

Rabbi Alexis Berk
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Hope

Here's what will most likely *not* be new in this New Year: war, atrocity, bloodshed. Here's what will most likely *not* be a realized dream: world peace.

We live in a world that, once again *this* New Year hosts a human race committed to expansive and unrelenting violence as a solution to too many things. As summer gives way to fall, we continue to mourn losses from the fight in Gaza, while precarious *détente* rests uneasily.

And, now, what remains for us to address, or not, is the pervasive and ongoing fear of extremist groups, specifically and most imminently, ISIL. I feel like we have to talk about it on this day, but let me formally register my earnest wish that we could talk about almost anything instead.

On Wednesday, September 10, President Obama addressed our nation to discuss his plan for the impending world doom we all dread at the hands of ISIL – and all of the fearsome ripples and reverberations there from. No doubt, you saw or read Obama's remarks. He said it this clearly: we will fight this fight – “we will conduct a systematic campaign of airstrikes against these terrorists. Working with the Iraqi government, we will expand our efforts beyond protecting our own people and humanitarian missions, so that we're hitting ISIL targets as Iraqi forces go on offense. Moreover, [he continues] I have made it clear that we will hunt down terrorists who threaten our country, wherever they are. That means I will not hesitate to take action against ISIL in Syria, as well as Iraq. This is a core principle of my presidency: if you threaten America, you will find no safe haven.”¹

When, he was finished, Chuck Todd said this: “[Obama] made a pretty bold case for American interventionism ...about why it is that America has to be the one...to lead these charges around the world.”² I can't stop thinking about this turn of phrase – American interventionism.

There are so many Jewish examples of the fundamental, central value of interventionism, almost too many to list. Do note: interventionism is different than intervention. Intervention is once; interventionism is a way of life. As a conduit of Jewish tradition and interpretation, I simply can't express strongly enough the principle of the infinite value of every human life, no matter the continent or country – that's Talmud. Or, the basic, chilling, indefensible violation of standing by while our neighbor bleeds –that's Torah. Or, the incessant repetition of the Jewish mantra-like post-Holocaust admonition – never again. Jews say that all the time: never again. Starting when? 1948? Or, tomorrow, maybe? Never again, what? Genocide? Torture? Systematic, religious or ethnic based cleansing? Never again to *us*? Or, are we on guard for everyone? Because, we are Jews – and this is how we think. Intervention when life and liberty are at stake? This is what we do.

¹ <http://www.npr.org/2014/09/10/347515100/transcript-president-obama-on-how-u-s-will-address-islamic-state>

² <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/chuck-todd-obama-lays-out-bold-foreign-policy-push-n200701>

Obama's approach and attitude fits precisely with the Jewish mindset on this. Our own siddur, *Mishkan Tefilah*, captures the famous poetic declaration of Jewish purpose – by Edmund Fleg:

“I am a Jew because Judaism asks every possible sacrifice of my life.
 I am a Jew because wherever there are tears and suffering the Jew weeps.
 I am a Jew because whenever the cry of despair is heard the Jew hopes...
 I am a Jew because the promise of Judaism is a universal promise.
 I am a Jew because for the Jew, the world is not finished; human beings will complete it....

I am a Jew because Judaism places human dignity above all things...”³

And, lest there be any confusion about where the Reform movement stands on this, Reform leaders issued an official statement just over a week ago to be extra clear: “We commend President Obama's commitment to stopping the spread of ISIS, which has imposed terror in the Middle East and beyond and whose actions are appalling and offensive to all who value freedom. ...The spread of extremism anywhere is a threat to human rights everywhere, and we pray for all of the victims and their families who have been affected by the ISIS regime. We pray too for the safety of American and coalition troops on the front lines of this effort....”⁴

There is no Jewish ambivalence about how we must address terror and atrocity and inhumanity in the world. We weep. We care. We intervene. We work to fix it – as a way of life. There is nowhere in all of Jewish writing and thought that will support or confirm the appropriateness of standing back while there is suffering. Nothing. Nowhere. So, we will go help and fix. Just as our president said.

Unless, this is not the best idea. Because what if what we do there doesn't help and it doesn't fix it? What if we can't fix it? Because we just can't – can't make them stop killing without doing more killing? Because we can't make them believe like we believe or live like we live? We can't bring our ideal model there – not because it's not an ideal model, but because it doesn't work when we try to force it upon others. How many times and how many ways must we learn this? And, what if we make it worse?

Republican Senator from Kentucky Rand Paul was recently interviewed on NPR. While Senator Paul does support combating ISIS, he argues that our recent and historic interventions have not effectively curbed the threats. Senator Paul says: “I would make the argument that ISIS has had a safe haven for the last two years precisely because of our intervention in Syria. Not only our arming of the rebels, but Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait – millions if not hundreds of millions of dollars of arms have poured into Syria...We've gone too far in thinking we can re-create an American democratic paradise in the Middle East. We have time and again toppled secular dictators and they've been replaced by chaos. Libya's a perfect example...now less safe and actually more of a threat to America. Same with Syria.”⁵ With this, he concludes.

And, not to put too fine a point on this, but what about the dubious outcomes of the Vietnam War, the Korean War, the decades of the Cold War? Problems solved – once and for all? There simply are no victories in these wars; those days are over. Given that,

³ <http://www.creedia.com/content/i-am-jew-becauseby-edmund-fleg>

⁴ http://urj.org/about/union/pr/2014/?syspage=article&item_id=114540

⁵ <http://www.npr.org/2014/09/11/347711599/rand-paul-u-s-must-be-more-realistic-in-foreign-policy-approach>

who knows what to do here, anyone? Anyone on this earth? Maybe Henry Kissinger – he just came out with a new magnum opus called *World Order*. In a review, it was hailed as “a book that every member of Congress should be locked in a room with – and forced to read before taking the oath of office.”⁶ I presume this is because it has the solutions. Excellent.

Kissinger explains: “The premise [of this book] is that we live in a world of disorder: ‘While the *international community* is invoked perhaps more insistently now than in any other era, it presents no clear or agreed upon set of goals, methods or limits....Chaos threatens side by side with unprecedented interdependence.’ Hence the need to build an order – one able to balance the competing desires of nations.”⁷

This sounds great – world order it is. I know no one is in the mood for semantic games, but the terms matter when people are trying to agree on something, or to something. World order. Which nations are considered legitimate in the “world”? All nations seeking to exist as part of our shared world? And what does “order” look like? Automatic weapons slung over shoulders of dust-mask wearing rebels impose a kind of order. So do peace agreements. Who decides how *order* happens in this *world*? Is the fight against ISIS the formula for world order?

You know, George Washington himself warned about the U.S. getting involved in world politics and foreign affairs. He summarily admonished our nation about this in his farewell address, with eloquence and elegance. Listen to these soaring words from our nation’s first president: “Antipathy in one nation against another disposes each more readily to offer insult and injury, to lay hold of slight causes of umbrage, and to be haughty and intractable...Hence, frequent collisions, obstinate, envenomed, and bloody contests. The nation, prompted by ill-will and resentment, sometimes impels to war the government, contrary to the best calculations of policy. The government sometimes participates in the national propensity, and adopts through passion what reason would reject; at other times it makes the animosity of the nation subservient to projects of hostility instigated by pride, ambition, and other sinister and pernicious motives. The peace often, sometimes perhaps the liberty, of nations, has been the victim.”⁸ Insights spoken in 1796 – perhaps even more true today.

It feels like we are stuck between the ultimate spiritual and political rock and bad place. Our president can’t win. If he is circumspect, he’s called a coward; a softy. A wuss. If he’s decisively aggressive, he’s characterized as careless with human life, impulsive; putting our own troops in peril, repeating mistakes so recent we are still extricating ourselves from them. He’s still trying to get our troops out of the last quagmire we strode into. I’m not a politician, I’m a religionist, so I get to say it: our President and those who surround him are human beings. With hope and fear and intellect and heart.

We are in a situation that requires a lot of consideration and strategy. Even Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations and former Bush administration official empathically affirms that Obama “is someone who, more than most in the political world, is comfortable in the gray rather than the black and white.” [Haass continues: Obama] clearly falls on the side of those who are slow ...to decide

⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/books/review/henry-kissingers-world-order.html?_r=0

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp

because deciding often forces you into a more one-sided position than you're comfortable with."⁹ **I find it important – and not incidental – to note that a one-sided position has never led to peace. For any individual. For any couple. For any family. For any nation.** Events are always more nuanced than that.

But, all theorizing aside – we are already in deep. Pundits and theorists have called intervention with ISIS a Pandora's Box. That implies, of course, that once it's open, every bad thing on earth comes flying out. I kept hearing this reference to Pandora's Box, thinking I knew what it meant. But, I didn't know the whole legend. If you'll indulge me, I think it's quite important to get how the legend ends. The little known ending could be the *most* important part of the story. It really reminds me of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. See what you think.

Zeus – king of the gods – creates the lovely Pandora and gives her as a gift to Epimetheus to be his bride, “along with a box with a warning label telling the couple never to open it. ...

Epimetheus insisted that his wife obey the letter of the label. Unfortunately, one day Pandora's husband left her side for a few hours. Pandora was gifted with curiosity ... Maybe if she just took a quick peak.... Looking around to make sure no one was watching, she opened the box Zeus had given them just a crack. As Pandora did so, ghostly forms gushed forth from the crack. Pandora had unleashed all the evils now known to man. No longer could man loll about all day, but he would have to work and would succumb to illnesses. At the very bottom of the container was the last thing to come out. It was something that wasn't evil. We call [the last thing,] the good that Pandora unleashed, by the name of **hope**.”¹⁰

When we hear the reference to Pandora's Box, we think only of the unleashing of “all the evils now known to man.” Without relent. Never ending problems. But, according to the myth, without Pandora's Box being opened, we humanity never would have experienced hope. This seems significant. And, this part of the story is never emphasized. Why? Hope could be the most vital human characteristic of all. Yes, curiosity and ambition open any Pandora's Box. But, what lurks expectantly and inevitably beneath? Hope.

We all accept the limitations of our effortful but flawed human instinct to worry that any intervention is a Pandora's Box. **We may have to open this box, but this tale suggests that underlying any daunting aperture of opportunity is a patient, foundational hope.**

Israel's poet laureate, Yehuda Amichai charged humanity to be *negu'ay tikvah* – infected with hope. How can we hope right now? Wouldn't we need to feel better about the prospects for success or deliverance?

"Many of us confuse hope with optimism," said Harvard professor Jerome Groopman in his book, *The Anatomy of Hope*. "But [he explains] hope differs from optimism. ... Hope, unlike optimism, is rooted in unalloyed reality... Hope is the elevating feeling we experience when we see – in the mind's eye – a path to a better

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/grecoromanmyth1/a/050410Pandora_and_her_box_or_pithos.htm

future. Hope acknowledges the significant obstacles and deep pitfalls along that path. True hope has no room for delusion."¹¹

We will read certain prayers on this day, and we will mean them. We *mean* them. In just a moment we will say this together: "We worship the power that unites all the universe into one great harmony. That oneness, however, is not yet. We see imperfection, disorder, and evil all about us. But before our eyes is a vision of perfection, order, and goodness: these too we have known in some measure. There is evil enough to break the heart, enough good to exalt the soul. Our people has experienced untold suffering and wondrous redemptions; we await a redemption more lasting and more splendid than any of the past."¹²

We will continue right into this prayer: "When will redemption come? *When we master the violence that fills our world.* When we look upon others as we would have them look upon us. *When we grant to every person the rights we claim for ourselves.*"¹³

When will redemption come? When the utopia described above is manifest. When will that be? When the aforementioned criteria are met. When will we be able to do that? I don't know. It's not looking good for this year.

In preparing for today, I worried that in the end someone might just ask me straight up: what's the answer? Should we go to war to combat ISIS? Or, should we hold back, knowing that our interventions rarely improve things? What do I really think? Aren't rabbis supposed to make wise Jewish sense of this senseless world? Wasn't this pulpit – in all its majesty – built to buttress the oratory of those who know how to fit the pieces together in a way that works?

You're quite right if you've noticed that all I've been able to spell out here is a clear lose-lose proposition. If we intervene, we will likely make a huge mess. And, if we don't, it would mean literally seeing video beheadings and managing our nausea with powerless, unnerving incredulity. Neither of these is acceptable in any way – certainly not in any Jewish way. A perfectly impossible choice is before us.

The insight I keep returning to is a contradiction filled teaching from the Talmud: *b'makom she'ein anashim, hishtadeil lihiyot ish*. Translation, literally: in a place where there are no human beings, strive to be a human being. For our purposes: in a time devoid of humanity, strive to be the most human. More ideally human.

What does that mean? We don't reduce this complex situation to political certainties; there are none. We don't act like we know the outcomes of every impossible decision; we can't know. We don't criticize those who have a different opinion – since no certainty exists; we give those serving and leading some civil benefit of the doubt. We don't yell and scream at each other; we act with peace and compassion and every bit of wisdom we can summon.

When will redemption come? That is the Jewish question today. Not: *will* redemption come? Not: *is* redemption possible? Maybe our own imagination is the only obstacle. Maybe our collective human imagination. But, it can't be that we conclude

¹¹

<http://view.mail.rj.org/?j=fe9015767666007a7d&m=fe9315707361057572&ls=fe1b1776716c04757c1d75&l=fe1d167574660c&s=fe5d1271736207787513&jb=ffcf14&ju=fe51177677630c797d1c&r=0>

¹² Gates of Repentance, p. 102.

¹³ Ibid, p. 103.

today that redemption is *not even possible*. Because then, our prayers would be empty and our aspirations worthless. And, our humanity – vacuous.

This New Year will not bring an end to violence and bloodshed. That seems fairly certain. But, what is even more certain is our collective longing and capacity for hope. A predicament of misery has never been an obstacle for the Jewish dreamer – the Jewish human – propelling toward a new actuality, even more brilliant than that conceived by the generation before. Redemption is on its way, along a winding path. Historical precedent is not our guide. The Creator, the Source of all redemption and peace is our Guide.

I hope – and, I mean the kind hope with no room for delusion – that our good ideas will heal our world’s violent pains. We hope our ideally human hope – the kind that “acknowledges the significant obstacles and deep pitfalls along the [winding] path.” Troops, no troops. Ground, air. Collaborations, coalitions, we hope. Someone will be wrong. And, maybe someone will be right. Attempts will work; attempts will fail. But, one thing remains true beyond all else: *b’makom she’ein anashim, hishtadeil lihiyot ish*. In a time devoid of humanity, strive to be the most human. More hopefully human. That, we can do. On this Rosh Hashanah day. But, also eternally.