

Kol Nidre Sermon 5775/2014
“Jews: a Dissatisfied People”
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Writer and journalist, David Grossman, is famous in Israel. Those who don't necessarily agree with his politics might say he's closer to being infamous in that word's more controversial sense. He has been an outspoken critic of Israeli policies toward the Palestinians before and even after his son, Uri, was killed in 2006 while fighting in Lebanon in the war against Hezbollah. Grossman wrote an important opinion piece in the New York Times this past summer, while the Israel-Hamas war was raging. Here's how he begins:

Israelis and Palestinians are imprisoned in what seems increasingly like a hermetically sealed bubble. Over the years, inside this bubble, each side has evolved sophisticated justifications for every act it commits.

What David Grossman does with his metaphor deepens the impact and the importance of his message. Both sides, he writes, “obey the law of the bubble — the law of violence and war, revenge and hatred.” The bubble, he says, is a place of both cruelty and desperation. He asks, “How on earth can it be that we have been suffocating together inside this bubble for over a century?” He wonders why a series of Israeli governments have been unable to approach negotiations with any of a number of more open and forthcoming Palestinian leaders. He wonders why Israeli leadership has ignored the Arab League Initiative for twelve years. He even wonders why Israel hasn't made even the smallest move to initiate discussions with Hamas itself. He wouldn't be the first Israeli to offer such an extreme suggestion. Former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban said, “If you want to make peace, you don't talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies.”

Grossman offers another metaphor; he sees the conflict as a grindstone around which Israelis and Palestinians slog side-by-side blindly in endless circles and “numbing despair”. As if to prevent his readers from falling, confused, depressed and anesthetized into the

poetry of his prose, and to prevent his critics from dismissing his writing as so much left-wing idealism, Grossman suddenly become practical. He straightforwardly acknowledges that the “potent hatred against Israel” is an absolute truth that cannot be blamed on the occupation alone and the threat to Israel is not puffed up right-wing “paranoia”. The threat, he says, is “real and crucial”. He then calls upon that same right-wing to understand the limitations of the use of force, that in this place in human history, there are no “unequivocal victories” (if there ever were). Grossman says that the challenge for everyone involved is the “real anguish of the Palestinian people, and as long as the suffocation felt in Gaza is not alleviated, we in Israel will not be able to breathe freely either”.

Facing this challenge and this reality leads directly to difficult questions. Is it possible that a negotiated peace with the “enemies” to which Abba Eban referred could actually be the best option for Israel that will engender the most security? Are Palestinians, is **Hamas**, coming to realizations similar to those of many right and left wing Israelis? Can Israel continue to dismiss the majority of Palestinians who have come out in favor of a negotiated settlement? I have no doubt that Mr. Grossman is alluding to the tragedy of his own son’s death when he asks, “Will the government of Israel, after this bloody war, after losing so many young and beloved people, continue to avoid at least trying [the negotiation] option” and ignore even the **possibility** that an agreement with the West Bank, through their President Mahmood Abbas, “might gradually lead to an improved relationship with the 1.8 million residents of Gaza?”

David Grossman wrote his article in the midst of this summer’s war and still he was able to see what must follow war, the understanding that the borders between Israel and Palestine “no longer separate Jews from Arabs, but people who **long to** live in peace from those who feed, ideologically and emotionally, on continued violence.”

Using a concept to which former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres referred often, Grossman talks about “remembering the future” a powerful and intense envisioning that has the strength to lift people out of the seduction basing present actions on recollections and interpretations of and reactions to the past. Without remembering the

future, Grossman concludes, “we will all — Israelis and Palestinians, blindfolded, our heads bowed in stupor, collaborating with hopelessness — continue to turn the grindstone of this conflict, which crushes and erodes our lives, our hopes and our humanity.”

David Grossman’s metaphors of the suffocating bubble and the grindstone that crushes hope are internal metaphors that come from deep within his Israeli psyche. I’m an American Jew; my perspective is different. For me, my symbols of what Israeli’s refer to as המצב, haMatzav, “the situation” are the fences between Israel and the West Bank and between Israel and Gaza. You heard me speak of the Fence before. You heard me tell the story of my daughter when she was in London on July 7, 2005 when she was literally caught in the middle of a terrorist attack. While I would do anything to keep my children, your children and the children of Israel safe, the Fence is a monument to a failure of leadership, Palestinian and Israeli, and those leaders’ failure to “remember” a better future.

How did the war this summer begin? It did not begin with missiles. There have been thousands of missiles from Gaza over the past several years and somehow, for the most part, Israel has been able to deal with it, realizing that reacting militarily would only make things worse, force Israel to attack densely populated areas with hundreds of civilians and not really solve anything. What was it then? **Who** started this war? Was it those who kidnapped and the killed those three Yeshiva students, Eyal Yifrach, Naftali Fraenkel and Gilad Shaar? Only partly. It was also those who, in apparent retaliation, burned, alive, Mohammed Abu Khedair on his way to mosque for Ramadan. It was the Hamas leadership for either orchestrating the kidnapping of the Jewish teenagers or for creating a culture of violence that encourages people to do such things. It is Hamas doing little or nothing to better the lives and lot of the Gazan people. It is the occupation of the West Bank and the blockade of Gaza, something that most Palestinians view as collective punishment. Let me remind you what our Palestinian guide said about the Occupation to Toby on the last day of our interfaith trip to Israel/Palestine: “It’s like living in a prison when you know you’ve done nothing wrong, like being guilty without a trial. My children,” he said, “wake up in prison every day.” How is it that the **Jewish** state can forget one of the most famous moral debates in the Torah – the scene early in Abraham’s relationship with God in which Moses finds

out that God intends to wipe out the entirety of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah? Abraham responds by saying, “Be it far from you...to slay the righteous with the wicked...Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” Be it far from **us** to punish the innocent along with the guilty with this occupation and blockade. Most Palestinians are not involved in violence of any sort against Israel. Far be it from **us** to **slay** the innocent along with the guilty. I know the Hamas rockets were aimed at Israeli civilians. It doesn't matter. We're the Jews.

This summer's war is also the result of the culture of hatred, violence, mistrust and martyrdom created by Hamas and some Muslim leaders in Gaza. It is also because of the hatred and mistrust that is bred on the Israeli side of the fence and exacerbated in some communities that led to the insanity of burning an innocent teenager alive in the name of Judaism and the Jewish state. As the violence escalated, it was all of the Israeli rationale for the killing of innocents that contributed to this war. It was the apparent priority decision of Hamas to protect its fighters rather than its citizens and somehow convincing its own constituents that this was the right thing to do.

Every rabbi knew that every one of us would speak about Israel these High Holy Days. From what I have read, many of us wrestled with what it was we might say. I had no doubts about what I wanted to say, it was how I wanted to say it that was at issue for me. Clearly, I align myself with David Grossman's perspective, and his writing enabled me to express things more clearly and artistically. I hope it helps you, too. It's not an analysis of the complex and difficult details with which Israelis and Palestinians will have to deal if they are to ever live in peace. As I mentioned, Israelis always use the word המצב haMatzav, “the situation” to refer to how things are in Israel, a term that reflects both a daily practicality that enables Israelis to cope and resignation to the inescapability of המצב, haMatzav, “the situation”. Selfishly, because I love and believe in Israel so much, I push myself to “remember the future” and work to bring about a real change to the situation. I can't **predict** the future, but I'm pretty certain that if the status quo isn't shifted between Israel and Palestine, something like what we saw and some of us experienced this past summer will happen again in a few years. And then it will happen again a few years after that, and a few years after that and on and on with the results only getting worse and the two sides more intractable.

The past of Israel/Palestine is easy to remember. It actually doesn't change that much and repeats itself predictably so that one could be in any decade since 1948 and pretty much be able to portray the reality on the ground with a generic description. The future, a real future, is built with what Shimon Peres calls the most precious Jewish gift to humanity. He says, "The Jews' greatest contribution to history is dissatisfaction! We're a nation born to be discontented. Whatever exists we believe can be changed for the better." Every Nobel Prize won by a Jew attests to the belief that things can be changed for the better. The Jewish people even have the *chutzpah* to think that **Judaism** can be changed for the better.

The world thinks that the grinding hopelessness between Israelis and Palestinians cannot be fixed, that the "situation" can't be altered for the better. Jews are not built to believe that.

How do we do it? What can **we** do to change that which no one has been able to change for so long? We do it with something else that Jews are very good at – we k'vetch. Call your Senators and Congress person. Tell them, despite everything that happened this summer, the push for peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine should **never** stop. Call them in the name of J Street or Americans for Peace Now or just call because you're a Jew and your Jewish dissatisfaction won't let you keep quiet. Call the President. Tell him to send his representatives back to Israel and Palestine and keep them there. Tell him to make sure they bring Israeli and Palestinian leaders to the negotiating table and make sure they sit there until they've worked it through. Tell Benjamin Netanyahu that you're dissatisfied. Tell him that he's too satisfied with the way things are and that he's not being Jewish enough. Tell them all that an agreement between Israel and Palestine can work as a paradigm to fix so much else that is wrong in the Middle East if not the world.

Shimon Peres, echoing Lady Gaga, said we were **born** to do this. We're the Jews. We're **never** too comfortable. Peres's description of Jewish character has given me a new understanding of what is the sign for when the Messiah has arrived: the Messiah will come when we, the Jewish people, are satisfied. We're a long way

from “satisfied” when it comes to peace **between** and sovereignty **for both** Israel and Palestine. Let’s get to work.