

Sacrifice, Loyalty and Endurance: The Support of a Heritage and a Homeland

Let me begin by asking you a single question: Do you pledge your loyalty to Judaism, and to the Jewish people, amid all circumstances, and conditions? How would you answer the question-- with a "yes", or with a "no", or with an "it depends"?

If you were born Jewish, it is a question you may never have been asked...and one you never needed to answer...at least in such a public setting.

But this is, without exception, the most important question we ask, of every single candidate for conversion, on the evening of their conversion ceremony; it requires an absolutely unwavering determination, and a publicly proclaimed willingness to stand at the ready in defense of our faith, our people, and our ancestral homeland.

What does it take to become a Jew? And why on earth would someone choose that path for themselves...I mean, would you, were you born to another faith, other than the Jewish faith?

In recent weeks, on virtually every Friday night, from August through September, and now through October, as well, we've welcomed (and will continue to welcome) many of these students, into our congregational home and into our communal heart. For those of you who have ever been present at those Conversion Ceremonies (and by way of explanation for those of you who haven't) they are extremely moving, touching and inspiring moments...not only in the lives of those who come to Judaism, and choose to embrace it fully...but also in our lives, and in the life of our Temple, and our Temple Family.

In fact, even before the night of their conversion ceremonies, these Jews-by-choice submit themselves to a loving, yet rigorous, examination of their preparation and readiness for conversion. Usually, on the day of their conversion, your rabbis and cantor convene a beit din, a rabbinic court, made up of a minimum of three members of the clergy, or three extremely knowledgeable and committed Jews. Usually, these rabbinic courts, which one recent convert jokingly referred to as "the interrogation", are assembled in my office, which another recent convert lovingly referred to as "the interrogation room"...bless their hearts.

There, too, as part of an interview that is always quite loving and gentle...we nevertheless arrive at a rather serious moment, at which time I always ask each candidate about their readiness to take on a faith and a heritage, that, while quite beautiful, comes with an ancient history of anti-semitism, coupled with a more recent history of anti-semitism disguised as anti-zionism. Given our history, it would seem to be a reasonable question.

We have no choice, we say, we who are born Jews, but you who are Jews-by-choice...you do. It is often said that "You can choose your friends...but you can't choose your family", but in this regard, that is simply not true. In this case, those who come to

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Judaism choose more than a faith; they choose to be part of the Jewish family, with relations and relationships stretching across both continents and centuries.

And so, therefore, once again, because of these required commitments to these connections, to these ties which bind our Jewish family, we actually ask those who come to join our Jewish family, and faith, this very question (along with a few others) right here on the pulpit: "Do you pledge your loyalty to Judaism and to the Jewish people, despite all circumstances and conditions?" And often, we add these words to their conversion ceremonies as well: "Knowing well the history of martyrdom in years past, so-and-so has chosen (nonetheless) to join their destiny with ours. And we are prepared to open our hearts to them."

It is a powerful moment for everyone in the room, for them, and for us. These wonderful souls have chosen Judaism, have chosen this sacred place as their Jewish home, and this sacred assembly of souls as their Jewish family and their Jewish community. They have enriched our lives in countless ways, and we are fortunate to have them accept our embrace even as we fully accept theirs. They are -- each and every one of those who come to embrace Judaism-- true blessings that magnify and sanctify our congregational life.

And the truth is...in our day, one could argue that we are all Jews-by-choice...we can all choose to remain Jews, or to remain indifferent. It is all now a matter of choice, for all of us: There are no self-imposed shtetls, nor super-imposed ghettos. And so, the very questions we ask of them, we ought to fairly ask of ourselves as well: Do we pledge our loyalty to Jewish faith, and by extension, to the Jewish people, and to our Jewish homeland, despite all circumstances and conditions? And is it all worth the sacrifice? Is it worth it, not just when it's an easier time, or an easier place to be a Jew, but even when it's not? Do we still have the stamina, the endurance, as a people, to remain loyal when it becomes quite lonely to do so, and when the going gets tough...will the tough get going...or will they just choose, to go away? These are the questions that go to the very heart of a people: the questions of sacrifice, loyalty and endurance.

You should know that we are not alone, nor the first, to ask these questions. In fact, Golda Meir, of blessed memory, often asked herself the same question of sacrifice.

In his recently released book, *The Prime Ministers*, Israeli author Yehuda Avner highlights Golda Meir's depiction of a unique moment in her life, and the life of the Jewish nation, one that illustrates the complicated balance, and healthy tension, between reward and sacrifice. Golda tells of a meeting between herself and a group of young, exhausted soldiers, serving in the tank brigade, a meeting held during the festival of Sukkot, immediately following the Yom Kippur War:

After speaking to the group, she asked, "Now, is there anyone who would like to ask me something?" One tank crew member in his early twenties raised his hand: "I have a question. My father was killed in the War (of Independence in) 1948, and we won. My uncle was killed in the war of fifty-six, and we won. My brother lost an arm in the sixty-

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seven war, and we won. Last week, I lost my best friend over there...and we're going to win. But is all of our sacrifice worthwhile, Golda? What's the use of our sacrifice, if we can't win the peace?"

With a deeply compassionate tone, Golda gently offered her reply: "I weep for your loss, just as I grieve for all our dead. I lie awake at night thinking of them. And, I must tell you in all honesty, were our sacrifices for ourselves alone, then perhaps you would be right; I'm not at all sure they would be worthwhile. But if our sacrifices are for the sake of the whole Jewish people, then I believe with all my heart that any price is worthwhile."

But there's more she has yet to offer, both to the soldier, and perhaps, to us: "Let me tell you a story", Golda continues. "In 1948, in this season of the year, I arrived in Moscow as Israel's first ambassador to the Soviet Union. The State of Israel was brand new. Stalinism was at its height. Jews, as Jews, had no rights. They had been cut off from their fellow Jews for 30 years, since the Communist Revolution of 1917. Stalin had proclaimed war against Judaism. He declared Zionism a crime. Hebrew was banned. One was sent to the gulag or to Siberia for far less."

"The first Shabbat after I had presented my credentials, my embassy staff joined me for services at the Moscow Great Synagogue. It was practically empty. But the news of our arrival had spread quickly so that when we went a second time the street in front of the synagogue was jam packed. Close to fifty thousand people were waiting for us...Despite all the risks, despite all the official threats to stay away from us, these Jews had come to demonstrate their kinship with us."

"Inside the synagogue," she went on, "I was caught up in a torrent of love so strong it literally took my breath away. People surged around me, stretching out their hands, and crying,

'Sholem aleychem, Goldele'. (Peace be unto you, Goldele).

'Goldele, lebn zolstu (A long life to you)'.
'Gutt yontef, Goldele'.

And all I could say, over and over again, was 'A dank eych vos ir zayt gebliben Yidn' (I thank you for remaining Jews).

And (then, they) cried back to me, 'Mir danken Medinas Yisroel' (We thank the State of Israel).

And that was when I knew for sure that our sacrifices are not in vain." (p.239-241)

The collective narrative of our Jewish family, and our obligations to one another, and our bond between one another extend beyond borders, and barriers of space and of time. Whether it be the soldier who defends the Jewish State; or the Prime minister of the Jewish nation, who visits Jews in a nation which denied its Jewish citizens their religious rights; or whether it be the people, whose rights were denied...yet who gathered, in spite of the risk, in spite of the danger, in spite of it all, to acknowledge their communal history, to give honor to their collective heritage and to give thanks for their ancestral homeland...or whether it be us, here, at this time and place...we link our past...and our destiny...one to the other.

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It is as the rabbis said, in the Sayings of the Sages, when they said: Kol Yisrael aravim zeh bazeh--that all Israel, all the Jewish people, each and every one of them, has a profound and sacred obligation to care for the other members of our Jewish family... despite all circumstances and conditions...and to do so, no matter what. It is not just a willingness to sacrifice, it is a determination to remain loyal to our people and our homeland.

We begin the New Year with an Israel perhaps more isolated, more ostracized, more vilified, by more nations of the world than perhaps ever before, in the history of the modern Jewish state. There are orchestrated efforts to deligitimize Israel at every turn, with more calls for universities and other organizations to divest themselves from Israeli businesses and other enterprises with every passing month. The Arab Spring, it now seems, may bring the chill of winter winds toward the State of Israel; the frost of a cold peace with some of her neighbors, may well turn into a hard freeze.

In the past few months alone, Israel has sustained multiple terrorist attacks on its southern border; the volley of rockets, from the Gaza Strip, land Israel turned over to the Palestinians in the pursuit of peace, continue to fall, with ever greater range, frequency, force and accuracy, continuing to target innocent Israelis and their children. Turkey, Israel's former chief military and strategic ally in the Muslim world, recently expelled the Israeli ambassador, over the flotilla incident, and seriously downgraded its relationship with the Jewish state. Within the same week, Egyptian mobs attacked the Israeli embassy in Cairo, with a delayed response from the Egyptian police and military to protect the Israeli diplomats trapped inside the embassy. Within hours, concerned about their safety, the government of Israel sent two aircraft to bring all but one of the diplomats and their families back to Israel. The following week, fearing similar protests in Jordan, with a similar response from her defense forces, Israel evacuated its diplomats from its embassy in Jordan. And, oh yes, in the meantime...and all the while...there's this little nuclear program they're working on in Iran, a country whose leadership has openly expressed the desire to annihilate the Jewish state and the Jewish people who reside within it.

And, of course, just this past Friday, the Palestinian leadership took their quest for statehood, not to the negotiating table, but to the United Nations...not exactly the most fair and balanced place for those who love Israel and her citizens. When Mr. Abbas called for an end to "63 years of suffering" under Israeli occupation, he deleted one crucial fact: The Palestinians could have had their own state 63 years ago, had they simply chosen to do so. But the simple fact remains, that they chose a different course of action. To quote Abba Eban's memorable line, "The Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity." Indeed, as the Israeli ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren, wrote in this past Saturday's Wall Street Journal: "...nearly 64 years ago, at the same U.N...On November 29, 1947, the General Assembly voted to partition British-controlled Palestine into two states, one Arab and one Jewish, that would live side-by-side in peace. The Jews accepted the agreement, but the Palestinians rejected it...While the circumstances have changed since 1947...the

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formula for peace remains unaltered. By accepting the Jewish state, the Palestinians can have their own.'

It really is that simple. Even J Street, which endorses a two-state solution, is against this effort of the Palestinians at the U.N. In order to make peace, you need a willing partner; In order to have a willing partner, they need to recognize your right to exist, in safety and security. And we simply are not there yet.

This is not to say that Israel is perfect, nor that every decision she has made have been good ones, or the right ones, or the best ones, nor does it mean that we should all agree with all of those decisions. As Tom Friedman recently wrote: "I've never been more worried about Israel's future...I have great sympathy for Israel's strategic dilemma and no illusions about its enemies. But Israel today is giving its friends...nothing to defend it with." (NYT, 9/18/11) There needs to be room for vigorous and open dialogue and debate among us. (More on that next week.)

But we are family, all of us. And our first duty is to protect and to defend. We have the right to question, to challenge, to doubt, to worry...but our ultimate obligation, as family, all of us, is to be loyal to one another, to do all we can to protect and defend the Jewish state from harm, even when we differ on which approach best serves that end. We are her family, all of us, those who were born among the chosen people, alongside of those who chose to become part of this family, all of us. And family is obligated to love one another, even when we don't always like one another; family is required to guard and support the homeland, even when it chooses to live elsewhere.

And, as her family, have no doubt: She will be there for us...as she and her citizens have always done, in countless ways, and on numerous occasions -- always standing at the ready, to protect us, and to rescue us...should the need arise. This is what family does: It does all it can, to keep the ancestral homeland and those who dwell there... safe, and it brings those members of the family, and their dear ones who are in need of protection... safely home.

This is my message to you this New Year: Remember your family; and remember to whom you belong. Israel needs us; Israel needs her friends...but, even more, Israel needs the support and the love of her family...and that includes all of us. So: Do you-- do we-- pledge our loyalty to the Jewish people, and the Jewish homeland, despite all circumstances and conditions? It is a question of sacrifice, loyalty...and endurance.

In his book, "Legends of our Times", Elie Wiesel tells the story of a man he met in Saragossa, Spain, in the early 1990's. As you might infer, before 1492, there was a thriving Jewish community in Saragossa; but today, they are no more...save for perhaps a few. The man offered to show Wiesel around town. So they start talking and, over time, the man begins to ask Wiesel some very personal questions. When it became obvious to the man that Wiesel was Jewish, the man said to him: "There have been no Jews here for almost 500 years. I've been waiting to meet one so I could ask for some help. There is something I want to show you in my home". The two men continued on to

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a small apartment, and the man shared a yellowed piece of parchment with Wiesel. "Is this in Hebrew?" he asked. Wiesel started to read it...and became visibly shaken. These were not only Hebrew letters...but they were words that had been written over 500 years earlier. He started to translate the document for the man: "I, Moses, the son of Abraham, forced to break all ties with my people and my faith, leave these lines to the children of my children, and theirs, in order that on the day when Israel will be able to walk again, its head high under the sun, without fear and without remorse, they will know where their roots lie. Written at Saragossa, this 9th day of the month of Av (Tisha B'Av), in the year of punishment and exile." The year, of course, was 1492, the year of the Spanish Inquisition.

A few years pass. Elie Wiesel's journeys take him, to the streets of Jerusalem. All of a sudden, a man runs up to him, and says, "Shalom, shalom, do you remember me?" " Saragossa", he says, "Saragossa." There he was, on the streets of Jerusalem, this time, speaking to Wiesel, in Hebrew. "I have something to show you," the man says to Wiesel. He took Wiesel by the hand, and brought him up to his small apartment. There, the man shows Wiesel the same yellowed piece of parchment, now placed in a picture frame on his wall. But this time, it was the man who read it, in Hebrew, to Wiesel. He had come home, to Israel, the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people. He had learned the sacred language and customs of the Jewish people, and he had redeemed his Jewish lineage as a proud and loyal member of the Jewish people.

There is a Jewish legend, that all Jews, throughout all time and space, stood together at the base of Mount Sinai, at the moment the Torah was given to us. Jews-by-birth, Jews-by-choice, newcomer and native born, all stood together as one. This can also be such a moment in time. From Sinai, to Saragossa, to this synagogue, we can stand together as one...connected by faith, sustained by the bonds of community, and strengthened by our commitments...to heritage, to history, and to homeland.

May it be so. Amen.