

CCAR Presidential Sermon by Rabbi Martin S. Weiner

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"Munich, Vietnam, & Saddam"

My friends, I have been a rabbi for nearly four decades. As I have prepared sermons over the years, there were many occasions of deep personal struggle. As colleagues, we often confront profound social issues. There are always agonizing questions: Should I speak out on this very difficult problem. Is my approach valid? Are my views in keeping with Jewish values?

I know that there are serious divisions among our colleagues and among America's citizenry about the war against Iraq. At the outset of my message, I want to stress that I have profound respect for those whose views differ from mine, as I hope they would respect my views. The depth of my concern on this issue of "war and peace" echoes through my entire life.

My rabbinate began in 1964--the build-up for the Vietnam War. I still remember the self-doubt I experienced as I preached my first sermons against that conflict in Southeast Asia. I wondered whether my deep commitment to the Peace Movement would someday be justified by history. I am sure that many of you have had similar feelings when you took a controversial stand.

As I indicated in a CCAR Newsletter column, I was an early opponent of the Vietnam War. In Baltimore I was a pioneer member of Clergy and Laymen Concerned. I attended meetings with Father Philip Berrigan. To this day I cherish a photo published in the Alumni Magazine of Johns Hopkins University. It shows a major anti-war rally in downtown Baltimore. A young Marty Weiner is pictured as one of the three major speakers at the rally along with United States Senator Joseph Tydings and the Archbishop of Baltimore.

I am still haunted by the senseless loss of hundreds of thousands of lives in that bloody conflict. The anguish came home to our own congregation. Five young men from Oheb Shalom went off to the jungles of Vietnam. One of them returned unscathed. One was wounded. We buried three of them. The story of one was particularly sad. He fought for eleven months through the jungles and rice paddies--a so-called normal tour of duty. On his final day in Vietnam he phoned his parents and told them that he was flying home that night. The plane was shot down. The military recovered his body three months later. You can imagine the anguish of his parents and my feelings as a rabbi trying to bring a measure of comfort. As a brave protest, that soldier's mother returned her son's medals to President Nixon

The year is now 2003. It is incredible that at this moment, the last few months of my active rabbinic career, our nation is again engaged in another battle across the seas. Hundreds of thousands of men and women are in the desert with tanks and artillery and helicopters. Thousands of others are on ships attacking with planes and missiles. It would seem that history has brought me full circle. Based on my passionate concern for peace in the spring of 1965, I should feel a renewed sense of purpose. I should be marshalling all my energies protesting America's war against Iraq. My friends, with a profound sense of humility, I must tell you that is not the case. There have been many anti-war rallies in my very liberal community of San Francisco. I have not attended any of them--to the amazement of peace activist friends in my congregation.

You might ask, why? Have I lost all my youthful values?

I don't think so. All the same liberal values are within my spirit. But I view the challenges of this era quite differently from those of the 1960's. Possibly some of you are asking, how could anyone go along with the Bush Administration? I strongly oppose nearly every policy of the current administration: on the environment, on reproductive rights, on tax policy, on health care, you name it--every policy except the battle to disarm Saddam Hussein. I was touched by the comment of Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, Tom Friedman on the issue of Iraq. He wrote: "Some things are true, even if George Bush believes them."

Many of you will recall what has transpired on this issue within our Reform movement. At a meeting last September, the Executive Board of the UAHC debated a resolution on Iraq that supported unilateral preemptive military action by the United States, providing that there was Congressional approval, and a serious effort to obtain United Nations and international support. The resolution stressed that the policies of our government should include provisions to protect the lives of innocent civilians as well as plans for the rebuilding of a democratic society in Iraq.

This resolution passed the UAHC Executive Board by a vote of 45-11. I voted for the resolution and I voiced support for the effort to disarm Saddam Hussein in my Kol Nidre Sermon.

Last October our CCAR Board of Trustees debated the Iraq issue with wisdom and passion. Clearly, there were strongly held diverse opinions, probably representing the diversity of views within the Conference as a whole. In the end the CCAR Board did not take a stand on Iraq.

We come now to the present. This CCAR Conference is taking place at a unique moment in the Conference's 114 year history. If one thinks about World War I starting in August and World War II in December and the build-up to Vietnam taking place gradually over many years, never before in the history of the Conference have we been meeting at the very moment when our nation embarked on war. Our feelings at this CCAR meeting echo the intensity of our emotions during last year's Conference in Jerusalem.

Last March we came together during one of the more violent weeks of terrorism. None of us who were present a year ago in Jerusalem will soon forget that experience. I recall especially that Shabbat morning that we shared together at the College-Institute. Looking through huge panorama windows, we were spiritually overwhelmed by the bright sunlight on the ancient walls of the Old City. We prayed and sang together. That morning I felt compelled to address you, my colleagues, concerning my personal struggle regarding Israel. I expressed a profound longing for peace shared by so many of us, but I also stressed my anguish that there did not seem to be a partner for peace in the Palestinian leadership. I said that possibly Yasir Arafat's ultimate goal was then and may always have been the destruction of Israel. Much has transpired in this past year. Arafat has been marginalized as a Palestinian leader. His iron grip on power is loosening. Last week Reform-minded Palestinian leaders elected a new Prime Minister who may enter productive peace negotiations with Israel. As we look back now, we realize that many of us, who had hoped that peace was near at hand, had to take a hard look at the reality of the situation.

On this Shabbat Morning, we meet in a very different setting--the heart of our nation's capitol. I again feel compelled to share with you the struggle within my own soul. It is the agonizing ethical question of our time. Is America justified in this preemptive attack on Saddam Hussein? I'm sure that most of us have debated this issue with friends and colleagues. Many of you have held forth on HUC-ALUM and RAVKAV. Possibly you have read Mark Washovsky's responsum on Preventive War.

Why have I searched my heart and come down on the side of war, seemingly so opposed to my lifelong commitment to the cause of peace? I could give you many reasons, but constantly I return to the lessons of history. I told you that I was haunted by my memories of Vietnam and the thousands of soldiers who died in that futile war. I feel very differently about Iraq, because I am haunted by another memory: the horrors of the Holocaust and World War II--especially the events of 1938--the year of my birth.

That summer Adolph Hitler, following his takeover of Austria, set his sights on the Sudetenland, part of Czechoslovakia occupied by several million Germans. Czechoslovakia, a creation of the Versailles peace treaties, was the most democratic, progressive, enlightened, and prosperous state in Central Europe. Hitler was committed to destroying it. He massed his troops on the Czech border and threatened to attack unless his impossible demands were met. For several years, Hitler had been re-arming Germany contrary to the provisions of the Versailles treaty. The world had turned a blind eye to his illegal actions and given in to all his demands. England, France, and Russia, all had defensive pacts to protect Czechoslovakia. Their decision, whether or not to confront the dictator, was to be a great turning point in the course of human history.

Recently I reread the story of that summer of '38. I was amazed to learn that the Chief of the German General Staff was absolutely opposed to Hitler's reckless plans. Most of the German generals shared that same sense of dread. Germany was poorly defended on its Western borders. According to key documents from that period, the Nazi generals realized that the armies of France and England could easily have marched into

Germany and destroyed the Third Reich. In fact most of the German generals believed that England and France would do exactly that.

Fearing this reality, the generals plotted to depose Hitler. The conspirators planned to seize him as soon as he issued the final orders to attack Czechoslovakia. They would bring Hitler before one of his own People's Courts. The charge would be that Hitler had tried recklessly to hurl Germany into a European war and was therefore no longer competent to govern. Throughout the summer of 1938 the German generals sent emissaries to England and to France. The generals begged them to take action so that they could move against Hitler.

But Adolph Hitler was much smarter than his generals and the "so-called" statesman of Europe. Hitler faced down the generals. Then in a series of brilliant threats, much like Saddam Hussein, Hitler maneuvered the British and French into the Munich pact. Prime Minister Chamberlain and his colleagues traded Czech freedom for "Peace in our Time." Hitler marched into Poland a year later. World War II began. More than fifty million souls perished, including six million Jews. There was a terrible danger to humanity; so many did not recognize it.

Each of us might ask ourselves a very troubling question: "If the British and French had had the courage to march into Germany in the summer of 1938, would it not have changed the course of human history. There would have been no Final Solution. There might have been no Second World War.

It is very interesting to ask about the actions of our colleagues in the Central Conference during those years. I read through some of the CCAR yearbooks from the 1930's recounting the debates at our annual meetings. Of course, beginning in 1933 when Hitler came to power, our Reform colleagues constantly passed resolutions denouncing the persecution of our brothers and sisters in Nazi Germany. The CCAR sought to have American and World Jewry take a unified stand in opposition to Nazism. But what about the possibility of supporting any military action against Hitler! No-- throughout the 1930's most of our colleagues strongly supported neutrality and an arms embargo. In those years our colleagues were totally committed to pursuing peace even in the face of Hitler's madness.

In 1937, the Chair of the CCAR Committee on International Peace proclaimed: "We must not forget that that we were able to remain out of the last European war for three years and it is entirely possible with our recent experience so fresh in our minds to keep out of the next one...."

In 1938, the critical year about which we speak, the CCAR passed a resolution publicly expressing its "abhorrence of the Japanese invasion of China, the German annexation of Austria, and the continued armed aggression of foreign powers in Spain." At last though, many rabbis began to question the Conference's pro-neutrality stand.

Finally at its 1939 convention the CCAR reiterated its "abhorrence of war and reaffirmed the prophetic position of the Synagogue, consistently held through the centuries, that armed strife is not an essential instrument of national policy and war should be outlawed." The resolution went on to affirm that theone avenue to permanent peace is though a policy of peaceful change.

That was in June 1939, believe it or not, right here in our nation's capital--less than three months before Hitler's Blitzkrieg smashed across Europe and the Luftwaffe rained death on England. It seems that most of our CCAR colleagues, scarred by the brutal trench warfare of World War I, could not conceive of confronting Hitler and the forces of Fascism, unless our own land was invaded. That would come at Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

As I read through these yearbooks the words of Jeremiah kept echoing through my mind: Shalom, Shalom, v'ayn Shalom: "Peace, Peace but there is no Peace."

Many of us might find it rather prophetic that this conflict with Iraq was formally declared in President Bush's broadcast to the world on the very eve of Purim, that Jewish festival marked by carnivals and frivolity, but one that we know has very serious lessons for us. On the Shabbat before Purim we read that dark passage from Deuteronomy warning us to remember Amalek. How often, have we, as rabbis, drawn the parallels between Haman, Amalek, and Hitler. Nechama Liebowitz explains the meaning of Amalek with these words: Amalek is..."the archetype of the wanton aggressor who smites the weak and defenseless in every generation." Is Saddam Hussein Amalek? Or is it that a silly connection?

Elie Wiesel, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, has devoted his life to the cause of Shalom--Peace. Yet in a recent article he, too, drew the frightening parallel between Saddam Hussein and the appeasement of Hitler in 1938.

Wiesel wrote: "Saddam Hussein is the ruthless leader of a rogue state to be disarmed by whatever means necessary if he does not comply fully with the United Nations mandates to disarm. If we fail to do this, we expose ourselves to terrifying consequences."

Elie Wiesel concludes with these words: "What is comes down to is this: We have a moral obligation to intervene where evil is in control. Today, that place is Iraq."

Yet for all of us there is a terrible anguish, when we see the innocent victims of war on our television screens. Rightfully we respond with profound compassion. Yet we seem to so easily forget the thousands of innocent Kurdish villagers, whom Saddam Hussein slaughtered with poison gas. Many of the Kurds who lived were maimed for life. As we see those troubling images on television this week, we seem to forget how in 1991 Saddam Hussein killed thousands of Shi'ite Muslims. We must ask ourselves: in the future how many tens of thousands of innocent lives might be spared by the ouster of this man?

There is a critical footnote to this issue of anguish over casualties and prolonged weeks of fighting. Prior to her address on Thursday evening, Secretary Albright privately shared with a few of us her anguish over the War in Kosovo fought during her term of office. She told us that there were many in the media and foreign governments who made the massive US air attacks personal by calling it Albright's war. She recalled for us her terrible feelings of uncertainty in the first days of the war when things were not going well and when there were tragic mistakes like the bombing of the Chinese embassy. Yet America and her allies held fast to their mission for 78 days. Finally the Serbs surrendered. Slobodon Melosovich is now imprisoned as a war criminal. Yugoslavia is at peace. The cost was high--2000 civilians, including women and children, died along with thousands of Serb fighters. We might think about those brutal attacks from the air. There were very few protests.

Now we come to that most agonizing question of all. We ask ourselves: how will events unfold in the next few weeks or months? Some of us may have dreamed that without a shot being fired somehow Saddam Hussein would depart Iraq with his minions. That would have been our cherished dream--our fantasy.

What is our nightmare--one that haunts all of us? The nightmare would be a prolonged series of bloody battles with terrible casualties on both sides. The conflict then leads to a wider conflagration that becomes a Moslem holy war with terrorist attacks bringing death and destruction around the globe. That is our nightmare--is it not? It might yet come to pass.

What is a third more hopeful possibility? That America and her allies will fulfill their mission to remove Saddam Hussein from power, to destroy his weapons of mass destruction and that the casualties will be kept to a minimum. What if America and her allies then work to rebuild Iraq on a democratic foundation in which her people can truly benefit from their oil resources? What if this bold action helps to break the tragic status quo in the Middle East in which authoritarian regimes utilize their wealth to inspire Islamic fanaticism? What if this war to disarm Iraq is the breakthrough that leads to a genuine peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, democratic reforms in Iran and Saudi Arabia, and a new spirit of hope throughout out the Middle East. Is this third possibility only a crazy dream? Could it happen?

Many of you will recall Ambassador Dennis Ross, the respected diplomat, who led America's delegation in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. He received high praise from Secretary Albright on Thursday night. Ambassador Ross was the speaker two years ago at our CCAR conference in Monterey, California. Recently Ambassador Ross published an essay confirming his belief that the final dream I mentioned is a real possibility. He stressed that there are clear signs in recent weeks that many key Arab leaders are beginning to adjust to a new reality that is developing because of America's strong stand against Iraq. Both the Egyptians and the Saudis seem to see the way the wind is blowing..." Even Syria, long among the most fanatical nations in the region, has been restraining Hezbollah and has withdrawn troops from Lebanon. Why is this

happening? Ross replies: "The political culture in the region has always put a premium on power and adjusted to it."

Mr. Ross even creates some dramatic images for the future: "Assuming the war goes well, anger among the Arab publics is going to abate once Saddam has an fallen and pictures of Iraqis rejoicing over their liberation are beamed throughout the Arab world. Who in the Arab world will say that President Bush was wrong, as images of people released from the enduring hell of Saddam's rule, are appearing on the television screens? Similarly, who will say war was a mistake when Iraqi scientists and technicians emerge from the wood work after Saddam's demise to reveal the chemical and biological agents he has denied having?"

In essence, Ambassador Ross, certainly not part of this White House team, proposes a realistic dream that the liberation of Iraq creates an incredible window of opportunity to reform regimes in the Middle East and to reach a peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. The key will be, not simply winning the war, but winning the long difficult struggle for peace.

My friends, I hope you can sense the profound personal anguish in my own heart as I presented this message. None of us can be certain as to how this war and its aftermath will be written on the pages of history. Many of us felt vindicated by our stand against the war in Vietnam, because of history's verdict on that conflict. How will history judge this war? Five years from now, how will I feel about my message to you this day? How will the judgment of history view those of us who supported the war? Those of us who opposed the war? We cannot know at this time.

Each of us must do all in our power to bring some measure of meaning and hope to our people, especially to those who have given the ultimate sacrifice in this conflict. This idea was expressed beautifully in some poignant verses by the poet Archibald MacLeish:

The young soldiers do not speak....

They have a silence that speaks for them at night and when the clock counts.

They say: We are young. We have died. Remember us.

They say: We have done what we could but until it is finished it is not done.

They say: We have given our lives but until it is finished no one can know what our lives gave.

They say: Our deaths are not ours; they are yours; they will mean what you make them.

They say: Whether our lives and our deaths are for peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say; it is you who must say this.

They say: We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.