

**THE PURPOSE OF A NATION AND ITS CITIZENS; MICAH 6:6-8, 1COR. 1:18,25-31, MATT. 5:1-12; 1.29.17; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC**

I want to talk today about Israel, America, the purpose of a nation-state, and our lessons – the prophet who asks what kind of commitment is needed to sustain Israel, the apostle who invites the factions in Corinth to depend upon the wisdom of God and Matthew who extols the virtues of everyday folks. One of the most challenging visits on our tour in Israel was to Yad Vashem – Israel’s Holocaust memorial.

In 2005, the structure that houses the Holocaust memorabilia and narrative was built. It looks like a huge spike driven into the heart of the adjacent hill into which it is embedded. The long narrow tunnel (much larger once you are inside) has a skylight that runs the length of the building to remind visitors that the atrocities of the Holocaust took place in broad daylight.

The long hallway that is the museum dips to signify the lowest point of the Holocaust where Death Camp exhibits are featured; the tunnel then rises and leads into an open porch that looks onto one of Jerusalem’s newest suburbs; a fitting conclusion to the Shoah or ‘calamity’ the name the rabbis gave the Holocaust, making the point that it ended not in the eradication of the Jewish people as Hitler hoped but in a flourishing modern Israel, through remarkable courage and resolve.

But it is the early exhibits that come back to haunt. Just inside the entrance is a video projected onto a wall of a Jewish festival from the early 1920s that took place in Eastern Europe – where the pogroms, ghettoization, mass shootings and finally death camps were located; in the video, only a few years before Hitler’s rise, people are dancing, celebrating, and a large children’s chorus singing.

As you enter the museum through a set of doors you turn your back on the continuously running video; a stark reminder how the world turned its back on the Jews as they were methodically isolated, demonized and murdered.

From Yad Vashem we traveled across town to the Shalom Harman Institute – a think tank founded several decades ago by Rabbi David Hartman in honor of his father Shalom Hartman. The Institute occupies a modern building with a courtyard in the center surrounded by a balcony that runs along the second floor. The purpose of the Institute is to encourage and explore multi-faith dialogue and understanding, pluralism and the factors and forces that oppose or support it.

Rabbi Leon Morris, an American who has migrated to Israel with his family and is now an Israeli citizen led a conversation with our group that raised the question of the purpose of modern Israel.

Rabbi Morris presented us with two documents: one, a brief speech given by the chief of the Israeli Defense Forces at Auschwitz on the anniversary of the Remembrance of Holocaust Martyrs and Heroes in May of 2008.

The other, an essay by David Hartman suggesting that the purpose of the modern state of Israel is to create a secular society based upon and infused with the highest ideals of Jewish law and tradition.

It is a debate I hope we will engage here in the United States after the first week of the new administration – that is, what is the purpose, not of the State of Israel, but of the United States of America? Israel offers some poignant parallels.

If Yad Vashem was difficult, so was the discussion at Hartman. The tension the rabbi wanted us to engage was between a nation state that exists solely for itself in the narrowest terms or a nation state that exists to welcome and work for the wellbeing of all people.

General Ashkenazi's Auschwitz speech was nearly a call to arms: "The Star of David is no longer a mark of disgrace, but a symbol and a sign of the resurrection of the Jewish people. As the commander of the Israel Defense Forces, I stand here with pride and honor and pledge – 'Never Again!' Never again shall we stand helpless, crying for the mercy of others, never again shall we beg to be defended. Never!"

Beyond its own self defense what is the purpose of a nation? At what point does a nation permit free speech and a free press even when some who enjoy those freedoms will use them to oppose the core values upon which that nation is founded? At what point does a nation limit, or not, its racial, ethnic and religious diversity?

Israel answered that question in 1948 when it was founded as a democratic state; bravely embracing, just three years after the end of the war and Hitler's final solution to eradicate Jews from the face of the earth, Israel answered that question by becoming an open society because the Jews who founded the new State of Israel knew the history of their people; for thousands of years and specifically during the decades of the 30s and 40s in much of Europe they were subject to unimaginable suffering under totalitarianism.

Our founders, who migrated to these shores three hundred years ago to escape oppression under monarchical rule embraced what was then an experiment in democracy – because they too, like the Jews of 1948, knew that anything short of an open society with democratic freedoms soon becomes the tool of oppression for those in power.

Israel is at a crossroads. Nearly every geo-political discussion we had there raised the question of Israel choosing to be a Jewish state at the expense of its democracy. That is, Israel's security fence and expanding settlements in the Palestinian territories were raised as obstacles to the democratic values upon which Israel is founded.

Few Israelis dispute this. Yet, the security fence was built not to keep immigrants out, as President Trump seems to think when he says that the wall in Israel is a model for his wall with Mexico; rather, Israel's wall was to keep terrorist suicide bombers from passing through the territories into Israeli society – as they had freely done for years until the fence was built.

Nevertheless, how long can such a fence exist that contains and curbs the movement of those who reside within it, without at some point, violating the open society the state claims to be? Yet, to make the Palestinian territories a sovereign nation state with its own borders and military and Israel will create a foe perfectly placed and equipped to fulfill the aim of the PLO and Hamas to dissolve the Jewish state.

Most of us came home from Israel more confused, more perplexed about Israel's future and, at least in my case, sympathetic to the argument that any remedy or peace accord, if it is to endure and be accepted by both sides, must evolve from the ground up rather than be imposed from the top down by an international vote.

The vision of the folks at the Hartman Institute that the modern State of Israel ought to embody the highest ideals and principles of Jewish law and tradition reminded me of proud moments in our own history and leadership like George Washington when he stepped down after serving as president rather than choosing to become a de facto king as he could have; or Abraham Lincoln extending and expanding Constitutional rights to all citizens including slaves freed by the Civil War; or Teddy Roosevelt advocating worker rights for men, women and children who were being abused by the robber barons of industry; or Reinhold Niebuhr and Rabbi Abraham Heschel who viewed from their Judeo Christian perspective the proper role of our nation to be the pursuit of justice.

Yet, the pendulum swings in two directions. There have been dark moments in our history as well: the incarceration of Japanese during WWII, McCarthy paranoia in the 1950s regarding communist infiltration of the government; Jim Crow laws following Reconstruction in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and after the 1960s Civil Rights movement.

These were occasions when the democratic values and principles that have made the United States the leader of the free world were retracted out of fear. It appears after the first week of the new administration that we have entered a new era of fear – grounded in an inauguration speech that identified little but carnage across the land, the free reign of gangs and violence, and the end of our economic strength.

Consider the first acts of the president: a cascade of executive orders that seek to close the borders and threaten the safety and welfare of hundreds of thousands of people – women, refugees, immigrants, Muslims, native Americans, black people, and all working people in need of healthcare.

A wall with our southern neighbor has been ordered to be constructed, so-called sanctuary cities will be punished, the repeal of the Affordable Care Act is underway, climate change is denied in the same week we are told rising sea-levels greater than expected will destroy whole coastal cities, gag orders on climate scientists and the mainstream press shut out and told to shut up.

Just as Israel is questioning the future of its democracy because it has limited the freedoms of Palestinians to staunch what was methodical terrorist bombing of civilians at public gatherings; so it is time for us to question if we are jeopardizing the democratic principles and pluralistic vision the United States is founded upon.

Not in self defense because we are being periodically bombed by terrorists but because the Trump administration is placing nationalism over the cherished vision and values that have defined America at its best.

This is not an academic or partisan political issue but a moral debate with irrevocable consequences for millions of people.

Today's lessons offer a biblical view of the principles upon which a nation depends; Micah identifies the role of a citizen of the state, Paul a citizen of the church.

The scene in Micah is a trial. Israel has placed her faith in commodities; she thinks God will be pleased with burnt offerings, calves a year old, thousands of rams, and rivers of oil. Rather, a deeper commitment is needed says Micah, the Lord requires you to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

In his letter to the church in Corinth Paul tells a congregation – in which different groups each claim to possess the truth – to remember that God chose the lowly and foolish to shame lofty and the wise.

If there is any take away from the first days of a new administration it is that we are human – we the citizens and leaders of the nation.

It is hard to imagine that any more evidence is needed to see that our new president is inducing, apart from his economic ideas and proposals, fear of the other, so that we will not object to giving up inalienable rights on the one hand; and on the other hand, his repeated promises of vast and terrific economic abundance, seem aimed at silencing our protests against abuse of the environment, abuse of the media, and exclusion of marginalized citizens of including poor white people, who our constitution was designed to protect.

It was at just such a moment when the future of Israel hung in the balance that Micah called the people back to a higher and nobler vision – *to do justice*, that is, redistribute power and wealth and correct the inequalities that marginalized some for the enhancement of a few; *love kindness*, that is, do everything we can to build strong, healthy neighborhoods for all people, not just enclaves for the rich; *and to walk humbly with God*, that is to remember who we are and abandon self-inflating nationalism and supremacist racial ideology.

The most haunting displays at Yad Vashem were those that told the story of the days just before genocide when the newly elected National Socialist Party curtailed the freedoms of German citizens, and moved within just a few years to implement the murder of six million Jews, including gypsies, and people of color and disability.

It began with the coordinated slandering of the Jewish people; then the campaign of isolation by the forced wearing of the Star of David; then the crude subhuman depictions of Jews in political cartoons and ideological statements by elected leaders, academics, and clergy; plus claims of responsibility for international financial conspiracies and finally, all too easily, without public protest the gathering, arresting, and herding of Jews into ghettos surrounded by walls and armed guards.

By then it was too late. The people had bought into the demand for eradication that constructed thousands of shooting pits, then the gas chambers and crematoriums. This campaign was not carried out by a single political party with a crazed leader. It was an evil the vast majority of Germans as well as much of France and other occupied countries participated in. The nationalism sweeping across Europe now is not unrelated to this dark past.

But we do not live under a totalitarian regime. Our president is not a dictator. Nor is he the king or the CEO of America. He is the quintessential public servant. He works for us until we decide to terminate his employment.

Yet, this is no time to take for granted the rights and freedoms so dearly earned and bought over two and a half centuries with precious American blood.

The array of voices, including more and more Republicans, who are raising concerns about the direction of the new administration is stunning. This is no time to panic but it is time for calculated examination of the far-reaching and dangerous orders emanating from the Oval Office. It is time to resist anyone who compromises the Bill of Rights or Constitution. It is time for everyday folks like you and me, who Micah, Paul and Matthew call to embody peace and justice, to reclaim what always has and always will make America great. Amen.