

*This sermon was delivered on Shabbat March 30, 2008. Since it was delivered I have received many comments from the congregants who were in attendance. As a result of these comments I have altered the plans for further talks slightly from what I originally announced. I will still speak directly from the bima on the subject of Messianism and Nationalism, a subject I feel professionally competent to address from the bima. However, regarding the issue of hearing the Palestinian story and the subject of the impact of occupation on Israeli soldiers, I will be looking to bring in guest speakers to speak, not from the bima, but after services at extended Kiddush where their can be give and take between the speakers and the congregation. A schedule for my remarks as well as these special programs will be posted as soon as it is available.*

John Adams

Have any of you been watching the HBO production of “John Adams?” I have and having also read the book, I continue to be fascinated by the Revolutionary and Federal eras. I am especially struck again and again by the clarity of the moral vision that powered the so called “Band of Brothers” (and Abigail Adams, Dolly Madison, Morey Otis and Molly Pitcher). So maybe we could set the record straight and call them the Band of Brothers and Sisters. Actually, of course, such a linguistic correction brings to mind the notable failures of vision that also characterize the founding era.

Glorious ideas were transformed into a national consciousness – and grievous flaws were allowed to fester until they could only be cleansed by blood. The slave trade and the institution of slavery and the whole question of race would be a cancer on the body politic which, as we heard here in Philadelphia last week, is not healed yet. We also

heard that what might assist in the healing is truth-honest airing of perceptions and misperceptions that might allow white and blacks to truly see one another.

But I don't want to talk about race in America this morning. I want to talk about Israel. I've been wanting to talk about Israel for awhile and I've been considering holding it for the High Holidays. And I still may. But the appearance in yesterday's New York Times of a headline presaging the development of Apartheid in Israel and the immanent approach of Peach and the lofty rhetoric about liberty that will be on Jewish lips reminded me of the tragic disparity between American rhetoric and reality. I wondered whether we can learn from American history and bring that learning to our thinking about Israel.

The truth is this complex subject and my conscience will require a few talks at the very least. So let me set an agenda. The first item on the agenda is to talk about truth. To realize that there are more than one truth in the Israel-Palestinian history and that hearing the other's truth – even while disagreeing with it – might be helpful. Much as I have personal differences with it, I will try in a near future talk to bring what I can of that Palestinian story to our ears. Next of concern to me is the truth of the impact of ongoing military occupation on the soul of Israel. As Golda Meir said: "We can forgive you for killing our sons. But we will never forgive you for making us kill yours." I recently had the opportunity of seeing an exhibit that was here in Philadelphia mounted by Israeli soldiers about the self-degradation resulting from being occupiers - even when they could offer no alternative to the necessity to be one. A brief excerpt from that exhibit: I am quoting on Israeli soldiers:

"My commander when he saw me carrying a camera in my vest asked me why.

So I told him for social purposes and also if I come across something interesting I take a photo. So he said nothing. He knew I was taking photos of severed hands and blown up heads and all that. Every once in a while he would ask if the photos have been developed. He wanted to see them. Of course its not just photos of bodies. They are also part of everyday life passed around between everybody. And I still have it. A black album I try to bury so that I won't find it by mistake."

What is the impact of a Jewish soldier owning a "black album" that he is forced to bury? Can an entire people afford to bury its "black album.?" What do we Jews say about other nationalities who bury their "black albums?"

The point here is to register the truth. Justified or not, the occupation is wreaking havoc with Jewish souls. And in this vein perhaps we need to talk about highway 443 from both sides of the issue as represented by competing Israeli positions. This is the highway originally constructed with the permission of the Israeli Supreme Court on Palestinian land on the condition that it would primarily serve Palestinian traffic. It is now closed to Palestinians. Again, arguably for pressing reasons. But there are costs associated with these reasons. We should remember that in fact there are two sides of every one of these issues in Israel and that we ought to be empowered as American Jews to speak from both of those legitimate positions without vilification.

And, finally, I will want to address what might turn out to be Israel's grievous flaw. Perhaps we need to understand more fully the moment when Israel went from being an internationally sanctioned haven for the Jewish people within narrow borders, gladly accepted, to being an occupying force in a conquered land, and claiming that

conquered land by the default of settlement, even in the face of enemies who would offer no peace had Israel withdrawn from that land.

Were there any other choices? To what extent did nascent messianism mix with nationalism? What is the cost of nationalist-messianism to Israel and how should its development be viewed by Jews concerned about its impact not only on Israel but on Judaism? Each week on Shabbat we recite the prayer for the State of Israel. I do so with great pride, but also with a shudder. The shudder accompanies the phrase ‘reishit zimichat geulatanu’ “the beginning of our redemption.” I want an opportunity to talk about that shudder and why I think it is important to note.

Our American founding fathers left a legacy of blood to succeeding generations. We are still arguably in the founding period of modern Israel. Can we do better? These are questions I will continue to explore.