

Friday Night – July 12, 2014 – Israel and Yotzer Or

Shabbat Shalom.

Like most of my clergy colleagues around the country and around the world, I have spent many hours thinking about how to address the deteriorating situation in Israel. Of course, we will hear much from Rabbi Steinhardt upon his return next week, and he sends his regards, but I didn't feel right not saying anything at all. I know that the drasha on Friday nights are generally less formal, more interactive, but there is something on my mind, on all our minds that must be talked about.

But I want to speak about this in terms of values, not in terms of politics. I don't mix in to politics...that's why I work at a Conservative synagogue...

Let me begin by quoting excerpts of a letter Rabbi Neil Cooper of Temple Beth Hillel Beth El in Wynnewood, PA sent out to his congregation while in Jerusalem a few days ago, which I think reflects some important values that we as Jews know to be important:

When a child dies, there are no words which are sufficient for parents to express their pain...only a week ago we learned of the murder of three Israeli teenagers, children on the way home from school, who were abducted, kidnapped and murdered... To do this, to inflict such excruciating pain, required thoughts and actions which defy the most basic understanding of what it means to be human...For those of us who belong to a religion which affirms life, the killing of children is antithetical to every instinct we possess.

A few days ago we learned that the perpetrators of another recent crime, the murder of a Palestinian teen, were Jews...It is widely assumed here that the perpetrators acted out of revenge, that this murder was the price tag which this fringe group has paced on the murder of Jews...But this murder does not even the score...the murder

of this Palestinian teen comes with a price tag...And so today, I am in pain. I feel shame, and I believe this is part of the price tag.

I have spent many years of my life studying Torah and commentaries, learning the lessons of our people, and identifying what makes us unique among the nations of the earth. But with the events of the past weeks, I have found myself so drawn to another book—perhaps even more familiar to me...The siddur, the prayer book. This week I have felt such a need to pray...I have had what to say to God, and I spend a lot of time trying to find new ways to make the words of traditional Jewish prayer relevant. And so I want to use the words of a bracha, a blessing that we recite every morning to talk about Israel. If you still have the blue Siddur Sim Shalom we used for Mincha, you can follow on page 106, on the third line of Hebrew:

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-Olam, yotzer or uvorei choshech, Oseh shalom uvorei et hakol.

Praised are you, Lord our God, Sovereign of the universe, who creates light and fashions darkness, maker of peace, creator of all.

In order to better understand the connection, we need to break the blessing into pieces. The first piece talks about God as Ruler of the Universe, who creates light and fashions darkness. We learn in Bereishit that we are created in the divine image. That tells us something about ourselves, but it also tells us lots about God. We are taught by the rabbis that prior to the creation of the world as described in Genesis, God created and destroyed a thousand worlds until he made this one. And we know that even after this world was created, the majority of it was destroyed by the great flood. This, along with the creation narrative, teaches us that God is fallible...therefore, we, too, are fallible. Just as God creates light and darkness, we have the ability to use our godly spark to bring light and darkness to the world. We must be very judicious in how we use this great power, and do our best to be mindful of our actions in such a way that although some darkness is necessary to make us aware of the light, we are always striving to fill the world with beautiful light.

Maker of Peace. Peace is a difficult one. The word appears several times in the Torah, but it is not really defined. This is also part of the difficulty today, as I see it. We have our definition of peace, and the Palestinians have their own, very different, definition of peace...but if we can find the common ground in our definitions of whatever peace means, however much or little common ground there is, we have taken one step forward in using our God-given ability to create and to pursue peace.

Creator of all. All life, all of creation, is precious. We know this truth. No one life is worth more than another. While our Israeli military is doing whatever it can to protect our citizens and our Palestinian neighbors, Hamas uses civilians as human shields and as media props. All people, all that lives, is created in God's own image. We must all work to harness that great gift and use it to create light and make peace in the world.

So I want to offer you a challenge, whether you are in shul tomorrow or not. As we recite the Yotzer Or blessing, let us think not only of the morning light for which we are grateful; let us be cognizant of the responsibility we all share as we inhabit God's beautiful world. It's a truly magnificent place... We pray that the violence will end soon, and that our brothers and sisters across the sea should never know such pain again. Shabbat shalom.