

A Synagogue of Dialogue
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5770
Rabbi Peretz Wolf-Prusan

I would like to begin my remarks with a blessing and end with a blessing.

Take special care to guard your tongue
before the morning prayer.
Even greeting your fellow, we are told,
can be harmful at that hour.
A person who wakes up in the morning is
like a new creation.
Begin your day with unkind words,
or even trivial matters—
even though you may later turn to prayer,
you have not been true to your Creation.
All of your words each day
are related to one another.
All of them are rooted
in the first words that you speak.¹

I care about everyone in this room and I am distressed how we are talking or not talking to each other about the most critical issue of our time as a Jewish community: Israel. I do not know if the words we speak will determine the fate of Israel, but I am certain they will determine the fate of this community. We are still in our morning prayers, so there is time to reflect.

So, what are we doing here this morning? According to the Torah, as this is the first day of the seventh month, it is a sacred day and we may not do any mundane work. We are to hear the sounding of a horn, make a burnt offering consisting of one young bull, one ram, and seven yearling sheep [all] without blemish.²

The Talmud adds a Torah reading: Genesis 21: the story of Isaac's birth. The reading begins with the words, "Adonai remembered Sarah as Adonai had said." Her deepest wish was fulfilled and the promise to Abraham was kept. According to the Talmud, Isaac was born on Rosh Hashanah.³ Happy Birthday, Isaac.

Until the Destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, Holy Days were announced in Jerusalem based upon witnesses sighting the new moon. People living outside the Land of Israel would not know exactly which day was correct, so the sages of Yavneh, following the destruction of Jerusalem, declared two-day observances, especially for Rosh Hashanah which occurs on the New Moon. Two days of Rosh Hashanah, even in the Land of Israel.

We need a Torah reading a second day, so we rolled on to chapter 22, and found the Binding of Isaac. Now here is drama! And what is more, Talmudic tradition tells us that it also

occurred on Rosh Hashanah, so happy birthday Isaac. The top choice of Shofars for Rosh Hashanah becomes the ram's horn, because of the connection to the ram caught in the bush that takes the place of Isaac, on his birthday, possibly his best birthday present, ever. What readings: Chapter 21, Remembrance and birth, chapter 22, peril and salvation and the image of the ram's horn.

What happened to the second day? We jump to the Reform Movement in Central Europe and the third rabbinical conference of 1846 in Breslau. It was resolved that "second-day festivals... have no more validity for our time."⁴ By the 1960's in the United States it could be stated that virtually without exception "Reform Congregations observe... Rosh Hashanah one day," so that "the Reform movement reverted to the Biblical observance of the length of the festivals, even with regard to Rosh Hashanah."⁵

Problem: One day, two readings: Chapter 21 starring God, Sarah, baby Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael or Chapter 22 starring Abraham, God, a bound Isaac, a really big knife and a ram's horn! A choice: Women and birth or men and near-death? The promise of **life** or **there is always someone trying to kill us**? Conclusion: One day and one reading. Chapter 22. The Binding of Isaac: Bring on the sermons.

I propose that we keep rolling on to Genesis 23: "And Sarah's life was a hundred and twenty seven years... And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba it is Hebron in the land of Canaan. And Abraham came to grieve for Sarah and to weep for her. And Abraham got up from in front of his dead, and he spoke to the children of Heth, saying:

"I am a resident alien among you"

Give me a possession for a tomb with you so I may bury my dead."

They said: "Listen to us, Sir. You are a prince of God in our midst. Take our best burial site to bury your dead. No one among us will deny you."

Abraham bowed low and spoke to them and said, 'If you really want to help me bury my dead and [put her out of] my presence, listen to me, and speak up for me to Ephron son of Zohar.

Abraham spoke to Ephron so that all the local people could hear. '**Listen** to me,' he said. 'I am giving you the money for the field. Take it from me, and I will bury my dead there.'

Ephron **replied** to Abraham: "My lord, **listen** to me. What is "400 silver shekels worth of land" between you and me? Bury your dead."

Abraham understood what Ephron meant. He weighed out for Ephron the silver that had been mentioned in the presence of the children of Heth, 400 shekels. Pay close attention to the rhythm:

Shma'enu / Listen to us

shma'eni / listen to me

Adoni shma'en" My Lord, listen to me

Vayishma Avraham el-Efron / Abraham deeply listened what to what Ephron was saying.

Abraham first listened and then spoke. They spoke and he listened deeply. Then he got what he wanted, the Cave of Machpehah, now in Hebron, through dialogue.

The Talmud says: "For three years there was a dispute between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. 'The House of Hillel: "The law is in agreement with our views." The House of Shammai: "The law is in agreement with our views."

Then a *bat kol*, a voice from heaven, announced, *Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim Chayim*, "These and those are the words of the living God, but the law is in agreement with the rulings of Beit Hillel."

Since, however, "*Eilu V'eilu*, both are the words of the living God," what was it about Beit Hillel? They were kindly and modest. How so? Beit Hillel studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai, and what is more, they recounted the words of Beit Shammai before their own.⁶ Listen for the pattern: Beit Shammai spoke. Beit Hillel listened, repeated what they heard, and then they spoke.

Hillel and Shammai were the last pair in a chain of tradition that began in 273 BCE; known as the period of the *Zugot*, meaning pairs, lasting almost 300 years. Then, according to the rabbis, dialogue, modesty, and kindness amongst the People of Israel ceased. The Rabbis of the Talmud knew that Roman military power destroyed Jerusalem in 70 CE. Yet they reframe the destruction as a self-inflicted wound. Here is how they explain the fall of Jerusalem: Kamtza and Bar Kamtza.

The host of a gala banquet invited Kamtza. By a terrible mistake the host's worst enemy, Bar Kamtza, received the invitation. He thought it was an offer of reconciliation. He went in that good hope and sat down at the table. To his horror the host ordered him out. Bar Kamtza pleaded to save face, just to be allowed to stay, even offering to pay for the entire banquet.

The host refused to listen. Bar Kamtza was evicted from the hall and humiliated in full view of the silent rabbis who were present, who heard, and said nothing. The rest of the story details Bar Kamtza's revenge that led to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem.⁷ Mistrust and hatred caused the destruction of the Jerusalem.

One of the most important residents of modern Jerusalem was Martin Buber, was born February 8, 1878 in Vienna. He spent much of his childhood with his grandfather, the scholar Solomon Buber, in Lvov. Young Martin studied in Vienna, Leipzig, Berlin, and Zurich and soon entered the Zionist Movement. In 1902, Buber became the editor of the weekly *Die Welt*, the central magazine of the Zionist movement. He lectured in religion and philosophy at the University of Frankfurt from 1924 to 1933. During that time, he worked together with Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) at the "Lehrhaus" and together they translated the Bible into German. In the first years of Hitler's rule, he stayed in Germany until he had to emigrate in 1938, and from then on he lectured at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

It was said that when Buber first came to Israel he spoke a basic Hebrew and was easily understood in the market and on the street. When he mastered the language and began to teach his ideas then nobody could understand him.

His was a minority voice in pre-1948 Palestine: "We have not settled Palestine together with the Arabs but alongside them. Settlement alongside, when two nations inhabit the same country, which fails to become settlement together with, must necessarily become a state against."⁸

His voice was drowned out by the Nazi Collaborating Grand Mufti, the Holocaust, the murder and mayhem leading up to the 1948 War, his disputes with David Ben Gurion and Menachem Begin, the aggression of the invading Arab armies, and the non-recognition of Israel that existed in the Arab countries until only recently. It is impossible to have a dialogue with neighbors who deny each other exist.

Despite it all, after the Founding of the Jewish State, Buber made many efforts for improving the understanding between the Israelis and the Arabs, in the postwar period he also worked for reestablishing the dialogue with German thinkers and institutions. He was not wildly popular by the established powers, yet he continued to teach, lecture, and publish over 700 books and articles.

As a young man in Europe Buber wrote that "During the First World War it became clear to me that a process was going on which before then I had only surmised. This was the growing difficulty of genuine dialogue, and most especially of genuine dialogue between men of different kinds and convictions. Direct, frank dialogue between us is becoming ever more difficult and more rare; the abysses between man and man threaten ever more pitilessly to become unbridgeable.... This is the central question for the fate of mankind. Since then I have continually pointed out that the future of man as man depends on a rebirth of dialogue."⁹

What he was witnessing in Germany were the three great enemies of dialogue: violence, mistrust and propaganda. Propaganda is opinion expressed for the purpose of influencing actions of individuals or groups. The propagandist tries to "put something across," good or bad.

"The real struggle is not between East and West, or capitalism and communism," Buber said, "but between education and propaganda. Education means teaching people to see the reality

around them, to understand it for themselves. Propaganda is exactly the opposite. It tells the people, 'You will think like this, as we want you to think!'

"Education lifts the people up. It opens their hearts and develops their minds, so that they can discover the truth and make it their own. Propaganda, on the other hand, closes their hearts and stunts their minds. It compels them to accept dogmas without asking themselves, 'Is this true or not?'

Buber observed that the trouble in modernity is more than conflicts of ideology. It is a conflict of tempo. The tempo of propaganda is feverish, nervous. It is the pace of television and the radio. Buber said this before "Shock Jocks", Hate Speech and Talk Radio, before the 24 hours news cycle on cable. Before opinion replaced reporting, before bloggers and tweeters. Buber said this is not education. Education goes at a slow pace. It is the pace of teachers talking with their pupils.¹⁰

On mistrust Buber said, "Nothing stands so much in the way of the rise of a Civilization of Dialogue as...basic mistrust. What does it help to induce the other to speak if basically one puts no faith in what he says?"¹¹

Here, today, I propose a modest start to a Civilization of Dialogue, a Synagogue of Dialogue. Here, inside this house, let's roll past the knife wielding Abraham who does not hear that well (it took the Angel two shouts to get his attention) to the Abraham who listens to his neighbor.

Why? Because, the challenge of our time is Israel: Israel and Palestine, Israel and Iran, Israel and its Arab minority, and Israel and Reform Judaism. We need to listen to each other for our health and well being. Already damage has been done. In this New Year and the next we are being challenged across generations, between collective viewpoints and communities of conviction. In this room we are the voices of AIPAC and J Street, Brit Tzedek v'Shalom and Hadassah. Jewish National Fund and the New Israel Fund. "*Eilu v'Eilu / And all are the words of the living God.*" Those of you who are silent or who have been silent or have been silenced, you are part of this like the rabbis at the banquet. We here in San Francisco are not threatened with violence, but we are surrounded by propaganda and mistrust. The threat is real, damage has been done, we can repent.

We are taught that one who possesses these three traits is one of the disciples of our father Abraham: A generous eye, a humble spirit, and a kind soul. How do we know Abraham possessed a humble spirit? When the children of Heth called him a prince, he refers to himself by saying: "I am a resident alien among you."¹² We are all alien to each other until we listen. Deeply listen with unconditional mutual regard, in this house, around that fountain, and under this dome. If we can master that then we can expand to the city and beyond, to the entire world under the dome of heaven, and be worthy children of Abraham and Sarah. Keyn Yehi Ratzon.

¹ An Excerpt from **Your Word Is Fire: The Hasidic Masters on Contemplative Prayer** edited by Arthur Green and Barry W. Holtz

² Numbers 29

³ Talmud Rosh Hashanah 10b.

⁴ While the conference urged consideration for the feelings of those Jews still attached to the observance of *yom tov sheni*, it insisted that communities were well within their rights to abrogate it, going so far as to conclude that "the prohibition of leavened bread on the last day of the Passover festival shall not be obligatory for the individual." [The sources are gathered by W. Gunther Plaut in **The Rise of Reform Judaism: A Sourcebook of its European Origins** (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1963), 195-199, from *Protokolle der dritten Versammlung deutscher Rabbiner*, Breslau, 1846, 208ff.]

⁵ [R. Solomon B. Freehof, **Reform Jewish Practice and Its Rabbinic Background** (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1963), 1:16, 19.]

⁶ Eruvin 13b

⁷ Gittin 55b-56a

⁸ **A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs.** By Martin Buber, Paul R. Mendes-Flohr p. 9

⁹ **Political ethics and the United Nations: Dag Hammarskjöld as Secretary-General** By Manuel Fröhlic, p. 105

¹⁰ **Martin Buber: An Intimate Portrait** by Aubrey Hodes, p. 118

¹¹ Speech at Carnegie Hall entitled "**Hope for this Hour**, quoted in **Pointing the Way** by Martin Buber (New York: Harper & Row 1963) p 221

¹² Avot d Rabbi Natan 45