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## JEWISH COMMENTARY

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# ‘I Will Not Fail Thee Nor Forsake Thee’

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

AS THE 80TH ANNIVERSARY of D-Day was marked in early June, many recalled the address given in Normandy by Ronald Reagan 40 years earlier—his celebration of the “boys of Pointe du Hoc.” In a biblically inspired speech, Reagan described General Matthew Ridgeway listening in the darkness the night before the assault and pondering God’s words to Joshua in the Bible: “I will not fail thee nor forsake thee.” Reagan concluded by vowing: “Let our actions say to them the words for which Matthew Ridgeway listened: ‘I will not fail thee nor forsake thee.’”

The speech is justly celebrated and remembered. A year later, on Veterans Day in 1985, Reagan delivered another set of remarks at Arlington National Cemetery inspired by the same story. This now-obscure event deserves to be recalled as I write, with the White House demanding of Israel a permanent cease-fire in Gaza. Reagan’s Veterans Day remarks were not merely a masterpiece of rhetoric; they succinctly summarize a larger moral and political point about the necessity of war and the mistakes statesmen make about peace. It is a speech with eerie relevance to the moment in Israel today, and to the role of America in the world.

At Arlington, the president, as at Normandy, spoke of the sacrifices made by those who fell. But he then emphasized another theme—one largely absent

from the Pointe du Hoc remarks—that sadly, those who died had had to fight in the first place because their leaders had failed them, because statesmen had spoken of a “peace process” that was merely an excuse to allow evil to fester.

The living have a responsibility to remember the conditions that led to the wars in which our heroes died. Perhaps we can start by remembering this: that all of those who died for us and our country were, in one way or another, victims of a peace process that failed; victims of a decision to forget certain things; to forget, for instance, that the surest way to keep a peace going is to stay strong. Weakness, after all, is a temptation—it tempts the pugnacious to assert themselves—but strength is a declaration that cannot be misunderstood. Strength is a condition that declares actions have consequences. Strength is a prudent warning to the belligerent that aggression need not go unanswered.

One is reminded here of a 1999 Edward Luttwak article in *Foreign Affairs* titled “Give War a Chance.” It is, Luttwak reflects, a truth that is often overlooked that “although war is a great evil, it does have a great virtue: it can resolve political conflicts and lead to peace.” The foreign-policy establishment, Luttwak writes, assumes that a cease-fire is always a good thing. In fact, it is all too often an act of what Luttwak calls “premature peacemaking.” A cease-fire, he notes, “tends to arrest

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war-induced exhaustion and lets belligerents reconstitute and rearm their forces. It intensifies and prolongs the struggle once the cease-fire ends—and it usually does end.” Only through total destruction of the enemy can true peace be achieved, while mercy in the form of a cease-fire only allows evil to persist.

A statesman’s stated preference for “peace” is not always a virtue. Harry Truman’s aide Clark Clifford once recounted a moment in which the president was showing Winston Churchill the redesign of the presidential seal, featuring an eagle clutching arrows in one set of talons and an olive branch in the other. The eagle’s head, he explained, once faced the arrows, but it had now been changed; it was turned toward the olive branch to show a preference for peace. Churchill supposedly replied, “Why not put the eagle’s neck on a swivel so that it could turn to the right or left as the occasion presented itself?”

In a similar sense, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik once noted that while many religious thinkers wrongly celebrate love as an emotion that is always appropriate, the Bible often calls us to respond to the needs of the times by executing an emotional pivot, from loving actions to violent ones. Rabbi Soloveitchik reflects that we may well wonder “at the ease” with which the emotional tenor of the Bible suddenly switches: “The transition from norms based on sympathy and love to laws calling for stern, sometimes ruthless, action, is almost imperceptible.” This scriptural swivel, he reflected, highlights that for Judaism, a true concern for peace necessitates the destruction of evil; and that, he argued, requires “active opposition,” as well as a “detestation of everything that is base and ugly.”

This central lesson of our civilization seems to have been forgotten—particularly by Reagan’s successor in the White House today. Joe Biden argued in late May that a death cult that burned families alive, raped women, beheaded babies, and continues to announce its intentions to seek Israel’s annihilation is capable of embracing peace:

Indefinite war in pursuit of an unidentified notion of “total victory” will not bring Israel in—will not bring down—bog down—will only bog down Israel in Gaza, draining the economic, military, and human—and human resources, and furthering Israel’s isolation in the world. Hamas says it wants a cease-fire.

This deal is an opportunity to prove whether they really mean it.

*Whether they really mean it?* It was seemingly in response to such thinking that Reagan at Arlington spoke:

Peace also fails when we forget to bring to the bargaining table God’s first gift to man: common sense. Common sense gives us a realistic knowledge of human beings and how they think, how they live in the world, what motivates them. Common sense tells us that man has magic in him, but also clay. Common sense can tell the difference between right and wrong. Common sense forgives error, but it always recognizes it to be error first.

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“We endanger the peace,” Reagan reflected, “and confuse all issues when we obscure the truth; when we refuse to name an act for what it is.” Only after making this clear did Reagan refer to the American obligation to those who had died; only then did he invoke the Ridgeway story:

Peace fails when we forget to pray to the source of all peace and life and happiness. I think sometimes of General Matthew Ridgeway, who, the night before D-day, tossed sleepless on his cot and talked to the Lord and listened for the promise that God made to Joshua: “I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.”...

Let us make a compact today with the dead, a promise in the words for which General Ridgeway listened, “I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.”

The point, then, is that neither to fail nor to forsake those who died is not merely to bear their memory, but to ensure that the earlier mistakes that necessitated their sacrifice not be repeated. It is this attitude, Reagan reflected, that must be made manifest in American leadership: “Peace fails when we forget what we stand for. It fails when we forget that our Republic is based on firm principles, principles that have real meaning, that with them, we are the last, best hope of man on Earth; without them, we’re little more than the crust of a continent.”

Eighty years after D-Day, we may well wonder how many leaders are still willing to give war a chance. 