

## FOR OUR FAILURES

Delivered by  
Rabbi Floyd Herman  
on  
Yom Kippur Morning  
2007 - 5768  
Temple Beth Shalom - Sandhills Jewish  
Congregation  
Jackson Springs, North Carolina

This is a day of self-examination; a day to assess our successes and even more our failures. It is a day to think about where we have gone astray as individuals and as a society. It is a day to speak of our failures as a nation and a people.

The poet, James Russell Lowell once wrote:

*“Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide....”*

On this day of days, when the fate of all of us and of nations hangs in the balance, it is especially imperative that we decide, decide not just to speak the pious words printed on the dusty pages of the prayer book, but to speak truth to power, to speak in the name of those who cannot speak, to speak about the events that shape our world and our lives.

I am usually reluctant, on this day, to speak about current events lest I be accused of preaching partisan politics. Unfortunately, we live in such a partisan time that any statement about anything that is happening in the world is liable to be seen as partisan. I have political views. Many of you know how I feel about many issues. But there are moral sides to every issue and I shall attempt, this morning, to present a moral perspective, my moral perspective, to be sure, hopefully a Jewish moral perspective, on a couple of major issues of our day. I hope not to abuse the privilege of this pulpit nor the trust which you have placed in me.

But I believe that the *“time has come when silence is betrayal,”* to quote the words of Dr. Martin Luther King. In 1967, Dr. King said,

*“Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government’s policy, especially in time of war. Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one’s own bosom and in the surrounding world. Moreover, when the issues at hand seem as*



*perplexed as they often do in the case of this dreadful conflict we are always on the verge of being mesmerized by uncertainty; but we must move on.”*

Dr. King was, of course speaking about the Vietnam War, but his words apply equally to this disastrous conflict in which we have been engaged for far too long in Iraq. We do not easily assume the task of opposing our government’s policy. We do not move without great difficulty against the apathy of conformist thought within ourselves and within our world. And what can we say when the issues are so perplexing, so uncertain, so difficult?

It is not my aim this morning to recount all the reasons we should never have been in Iraq in the first place. Some of you know that I come very close to being a pacifist. War, armed conflict, is always for me the last resort. I was always opposed to the invasion of Iraq. I could not understand what we could accomplish there. If we could contain the Soviet Union with its real weapons of mass destruction for all those decades, why could we not continue to contain Iraq with its unproved weapons of mass destruction? Saddam Hussein, that great enemy was, in the beginning and in the end, nothing more than a paper tiger. Our great friends the Israelis knew this. Somehow our President and his advisors and most of the members of Congress did not.



Iraq War (Windows of Suffering #11)  
David Baker

But all of that is past history. We are there. We have not improved the lives of the people of Iraq. In spite of the President’s assertion this week that “ordinary life” is returning to Iraqi citizens, reports on the ground belie his assertion. Four million Iraqis have been displaced by this war. Some have left the country; others have been relocated into ethnic or tribal areas. Sunnis and Shiites live in separate walled compounds, afraid for their lives to venture out of their neighborhoods. Neighborhoods have become religiously pure. Even in Bagdad there is electricity only a couple of hours a day; the water is undrinkable. Life is hardly ordinary even by the standards of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, much less by our standards.

And we have not brought democracy to Iraq. Perhaps we never will, at least not what we think of as democracy. Free elections do not always work. We tried to impose democracy in Germany after World War One. Nazism was the result. We tried to bring free

elections to the Palestinians. Hamas was the victor and the Palestinians are fighting each other and are no closer to peace with Israel than they were before the elections. And what some have called democracy in Iraq has devolved into sectarian and tribal warfare. I hesitate to quote the President of Iran, but last May he wrote an open letter to President Bush which can be instructive of the ideas and attitudes prevalent in that part of the world. In this letter he said:

*“Liberalism and Western-style democracy have not been able to help realize the ideals of humanity. Today, these two concepts have failed....Whether we like it or not, the world is gravitating towards faith in the Almighty and justice and the will of God will prevail over all things.”*

Ahmadinejad was not speaking of our kind of justice. This is not democracy as we know it.

And so here we are, bogged down in a civil war in a place in which we should never have been. There is enough blame to go around for what has happened in Iraq and our role in it. Thomas Ricks, prize winning Pentagon reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* and now the *Washington Post*, in his book, *Fiasco*, puts the blame on everybody within the government. Of course, most of it is reserved for the President and his advisors. And some of us think the President still doesn't get it. The *New York Times* editorialized yesterday,



*“If anything was clear from General Petraeus’s testimony and the president’s prime-time speech, it was that Mr. Bush has no idea how to end the war in a way that salvages as much as possible of America’s treasury, blood and global image while limiting the chaos that would follow any withdrawal, whether it comes quickly or slowly. Mr. Bush’s only idea is to keep the war going until he leaves office, and that means that other co-equal branch of government, the Congress, will have to lead the way out.”*

And Ricks claims, quite rightly I believe, that after 9/11 Congress retreated to the basement of the Capital and was not heard from for six years. There was no oversight. There was no questioning of plans or assumptions or failures.

And the generals are no less culpable. It is the role of the military leadership to speak up when they question the plans of their civilian bosses. Most remained silent. Those who did speak up quickly lost their jobs.

And we were silent too. Where were the American people, including me, who opposed the war, who thought that the war was ill advised? Did I say enough? Probably not. I remember a convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in the 70’s. Then we debated the Vietnam War endlessly. At the convention after the invasion of Iraq a resolution was introduced which supported the troops but barely questioned the wisdom of the war. I took the floor to ask, “*Why are we not debating the policy of our government?*” Many of my colleagues seemed to nod in agreement, but there was no debate. Whatever innocuous resolution was passed, passed quickly and I too remained silent.

It was not until this year that the Reform movement passed a resolution which spoke seriously about the war. It sums up how deficient and delinquent was the mandate for war, at least in terms of what might constitute a just and necessary war. Here is part of what it says:

*“...our failure to pursue all reasonable alternatives to war, to mobilize the kind of broad-based international cooperation we had in the first Gulf War, the array of faulty justifications for war offered, the woeful lack of planning for the aftermath of the invasion, the disgraceful*

*failure to protect the civilian infrastructure, the abuses of prisoners, the alarming devastation wrought on civilians – all these and more raise significant abuses and failures of Jewish just war standards.”*

And yet we are there. We have been there longer than we were involved in winning World War II. We are likely to be there, according to our military experts and the administration, for a long time. Some say as long as 50 years. So what can be done to extricate ourselves from this military and political debacle?

First, we must continue to commend and support all our service men and women and their families who have answered duty's call and served our nation honorably, sometimes over and over and over again. And we must insist that they receive generous benefits including quality health care. To ignore the physical and mental health of our returning troops and their families is morally wrong.

Second, we must begin a phased withdrawal of our troops. Most experts have convinced me that no matter what we do in the matter of withdrawing our troops - or not - will be wrong. If we do not begin immediately to bring them home, then we will be there for many, many years. At the same time, if we bring all of them home immediately, it seems pretty certain

that the civil war will escalate and the safe haven we created for Al Qaeda will continue to grow. We have made so many mistakes that we are bound to make other mistakes as we try to extricate ourselves from the mess.

One of my colleagues has suggested that we withdraw our troops to the borders of Iraq, especially those with Iran and Syria. Our role would be to try to keep Iranian and Syrian extremists out of the country. Our troops would seal the borders. I am not sure this is a workable plan from a military perspective, but it is at least a plan worthy of discussion. And it would, perhaps, bring most of our troops home.

It would also, perhaps, give the Iraqis a chance to settle their ongoing civil war without outside interference. We can offer all sorts of economic incentives as well as high level, expert diplomatic support to try to ease tensions and help the Iraqis themselves restore a semblance of law and order.

But we cannot ever settle their centuries old tribal and religious aggression against each other. Most of us do not even understand the basis of their hatred. They must be willing to make some kind of accommodations for themselves: perhaps establishing three separate ethno/religious areas under some kind of loose federalism. We must begin to limit our role so that the Iraqis will begin to deal with their problems on their own.

The sad part of all of this is that we got into an unwinnable war, no matter what the President and some members of Congress continue to say. We have done serious damage to a country, even as we removed a brutal despot. And as much as I would like to see all our troops come home tomorrow, I don't

“The sad part of all of this is that we got into an unwinnable war, no matter what the President and some members of Congress continue to say. We have done serious damage to a country, even as we removed a brutal despot. And as much as I would like to see all our troops come home tomorrow, I don't see how that is possible, militarily and even more importantly, morally.”

see how that is possible, militarily and even more importantly, morally.

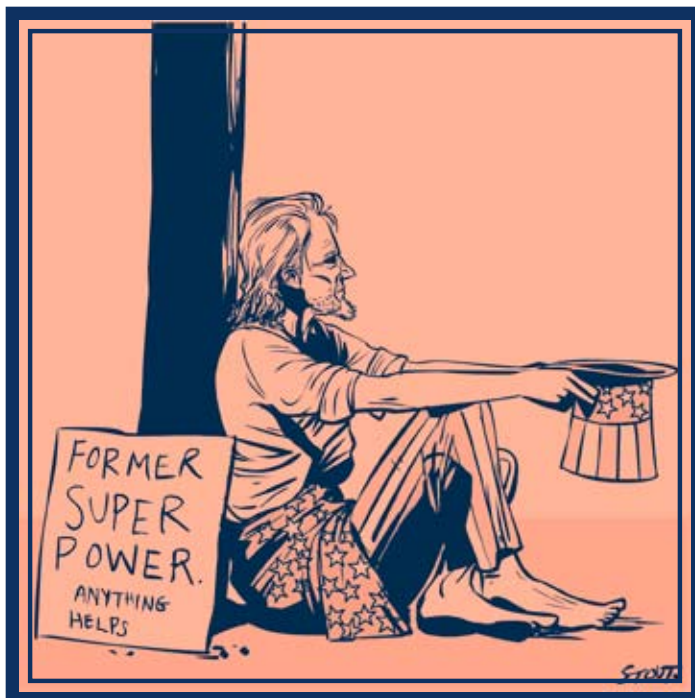
I believe that all Americans would wish our troops could all come home tomorrow. I also believe that it is long past time for Congress to begin to defund the war. Unfortunately, the Senate cannot even pass a bill which would require our brave and exhausted troops to spend as much time at home as they do in Iraq. Even though a majority of Americans and a majority of members of Congress believe Congress must begin to pass binding resolutions and laws to begin to draw down the troops and cut off the funds, the arcane rules of debate require every vote to pass by 60%. Therefore nothing happens.

That same New York Times editorial continued:

*“Democrats and Republicans who oppose the war have a duty to outline alternatives. Those who call for staying in Iraq have a duty to explain what victory means and how they plan to achieve it. Both sides are shirking an obligation to deal with issues that must be resolved right now, like the crisis involving asylum for Iraqis who helped the American occupation. Congress is the first place for this kind of work. Right now, it seems like the last place it will happen.”*

It is long past time for us, American citizens, to let our leaders know, both the administration and Congress, that four and a half years is enough. We may not have all the strategies for getting out, but we must begin. And one way is to stop spending the billions we have been spending half way across the world in a war which our leading general admits that he is not sure has made America safer.

It disgusts me to think about how much money has been wasted in Iraq. Yesterday, it was reported that the war so far, has cost half a trillion dollars. It costs three billion dollars a week and if we keep even fifty thousand troops there for fifty years it will cost two trillion dollars. These numbers are, to me, staggering, especially when we know how much poverty there is here in America. Do you know that there are more than thirty-seven million Americans who live below the poverty line and millions more hover barely above it? We all too often close our eyes and ears to their plight and do not take up the call for justice on their behalf.



The Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the representative body of fourteen national agencies and 125 local community relations councils, is a leader in the effort to put Jewish values into action. This year they have embarked on the “Food Stamp Challenge”. Their leaders, in the week between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, have launched a nationwide Jewish anti-poverty campaign dedicated to raising the profile of hunger and poverty in the United States and mobilizing the Jewish community in a concerted effort to combat it.

Several national leaders, this week lived on the national average food stamp benefit of just \$1 per meal per day - \$21 per week. Twenty-six million Americans, over



half of them children, currently depend on this program for the most basic nutritional substance. While I did not do this while I was here, Sukkot is also a perfect time to identify with the poor by participating in this challenge. I intend to try it. I encourage you to try it too.

(You can find the Jewish Council for Public Affairs at [jewishpublic.org](http://jewishpublic.org). The website is not easy to navigate. A more interesting site is the Social Action tab at the Union for Reform Judaism website, [urj.org](http://urj.org). From the social action page search for “food stamp challenge” and find a blog that Rabbi David Saperstein kept during his week.)

I can remember when we tried to spend only \$20 a week on groceries. But that was almost 50 years ago when \$20 went a lot farther than it does today. It is hard to walk out of any supermarket with only one or two meals in my basket and not spend more than the \$42 that would be allotted for Barbara and me. Sadly, there is still poverty in this country and the numbers are growing.

This is the wealthiest country in the world and yet it is the only industrialized country in the West which does not provide health care for all its citizens. About forty-seven million Americans do not have health insurance. That is 16% of our population. Forty-seven million people are more than the combined population of the twenty-four smallest states in the Union. Nine million children are uninsured. And the attempt to reauthorize the Childrens' Health Care Bill, S-CHIP, a program supported by the organized Jewish community, almost every governor and most members of Congress is threatened with a veto. The President says it will lead to national health insurance, read socialized medicine.

Universal health care will be an important issue in the next presidential election. It is important for us to make sure that every candidate, no matter the party, has a plan. And it is not impossible to provide health care for all. We already have a national health insurance program. In the 60's, Ronald Regan pumped up the warnings against this program of “socialized medicine” by saying if it becomes a reality, *“you and I are going to spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in America when men were free.”* We call it Medicare, and while it is not perfect, I am not sure that any of us in this sanctuary today who are Medicare recipients would be willing to give it up.

Forty years after the declaration of the “War on Poverty,” by President Johnson, there are still too many poor people in this wealthy nation. I know, there are many reasons for poverty – lack of education, illiteracy, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, lack of opportunity, and the like. All of these need to be addressed. But if we can spend billions of dollars half way across the world in an ill advised war and an ill planned

follow up, surely we must find the will to spend some of our resources to help those in our own country who are in need. This is more than a political issue. It is a moral issue.

I am sure you know this discussion could go on and on and on. There are more failures in our society which need to be addressed. Perhaps in the days and months ahead we shall continue our discussions. And I am sure there are some here today who do not agree with what I have said. I hope you will share your point of view with me.

For now, let me conclude with the glorious and prophetic words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who wrote,

*“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is a thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. The ‘tide in the affairs of men’ does not remain at the flood; it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: ‘Too late.’ There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or our neglect. ‘The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on....’ We still have a choice.”*



Mordechai Rosenstein

This day, Hayom, is our day of choice. The invisible Book of Life will be sealed on this day for another year. So goes the metaphor in our prayers. May we choose life, this day and always. May we work to end war and destruction, poverty and illness. May we do our part so that we and our world will be inscribed in the Book of Life for blessing and peace.

Amen.

*I am grateful for my discussions with my friend and colleague, Rabbi Bradd Boxman, and for the insights he provided me as I prepared this sermon.*