



JEWISH COMMENTARY

The Wonder of the Abraham Accords

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

THREE DAYS before Rosh Hashanah, I heard the most unexpectedly stirring sermon of the High Holy Day season. The pulpit from which it was delivered might have been unusual, but it was a sermon just the same, complete with a *devar Torah*, an inspiring biblical insight. The location was the South Lawn of the White House, where a largely Jewish audience gathered to celebrate the signing of the “Abraham Accords.”

Standing on the Truman Balcony with the president and the foreign ministers of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, the prime minister of Israel spoke of how war had marked his life: how a comrade had died in his arms, how his brother Yoni had perished at Entebbe, how his parents never ceased to mourn for their eldest son. Benjamin Netanyahu then added that it was only because Israel had ensured its security and strength that peace was possible, because “ultimately, strength brings peace.” Then he suddenly cited sacred scripture:

King David expressed this basic truth thousands of years ago in our eternal capital of Jerusalem. His prayer immortalized in the Book of Psalms in the Bible echoes from our glorious past and guides us towards a brilliant future. *Adonai oz le'amo yiten; Adonai yevarekh et-*

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.

amo va'shalom. May God give strength to His people. May God bless His people with peace.

The biblical reference captured the astonishing transformation in diplomacy that had occurred. The premise of the Oslo Accords of 1993 had been that Israel had to “take risks” for peace, that only an Israel that was willing to make itself weaker could reach an agreement with the Palestinians, and that only peace with the Palestinians would allow for normalization with the Arab world. Israelis soured on these risks when what followed was not peace, but bus bombings and cafe massacres. Now, in a region terrified of Iran, it is not Israeli weakness but strength that makes it so attractive, and an agreement with the Palestinians has been deemed unnecessary for normalization with other Arab countries.

The achievement is not only political in nature. Right before the accord signings, the president’s adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner presented the king of Bahrain with a Torah scroll. As the Israeli journalist David Horovitz put it, the moment was “tender and moving—with the gazes of both men focused on the velvet-covered scroll rather than each other, respectful of it.” Strikingly, the verse cited by Netanyahu is sung in synagogue every Sabbath as the Torah is returned to the Ark, hinting thereby that what is occurring is *religious rapprochement*, an embrace by two Islamic countries of the world’s center of Judaism. Israel has a cold peace with Egypt and Jordan, but nowhere in these countries is Judaism flourishing. In contrast, the Abraham Accords were followed by shofar soundings and sukkahs in Dubai, and

the crown prince of the UAE insisted that he hoped to see Passover programs filling hotels in the Emirates.

The prime minister's allusion to the "eternal capital" of Israel is therefore noteworthy, for it may well have been the moving of the American Embassy to Jerusalem in 2018 that set the stage for what was to come. When the United States formally recognized the Jewish people's bond with Judaism's most sacred city, the much-prophesied uprisings of the Arab street failed to materialize. This belied the sacred creeds of the intellectuals, indicating that at least part of the Arab world was prepared for an independent, flourishing Judaism in the Middle East. It was a sign, in other words, that a recognition of the Divine blessing of strength on the Jewish people can be followed by the miraculous achievement of peace.

Following the accords, some who opine on Israel for a living have begun to reexamine their priors. "Maybe we were wrong," mused the headline of a piece by Aaron David Miller, a Middle East specialist who served several administrations. Not all, however, have been so graciously self-reflective. Writing in the *Atlantic*, Jeffrey Goldberg mocked the name given to the agreement as a "genius marketing move," scoffing that "I would have preferred the 'Isaac and Ishmael Summit,' or 'The Treaty of Ghent,' for that matter." The snarky bitterness is unbecoming, but the irony is that in the midst of Goldberg's diatribe lies an unintended and profound truth. Given the calendar, the "Isaac-Ishmael summit" is a *perfect* name for that High Holiday gathering, for it captures the larger theological import of the breakthrough.

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, Jews around the world read from the Torah about the separation of Ishmael, by God, from a heartbroken Abraham, and the angel of the Almighty saving Ishmael in the desert. On one of our holiest days, the Jewish focus is, for a moment, not on Isaac, but on the Almighty's concern for his elder brother. The Jewish people, no matter how persecuted, always made manifest the bond between them and the rest of humanity, yearning for a moment not when all nations will become Jews but when all will recognize the truth of Abra-

ham's mission, and amity between enemies would be achieved.

The Abraham Accords is a moment to be remembered in Jewish history and an achievement in American diplomacy that, no matter what occurs in the election, deserves to be studied and celebrated. It ought to inspire us to ask what else "experts" might have been missing. What other aspects of the Arab-Israeli divide, once thought unbridgeable, can now be contemplated? Most interesting is a question raised by several Israeli writers: Is it now time to take a new approach to the

Temple Mount? If parts of the Arab world can at least come to terms with a Jewish Jerusalem, is there a possibility that not only Muslims but also Jews can pray at Judaism's most sacred site?

Three days after we sat on the South Lawn of the White House, I stood in the synagogue overseeing Rosh Hashanah services unlike any other. What was usually a packed sanctuary was this year marked by masked worshippers socially distanced from one another. We prayed, of course, for a return to health and normalcy, but we knew the pandemic would continue to impact our lives for months to come. In Jerusalem, a resurgence of the virus would lead to a shutdown of synagogues and a Western Wall largely devoid of worshippers. But in the midst of the depressing nature of that moment, I read from the Torah, to the congregation, of Ishmael, of God's

concern for Abraham's eldest son.

For the first time, its text to me embodied not an abstract aspiration, but something that, in a very small way, seemed directed to us in our time. And then, as the Torah was returned, a millennia-old verse was suddenly sung, sanctified by the dreams of Jewish generations yet in the moment endowed with renewed relevance: *Adonai oz le'amo yiten; Adonai yevarekh et-amo va'shalom.*

It was a reminder that even amid our caustic politics and trials, we still live in an age of wonder of which our ancestors could only have dreamed, and that in such an age it was not unreasonable to have hope in the year to come—perhaps even more wondrous things than Passover programs in the United Arab Emirates will happen next year in Jerusalem. 🍷

On one of our holiest days, the Jewish focus is, for a moment, not on Isaac, but on the Almighty's concern for his elder brother. The Jewish people, no matter how persecuted, always made manifest the bond between them and the rest of humanity, yearning for a moment not when all nations will become Jews but when all will recognize the truth of Abraham's mission, and amity between enemies would be achieved.
