

Parsha Naso 5769  
Rabbi David Steinhardt  
June 6, 2009

Shabbat Shalom

It was a remarkable moment! Thursday morning the President of the United States, a Christian with Muslim roots, an African American spoke to the Muslim world from the University of Cairo. For some, I know, his presence was disturbing. For radical Islamists and for those who fear and mistrust the U.S., it was a time of great consternation. They fear this happening because they fear their hold on the Islamic world. For Israelis and Jews throughout the world who exist with a sense of impending doom, this added to their fear and to their mistrust. Responses were interesting to note after the speech. They were as you might have predicted. And critics seemed to jump on "pieces" without viewing the larger meaning of this speech. There were parts of the speech that raised many serious questions. There were parts of the speech that were disturbing to Jews and to the Jewish world. There were parts of the speech that were disturbing to Arabs and Muslims also. It challenged people to move beyond the comfort zone. It also challenged people to move beyond suspicion. I will address some of the issues. But, I begin by saying that I was pleased that the President would confront these serious challenges with strength and dignity. There have to be new ways to do business. We all agree that conflict is best resolved through dialogue.

Thomas Freedman had it right Wednesday morning when he wrote: "What is said privately must be spoken in public." Most leaders in Israel and the Arab world already know what needs to be done. Privately, Arab leaders express that Israel as a Jewish state must be reckoned with; trade and development need to be shared. Privately, Israel leaders and Palestinian leaders know what the final status should look like. Arab leaders know what it will take for peace and the establishment of a Palestinian State. There are settlements that will have to be dismantled and there are settlements that will stay. But leaders aren't saying it, at least publicly. Perhaps out of fear and mistrust. There's a type of...you know, you go first. No, you go first and no one goes first. And there's a knowledge that there are extreme elements bent on destroying Israel and the West. And so we fear the dialogue.

I will tell you what I liked about the speech and I will tell you what I disliked about the speech. But I ask you to please wait.

Before I do so, I want to speak a little bit about the Torah portion. In this week's parsha, Parshat Naso, one of the truly disturbing rituals of the ancient world is placed before us. It is the Ritual of the Sotah. The Sotah is the suspected adulterous who is given a potion, a terrible mix, to drink. After she drinks the potion, if her belly distends and her thighs sag, she is deemed an adulteress and subject for a capital crime. When a man's jealousy grows against his wife believing that she had an illicit sexual relation with another man and he is beyond himself, he knows not what to do, he is given a response. The Bible, in the ancient world gave him a framework to deal with his suspicion. Although a simple

and quick reading of the section makes us shudder at its primitive nature, the truth is that it reflected advancement in human culture in its time. The Babylonian code of Hammurabi stated that a wife who is suspected by her husband of infidelity is to prove her innocence by throwing herself into the river. If she survived, then she'd be innocent. If she drowned, she would be guilty. Other cultures recorded very harsh measures for suspected wives. They could be thrown out of the houses; they could be publically humiliated, stoned or burned. The Torah prescribes something that seems a bit more mild. In our time we can learn that this is not only about illicit sexual relations, but more importantly, it teaches us about the irrationality and dangers of jealousy and the threat that suspicion creates.

The Talmud elucidates the ritual and indicates that there needed to be witnesses to the woman's act who testified that she secretly spent enough time with a man alone in order to be considered suspected adulterer. The case could not be heard by a local court, but had to be brought to the Sanhedrin or to the Supreme Court. Only they had the power to order a woman to drink the water of bitterness. So, the conditions, in fact, made it almost impossible. If the husband who had a record of infidelity himself, the case could not be heard by the Supreme Court. The rabbinic law then added to the biblical law to assure that a woman had a right to a fair inquiry and to a trial. By the year 70, the law of the Sotah was really no longer a consideration.

So here's the significance that I wish to convey. A person's suspicion should not go unbridled. Suspicion is not allowed to overtake a human being so that they act out irrationally. Retribution for wrongdoing could only come through a system of law, an orderly system, a humane response to man's potential inhumanity.

In a very significant way, one component of the essential nature of the Jewish tradition has to do with placing boundaries on innate, natural human behavior and human response. Process in decision making is critical. There are feelings and passions which are recognized, but in the end there needs to be values that guide us and a law that protects us all. How important that is.

Let me get back to that as I consider President Obama's speech.

I know there are tempers and powerful responses coming from all over the world. Osama Bin Laden wants to kill Obama and right wing Jewish militants see this as the end of the wonderful Israel-America relationship. I suggest that we are a bit more introspective as we sit here. We need to be able to look at this with a critical eye.

There are remarkable aspects of Obama's speech and his approach. Clearly things are NOT working. And the nature of the Mid-East; Arab-Arab relations and Arab-Israel relations needs to change. Previous paths were heading towards disaster. Will that change? Maybe. Maybe not. But we need to try something different. We need the beginnings of intelligent discourse.

I'm not a pundit. I'm not a political scientist. I am the rabbi of this congregation. I am a proud Zionist. I am a Rodeph Shalom, a pursuer of peace. And I believe in dialogue. So this is the first word. Not the last. Obama's speech was an act of courage. It presented an America that is not just merely a colonial power, but one that wants to enter into respectful and honest and decent negotiations. Stepping out for a second from our own vantage point as Jews and Zionists and supporters of Israel and looking at this from a global prospective, the purpose becomes very clear. After all, this was not intended as a speech given to you and me, this speech was to the Muslim world. He is interested in promoting democracy in a very different way.

As an act of great emotional maturity he is able to state in many different ways I hear you, I hear your challenges. That brings people in. He also states "these are our challenges." So may claim it to be naïve, but yet we see a very bold attempt. He is challenging radicals of the Islamic world. He is taking on the fundamentalists, by expressing appreciation for the contributions of Islam and those who seek peace. And he does so by appealing to the massive young populations and those who see that extremism leads to death and not hope. He is challenging that world to say no to violence. He's promoting Democracy. He expressed the desire for women's rights to be honored. He called for education of women and supporting the growth of schools. He expressed empathy for the pain of Palestinians as well as an understanding of Israel as a refuge for the Jewish people after the Holocaust and where anti-Semitism is a clear and present danger. In strong terms he referred to the tragedy of Buchenwald and the atrocity of the six million. Yesterday he visited the Buchenwald. Some were distracted by Moral Equivalent, not what he was doing.

The responses from the pundits that I mentioned were so predictable. Those who don't like Obama or don't like his style, don't like his background, don't like one aspect or another was very critical of the speech. Those who like Obama and appreciate his style and appreciate what he has done and his intelligence, liked the speech.

A few noted places of the Jewish conversations I have read and heard. Some rabbis were upset with his quoting from Koranic and New Testament texts without attributing them to their origins. We know that both the Koranic and the New Testament texts came from ancient Hebrew and rabbinic tradition. It's childish for that to be a problem. Because they are texts that reflect the meaning of life and the value of life and from ones who wants to study sources, then one would come to the true sources. But that wasn't the purpose. The purpose was to describe meaning. He was speaking in Cairo. He was speaking to an Islamic audience and that is an important thing to note. If you noted the very expression of a quote from the Koran brought applause; it was as if the audience was saying: You appreciate us. You respect us.

Borrowing text from our tradition is really a good thing. It speaks to our influence. Someday the world will understand the notion of "*L'Shame Omro*," quoting from the origins, which we believe, will hasten redemption. I don't think we should be too concerned about that.

Clearly he spoke about a two state solution, Israel and Palestine. Although, that does evoke a sense of fear because of past history, we must note that the majority of Israelis understand that a two state solution is the ultimate solution for Israel to remain a democracy. Most Israelis and Jews understand that occupation is morally corrosive. Most of humanity believes in a people's right to self-determination. The nature of those boundaries, the nature of the final issues regarding that two state solution will come ultimately through negotiations. And there are critical steps of the condemned, the violence that brings no one closer to their goals. He responded to the victims of the Palestinian people and he made note of Israel being born out of Jewish persecution and Jewish suffering also.

To be able to stand in the shoes of another, to be able to see the world from the place where "the other" stands is a critical component in the process of peace making. In relational psychology it is the beginning of healing. It may be that the world and the Palestinian people are not ready for that yet, but small steps are being taken to bring us to that place. The issues are very complex issues and the final settlement issues will ultimately need to be negotiated.

I had issues of uncertainty and concern with the speech. I had great difficulty with his acquiescence to the Iranian nuclear desire for energy and peaceful purposes. And I've since learned that we have been trying to do this since 2003. Until there is regime change, until there is a different language and different intention expressed by the Iranian leaders, the world should not see that as an acceptable option. Israel cannot and will not. But perhaps he, knowing full well that there will be elections next week in Iran, is also speaking to their own people, creating a last chance for regime change without the loss of more lives.

I was troubled by the fact that three times President Obama, in talking about religious freedom said that women should be free to cover their heads, to wear the Hijab, but never stated that they should be free "not to"! He addressed the issue of radical violence, but not the radical ideologies that create it. He never mentioned Lebanon and Hezbollah and the upcoming election. BUT, I know he wasn't speaking to me, to us, to Jews or Israelis. He was speaking to a billion Muslims and he was looking to inspire change. For if change can come from within, real growth will pursue. For who amongst us wants more war and to see the destruction of more innocents.

I remind you, Israel is an autonomous state. It is not the 51st state of the United States of America. We do retain our own autonomy and our own strength in this matter.

Finally, I shared the concern of the description of Israel's origins in response to persecution and the Holocaust. This opens a whole, vast area of uncertainty regarding our historical connection and roots in the Land; A three thousand year history of connection; A Zionist Movement that legally bought land from previous owners.

And I was also disturbed by the reference to the religious leaders praying together one day. Why you might ask? The answer is simple. In Jerusalem today, all religious sites

and all religious people are respected and are able to pray together or separately. Israel has assured that. The State of Israel has allowed for that dignity as opposed to previous owners!

I want to get back to the Sotah connection. It is about parameters of behavior that are defined by law. In the end, although the most significant, this was Obama's fifth time, addressing the Muslim world. Now we must enter the process that leads to resolution of conflict. The process for the resolution of conflict begins with recognition. It continues with an end to violence; and rejection of terror, more than that, gaining control of those who perpetuate terror. When that happens, then the next step is taken. The settlement issue is complex, but those defined as illegal settlements will need to go. There is a road map to peace that Israel has already agreed to and America has already agreed to and the Palestinian's have already agreed to. The breakdown of the road map was caused by terror. And that is noted. And Democracy, defined by democratic institutions needs to take hold.

So, my hope and my prayer is that the rhetoric and masterful inspirational speeches will turn to serious negotiation. The negotiation is reflected by realities on the grounds that lead to an end to violence. No more ketyushas and no more rockets, and no more bombings and an easing at checkpoints and border crossings and travel restrictions. There needs to be respect for all citizens and land owners. And that comes when there is no violence and no suspicion and fear. And a combined effort is necessary to help with humanitarian relief. Travel back and forth between Egypt, Jordan Arab countries and Palestinian territories and Israel can happen. Recognition of Israel as a Jewish State is a must. THEN, as this process moves forward, then Palestinian people who have suffered so much will be granted autonomous statehood. It is a huge, huge gap between the suspicion and the ideals and the reality. We have no choice but to attempt to cross that chasm. Obama's right, and we know it. It begins with the word.

The ritual of the Sotah provides a way for us to see out of the trap of human suspicion. Politics, statecraft, diplomacy provide us with a way to move ahead. Violent responses are left only when there is no option. We all know that.

There are great challenges up ahead. I say to you what Reb Nachum of Breslov said "The whole world is a narrow bridge, but the essence is that we should not be afraid." We must remain strong. As Jews, we must continue to build strong institutions and communities in Israel and America. We wish our leaders success. And stand behind them as they continue in their pursuit of peace. We pray, hope and work for both a Jewish, and Israeli and an American vision of peace that is not clouded by suspicion or dreamlike naïve vision, but rather shaped by deep human understanding, wisdom and reality. Step by step we enter a process that God willing will bring peace to Israel and her neighbors and to this world of ours.

Shabbat Shalom

