

Parshat Bechukotai
May 21, 2011
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas
The World is not coming to an end!

I have come here today, as your rabbi, to share with you a very important message: The world is not coming to an end! I repeat: the world is not coming to an end!

Feel a little better? I mean especially for those of you who are here today celebrating Jordanna's Bat Mitzvah or Adin and Jordana's and Jessica and Aaron's upcoming weddings – I suspect this announcement is a matter of some relief.

I mean really – what is the point of getting married – if the world is coming to an end? And what was the point of all of those months and months and hours upon hours of Bat Mitzvah instruction, Jewish education and Shabbat preparation – if you would get your Bat Mitzvah certificate at 11 AM Saturday morning and the world would end later that same day. I mean really – what is the point?

So, I your rabbi bring you good tidings: despite what many of you are hearing or feeling in response to President Obama's speech on the Middle East yesterday, the sky is not falling, destruction is not upon us and the end is not near.

Oh, you thought I was referring to that prediction by the Evangelical Minister Harold Camping who has garnered a lot of attention with his announcement that the world was coming to an end today at 6 PM EDT? OK – I'll deal with that too.

As you can imagine – I have a lot to say about these things. But just in case you don't have the patience to follow my comments in detail, just in case you are not interested in the substance of my argument. I shared with you – as a public service – my bottom line if you will, don't worry, the world is not coming to an end – you may proceed with your life as planned. And lest you wonder from whence commeth my confidence, if you are suspicious that a modest rabbi who occupies a pulpit in Roslyn Heights, NY might not have all the answers about the future of the universe – do not fear for this is not my personal wisdom I share with you today – it is the wisdom of our sacred faith, it is the insight of 2000 years of Jewish teaching – I stand here with complete confidence in telling you that the end is not near – because the Bible tells me so.

First let's deal with the good reverend Camping.

So here I was just beginning to deal with all those Mayan calendar predictions that the world was coming to an end in 2012 and figuring that at least I had a few months to come up with a solution to the impending demise of the universe then along comes this 89 year old preacher, the president of the Christian network Family Radio whose biblical scholarship deduced through his close reading and mathematical acumen that the world was scheduled to end today. By the way – this is not the first time Reverend Camping has predicted the end of the world – he did so also in 1994 and I have little reason to believe that his math calculations or bible study skills have improved sufficiently to worry me about his current prediction. Now what worries me is not that there are preachers like Reverend Camping, but that he has followers like Marie Exley. MSNBC reported the story of one Marie Exley a 32 year old army veteran, a

supporter of the Reverend Camping who said that at 32 she was thinking of starting a family – but now with the world coming to an end there is more important work to be done – and she has spent the last six months organizing and getting the word out about the coming apocalypse.

You see this is what really gets me angry about all these doomsayers – it is not whether they are right or wrong – but that they distract us from more important work that we have to do. I really do not feel much of a need to respond to the Reverend Camping's predictions – it really is very simple. Either we will get up tomorrow morning, or we won't. If yes, good news. If no, my bad. Now what concerns me is not whether these apocalyptic visions are right or wrong – but rather in engaging them and embracing them – we paralyze ourselves and prevent ourselves from the more important work at hand. A young woman – who should be starting a family – is instead preparing for the end of the world. And if and when the world does not end – as I predict it won't – she just may be too old to start that family – and she will, because of this silly game – have squandered a precious and sacred opportunity to be a mother.

The tragedy of the end of the world'ers is that they distract us. When a fire alarm goes off – we are required to stop whatever we are doing and leave the building. No matter how important what we were doing at the moment – teaching math, making love, answering a phone call – you drop everything and leave – such is the demand of a fire alarm. Well that's what these apocalypse loonies do – they interrupt our important conversations and occupations and distract us with a series of never ending false alarms – and because we are taught never to ignore a fire alarm – because who knows this one may be real – well we feel forced to respond. Think of all the math, think of all the love making that has been lost due to false alarms. Maybe it is time to start prosecuting the criminals who perpetrate these crimes.

But really, I am much more concerned about those who see the end of the world in President Obama's speech than I am concerned about the Reverend Camping. Because tomorrow we will know the fate of the world – but we will be arguing the future of the Middle East for months and months – and there is so much important work to be done and I fear the doomsayers have us running to the exits rather than focusing on that important work. And to be honest – I wonder if some of those false alarms are not false at all – but intentionally being set – by those who deliberately do not want us to focus on the important work at hand.

Look a sermon is not the place and a rabbi is not the expert to break this matter down in any sort of great detail. Was that the speech I would have written? No, but then again, Barak Obama is not a rabbi, nor is he the president of Israel – he is the President of the United States. Well, the last president said all the things we wanted to hear. Well, he said all the things some of us wanted to hear – but more importantly – how did that help us? Aside from making us feel good because we knew he would not push Israel to do anything – did it bring peace to the Middle East? Did it make things better?

And I think this guy will? I don't know – I really don't but I will tell you this – someone has to try. When the president says, "the status quo is unsustainable" – I agree 100%. For those of us who love Israel and care deeply and desperately about her future – time is not on our side. The tide of world opinion is against us. Do you fear an action on the part of the United States that might make things worse? Me too. But I fear inaction on everyone's part that I know will make things worse, even more.

Look there is a lot in the President's Speech that makes me nervous. One of the problems is that for this to work out well it will require a lot of trust on our part – and when it comes to the Middle East – President Obama has not yet earned our trust. But still, what are the two most significant threats to Israel today? Today – May 21, 2011. (Leaving Iran and Syria and Egypt and those other long term threats aside) In my opinion – the two greatest immediate threats – are the alliance between Fatah and Hamas and the plan to seek UN approval of a unilateral proclamation of a Palestinian state in September. In my opinion – either of these is a major threat and together they are potentially catastrophic. And what did the president say in his speech yesterday? He said he would not support a push in the UN and advised the Palestinians to abandon it and he said that he would not blame an Israel that refused to negotiate with Hamas. That it makes no sense for a nation to be expected to sit down with people who are sworn to their destruction.

In order for you to see this speech as a disaster – you have to dismiss the fact that on the two most significant issues that confront Israel today – the President of the United States came down exactly where we would want him to.

But, my intention today is not to support or criticize our president. I think there is much in this speech to criticize and much to support – and let the conversation begin.

First we need some perspective – do you realize what we saw this week? The Prime Minister of Israel sitting side by side with the President of the United States, speaking his mind. How many times has that happened in Jewish history? When we have had a seat at the table? When our opinion mattered. When a Jewish leader, speaking on behalf of a Jewish state spoke on behalf of the welfare of his people. That alone is remarkable. To see them speak to each other. The question is did they listen to each other? Here is my fantasy of what I would love to see happen when President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu speak at the AIPAC Conference this week. I would love to hear President Obama say, "Look I heard what you had to say, and I understand why you did not like everything you heard from me. Come let's work this out together." And I would love to hear Prime Minister Netanyahu say, "Look, I heard what you had to say and I understand why you did not like what you heard from me. Come let's work this out together." That is what I would like to see happen.

But my target today is not the Prime Minister and not the President – it is the doomsayers – who would sound the alarm to try and get us to abandon the building rather than stay and do the hard work that needs to be done.

The prophets of doom, who would declare this speech, this president as a disaster and a tragedy for the Jewish people and for Israel – are not really presenting an analysis of the president they are presenting a strategy of distraction – and it would be just as sad and tragic for us to allow ourselves to be distracted from the important work that lies before us – as it was for that young woman – who put off having a baby to declare the coming end of the world.

Allow me to teach you a midrash. It is from the collection known as Avot D'rebi Natan chapter 31. It is quoted in the name of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai who lived at a truly apocalyptic time. He was there at the destruction of the Temple by the Romans – he was a key Jewish leader at the time of the Jewish exile, an exile that would last for the next 2000 years. He lived at a time when there was no shortage of Jewish doomsayers who were declaring – with good

evidence – that the world was coming to an end. And even though the Temple was in flames, the Jewish people decimated – Rabbi Yochanan taught a very different kind of torah. Here is what he taught: “If you are planting a tree and someone comes up to you and shouts, ‘the messiah has come, the messiah has come,’ finish planting the tree and then go greet the messiah.”

What a remarkable teaching – from one of the key figures responsible for the survival of the Jewish people at one of its most critical junctures. It was Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai who escaped from a Jerusalem in flames in order to establish an academy of torah at Yavneh. It was Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai who refused to be distracted from the important work of building a better tomorrow precisely when today seemed lost.

Why should you finish planting the tree? I mean if the messiah is here – who needs another tree? But, the wisdom of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, was – if we stopped and dropped everything anytime someone shouted fire – no trees would ever get planted. So finish planting your tree – if the messiah has truly come – he’ll still be there when you are finished.

You see that’s what I would have said to that woman – go have your baby. Don’t put it off to embrace the messiah. Plant your tree and then go greet the messiah.

This is the wisdom of our sacred tradition. We finished today the third of the five books of Moses. And we re-enacted a simple but beautiful tradition – that we Jews have been doing for thousands of years. Upon the completion of the reading – we all stood up and we chanted out loud – *hazak, hazak, v’nithazeyk. Be strong! Be strong! And we will strengthen each other!* Why did we do that? What is the point of that custom and what is the purpose of those words at that moment?

It is somewhat unsettling – even a bit frightening to come to the end of a book. To finish any endeavor creates in us a sense of unease. We conclude one chapter and we know what it contained – we were comfortable and familiar with its contents. But now it is over – and we are not sure where to go from here. We hope there will be a next chapter to begin, a new chapter to embrace – but we can’t be sure, we are not certain – so we come to this end – any end with a sense of fear and trepidation. And our tradition – in its wonderful and magnificent wisdom – it meets us just at such a moment of fear and tells us – don’t be afraid.

We stand up – together – as a community and we say: *hazak, hazak, v’nithazeyk. Be strong! Be strong! And we will strengthen each other!* No need to panic. No need to sound the alarm. All will be well. Be strong my friend – and we will be there to strengthen each other. We will get through this together – as we always have. The end of the world? I don’t think so.

To a people worried about the future of Israel – I share your concern. It is clear that yesterday marks the end of something and the beginning of something new. I understand your fear – it is my fear as well. *Hazak, hazak, v’nithazeyk. Be strong! Be strong! And we will strengthen each other!* No need to panic. No need to sound the alarm. It is no coincidence that thousands of Jews, thousands of Israel’s supporters will gather in Washington this coming week for the AIPAC convention. Prime Minister Netanyahu will speak. President Obama will speak. The conversation will be engaged and the work will begin. All will be well. Because we will be there for each other as we have always been. Be strong my friend and let us do the work that needs

to be done. There are trees that need planting.

To my precious young couples about to be married – to Jordana and Adin; to Jessica and Aaron – we, this community who cares for you and loves you – we wish you well. Are you a bit nervous as you begin this new chapter in your lives? We understand -- *Hazak, hazak, v'nithazeyk. Be strong! Be strong! And we will strengthen each other!* You are blessed with remarkable families who love you and will be there for you. You have the support of a caring community that will do what ever you need us to in order to help you. But have confidence in the incredible people you have become – embrace this moment, and your love and move forward with confidence into your new tomorrow. There are trees that need planting.

And Jordanna – our Bat Mitzvah woman. Please come forward. We are so proud of you – that you to confronted your fears, and celebrated what we hope you now see is a moment of great strength and celebration -- *Hazak, hazak, v'nithazeyk. Be strong! Be strong! And we will strengthen each other!* There are trees that need planting.