

Remembering the Past; Remaking the Future

Isaiah 43:16-21

This hasn't drawn much attention in the media, but President Obama is leaving this week for his first official visit as President to Israel and the Palestinian territories. Normally, a trip like this would be preceded with much fanfare, given the role that past administrations have had in the Middle East peace process and the importance the American-Israeli relationship has in U.S. foreign policy. We might have expected weeks of diplomacy by the Secretary of State leading up to this moment, designed to advance the peace process with a new treaty to be signed which would alter the political landscape of the region. But, as far as anyone can tell, the itinerary for Obama's trip will be little more than selective tourism in the Holy Land.

Few people in Israel or Palestine seem to care that the U.S. President is coming. A lot of expectations have diminished over the last four years from when Obama rode his wave of populism throughout the Middle East. Mohamed Abu Ghadan, who lives in Arab East Jerusalem, said in reference to this upcoming visit, "In my opinion, this is just a waste of time. It's not for the benefit of the Palestinian cause. It is for the benefit of our cousins [the Jews]." ¹ Danny Rubinstein, an Israeli political analyst, recognized the complications with such a high-profile visit.

¹ Scott Bobb, "Israelis, Palestinians Skeptical Over Success of Obama Visit," *Voice of America*, March 14, 2013.

My hope is that he will talk with us and with the Palestinians about how to renew the peace process and not only renew it. We don't need the peace process for the process. We need it to solve the problem. ²

That would be an achievement, to say the least. But no one expects that to happen.

Of course, it is unfair to place peace in the Middle East on the shoulders of a single U.S. President. Given the inability of past administrations to achieve this elusive goal, perhaps President Obama is being realistic and unwilling to devote the time and resources to something that will likely remain elusive. Why? Complications notwithstanding, the peace process will only go forward when the parties themselves figure out a new way to relate. It's not enough to merely negotiate the issues that keep each side from the bargaining table; it's also a matter of creating a new atmosphere and vision for what their relationship (and what the Middle East) could look like. Simply repeating the policies of the past won't help. Nor does a ceasefire alone guarantee a genuine peace.

That, of course, has been the fundamental problem all along. The Israeli-Palestinian relationship has been fractured by fundamental distrust and neighborly disdain and a history of retaliation and reprisals that prevent Israelis from easily viewing Palestinians (and especially their leaders) as social and political equals and Palestinians from viewing Israelis (and particularly their leaders) as little more than oppressive tyrants. These perceptions are so deeply ingrained and reinforced daily by every rise in hostility and violence and every complicating wrinkle in the relationship that the prospects are bleak for a peace process that mutually engages and

² Ibid.

benefits all sides. The public stances of Hamas, or the Palestinian Authority, or the Israeli government change little from year to year, and all are partisan to their perspectives, leaving little room for negotiation. Israeli and Palestinian political leaders, on the whole, seem resigned to the bleak reality that the present stalemate is the only way to deal with their differences and protect their own interests.

In light of this, what can a U.S. President do to mediate a peace process when the combatants, themselves, are unwilling to pursue and do the things that make for peace? Maybe the only thing the most powerful political leader on earth can do is...nothing!

The Middle East, stretching from Iraq to Egypt, has always been a stubborn landscape, defying Presidents, prophets, and peacemakers. A mix of bustling, congested cities and small, bucolic villages amidst rugged, formidable desert wilderness, this region has been scarred by thousands of years of war and conflict. Of course, it's revered as the birthplace of the three great Abrahamic faiths, which makes this land, not only sacred and coveted, but terribly ironic—a legacy of war inspired by ancient religions intended to bring about peace. *Shalom*, *Salaam*, and the “Peace of Christ” are offered in services all over the Middle East and around the world, as if those words meant something more than mere ceremony. And, of course, they do. The challenge is in finding those who offer such words of hope and peace to those outside of their own communities, especially to their adversaries.

In his thoughtful book, *Jewish Schizophrenia in the Land of Israel*, David Forman makes the point that, in Israel, religion is more of a barrier to political peace than a motivation behind it.

The continued coupling of religion and politics makes for schizophrenic decision making. ... If secular-led governments have to sacrifice too much of the political agenda to accommodate the ultra-Orthodox parties..., then they should display true pluralism by inviting the Arab parties to join them, something that has yet to occur in Israel. ...Politics and religion must go their separate ways. ³

I understand his point: rabid devotion to the religions that give people their spiritual identity often undermines the very purpose of their spiritual traditions and the prospects for peace. Instead of a noble cause, religion becomes the means to separate people, to define their cultures exclusive from others, and to justify by divine imprimatur the hatred that afflicts the region. This is not only true within Israel. It certainly is a concern throughout the Middle East where Muslim religious parties seek to impose Sharia law, or even in the U.S. where Christians often blur the lines between religion and politics in our pluralistic society. The “peace” radical religious groups refer to is one that doesn’t try to engage or respect the opposition; rather, it seeks to defeat or, in some cases, utterly annihilate them! It’s “peace” by conquering the opposition, not by engaging them respectfully. Such intolerance is remembered by all too many people in the Middle East and elsewhere who were made victims by their more dominant oppressors.

Frankly, that’s a worldview that’s not only inadequate, but dangerous, to hold in this generation. Something else must happen; some new way of addressing the relationships between Jews, Arabs, Persians, and Palestinians, between Shiites and Sunnis, between Christians, Muslims, and Jews, between the old guard and the new,

³ David J. Forman, *Jewish Schizophrenia in the Land of Israel*, Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2000, pp. 81, 82.

must emerge for the future to have any genuine prospects for peace. It's not the elimination of religion per se that must take place; it's intolerant religious teachings that have to be overcome.

And how does that happen? Only when there is a concerted, common, and meaningful investment in each other's lives, when there is broad-based interest in each other's histories and cultures, and when there is a sustained commitment to build trust and understanding across cultures and borders. It's inter-religious education and building inter-racial, inter-cultural relationships. Our histories and our faiths don't need to define borders or cultures or our respective outlooks, as they have in the past. That's tribal thinking. Instead, they can inform and inspire us to meet the challenges of pluralism and to build bridges with those who differ from us, yet who commonly share the land with us. This isn't just relevant to the Middle East; it's something we all can do in a world that beckons it.

The text for today suggests this (or at least that's what I'm willing to draw from it!). It comes from the prophetic books of Isaiah, from when the Jews were returning from the exile looking forward to the prospects of deliverance from Babylon and to coming home to what had been Judea—what we now know as Palestine. The broader text addresses the sense of Israel being redeemed from her recent past—from the sins (many of them political) that separated her from the Promised Land—and remaking her into a new people—people who have learned from their past and thus who can move forward into the future with an entirely new perspective.

This becomes particularly evident to me in a verse upon which the whole passage hinges: “Do not remember the former things, or

consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing...” The Jewish Tanakh does a better job of translating it: “Do not recall what happened of old, or ponder what happened of yore! I am about to do something new.”

What does it mean to not remember the past? How can one forget the former things? Doesn't it insult Jews in particular—those who have learned the lessons of the Holocaust to “never forget”? Isn't this naïve and foolish and dangerous, along the lines of George Santayana's famous observation, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”?

That's true, except that the prophet's call is not to be blind to the past, but instead to *not let the past blind you!* Don't remember the old ways of national salvation that required the violent end of your enemies as it did in the Exodus—don't assume the ways of God must be the same as in the conquest of Canaan. History is a teacher, to be sure, but its tragic experiences do not have to be replicated or to define the future.

In Isaiah's case, instead of returning to rebuild Jerusalem as a great conquering force, or defeating and destroying those who occupied the land in the interim, the Jewish exiles would return and rebuild by assimilating into the existing culture, even while some remained back in Babylon. It was unlike the story of the Exodus, when the whole nation was delivered. This was something new. Israel would be redeemed—not by force, not as a whole nation, but by steady integration and restoration over time. Not only that, the prophetic goal was not to be defined by borders, but by the core values of Judaism—a return to the noble teachings of the Torah.

There was good reason for this. In the exile, Judaism became defined more by its traditions and ethics than by any nationalist ambitions. That's why some remained back in Babylon (even when they were liberated by Cyrus), because they had rooted themselves there. They didn't cease to be Jews, even though they didn't return to the land of Judea. This was repeated throughout history. For the most part, until 1948, Israel has always been a people in diaspora, spread out among the nations. Secure borders were not what ensured their future; but secure, mutually beneficial relationships with their neighbors did.

This message rings true for any of the three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: as spiritual cousins, we don't need borders to define us, or dominant cultures and political systems in order to survive and prosper. We can do it by our shared core values and the mutual respect and trust-building we can work toward with those who are related to us in faith. Inter-religious respect and trust-building is perhaps the single most important bridge toward reconciliation that we have at our disposal in these times! Investing ourselves in understanding each others' lives and cultural influences and experiences and histories and religious perspective is what can move us toward a commitment in securing each others' survival and wellbeing. It's not just an "ivory tower" exercise for academics; it's a quality of life assignment meant to build relationships among Jews, Christians, and Muslims at the grassroots level among communities in Israel and Palestine, and in other parts of the world, especially here in the U.S, where we can do this freely and with fewer obstacles.

The truth be told, it's already being done in Israel and Palestine, much like it is happening all around us. It's not the politicians who are inspiring it nor the religious extremists who are making it happen; in fact, those who are powerful or intolerant in their beliefs are more of an obstacle in the way than an aid to trust-building and reconciliation. The issues that separate people on the community level are not as insurmountable as they are in the Knesset or for Hamas, or in the U.S. Congress. So people of faith who are open-hearted and open-minded and care about the survival of everyone are stepping up to build relationships of trust, by learning about each other and working alongside each other. With these relationships, we invest in each other's survival and wellbeing.

You and I can do our part by engaging our Jewish friends, our Muslim friends, and our friends and acquaintances from other faiths and perspectives with a simple ambition: let us get to know each other so that we can build the trust needed for each other's benefit. It's extending a love for one's neighbor across thresholds that desperately need to be crossed. It's a grassroots effort in peacebuilding that is more sustainable in the long run than a negotiated treaty.

With this as an ambition, it doesn't matter as much as it has in the past if a U.S. President is unsuccessful in fostering peace in the Middle East. Certainly, the politicians get all the headlines, as do extremists, as we know. But they are stuck in the patterns of the past. That's not good enough for these times. So efforts that remember the past for the lessons it offers, but remake the future in a new way are emerging between people, religious and non-religious, all around the

world—those who are cross thresholds and borders to know each other and build the trust that's necessary for peace. That is what's needed. In time, perhaps we'll realize the One who inspired us to believe in the first place—the God of Abraham—actually has been urging us to do this for centuries.

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