

CCAR Presidential Sermon by Rabbi Martin S. Weiner

Mar. 9, 2002
Jerusalem, Israel

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My friends and colleagues, Shabbat Shalom. I would begin my message to you with some personal words of thanks. First, on your behalf I would extend our sincere appreciation to Steve Garten and his very dedicated convention committee. As you can guess, planning this program in the midst of the uncertainties posed by September 11th and the turmoil here, has been a challenge unlike almost any other. As I indicated to you earlier this week, there was a time when we thought only a few dozen colleagues would be with us. The overwhelming attendance has been an inspiration. We would salute Steve and the committee for its willingness to adjust and modify the program and to develop new approaches as events unfolded.

Of course, the committee was able to accomplish its tasks with the full support of our dedicated CCAR staff. In addition to all of their regular duties, our Executive Secretary, Elliot Stevens, and our Administrative Director, Shelly Limmer, took on the 101 critical details so vital to the success of any convention. They have been instrumental in making our experience here so inspiring.

As President, it is a privilege to work with Arnie Sher, our Director of Rabbinic Placement, and Debbie Pipe-Mazo, our Director of Rabbinic Services. They are indeed caring professionals who provide the personal counseling and support so vital for our well-being as rabbis.

Finally, I would salute our gifted and creative, Executive Vice-President, Paul Menitoff. These past months were my first experience working on a regular basis with Paul in my capacity as President. I am truly in awe of the way he solves problems and brings together programs, policies, and people to help our Conference membership flourish. He is there for our colleagues in times of trouble and triumph. Indeed, it is an honor and joy to work in partnership with Paul on behalf of our CCAR Chevre.

Colleagues, this year marks a special milestone for our Conference----the thirtieth anniversary of the ordination of women. It is hard to believe that three full decades have passed since that historic year. Our women colleagues have brought a wondrous new perspective to our rabbinic world. As rabbis, all of us have gained so many inspiring lessons from the opportunity to serve the Jewish people together. The special programming for this Jerusalem convention caused us to postpone a celebration of this thirtieth anniversary until next March in Washington, D.C. Of course, at that gathering we will rejoice to celebrate another special, related milestone---the election of our first woman colleague as president of the Conference---my successor, Janet Marder.

My friends, every journey to Jerusalem inspires incredible memories. Several times this week my mind hearkened back to my first pilgrimage to this sacred land. The year was

1970 the first time our Conference held its annual meeting here. Israel and the Jewish people were still very much in a spirit of exultation after the Six Day War only three years before. Jerusalem was united under Jewish sovereignty. We rejoiced in singing Yerushalyim Shel Zahav. We visited the Kotel with a sense of profound awe.

I remember that the opening ceremony for that 1970 Conference was held in the amphitheater of the Hebrew University campus on Mt. Scopus. The President of the Conference, Roland Gittelsohn, began by reminding us that from that very hill, exactly 19 centuries before, in the year 70 C.E. Roman legions under Titus, attacked and burned the City and its Holy Temple.

On that beautiful March afternoon, we, as rabbis, were gathered on that same hilltop to remember the past and to affirm the bright present and future with an incredible spirit of hope. There was a crystal blue sky above us. I recall sitting high up in the amphitheater looking out at that magnificent scene---the eternal Judean hills spread out before us with shepherds, herding flocks of sheep, just as they did in the days of Abraham and Sarah.

A short three years later in 1973, many of us recall our feelings of anguish and despair on Yom Kippur and the days following. As long as I live, I will never forget standing on the bimah of my congregation reading war bulletins about Syrian tanks smashing into Kibbutzim in the Galilee and Egyptian columns racing across the Sinai. After a few weeks our anguish and turmoil turned to relief and joy as our Israeli brothers and sisters turned back the Arab armies.

As a Conference, we journeyed to Israel again in 1974. Over the course of the next nearly three decades we made this pilgrimage to Israel three more times, every seven years. We come now to this year-2002---different in spirit from '70 or '74 or any other year.

On one hand there is such very positive news in the battle for equal justice for all streams of Judaism. Who would have guessed in 1970, when our Reform Movement was struggling to gain a foothold in the Land, that one day the Israeli Supreme Court would order that Geireem, converted by Israeli Reform and Conservative Rabbis, should be listed as Jews in the official population registry. It has been a long and difficult struggle. We salute our colleague Uri Regev, and his IRAC staff, for the years of dedicated effort that led to this legal victory. Of course, we knew that this decision would come under attack by the Orthodox establishment. Tomorrow in our brief plenary session, we will have an opportunity to address a resolution supporting the Supreme Court decision and strongly urging the K'nesset to defeat efforts to overturn this milestone in the struggle for religious rights. This court decision, may finally lead to a compromise quite acceptable to us---the abolition of religion or nationality on Israeli identification cards.

1970---our first CCAR Conference in Israel---the era of the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War. 2002---a very different time. I know it was not an easy decision for many of

us to make this pilgrimage here to Jerusalem with our newspapers filled with stories about suicide bombings and gunmen spraying death on street corners. I know that there are many spouses and partners and children back home who are somewhat worried by our determination to be here. In my own family my daughter, Ellen, a mature and gifted attorney, sat with me a few days ago and ordered me not take any chances while here--basically to stay in the hotel and enjoy meals from room service. The look on her face told me that she wasn't kidding. I'm sure that many of you faced similar expressions of deep concern, maybe even some tears.

Yet we are here this day. We are here with our Israeli colleagues of MARAM, with our brothers and sisters of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, with the men and women studying this year at this Jerusalem campus of the College-Institute, our future colleagues. I would offer a sincere word of tribute to our Rosh Yeshiva, David Ellenson, whose brilliant scholarship is matched only by his *menschlichkeit* and love for the Jewish people. David is truly devoted to the critical importance of this Year in Israel program for the future leaders of our Movement. When something troubling happens here in Jerusalem, David drops everything in his grueling schedule to come here and to bring comfort and support to his students. He is truly an extraordinary rabbi. How blessed are the students here with the wisdom and inspiration of our colleagues, Michael Marmur and Shaul Feinberg.

Friends, as part of our experiences this week we have prayed and studied together. We have lovingly explored texts from ancient and modern sources. Most significantly, we have had an opportunity to renew a bond of love and friendship with family and friends whose *Ahavat Zion* has inspired them to fulfill the *Mitzvah* of residing in this Land. Sharing their thoughts and feelings---their day-to-day joys and concerns---has been an important aspect of our pilgrimage here. Most significantly our program this week has helped us to confront Israel's many critical social issues. We have seen the desperate plight of exploited women and migrant workers. We have stood in that neglected Bedouin shanty town on a windswept hill top. We have taken time to explore injustices endured by Palestinians---the demolition of homes, the humiliations at checkpoints, the severe limitations on travel and access to health care. We have opened our hearts and our minds to these issues, as we would hope that Palestinians would open their hearts to Israelis who suffer in these very difficult times.

Most significantly, we salute our colleagues who live here and commit themselves to the cause of social justice----rabbis such as Arik Ascherman, David Forman, and Ron Kronish. They have devoted their lives to alleviating human suffering and helping to build bridges of understanding among the diverse children of God who live in this sacred land. Truly these rabbis walk in the spiritual footsteps of Amos and Jeremiah. We should commit ourselves to sharing in their prophetic work.

Yet, at this hour we must confess to an overwhelming anguish confronting our souls. According to all reports this has been the worst week of bloodshed in the history of the so-called Second Intifada. Last night at Mevasseret Zion the rabbi read the names of 37 Jews, many of them women and children, murdered by terrorists since the end of

Shabbat last week. The events of recent months have caused us to confront some profound challenges to our thinking about Israel and its struggle for peace.

During those CCAR Jerusalem Conferences in the 1970's there was a sense of security and comfort for all of us inspired by Israel's victories in two wars. We toured the Golan Heights and the West Bank. We visited our Reform Kibbutz in the Aravah. Throughout the succeeding decades there were wondrous signs of progress toward the dream of Israel living at peace with her neighbors. We recall the signing of peace agreements with Egypt and with Jordan.

Our experience this week has been quite different. Keneset members have described the situation as terrible. Far from the euphoria of the 70's we recite gomel at this service for colleagues who escaped serious harm only two days ago in a café a few minutes walk from here. This pilgrimage of 2002 is indeed very different for us.

I knew many weeks ago, as I considered what I would say to you on this Shabbat morning, facing the incredible panorama of Jerusalem's ancient walls, that I could not speak about the normal themes for a President's message----plans and program that we might focus on in North America. The events of recent weeks and months----even these last days----have expanded ten fold on my original feelings and caused me, as you might expect, to modify my words based on our shared experiences in these recent days. I will confess to you personally, that I found preparing my message to you this morning among the most difficult in my entire rabbinic career.

On this Shabbat morning I would share with you my personal struggle and anguish---feelings possibly shared by some or many of you. As I mentioned in one of my Newsletter messages last fall, for many years I have been a strong supporter of the Peace Process. I was meeting with Palestinian Leaders in my community long before it was fashionable----even when it was considered traitorous by some. I always believed in the basic humanity of the Palestinian people----that most Palestinian parents longed for peace for their families with the same passion as Jewish Parents. I remember my feelings in the fall of 1993 as I sat in a San Francisco hotel room with Jewish and Palestinian community leaders as we watched Prime Minister Rabin and Chairman Arafat reach across for that famous handshake on the White House Lawn. Over the years I viewed the Israeli government's settlement policy in the West Bank and Gaza, as a tragic stumbling-block to a final peace agreement. Then came the summer of 2000---the negotiations at Camp David. We eagerly followed every report almost by the hour. The dream of peace seemed so very close---almost within our grasp.

Then came the rejection by the Palestinians----a tragedy for all the people in this sacred land. Many of us felt a sense of shock despite the reasons offered. Then began the campaign of violence and bloodshed that has gradually intensified over these last eighteen months. The Matzav, the situation, now seems to border on war. So many of us are now asking ourselves the ultimate question, a question that seems to negate years of hopes and dreams for us as rabbis: "Is there a real partner for peace within the

Palestinian leadership or the Palestinian people?" If you had asked me that question ten years ago, I would have said, "Of course." Now, I feel quite differently.

I could voice many reasons for my change of heart primarily based on the events that have unfolded in the last year and a half, my trip last summer with the Union Solidarity Mission, my own reading, and my experiences in these recent days. Here was the basic question for me: To most of us, Prime Minister Barak's proposals seemed so generous--well over 90% of the West Bank and sovereignty over Jerusalem, even a portion of the Old City. If Chairman Yasir Arafat rejected a Palestinian state in the summer of 2002, why should he agree to a peaceful settlement now? The unthinkable was beginning to take shape in my mind. Possibly many of us who have supported the Peace Process for the last decade or more must admit to ourselves that the Palestinians really do not want peace, that possibly Arafat's ultimate goal is now and may always have been the destruction of Israel. That's very difficult for me to admit to myself or to state publicly, but it is a conclusion that I am sadly coming to believe.

I resonate with the confession made by our colleague Eric Yoffie at the UAHC Board Meeting in June: "First and foremost, we have been wrong about Palestinian intentions." I salute Eric for his courage and leadership on this issue and so many others.

How can all this be happening, when for so long we felt that two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs could reasonably work together to build a bond of peace? How could we have misjudged the situation so badly?

A story told by one of the speakers last summer has echoed in my mind to this day. He was an Israeli government leader, who had been directly involved in peace negotiations with the Palestinians. He said that he had struck up a friendship with one of the Palestinian negotiators. In a quiet moment, the Israeli pointed out to his Palestinian counterpart, "The children in your schools are using textbooks filled with hatred for Jews. How can we build a peaceful relationship with one another when your children are being taught such bigotry from an early age?" The man's Palestinian colleague assured the Israeli representative, "Don't be concerned. Those are the old Jordanian textbooks. When the new Palestinian books come out, the lessons will be different." Sadly the new textbooks did come out. The expressions of hatred for Israel and the Jews were even worse than in the old text books.

This most troubling spirit was captured in a brief article originally published in the Los Angeles Times by Yossi Klein Halevi---the Israeli journalist and author. Klein-Halevi called his presentation "Cycle of Violence is a Middle East Lie".

He offered a series of parallel descriptions of Israelis and Palestinians that I believe captures the horrendous dilemma facing those of us who long for peace.

Among Klein-Halevi's most striking comments:

One side has religious fanatics who are violent and hateful but discredited by the mainstream public and repudiated by most of its religious leaders.

The other side has religious fanatics who are violent and hateful and celebrated by the mainstream as holy men.

One side is ready to compromise for peace and has abandoned its dream of complete possession of the contested land. The other side insists on absolute ownership of the land.

One side has painfully concluded that both sides in this decades-long conflict have inflicted and suffered injustices. The other side believes that only it has suffered injustice and attributes all wrongs to its enemies.

One side produces mothers who protest against sending their sons into war. The other side produces mothers who boast about the suicide deaths of their terrorist sons and declare their willingness to sacrifice even more sons for the cause.

One side teaches its children songs of peace. The other side teaches its children songs of blood and fire.

That last line truly struck a special chord within me. A few weeks ago I was sharing in a Religious School morning service with our younger students. As a closing melody our songleader was guiding our children through a rousing chorus of Od Yavo Shalom Ah-laynoo. My colleague, Steve Kahn, had just introduced the youngsters to the meaning of the song. As Jews, it is our sincere prayer and hope that peace will soon come to Israel and all humanity. Steve told the children that this song was introduced by a group named Sheva, whose members are both Israelis and Palestinians. Of course, he stressed the full meaning of the Hebrew word for peace, Shalom, and the meaning of the parallel Arabic word, Salaam. I want to confess something to you, my friends. I really love this melody. I find myself singing the words quietly at odd times during the day. I love the way the song begins slowly and quietly and builds in tempo and strength.

On that Sunday morning, as I sat surrounded by those charming little kids, I was suddenly overcome by a deep sense of sadness. I said to myself, "here we are in San Francisco, 8000 miles from the State of Israel. We are inspiring our kids to sing their hearts out with a song longing for Shalom---Peace. In one sense, this is beautiful and admirable."

On another level I asked myself, "are there significant groups of Palestinian children somewhere in classrooms in the Middle East or Europe, even here in America who are singing some equivalent melodies in Arabic---melodies dreaming about peace?"

I wondered. I actually phoned some members of the extensive Palestinian community in the Bay Area. I posed the same question to some of our peace activists here in Israel. I asked whether Palestinian school children, or Palestinian adults, ever express a hope

for peace in song. The answer seems to be no. There are no such songs of peace. If I am wrong please let me know.

My friends, after reading my Newsletter article on some of these themes last fall, our colleague, David Forman, who has devoted his life to this land and the cause of peace, and a rabbi for whom I have tremendous respect, wrote me a note that said, "You don't seem to offer any hope."

For me, possibly for many of you, that is the heart of our dilemma. Is there hope for the future?" Along with many of you, I don't honestly know, but I have been trying to fashion some type of meaningful response for myself out of all my experiences in the past year. I have been struck by the heartfelt comments made by David Hartman both during our meeting last summer and at our opening session on Tuesday night.

He called upon us to make a distinction between our prayers and hopes on one hand, and the stark reality of the current situation here on the other. Last summer David Hartman said (and it is even more apparent today) that what we are seeing in Israel is genuine hatred, a genuine desire to kill Jews. He reminded us that Jews will always be exposed to such radical evil. The key to the Jewish spirit is that we must affirm life in the midst of uncertainty. Several times he used the term, "moral ambiguity." That's a phrase that most of us probably find a bit troubling. In essence, if I understand him correctly, we live in a world in which we cannot always define things in terms of what is heroic and good, or evil and bad.

David Hartman also implied to us that the ultimate challenges to the human spirit are bound up in our families. I believe that each of us in that room last Tuesday night held our breath for a moment when David Hartman told us that he had lost a son-in-law in the war in Lebanon. Now he is confronting the fact that his two fifteen year old grandsons will soon be entering the IDF. Did you notice that another of our speakers, Keneset Member Tommy Lapid, offered a similar expression of deep parental concern. He said that he had once hoped that his son would not have to put his life on the line in Israel's defense. That hope had long been forgotten. Now, with sadness in his voice, Tommy Lapid said that he was facing the reality that his grandsons, too, might have to risk their lives.

Last summer, David Hartman, said to us, "Let us never forget that weakness invites aggression, power invites negotiations." In his lecture Thursday evening, our teacher David Ellenson, brilliantly explored this theme. Utilizing that heart-wrenching passage from Martin Buber, David affirmed for us that the use of power in defense of one's home and family is not wrong. Of course, one must make every effort to use that power responsibly, but it is not inherently evil to do so. As liberal rabbis it has not always been easy for us to come to terms with this idea as we view the IDF's actions against the terrorists. The sages of the Talmud clearly give permission for us to stop the Rodef, the Pursuer, with deadly force if necessary. For us as liberal rabbis, it is not always easy to translate that part of the Halachah to an IDF raid, because the military force used is not always precise. Mistakes can be made. Innocent civilians can be hurt or killed. Over

time, as is the case with some of you, I have come to an uncomfortable position, possibly what David Hartman calls "ethical ambiguity." The power of Israel's military, hopefully applied responsibly, must be utilized against those who are seeking to kill and maim the innocent. Some of us here on this Shabbat morning saw that danger in all its bloodthirsty possibilities on Thursday at lunch time on Emek Refaim. Were it not for the quick action of a young Israeli waiter with commando training, we might have seen dozens of deaths and injuries. We might have been reciting Kaddish, not gomel this morning.

As I have come to cope with this reality in my own mind, I would, of course, maintain that the terrible necessity of using power to defend one's family and community, must be balanced by the equal necessity of taking risks for the sake of peace. Last summer during our Solidarity Mission we visited the Yitzhak Rabin Center for Peace on the campus of Tel Aviv University. We saw a very moving video recounting Prime Minister Rabin's life: his youthful years in the Palmach, his courageous battles in war, and his equally courageous struggle for peace as Prime Minister. There was not a dry eye among us after we saw that video. Afterwards, Yitzhak Rabin's daughter, Dahlia Rabin-Pellesoff, spoke to us. She lovingly described her father's life and spirit with a special focus on his dedication to peace. I believe at one point there was a question about the possibility of peace in the months and years ahead. Mrs. Pellesoff, started to affirm that, of course, there was hope for peace, for if not....." Her voice trailed off. We realized the implication of the words she did not speak: "If peace is not possible, then my father died in vain..."

Friends, as I experienced that very emotional moment at the Rabin Center, I thought about that teaching of Hillel so familiar to all of us. "Be of the disciples of Aaron---an Ohav Shalom and a Rodef Shalom---a lover and a pursuer after peace. We all know the story how Aaron would approach two men who were fighting----visiting first one then the other, trying to reconcile their anger and differences so that the two individuals could eventually make peace with one another. All of us know how precious is the value of peace in our tradition. The character of Aaron affirms that we must make a supreme effort to bring about a peaceful conclusion to the disputes that tear apart families, communities, and nations. Despite all my expressions of concern about the current stance of the Palestinians, I have not forsaken the teachings of Hillel or the dream of peace.

I remember reading a most dramatic passage in the recent biography of Yitzhak Rabin by Dan Kurzman. There is a very detailed chapter on that famous ceremony on the White House lawn. It recounts the tremendous turmoil within Rabin's soul as he negotiated the interim agreement with Arafat. It is no secret that he did not trust Chairman Arafat. Until the very end there was serious doubt about whether Rabin would agree to sign the final document. The idea of shaking hands with the Palestinian leader was an anathema to Yitzhak Rabin. In the end Yitzhak Rabin signed the agreement and shared in the famous handshake. He realized that the possibility of establishing peace between Israel and her neighbors was so important to the future of his people, that he must take the risk and overcome his profound personal emotions. I'm sure that Ehud

Barak was overwhelmed with similar feelings when he made his valiant effort to achieve a breakthrough in the peace process.

Were all these efforts in vain? No, I don't think so. In a very real sense, it was necessary for Israeli leaders to make every possible effort in the cause of peace. That these courageous efforts were not successful, does not diminish their value and importance. Sadly, it was only by such "risk-taking," true to the spirit of Aaron and Hillel, that the world could gain an understanding of Israel's adversaries and the new directions that may be required to achieve the goal of peace.

Is there some hope on the horizon? Of course, none of us knows for sure. We do know that our meeting here comes at a time when Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, has put forward a peace proposal that most observers would have considered "unthinkable" only a month ago: an offer to bring about a full normalization of relations between the entire Arab world and Israel, providing Israel withdraws to the pre-1967 boundaries. The incredibly complex issues involved in this proposal are being discussed by diplomats and government leaders in a dozen different capitals as we speak. The impetus for this Saudi initiative probably has a very self-serving element. Clearly, the volatile situation, bordering on war, here in Israel threatens the stability of regimes like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. These states are quite worried that the out-of-control Palestinians are capable of bringing chaos to the entire region. This week we saw President Mubarak of Egypt meeting with President Bush in the White House to add his support to the peace effort. Clearly these Arab states working together with the United States could have a significant impact. How will Prime Minister Sharon and the leaders of Israel respond? Apparently, they have expressed serious interest in exploring the proposal. Israel's continued military pressure plus substantial US and Arab diplomatic efforts might bring about some progress. At this time no one can really predict what the future might hold, but there are some whispers of hope in the air. We must always maintain our sense of hope.

Colleagues, we have come to this troubled and holy land at a most critical time in its history. By our presence here this week we have affirmed our love for the land and its people. We have affirmed that, despite all that has happened, we have not given up our commitment to the dream of peace.

Many times during these recent months I have thought about the words spoken with such emotion, almost a decade ago by Yitzhak Rabin when he reached out his hand and heart in the cause of peace:

"Let me say to you, the Palestinians, we are destined to live together on the same soil in the same land. We, the soldiers who have returned from battles stained with blood; we who have seen our relatives and friends killed before our eyes; we who have attended their funerals and cannot look in the eyes of their parents; we who have come from a land where parents bury their children; we who have fought against you, the Palestinians---we say to you today, in a loud and clear voice; enough of blood and tears. Enough."

