

Parshat Naso
 “A Gesture for Peace”
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 June 6, 2009

Well, this week has given us one of the most significant speeches ever offered on the subject of peace, and it behooves us as Jews who care deeply about peace, who pray for it daily and work for it tirelessly, it behooves us to give this speech our full attention, to study its every word and understand its every nuance. I refer of course to the speech in today's torah portion – *Parshat Naso* on the subject of peace. What? You thought I was referring to President Obama's speech on Thursday morning in Cairo? Well, that was pretty significant, and will get to that as well – but first a word from our Sponsor.

For almost 4,000 years now we Jews are a people in pursuit of peace. In the words of our daily prayer book – words we recite every morning – we are *oheyv shalom, v'rodeyf shalom* – we are lovers of peace and pursurers of peace. The Talmud insists that of God's many names, when the Holy One, Blessed Be He, signs his signature to a document – he does so with one name and one name only: Shalom - peace. But after 4000 years it is easy in the spirit of the prophet Jeremiah to succumb to cynicism when he said, *Shalom, shalom, v'ayn shalom* -- Peace! Peace! Yet there is no peace – everybody talks about peace and yet peace is absent from the world.

To cry peace, when there is no peace is not so much an expression of hope as it is an abrogation of reality. Indeed, suggests the cynical prophet, peace is one of those things that it is much easier to talk about than do something about.

So here then is our dilemma. How are we to react to the President's speech in Cairo this past week? It is easy to be cynical and say that it is one more in a long line of speeches – beautiful words that cannot and will not be matched by concrete actions – expressions of hope and optimism which will go nowhere – this is the middle East – words there are used not to illuminate and enlighten but to obfuscate and delay – *Shalom, shalom, v'ayn shalom*.

Or is there any way, to embrace this speech as possibly something new, something different – not just the latest in a long line of failed peace attempts – but a chance, a real chance for change, for hope of a better tomorrow?

There is no sin in contemporary Israel that is greater than being a *friar* - roughly translated as “a sucker”, someone easily taken advantage of – naïve, -- nobody wants to be a *friar*.

That is why I studied today's torah portion of *Naso* – to see if it could offer us any guidance, any insight, any direction on this matter.

Probably the most famous part of today's torah reading can be found in the middle of it, Numbers ch. 6 vs. 22-26 – I invite you to take a look at it with me – it can be found on page 804 in your *Humashim*, in your Bibles. Called, *Birkat Kohanim* – “The Priestly Blessing” -- it opens with words of instruction – God speaks to Moses and says: “Speak to Aaron and his sons – *ko t'varchu et b'nai yisrael* – this is how you should go about blessing the children of Israel. And what follows are three verses of 3,5, and 7 words respectively: *Yivarechecha*

adonai, vyishmarecha --- yaer adonai panav eylecha v'hunecha --- yisa adonai panav elecha, v'yaseym, lecha shalom.

The Lord bless you and protect you!

The Lord deal kindly and graciously with you!

The Lord bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace!

These are words that have become familiar to most of you. Every Shabbat, the Cantor and I ascend to the ark and use these words of blessing to express our hopes for a young man or a young woman as they begin their journey into adulthood – as we did for Josh this morning. Every wedding is concluded with these same words of blessing, they are invoked at a baby naming and a bris. There are no words more fundamental to an understanding of Judaism and our belief in what God wants for us than these. When you want to bless the people says God – here are the words I want you to use – here are the hopes I want you to have – here are the dreams I want you to embrace – and it is no coincidence that the final word is Shalom – peace. It is a prayer of blessing – it is a prayer of protection – it is a prayer of kindness and graciousness – and it is ultimately a prayer of peace.

This *Birkat Kohanim* – this Priestly Blessing has another name in Hebrew – it is called, “*Nesiat Kapayim*” which means the lifting of hands. In the classic religious service in the *Musaf* service, *Kohanim* ascend to the *Bima* in the repetition of the *Amida*, cover themselves under the *tallit* and repeat this prayer after the *Hazzan*. And under that *tallit* – the *Kohanim* – lift their arms, raise their hands – as they recite this blessing – and it was believed that God’s blessing was literally transmitted through the hands of the priests to the congregation.

As a child I was taught not to look because the extreme glow of that transmission – kind of like looking directly into the sun – could cause severe damage. I remember my mother telling me that if you look – the first time you see the priests hands you go blind – and the second time you see them you die. As the precocious child that I was – I asked, “if you go blind the first time you see them – how can you see them a second time?” To which my mother could only respond, “*freg nisht kein kashas*” don’t ask such silly questions. This reenactment has largely been eliminated in most Conservative shuls – a decision about which I have very mixed emotions – the objections generally centered around the fact that the role of the *Koheyn* was inherited and not earned - -and there was something that was deemed contradictory and even unseemly about a *Koheyn* who may not have observed Shabbat or kept kosher or been very honest in his business dealings – striding up to the bema to take his rightful place blessing the people – and the male exclusivity of it presented its share of problems as well. Therefore we have come to leave this recitation to the *Hazzan* – and in so doing while some problems are clearly avoided – something is lost as well – something in the drama and mystery of a special, a holy moment.

Some of you who are less familiar with the goings on in the synagogue – may find this ceremony strangely familiar but are having a hard time placing it – let me help you. Does “live long and prosper” ring a bell? One of the great tragedies of my year of mourning – aside of course that I have lost my mother – is that I am not going to movies and have missed the long awaited Star Trek movie currently playing in a theater near you. Any Trekkie knows the Vulcan salute – raised hand, palm forward, fingers parted between the middle and ring finger and thumb extended – and many of you shul attendars know that it was patterned by Leonard Nimoy after the *Nesiat Kapayim* – the traditional way the priests raised their hands in blessing. It was from my friend and colleague Rabbi Gerald Zelizer that I learned that Nimoy explained

this in his autobiography, "I Am Not Spock" where he tells of shaping this Vulcan greeting on the blessing of the Jewish *Koheyn* and his hand motion. There is a difference. The hand gestures of the priestly benediction, fingers parted with thumb close to the index finger was meant to imitate the shape of the Hebrew letter *Shin* – which stands for *Shadai* – one of God's names. Nimoy saw this when he attended synagogue with his grandfather as a child. And the accompanying "Live long and prosper" has a smell of the original priestly blessing in its sentiment. By the way, I was informed that the appropriate response to the Vulcan greeting of "Live long and prosper" is? Any Trekkies here? Yes, "Peace and long life!" There is definitely a Jewish and biblical influence here.

And if Star Trek is too contemporary a reference for you, did you know that while excavating the new Begin Museum in Jerusalem, they unearthed the oldest Biblical text ever found – 700 years older than the scrolls from Qumran – it was inscribed on an ancient amulet and it was – *Birkat Kohanim!*

So here we have this *Birkat Kohanim* – as contemporary as today's movies – as ancient as the amulets archeologists found, amongst the oldest artifacts of our people. And these words were always part of a gesture – and the power of this gesture cannot and should not be underestimated.

And this past week our president made a gesture when he traveled to Egypt and he share his words in a major speech on the Middle East. What are we to make of the president's gesture? What are we to make of the president's words? Is it good for the Jews or bad for the Jews? Should we be hopeful – or do we have cause for worry?

Howard Fineman in Newsweek writing in advance of the trip suggested that Obama's predecessor set the bar pretty low, as long as no one throws a shoe at him, the speech will be deemed a success." But most of us have higher expectations than that. Fineman went on to caution – that the Middle East is "a place where talk isn't cheap, it is dangerous; it is a place where soothing words... are regarded warily at best; and where expectations, if raised too high, can come crashing down with devastating results." So what should we be feeling – we who care about Israel – should we be hopeful or fearful?

I find it interesting that in reading many of the Arab reactions to the Presidents speech they focus on what they liked about it – the tone, the recognition of Islam as a legitimate belief to be respected and honored, the criticisms of the occupations and the rights of the Palestinian people.

And if you read many of the reactions in the Israeli press they focus on what they *didn't* like in the speech – the tone, the recognition of Islam, the criticism of the occupation and the rights of the Palestinian people.

The President's speech was intended to be balanced – with words of strong encouragement and harsh criticism for both sides. But it is interesting and informative that many heard only one side of the speech. There were parts of the Obama speech that encouraged Arabs and made Israelis nervous - -and these are the parts that received the most comment. There were other parts of his speech, which might have been seen, as encouraging to the Israelis and cause nervousness to the Arabs – but these parts were by and large discounted and ignored. Why is that?

Both sides seem to have latched on to the same quotes as worthy of their attention – and both discounted major parts of this same speech as not worthy of comment or reaction. And while this is a gross generalization – I believe it also focuses on the core of what is happening here. Only one half of the president’s speech was seen as news. That a president of the United States speaks words that are encouraging of Israel and critical of Arabs – is not news – it is what we have come to expect – both by the supporters of Israel and the supporters of the Palestinians. But that a President of the United States speaks words supportive of the Palestinians and critical of Israel – well that is newsworthy and it should not be surprising to anyone that this will cause both Israelis and Arabs to take notice.

I received a phone call from our congressman Gary Ackerman a week or so ago. He asked if I would be willing to host a luncheon for the rabbis of Queens and Nassau County. He was about to leave on a trip to the Middle East – with stops in Jordan, Lebanon and Israel and he would like to brief the rabbis when he gets back, would I be willing to host a luncheon where he could speak to us. Of course I would – I had been scheduled to be in an all day conference with Chancellor Eisen at the Jewish Theological Seminary – but one does not say no to a United States Congressman – “uh I’m a little busy that day maybe some other time...” I don’t think so, so I dashed out of the Seminary came back to host the luncheon with the congressman here at Beth Sholom, before dashing back to the city for my conversations with our chancellor. But I was able to catch my breath long enough to realize we are really fortunate to have a representative like Gary Ackerman. His understanding of the issues that concern us – especially Israel and the Middle East – are deep and nuanced. As #2 person on the powerful House Foreign Relations Committee and chair of the sub committee on Middle Eastern Affairs – he is in a position to influence important policies of this government. There are few better friends that we, and Israel, have in the congress than Gary Ackerman. But there are some rabbis who came to this luncheon to make sure that the good congressman understands that being a friend of Israel means one thing and one thing only: no pressure on Israel to do anything it does not want to do.

To his credit, Congressman Ackerman rejected this definition of friendship. He spoke passionately of his belief that the clock is ticking and time is not Israel’s friend. Soon there will be more Palestinians than Jews in Israel – are we prepared to choose between a Jewish State of Israel and a Democratic State of Israel? In the first Intifada they came at us with sticks and stones, during the second one they lobbed crude missiles at us – now we know Hamas is smuggling in sophisticated weapons and Iran is working to develop an Islamic Nuclear bomb – do we really believe that doing nothing is in the best interest of Israel?

Congressman Ackerman insisted that in his opinion the former president was interested in a peace process, the current president is interested in peace. If he is correct – what will follow Obama’s speech may be even more dramatic than the speech itself. So as Jews who care deeply for the state of Israel and its future, should we be hopeful or worried?

It was only a speech.

It was only a gesture.

But as we have learned from today’s torah portion, *parshat Naso* – speeches and gestures are important – they are very important.

Congressman Ackerman took the time to come to our shul to speak to some 40 rabbis and to try and lift us up and give us reason to hope.

I also believe that President Obama's intention in traveling half way around the world and delivering a major speech at the beginning of his administration was to use those words and that gesture to lift up the hopes of all people in the region and around the world – I hope and pray he will succeed where so many others have failed. That is what speeches are meant to do, that is what words of blessing are meant to achieve – we call *Birkat Kohanim* – *nesiat kapayim* – a lifting of hands – because the words and gestures that surround this blessing are intended to lift us up. The torah portion is called *Naso* – it is meant to lift us up. Gary Ackerman came here to Beth Sholom to speak to rabbis to lift us up and give us hope - not pie in the sky hope – but a hope grounded in realism and truth.

Barak Obama traveled half way around the world to deliver a speech and to deliver a message – I am convinced he intended it to be a message of peace and of hope.

So should we be hopeful – or should we be worried. Yes. I am hopeful and I am worried –how can we be anything else?

Let us pray – that Obama's speech, like God's speech in *parshat Naso* will end in peace.
Vayaseym lanu shalom.