of Tzahal. The Israeli army is not only watched by the commanders and the political experts and the people and the media, it is also watched by every single Jewish mother in the state. We were told one of the reasons that the army withdrew from Gaza had nothing to do with strategic importance of a military presence there, but rather it had to do with the price of keeping our boys in such a dangerous situation, in spite of the national defense needs. They were too high.

But, it is the humanity of the soldier that is at the forefront of so much of the IDF's (Israel Defense Forces) actions. Now we learn that as the nature of warfare has changed so dramatically, as the distinction between combatants and non-combatants is so blurred; Israel focuses so much of its attention on a notion of fighting a moral war, taking such great care to avoid collateral damage. Rooted in our religious tradition, the essence of our theology and ideology is the value of life. We all know "He who saves a single life. It is as if he has saved the entire world." What we know from our tradition is that Jews do everything and anything to save a single life. We can understand why Israel is negotiating the way that they are for the release of one young man. In fact, what we have learned is that the Israeli government probably has not choice based on the desires of the population. For just about everyone in Israel says well it maybe wrong, but we have no choice. Imagine if it were your son.

Professor Gadi Wolfsfeld asked his Political Science students at Hebrew University if Israel should free 1000 Palestinian prisoners; including organizers of terrorist attacks for one soldier...he faced silence. He said people feel extremely uncomfortable raising the question. It is so politically incorrect in Israel that you run the risk

of being labeled a monster. Every one of us knows this boy and we all know his family.

Yet, there is another side of the coin and that is that Israel is a sovereign state. Israel has to protect its citizens. The precedence for the release of hundreds of terrorists shows that many of those released became core executors of the first Intifada. Terrorists who are released often come back to commit more terror. When you release 100's in exchange for one, kidnapping then is rewarded. Hamas or Hezbollah will kidnap again and again and again. It is a win/win for them. Barghoutti is responsible for the brutal deaths of so many Israelis. He is serving five consecutive life sentences.

We ask ourselves, would America do this? Would England do this? Would France do this? No. No. No! No nation in the world would do what Israel is going to do. So at what price is the exchange made? That is the tension of a Jewish state. For at its core are the values of the Jewish people. The issue of redeeming captives is known as *Pidyeon Shvuyeim*, it is extensively covered in Jewish law. Do you know why? The reason is obvious.

Throughout history there has always been periods when Jews were taken captive and held for ransom and what those captives knew and what those pirates knew and all of those who committed those gruesome acts knew was that Jews would always pay for their

family members to be released. There are families right here in the synagogue who left their country in Central America because of kidnapping. There was no choice. So kidnapping changes the natural order of things and exchanges for those who are kidnapped compromises national security. What a dilemma!

It is good to be part of a people that struggle with these things. I am happy to be part of a people who see individual lives as being so important that this conversation can even take place. In Israel there is a movement now, a political movement to pass a law so that in the future these types of exchanges would be prohibited. But, meanwhile there is no such law. God willing we will see the release of Gilad Shalit soon.

What is at the core of the dilemma is whether we live by the rules of power as determined by political and military reality or whether there is a higher sense of value that guides our very being.

After the Maccabean victory it is clear that political and military power subverted the capacity of the religious dimension of Jewish life to take hold. In fact, not only did political military power become corrupt, but religious establishment was also corrupted. The results were 2000 years of Jewish powerlessness. I guess the

question is, can we live as a people guided by essential values and at the same time retain autonomy and political power.

At the same time, there is another disturbing phenomenon taking place. It started a while ago during an induction ceremony of some soldiers from the crackerjack Golani unit. A few Israeli soldiers unveiled a banner at the induction ceremony indicating that they would obey Jewish law in spite of the commander's orders and they would not participate in the dismantling of settlements or the removal of settlers. There is a growing tension between an element in the ultra-Orthodox community and the Orthodox nationalist community and the State of Israel. Who has authority? Is it the extremist rabbis who tell their students that it is a violation of Torah law to give back even one inch of land? Or is it the government of the state and its army which is absolutely necessary to protect the autonomy and integrity of the nation? Thankfully there are alternative religious voices who will state that the pursuit of peace is not only a political demand but also a religious demand. These religious demands authorities would say the illegal settlements must go. There's a lot to balance here.

Sitting here, I think the issue is very clear. When compromising the authority of commanders of an army, of the IDF, we

compromise the very security and integrity of the state. Israel grew as a nation because of the necessity for a Jewish state to protect the Jewish people. Some say there is conflict between traditional Judaism and the modern state. But, the modern State is the place where the most traditional Jews can be at home. In fact, the state is the homeland for all Jews. Whatever their affiliation, philosophy, religious bent or not!

So it leads to a third conversation and that is the conversation of a Jewish democratic state. More and more are asked that questions, can there be such a thing as a Jewish democratic state? How can it be defined as democratic if it is defined as Jewish? Isn't that theocratic state? Isn't that the antithesis of democracy?

I think there is an answer to that question! For to be Jewish is not to be part of a people where absolute authority is given to one religious view or one religious interpretation; to be Jewish is to part of a culture of learning and a culture that contains ongoing conversation, dialogue and interpretation, disagreement in pursuit of meaning. The pursuit of meanings and values is a desire to improve the world. A Jewish state is a state which is not rooted in Halacha or particular rabbinic point of view or a particular denomination or a particular theological view of God or the Jewish

people, but rather the Jewish state is a state that is rooted in Jewish culture and Jewish history. A state whose language is Hebrew; whose calendar is the calendar of the Jewish people; whose official celebrations, national holidays are the holidays of the Jewish people. A Jewish state is a state where an education system that reflects the history of the Jewish people, the values of the Jewish people, the literature of the Jewish people. Like any state its educational system reflects its culture. The common history is the history of the Jewish people and the history of the land of Israel. The celebrations are the celebrations of the Jewish people and the values would reflect the values of the Jewish tradition. The distinction here is that the way it is observed cannot be determined by one rabbi or one rabbinic group or one approach. The distinction here is that its Jewishness cannot lead to a creation of culture that oppresses other visions of that culture. But rather it would unite, it would allow for multiple visions to create a better future. It needs to be rooted in a constitutional democracy that gives rights to all people and all religions, a place where minority voices are not only heard but given equal voice, equal respect.

The tension between statehood and religion between national identity and Israeli identity and Judaism is a great challenge for us. But, it need not dispel disaster as it did 2000 years ago.

Rather, the opposite. By learning that history and keeping our eyes open to the political realities of today and the country can grow and become stronger. To do so requires a number of things. It requires the rule of law. It requires a modern judiciary that interprets and adjudicates law and it needs a system of courts and police and a defense force that protects it. The Jewish state will take the best of Judaism and its variety of forms and values and integrate it into the public sphere. The Jewish people have a right to a state. Whether they are Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox, men, women, secular or religious. The Jewish people understand from their history that it has to be open to all people and all humanity.

Israel is at its best when it reflects this incredible dimension in the pursuit of values of its brilliance, whether it be in music or the arts or fine arts, or applied arts, whether it be in science or technology, medicine, economic theory, whether it be in its incredible social services and public consciousness that takes care of so many. But it must expand to include all of its citizens. Our job, as people who sit in the synagogue away from our homeland, is to do what we can to insure a moderate approach to religion and a zealous approach to the preservation of freedom and the pursuit of peace. In all of

this we know Israel desperately needs a constitution that will help to define both the Jewish and democratic nature of the state.

We have a generation who knew first hand the greatest tragedy to befall our people in 2000 years. It was to no small degree a function of statelessness and the powerlessness. Now we have a generation that understands that Israel is surrounded by enemies who wish for her destruction. Yet, we are very strong. Our power and our strength should not allow for abuse or corruption. Rather our power and our strength should allow us to bring forth our best human values. As Israel was destroyed 2000 years ago, not by the powerful Roman Empire from outside, but from the corruption inside, we must learn that lesson. It will be Israel's inability to internally create a society that is unified in its resolve to sustain a modern state. If not, the issues will be devastating...or from these issues and conversations a stronger, more creative and more open society will emerge. I hope and pray for the latter.

We've been inspired by the passages of the holiday of Hanukkah and we've grown from them and we've learned from them. But we cannot be a closed book. The message and the stories of Hanukkah cannot be told without an understanding of the meaning of its history and the realities that existed. If we live only with

mythology, we will die a mythological death. But if we learn from reality, we can create a nation with purpose and meaning. We will never have a consensus on the exact meaning of what is Judaism or even who is a Jew...but maybe we can all learn from the past and forge a better future.

The miracle of Jewish survival is about our commitment to learning, to observance, to community, to God, to freedom and to human life. Those we agree upon.

“Not by might, not by power, but by my spirit...”

...I used to disagree with Zachariah! I believed without our power and might, the spirit cannot thrive. Without the rebirth of our homeland we would not have much of a presence in this world today...Yet, without the spirit of God, the power, we have learned is always abused...The mission of being a light to the world would be lost. That is the spirit that respects every single human life, the spirit that works tirelessly in pursuit of peace. The Maccabees and their dynasty did not last long...We can learn from that.

I wish you all Shabbat Shalom.