

"VIETNAM AND THE JEWISH CONSCIENCE"

I feel I owe it to my congregation to begin today's sermon with an apology, or at least with an explanation.

Ever since our country has slowly but surely been sucked into the vortex of the Vietnam involvement, I have refrained from any public comment on the war. This I have done for three reasons.

First, I have always been apprehensive about reducing the pulpit to a platform, and making of the sermon a running journalistic commentary.

Second, I have always considered Vietnam to be a technically political, diplomatic, and military problem, beyond any special competence that a Rabbi can be expected to possess.

Third, I have been annoyed at those clergymen, Jewish and non-Jewish, especially the former, for whom Vietnam and civil rights have become the totality of religion, as if there is nothing else in Judaism to speak of except to fulminate against the Vietnam war and to espouse the cause of civil rights.

However, because of developing events, I have been forced to change my attitude, and I therefore feel impelled by conscience to address myself to the problem of Vietnam, though not without some hesitation.

I am still opposed to any political pronouncements from the pulpit. But Vietnam has become one of the major moral problems of

our time. True, it remains largely a political issue. Yet, there comes a time when certain issues expand beyond the narrow lines of politics and into the larger sphere of morality.

A great part of our population is convinced that the Vietnam war is immoral. At the very least I believe that most of us here this morning are not enthusiastically certain of its morality. The following, I believe, is an excellent test of how to intuitively judge the moral quality of the Vietnam War: how would you feel if your 18 year old son was ready to be drafted? Would you feel, as you felt during World War II and even during the Korean war, that it was unfortunate, but that as long as it was going to be done the cause was worthy of the sacrifice that you and your family were ready to make? Or would you feel that if your son was going to be drafted, and possibly shipped off to Vietnam, that you would agree to it only because a jail sentence is the alternative?

So if there is a moral problem involved, it becomes the responsibility of spiritual leaders to talk about it. For just as there is a danger of the pulpit sinking into politics, so is there an equal but opposite danger of the pulpit rising beyond the real world into the pious platitudes of pleasant irrelevancies.

But, one may ask, is it not still true that the Vietnam situation is too technical to offer a non-expert judgment? Yes, it is a complex issue. But it is not necessary to know every single detail of the situation before we react to it morally. Were that so, we should never be able to express the spiritual aspect of our personal-

my capacity as a Rabbi, to vote one way or another.

I do not believe that Vietnam is the only important problem of religion for today. I acknowledge the right of any moral human being, Jew or non-Jew, to come to a conclusion different from mine. I most certainly recognize the right and even the responsibility of any Jew committed to Torah, rabbi or layman, to think through the matter independently, and if necessary, to oppose my interpretation of the Jewish conscience with as much conviction, enthusiasm, and integrity with which I espouse it. Continued silence from this pulpit, however, is inexcusable. If our consciences are not activated now, if our moral traditions are not consulted now, we must remain mute and ineffective on a host of lesser problems which seem to monopolize our attention and drive out consideration of the more important issues.

Furthermore, it so happens that most non-Orthodox Jewish organizations have declared themselves against our Government's Vietnam policy, as if implying that all Jews are ethnically doves. At the same time, a number of Orthodox organizations have, with varying degrees of intensity, pronounced in favor of the present Vietnam policy, as if the judgment of Torah clearly backs the administration. It is important, therefore, that individual Rabbis, especially Orthodox Rabbis, make clear where they stand, lest their silence be construed as consent to the prevailing opinion within their group.

It is in this sense that I do two things: first, explain my

hesitation in speaking out in the past, and second, beg your leave to be heard today on Vietnam.

The core of our moral dilemma was summed up many centuries ago by the prophet Zechariah who said, ha-emet ve'ha-shalom ehavu, "Truth and peace loved each other." He meant that in the Messianic era, at the end of days, the two concepts of Truth and Peace will be resolved, they will be reconciled with each other. Until such a time, however, these two -- which in more contemporary language we would call "principle" and "accommodation" -- are in continuous tension and even opposition with each other. Truth is rigid, peace is pliable; truth or principle demands consistency to the bitter end, whereas peace wishes all sides to bend to a mutually happy solution. Our emet, our truth or principle, is: anti-Communism. As Americans we know very well that political and civil freedom cannot flourish under a Communist regime. As Torah Jews we recognize full well that Communism destroys not only Jewish religious freedom, but the very soul of the Jew. But shalom, peace or accommodation, is not only a matter of expediency, but is in itself a significant spiritual value. Neither of these is by itself an absolute. The one who pursues emet alone rides roughshod over all opposition, and tends towards fanaticism; whereas the person interested only in shalom ultimately compromises away all principle and ends in moral flabbiness and in surrender to the powers that be.

We are not, I hope, so unsophisticated as not to recognize the need for co-existence in this modern world between various forms

of governments. We must acknowledge that there are differing varieties of Communism, that it is not a monolith. And at the same time we are not so pacifist as to believe in no resistance at any time against any oppression. Thus it is that Judaism can embrace at one and the same time Isaiah's great vision of universal peace, and the laws of milhemet mitzvah, or the just war, the battle which we are commanded to undertake. There are some things worth laying down your life for, some things worth fighting for.

In a conflict between these two concepts in our particular case of Vietnam, I believe that shalom must prevail, with the least possible injury to the integrity of emet.

I believe that our present involvement in Vietnam will end either in nuclear holocaust for the entire world, or in bleeding our country into infirmity and into corruption of soul. For warfare in our times is different from what it ever was before. Cleancut victory or defeat is still possible in an encounter between small nations. But when super-powers are pitted against each other, there is only one ultimate solution: the nuclear bomb. Escalation must lead to the destruction of civilization on this planet.

Four years ago our country overwhelmingly disapproved of a presidential candidate who spoke out in favor of broadening the Vietnam war. That was an expression not only of political expediency but of moral insight.

It is not true that we Americans are so politically sensitive and morally delicate that we cannot abide the existence of a Communist

state in Vietnam. Our government's policy is decidedly not to try to destroy Communism in North Vietnam. And we have learned to live with a Communist state much closer to our shores -- right off the tip of Miami.

We have come to the aid of an ally in South Vietnam which is not genuinely worthy of the blood of our young men. These South Vietnamese seem less dedicated to the ideals of democracy than we -- and less to their ideals than the North Vietnamese adversaries are to their ideals.

I therefore believe that we must search out every opportunity to disengage ourselves; that we must stop the bombing in an effort to negotiate, even if we feel sure that such cessation of the bombing will result in frustration; that we must negotiate with all parties concerned, even with the Vietcong; and if the South Vietnamese leaders refuse to join us in this quest for peace, then they shall have to do without us in fighting their war.

My major concern with our situation in Vietnam is what it has done to the United States. For one thing, it has acclimated us to death too readily. It has innured us to the sight of summary executions of Vietcong, some of them in their early teens; to the barbarous murder of little ten-year old girls with their hands tied behind their backs in South Vietnam; to large-scale bombings, with all the anguish they cause to individuals; and even to our own growing casualty lists which appear in our newspapers daily.

Today we read of the law of parah adumah, the red heifer, which had to be brought as part of the purification process for those who had become ritually contaminated by contact with death, the man who was tamei met. Only through such purification from the defilement with death was a man regarded as prepared to participate in the Passover, in the celebration of freedom.

This lesson must not be lost upon us. The odor of death hangs pall-like over the world today. Americans, once again, are killing and being killed, and becoming hardened and brutalized in the process. We have permitted ourselves to slide, piecemeal and mindlessly, into a tragic and unnecessary war that has made us a reproach in the eyes of the civilized world. America has defiled itself, and soiled its soul with death, with killing, with napalm, and even -- we suspect -- with gloating as it undertakes the "body count" of enemy dead. Our country is today tamai met, contaminated with the business of death. Now is the time to betake ourselves to our national parah adumah. Now is the time to end the slaughter and search for purification, if we are ever to be worthy of the rights and the freedoms that God has given to this country. It may be true that in our disengagement from this death-dealing war, in our deescalation, we will be caught in certain ambiguities and paradoxes and ambivalences; but that is always the case when you seek to purify yourself from death. The parah adumah was a paradoxical ritual: it was metaher teme'im umetamei tehorim, it defiled the clean



and cleansed the contaminated. But such paradoxes must be experienced and suffered through if we are to have purification.

Look at what the Vietnam war is doing to us, how it is warping the moral fibre of our country. Our economy has been drained, the cost of making war has distracted us from paying attention to the turmoil in our cities, to poverty here at home. It has increased racial strife. And our youth has become restless. It should be acknowledged that our youth on the campuses today is an idealistic one, one that seeks justice and righteousness for all peoples. But its idealism has one dent in it, its ethical posture has one major flaw: disrespect for all authority. And this disrespect for all authority, this revolt of the generations, is in no small measure due to the tragedy of Vietnam.

Thus, in striving to affirm the ideal of emet in assisting a questionable ally in South Vietnam, we are destroying so many other truths, so many other vital principles, without which we are not the same Americans we once were.

Let me make it clear. In saying what I have to say about Vietnam, in pleading for greater and more credible efforts for de-escalation, I express no personal animosity against the President of the United States. I dissociate myself completely and utterly from the immature attacks against him on some of the college campuses, from the vitriolic, the vicious, the wild, and the paranoid assaults on his personality. In fact, on key issues other than Vietnam -- such as Israel and civil rights -- I believe that all of us here



this morning feel closer to the President of the United States than we do to his major antagonist on Vietnam, the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Which brings me to the next point: the problem of Israel. It has been asked: is it not inconsistent to be a "hawk" on Israel and a "dove" on Vietnam, to demand that the United States intervene to help Israel and that it pull out of Vietnam? And is it not possible that American Jews taking an anti-Vietnam stand will adversely affect the fortunes of Israel in administration circles?

My answer to both is, No. I am neither a war-monger nor a pacifist. I neither adulate the United Nations, nor condemn it totally. I prefer to judge each case on its own merits. Doing so, I find it thoroughly logical to favor our assistance, even militarily, for the State of Israel, the single democracy in the Near East, embattled by Arab nations which have declared as their purpose the destruction of Israel. And I would like us to get out of Vietnam, where we are fighting to support a government one of whose key leaders has declared that his favorite figure in history is Adolph Hitler.

Is it bad for Israel? The best advice is available to us by our co-religionists in high government circles is that it is not necessarily so. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that if in those dark days of May 1967 Israel would have needed American help and intervention, it would not have been forthcoming, because of the American over-commitment in Southeast Asia. Finally, the issue of

Vietnam is world-wide, and if the United States becomes irrevocably sucked into this endless swamp in Asia, all of us -- Americans and Israelis, Gentiles and Jews and Buddhists -- will suffer unnecessarily and endlessly.

Some two weeks ago, the junior Senator of New York, in attacking administration policy of Vietnam, said: Are we like the God of the Old Testament to decide which village should be bombed out of existence, and which hamlet should be spared?

No, Mr. Senator, we are not like "the God of the Old Testament," and we should not play God. But please remember, Mr. Senator, that the same Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition tells us that God is both warrior and peacemaker, that He is Ha-Shem ish milhamah -- a "Man of War" -- and oseh shalom bimeromav, One Who makes peace in His high places. And this same "God of the Old Testament", in commanding us to curb our normal compassion when it is necessary to further the ends of justice, so that we sometimes must lay waste to an entire city (the ir ha-nidachat), reminds us at the very same time: ve'natan lekha rahamim ve'rihamkha, "He shall give you pity and you shall have pity" -- that God will exercise compassion towards you only if you learn compassion and pity and mercy towards others.

And how we need that element of rahamim, of pity, in Vietnam! The whole tragedy of Vietnam was expressed a few weeks ago in a remark by an American Army lieutenant. In ordering his men to destroy a hamlet which had been infiltrated with Vietcong, he declared, "We

have to destroy that village in order to save it!" I fear that that paradox seems to describe our entire effort in all of Vietnam: we are determined to destroy all of Vietnam in order to save it from Ho Chi Minh.

Shades of Torquemada! That vicious and cruel and ugly priest of Spain caused thousands upon thousands of Jews to go to the auto-da-fé, he burned countless Spanish Jews alive, because -- he loved them so much! He wanted to save our souls, and since we refused to have our souls saved by declaring for Christianity, he loved us to death, he cast us into the flames.

That kind of inquisition is not what America ought to wish upon South Vietnam. No, what we must now turn to is the principle of rahamim.

There are some who oppose deescalation and negotiation, because they feel that anything short of victory is a defeat for our country. That is a simplistic and naive idea in the context of the realities of modern life and its complexities. I have already stated that in a modern era, when super-powers are confronting each other, clear victory and clear defeat are almost irrelevant. But if I were forced to choose right now between "victory" and "defeat," I would decide rather to lose a battle than a war, and I would rather lose that war than lose our chance for survival.

Would it be a psychological defeat for the United States if we pulled back now? Maybe. But then let us look at the bright side

of the picture: it may be helpful to the development of American character. I am not always happy with our popular mythology, the smug assertion that "America has never lost a war." A country that has never experienced defeat is like an investor who has never lost any money on the market or a child who has never been permitted a disappointment by his parents. In all these cases, the unbroken record of success is conducive to exaggerated self-confidence, to arrogance, and leads directly to probable catastrophe.

If our nation is truly great, we shall be able to accept temporary setbacks and go on with our national business.

Yes, if we are now forced to deescalate and stop the bombing and negotiate, we may "lose face." But I would rather that my beloved America "lose face" than that it lose its head -- and its soul...

At the beginning of this morning's first Sidra, we read the commandment: lo tevaaru esh be'khol moshvotekhem be'yom ha-shabbat, "Thou shalt not kindle any fire in all thy dwelling places on the Sabbath day." Rabbi Jacob, author of the Turim, in his commentary on this verse refers to the old Jewish legend, which should be taken symbolically rather than literally, that on the Sabbath the punishment that God metes out for all eternity to the wicked in the other world is halted. The esh shel gehennom, the fires of hell, are extinguished for the Sabbath day, so that even the sinners may rest. Rabbi Jacob tells us that this is a reciprocal act by God to the Israelites. If, God says to Israel, lo tevaaru esh, you will not kindle a flame on the Sabbath day, then I will extinguish the esh shel

gehennom, the fires of Gehennom on this self-same day.

The time has come for this country to think not of increasing its fire power, but of how to extinguish the conflagration; not of heating up but of cooling down the conflict. For with every rise in the temperature of battle, with every new napalm attack, with every increase in the bombing, we invariably stoke the flames of Hell which threaten to engulf us all.

Lo tevaaru esh! Hold the fire! Deescalate! Stop the bombing! And together let all of us search for an honorable peace. Let us extinguish the hellish fires of war and go on to a better life.

Of course, my friends, I have this morning presented to you no peace plan. I would expect my congregation, as a community of intelligent people, to be amused were I to attempt anything so bold. The business of an enlightened citizenry is to demand of its government that it, the government, move on to new positions and offer its detailed plans to achieve our national ends consonant with our traditional morality.

I have also probably not told you anything startlingly new for your moral consideration. But even if I have not, I hope that I have this morning contributed to advancing our discussion of the moral dimensions of our Vietnam involvement. Those of us who believe that the continuation of the war is immoral, had best make our voices heard. For lest we do, the pressure of those who wish to expand the war and use the ultimate weapon may drive our government,

even against its own better judgment, into a horrendous adventure from which we shall never be able to extricate ourselves.

Our country is strong, the strongest in the world. Perhaps it is a part of our naive and romantic nature to believe that America is not only physically and economically strong, but also endowed with moral strength and spiritual vigor. This moral strength must make us acknowledge, in honesty and integrity, that we are engaged in a futile and misdirected war. It is the function of such moral strength to make us search for peace and to find it.

For so is it written, Ha-shem oze l'ammo yiten, the Lord will give His people strength, and Ha-shem yevarekh et ammo va-shalom, the Lord will bless His people with peace.

May our strength be used to attain peace, the greatest blessing of all.