

“On the Other Side of the Jordan”

Parashat Devarim

August 1, 2014

My friends, I can say, indeed, that it is good to be back. But to be honest, it was also good to be in Israel, even now. In some ways, in the midst of all of this mess, I would rather be there than here, at least for part of the time. As I said in my message to the congregation, when your family is in trouble, when your family is in pain, you want... you need, you have to be there with them. Even if you can't make the pain go away.

Closer to home, this week our Reform movement heard some important news – that Rabbi David Saperstein, for decades now the Director of our Religious Action Center in Washington, D.C., has been appointed to a position as the next Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. Once referred to as the 101st Senator because of his tremendous influence in this city and on the national stage, Rabbi Saperstein will now need to be confirmed by the Senate. If he is, he will be the first non-Christian to take this post... and it will lead to a transition in our leadership at the Religious Action Center.

But I was already thinking about Rabbi Saperstein this week, even before I heard the news. He told us, once, when we were interns working for him, that if you ever faced a time when you could not think of a title for a sermon, you could always use.... “For Such a Time as This.”

For such a time as this... Almost used it this week. In the end, though, I am holding off on that one, in case I need it in the future. I do, actually, have a theme and a title tonight. It is called “The Other Side of the Jordan.” It is based on an anomaly in the opening words of this week’s Torah portion, the very first verse of the book of Deuteronomy.

The book opens in the following way:

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים, אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל,

בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן: בַּמִּדְבָּר בְּעַרְבָה מוֹל סוּף בֵּין-פָּאֲרָן וּבֵין-תּוֹפֵל, וְלִבְנֵי וְחִצְרוֹת--וְדִי זָהָב.

These are the words which Moses spoke unto all Israel on the other side of the Jordan; in the wilderness, in the Arabah, over against Suph, between Paran and Tophel, and Laban, and Hazeroth, and Di-zahab.”

On the surface, there is nothing wrong with the opening at all. The book purports to be a farewell speech from Moses, recalling everything that has gone before. Beware, by the way... be very careful around politicians who tell you they are just repeating the past; invoking nostalgia is often a cover for radical change. This so-called review is really a revolution, but that is a tale for another time.

But one phrase kind of... jumps out from this sentence, one thing that is kind of strange. “These are the words that Moses spoke to the Israelites... *on the other side of the Jordan?*”

Now, wait a second here. Doesn't Orthodox tradition teach that Moses... Moses *wrote* the Torah? But if he was the writer... who is it that is speaking here? If this is before the Israelites entered the land, what is this reference about... the *other side*? Doesn't this whole sentence make sense... as a retrospective comment? Something written much later. And therefore, something written by someone... *on this side of the river*?

Already as long ago as the early 12th century, the brilliant Biblical commentator Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra wrote the following about this and other, similar verses in the Torah: "If you can grasp the mystery behind the problematic passages: you will understand the truth." And then Ibn Ezra said something truly astonishing. "*V'hamaskil yavin*, the smart will understand – and the wise will be silent!" Ibn Ezra, in other words, was one of the first to see that a logical and rational reading of the Torah's own words *undermine the assumption* of Mosaic authorship of the Torah. Yet that assumption was a primary foundation of Ibn Ezra's religious life, and the society of which he was a part. And so he saw, he hinted... He had a secret, but he did not spell it out.

For now, though, I am interested in the spiritual significance of the words, and the lesson they can teach us, not their role as a major clue in unraveling an historical puzzle. Tomorrow morning I will return to an exploration of how Deuteronomy came to be written, and what its form and structure mean, a lesson that will lead to a teaching about something called a "sovereign state of mind." For right this moment, for right now I am less

interested in who wrote the Torah than in what we can get out of it. I want to ask what it might mean that Moses spoke to all of Israel from “the other side.”

Missiles fall, sirens sound, and we are, it seems, coming together again. At least at first, as is often the case, all but a radical fringe, all but a handful of voices within our community proclaim unity and solidarity and support. This is largely as it should be, with but a few caveats I will share in a few moments.

Indeed, the threat is very real, complacency and security and a psychological sense of well-being have all been challenged in ways we have not seen in years. The basic slogans are right: if Hamas were to stop using violence there would be no more war; if Israel were to stop using violence there would be no more Israel. Some would say it is just as simple as that. This is a just war, a defensive war, fought in urban settings and crowded conditions with horrendous tragedies happening all around us.

And more: the double standard stinks! Hypocrisy renders conversation with friends and neighbors unbearable, and often impossible. There are relationships strained – friendships ended – on arguments over Israel. This is our family, and those who do not understand the defense of our family, it is as if... Look, this sounds harsh, and this sounds personal, but the reality is that we cannot trust our own lives to those who cannot understand the nature of this attack.

And in the world beyond our personal conversations... How much anger towards Israel's response. A leader of Turkey claims that this is worse than Hitler and has the gall – Turkey, with all its unacknowledged baggage, its own closet-full of atrocities it will neither own up to nor yield for others to examine – Turkish leaders have the *chutzpah* to use the term “genocide!” What mirror do they use to look at themselves in the morning?

And where were the riots in London and Paris, over the actions of Assad, or ISIS, or more? ISIS: calling last week for the conversion, subjugation or outright slaughter of the Christians under their control. And Assad: whose supporters are slaughtering innocents in Syria in far greater numbers still than the losses in Gaza. And in Lebanon, where massacres of Palestinians in refugee camps even last year go unnoticed and without response. And where was the sense of shame in a United States urging restraint in how Israel approaches civilians – not that the cautionary note was wrong in and of itself, but where was that finger wagging and impulse towards restraint in any of our own recent wars? How does the civilian to combatant percentage compare, between texts and phone calls and knocks on the roof – in contrast to drones and bombs from high up and far away? Where is the rage on the street when Muslims kill Muslims, or Christians kill Christians, or Muslims and Christians kill each other, or anyone kills Jews? No, indeed, while I do not assert that antisemitism is behind each and every criticism of Israel, still, let us open our eyes and see how the world reacts very differently... when it is Jews who hold a

sword rather than meekly falling beneath it. The smoke of hate and hypocrisy so thick we could any of us choke without being able to change it at all.

True, true, all of it...

And yet let us not let the roar of self-approval and the shouts of acclamation make us deaf to a voice that might come... "from the other side."

Though I blame Hamas as the instigator and moral monster and see them as essentially and in all ways that matter entirely responsible for this terrible war, though I know the threat is real and ran myself three times to take shelter... I cannot totally shut out at least some of the images, and some of the voices, from the other side. Not those who defend Hamas, God forbid. But those who dare to ask what now, and what's next.

In Israel there have been rallies both questioning the war, and bringing Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs together in prayers for peace. Before the missiles flew I found myself walking amidst those who help up signs saying "*Lo l'alimut v'dai l'nekama!* No to violence and enough with revenge!" My friend and colleague Rabbi Edgar Nof, once of Haifa and now Netanya, writes movingly of many interfaith efforts he has participated in over the past several weeks. It is not true that the only pictures we should have are of bleeding children in Gaza and well-armed Israelis riding tanks. There are voices of hope and prayer and peace.

Some of those rallies, though, even ones which do not challenge the war but express hope and sympathy for the innocent on all sides, some of these gatherings have been attacked. Not just verbally, but violently. Right-wing voices have screamed not only “*mavet la’Aravim*, death to Arabs,” but also “burn all leftists” and “go to Gaza” (which, in Hebrew, is a phrase very close to the Hebrew equivalent of “go to hell,” so I suppose the chant was so linguistically obvious as to be politically inevitable.) In the pages of HaAretz there are those who raise other scenarios, who ask questions about alternatives, and implications... and the writers are treated as terrorists themselves. A left-leaning singer, Achinoam Nini, known abroad as Noa, was boycotted on Facebook and disrupted in the middle of a concert in Israel for voicing pro-peace sentiments... and then attacked on a tour of Spain self-righteous pro-Palestinian Euro-thugs as “Noa the Terrorist,” simply for being an Israeli.

How can we hear, in the midst of sirens and explosions, expletives and hatred? And if we cannot hear, how can we ever get from where we are, to where we need to be? What does winning look like, short of kill-‘em all and let the earth choke on the blood of martyrs?

Long ago Ibn Ezra made a point that we needed to be right, and we need to be wise. Is there a truth here that we see but cannot say? Or is it, rather, that wisdom will come in finding and giving voice to hope, in a world where hope seems to leech away with every passing day?

This night I have more questions than answers. It felt right to be in Israel, it feels right to stand with Israel. But I also sense that there is another story, and that what feels right... is not enough.

I hear the sirens, and the screams. But when I close my eyes, I think: Belfast. And Johannesburg. Paris, and Berlin. These are places once torn asunder, whose troubled past has been, mostly at least, put aside. And Selma, and Birmingham... Problems remain but progress is possible even in the darkest of places. It has happened before. It can happen again. I can see what tomorrow might look like. Just because I don't know how to get there... does not mean... we can give up trying.

What am I saying? In some ways I was being cautious and deliberately vague. But at the end of these remarks I guess it is time to come out and say it straight: Israel may be mostly in the right, but it does not mean that that is the end of what there is to say. "Right" does not mean "smart," and while there are no easy answers, I believe we need to listen to as many voices as possible now... our own, that of our family, that of those who serve with force and valor... and those who serve with placard and pen. And yes, somehow we need to see, we need to hear, we need to take in... the voice that cries out... from the other side. That, too, is Torah. That, too, is part of our heritage.

A famous quote, from *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Ancestors: “*lo aleicha ham'lacha lig'mor*; it is not incumbent upon you to finish the work. *V'lo ata ben chorin lihivatel mimena*; neither, however, are you free to desist from it.”

Shabbat Shalom.