

Jimmy Carter and the Betrayal of History
Parashat Sh'mot; January 12, 2007

So a book published late last year is still making headlines. Just in today's papers we read of the resignation of fourteen more members of Atlanta's business and civic leadership from the Carter Center's advisory board, in protest over President Carter's book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*. Having just finished the book myself, I believe these leaders were right to resign in protest.

I want to open my remarks tonight with a thank you, to a couple in the congregation who sponsored this night's sermon. What do I mean by that? Well, Josh and Suzanne Milton lent me their copy of the book. I didn't want to buy it, and hadn't gotten to a library. So, to the Miltons: thank you!

We read this night the opening words of the book of *Shemot*, of Exodus. And it is there, within the first few lines, in response to the genocidal decree of an insecure tyrant, that we hear of the world's first recorded act of civil disobedience. "*V'tir'ena ha'myal'dot et ha'elohim, v'lo asu ka'asher dibber aleyhem melech mitzrayim, vatichayena et ha'y'ladim*. And the midwives feared God, and hearkened not onto that which the king of Egypt had told them to do; rather they let the boys live." There, in the midst of a troubled Middle Eastern country, with ethnic conflict and violence all around them, two women stepped forward and acted as vessels of peace, as messengers of morality, as models and teachers of us

all. Under many circumstances – many, although not all – under many circumstances, it is possible to resist oppression with love. It is possible to resist coercion with morality. Sometimes non-violent resistance works.

And my friends, I believe with all my heart: had the Palestinians had a Gandhi, had they stood up for national rights and against Israeli restrictions with non-violence, with *civil disobedience*... they would have had a state, and we would have seen a two-state solution, many years ago.

Violence is also, in my opinion, the heart of what is wrong with Jimmy Carter's book. Violence, and the legitimacy of a *Jewish state*. Carter is unbalanced, he is biased, and his reaction to Palestinian violence seems tepid and perfunctory in comparison with his zealous recitation of Israeli atrocities. In key sections his condemnation of terrorism is absent altogether.

The rhetoric around this book has been hot and nearly-hysterical. It *is* true – as I have said before and as I really believe – that the organized institutions of American Jewish life react too swiftly and too broadly against *any* criticism of Israel. All this does is open us up to the counter-charge of an ancient canard: that Jews control the media, that Jews suppress any honest exchange or alternative points of view on anything having to do with Israel and the Middle East. It is a charge, astonishingly, which even President Carter seems to make, when he

argues that “because of powerful political, economic and religious forces in the United States, Israeli government decisions are rarely questioned or condemned, voices from Jerusalem dominate our media, and most Americans are unaware of circumstances in the occupied territories.”

President Carter later tried to clarify this comment: in a “Letter to Jewish Citizens of America,” he states that he “never claimed that American Jews control the news media, but reiterated that the overwhelming bias for Israel comes from among Christians.” But he digs himself deeper into the hole when, in the next sentence, he cites the “powerful influence of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee” and asserts that “there are no countervailing voices.” Indeed, in a highly publicized meeting with the Phoenix Board of Rabbis, he professed surprise and complete ignorance of ongoing debates about Israeli governmental policies within the American Jewish community. It is perhaps the case that we need to do a better job of publicly proclaiming the legitimacy of challenging Israel’s particular tactics, while simultaneously defending her overall cause.

But this is a bad book, and for many reasons.

The first issue that comes up, of course, is the provocative title, and the use of the word “apartheid.” The connotations and associations are troubling on a gut level, and many people never get past the comparison to the former South African regime. But you should know that there are those in Israel who are not that bothered by the use of the

word. Ha'aretz columnist Shmuel Rosner writes that this is “the worst word you can use against Israel and stay within the boundaries of legitimacy... Arguing about apartheid is pointless. There is enough material evidence to prove that apartheid exists in the occupied territories in one form or another. If you argue about the use of the word, you lose. If you argue that Israel is blameless, you also lose. The only argument you can make against Carter is about context and the bigger picture” – an argument I will come back to shortly. Former education minister and founder of the Citizen’s Rights Party Shulamit Aloni writes in agreement with much that is in this book. What was disturbing to me, however, when I read her article on-line, was the tone and tenor of those who responded to her. Comments included ones like: “Hitler should have finished the job.” A reminder of the *danger* of criticism... for even when we criticize out of love, there are those for who will use and take comfort in our words from whom no love is meant at all. We have to stand up for what we believe in. But with care, and with open eyes.

After his meeting with the rabbis in Arizona, President Carter has begun claiming that the word was not a reference to Israel itself, but to the situation in the occupied territories, which he then goes on to describe as, in some ways, *worse* than South Africa. But the debate about the word raises for me what is ultimately a crucial question: can a nation which gives special status to one group legitimately be called a democracy? I look around the world, and I see democracies which have

“official” churches everywhere I look. I look at our own country, and know that the premise and promise of equality as it appeared in our founding documents took centuries to work itself out in the reality of the society we live in – indeed, it is an ongoing project in the experiment of American democracy. I look at Israel and I know that the words of the Declaration of Independence contain visions and values that have yet to come to be, that Israel’s own Arab population has tasted discrimination and a lack of real opportunity. But I believe there *can be* a state that has a special relationship with one group, and still has the right to call itself a democracy. I believe that, in this world full of Christian and Muslim nations, there is room for a Jewish state.

Unfortunately, the problems with the book go beyond the title.

Oh, it starts out well enough. And its prescription for the future is somewhat widely-shared. But its bias throughout is deeply disturbing.

The book opens with Carter speaking of Israel’s right to exist, his condemnation of the killing of non-combatants, and the assertion that Palestinians must live in peace and dignity in their own land (p.17). He says that the “Arabs must recognize the reality that is Israel” (p.18), and in the first chapter speaks with some fondness of his first trip to the Holy Land. He does, in fact, briefly praise Israel as a vibrant democracy (pp. 67-68), this in contrast to the claim of my Arizona colleagues that such a sentiment was nowhere to be found in the book. In his summary he admits that “some Palestinians react by honoring suicide bombers as

martyrs... and consider the killing of Israelis as victories...” (p. 206) – although, by the way, note the use of his word “react” here – which puts the primary cause of the conflict elsewhere. And he does recognize that, in the end, “the security of Israel must be guaranteed” (p. 207)

But problems abound.

Perhaps the most minor annoyance is the insertion of his own religious perspective – I would even say religious prejudice – into his reading of the situation. He has every right to this perspective, but still, I bridled at his statement that the “few surviving Samaritans... complained ... that their holy sites and culture were not being respected by the Israeli authorities – the same complaint heard by Jesus... almost two thousand years ago.” (p. 26). And at his chutzpah, years ago, in telling Golda Meir that it was a common historical pattern “that Israel was punished whenever the leaders turned away from devout worship of God.” (p. 32) Yes, he really said that! He includes it in his own book with no shame, and the largely secular nature of much of Israeli society seems a personal affront to him.

I think it is fair, having read the book, to claim that Carter does see Israel as the “root cause” of the problem. He even uses that term once. He cites as “the root causes of the conflict – occupation of Arab land, mistreatment of the Palestinians, and acceptance of Israel within its legal borders.” (p. 202). No citation, whatsoever, about Palestinian violence. And an implied agreement, perhaps, with violence against

Israelis who are “over the line” of those legally recognized borders. He claims that “Israel put confiscation of Palestinian land ahead of peace” (p. 131). He says that “we all knew that Israel must have a comprehensive and lasting peace, and this dream could have been realized if Israel had complied with the Camp David Accords...” (p. 53) And he views “the overriding problems” as that “the actions of some Israeli leaders have been in direct conflict with the official policies of the United States, the international community, and their own negotiated agreements.” (p. 208).

So let’s talk about those negotiated agreements for a moment. Carter dismisses Oslo as a one-sided give-away benefiting only Israel, he dismisses out of hand the idea that Israel had ever allowed for any Palestinian autonomy (p. 52). On three occasions he condemns Israel for not following the road map (p. 173, p. 174, p. 187) – a charge which is more or less true, but is unaccompanied by a *single reference* to the fact that the road map *also* called for the dismantling of illegal militias and the entire terrorist infrastructure of such organizations as Hamas and Islamic Jihad and the Al-Aska Martyr Brigades.

There is distortion, shoddy scholarship and plagiarism, to such a degree that Professor Kenneth Stein, a former director of the institution, resigned his current position with the Carter Center and cut off all connection with it. He referred, in his letter of resignation, to the book as being “too inflammatory to even print; it is not based on unvarnished analyses; it is replete with factual errors, copied material not cited,

superficialities, glaring omissions and simply invented segments... Aside from the one-sided nature of the book, meant to provoke, there are recollections cited from meetings at where I was the third person in the room, and my notes of those meetings show little similarity to the points claimed in the book.”

Sloppy factual errors? Here is one, that I myself can cite. Carter refers to the 1982 assassination of the Israeli ambassador to London (p. 94) Shlomo Argov was not assassinated. He was paralyzed. He passed away in February of 2003. How do I know this? Because his daughter is a friend of mine, and a current member of this congregation, and she came to say Kaddish for her father in this sanctuary, at the Saturday morning service following our first ever Shabbat at Home, in 2004. [Now, this may seem like a very picky point. After all, he just needed to add the word “attempted” in front of “assassination.” Ironically, though, the context of the paragraph I am citing here is one in which he is critical of Israel for... making an inaccurate statement. So while complaining that Israel gets it wrong, he gets the facts wrong himself.]

Or this: he cites an Israeli attack, in April 1996, against a “well-known U.N. outpost” (p. 98). He does not cite the fact that outpost was attacked in error, having missed its target, a Katyusha launching site from just behind the outpost.

And while Carter mentions the Katyusha attacks of the past summer in passing and in the midst of extensive and eloquent prose about the damage done to Lebanon, I found *not one reference in the entire book* to the *daily* barrage of Quassam rockets coming out of Gaza.

Or: he criticizes Israel for restrictions placed on ambulances. But he says not one word about an issue I mentioned in my remarks these past High Holy Days, the Palestinian smuggling of weapons, in those same ambulances.

In the chapter on meetings with Israelis, one gets a solid impression: “bad Israelis!” And in the chapter on meetings with Palestinians one gets a solid impression as well. It is the same impression: “bad Israelis!”

And here are the two worst parts of the entire book.

First: Carter cites, without contradiction, a conversation he had with Yasir Arafat in 1990 in which Arafat asserted “The PLO has never advocated the annihilation of Israel.” Arafat went on, Carter says, to assert that what the Palestinians really want is “a democratic state in which Jews, Christians and Muslims all live together” (p.62) Well, we all saw how committed Yasir Arafat was to democratic values when he had the chance. More importantly, though, this sweet-sounding call for a secular, democratic state takes us right back to the beginning of my remarks. And make no mistake about it: this call for full equality under the law and no special status for anyone, which we continue to hear from

Palestinians to this day, this call for a one-state solution, including that which I heard from Rabbi Serotta's friend Imam Hendi in Frederick... this American sounding society, this vision is nothing more and nothing less than exactly what Arafat denied it was. It is a call for the annihilation of Israel *as a Jewish state*. But Carter doesn't care about that.

And the very worst thing. Unless this was just plain sloppy writing... well, let me not prejudge this. Let me read you two excerpts, and you can see what you think it means. Two examples of the same implication: "The International Quartet realizes that Israel must have a lasting and comprehensive peace. This will not be possible unless Israel accepts the terms of the Roadmap and reverses its colonizing the internationally recognized Palestinian territory, and unless *the Palestinians respond* by accepting Israel's right to exist, free of violence. (p. 162). Or this: "It is imperative that the general Arab community and all significant Palestinian groups make it clear that they will end the suicide bombings and other acts of terrorism *when international laws and the ultimate goals of the Roadmap for peace* are accepted by Israel." (p. 213).

Now, I don't know about you. But these nastily nuanced and highly conditional condemnations of terror are the worst thing I've encountered in the book. And one professor who was asked to participate in a group advising the former president about this book refused to do so, based on this last sentence alone. Professor Melvin

Konner of Emory University writes: “as someone who has lived his life as a professional reader and writer, I cannot find any way to read this sentence that does not condone the murder of Jews until such time as Israel unilaterally follows President Carter’s prescription for peace. This sentence, simply put, makes President Carter an apologist for terrorists, and places my children, along with all Jews everywhere, in greater danger.”

President Carter rightly, I believe, criticizes Israeli leaders who insist that *all* violence cease before *any* talks can be held. That is, Carter asserts, unreasonable. Alright, granted. But his position, as implied in these excerpts... is immoral.

Violence. And the legitimacy of the state.

That is what is at stake, under the cover, and between the lines, of this highly offensive, deeply disturbing work.

Criticism of Israel is often necessary. Israel is hardly blameless in much of what it does.

But this book is not the answer.

Someday a woman will come, who will fear God in a new way. She will not give up her seat. Or she will not aide in the humiliation of her people.

She will stand up for herself. But will not be a threat to us.

Such a woman will move our hearts.

She will be the mid-wife of a new nation.

She will change the world.

It will take a Good Book to do that. This is not that book.

But may that day come soon...

Shabbat Shalom.