

World Conference Of Mizrachi

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This is the second 80th birthday party of Mizrachi that I have been invited to attend. The first was in New York a few months ago, and the second is now, here in Jerusalem. Clearly, this is the more festive as well as the more authentic event, and I am honored to have been invited to address you on this occasion in the presence of so many dignitaries from Israel and overseas.

Reaching *gevurot* is worthy of happy celebration. An idea which was just a glint in the eyes of a few visionaries has become a reality which has had an enormous impact on religious Jewry, on the State of Israel, and on the world Jewish community. It is an occasion of gratitude to the Al-mighty to return the Holy Spirit to Zion, that we can together commemorate this eightieth anniversary in the Holy City of Jerusalem.

I shall not recount the triumphant achievements of Mizrachi in the course of the past eight decades. First, there are those here who can do that much better than I and out of a greater background of personal experience. Second, I do not see myself in the role of a cheerleader, and I do not think you invited me here for that purpose. Finally, self-congratulation is a luxury which we cannot afford when we are confronted with almost unprecedented challenges. Boasting of the past is usually the symptom of advanced age and the onset of senility. If we are vigorous, we must work to secure the future — which alone can give meaning and continuity to the achievements of the past.

The truth is that underneath the thin veneer of festivity lies a reservoir of sadness, tension, worry, and foreboding apprehension. There is angst and melancholy in the air generally in Israel because of events that do not require repetition by me. For Mizrachi, there is the awareness that it is today at a critical point in its history. Politically it has lost half of its parliamentary seats. Organizationally, it is in decline throughout the world. Some of us have begun to feel like vestiges of the past instead of harbingers of the future.

Some of you may think I am overstating the case, yet others that I am understating it. Whatever, the situation is an unhappy one. And yet, the burden of my message is that we must not allow ourselves to be gripped and paralyzed by a psychology of defeatism. As Hasidism taught us, sadness and despondency are the greatest sin. Greatness is achieved only in confrontation with great challenges.

This means that our generation can no longer look upon itself as those who continue the past, but as those who must rescue that past by reconstituting and

reformulating it in the face of adversity.

It means that we have a historic challenge in front of us this very day and an unparalleled opportunity to leave our mark upon history. This is the time neither to ignore the difficulties nor to despair of them and lose heart, but to rise to the occasion with a clear mind, a firm spine, and a fierce visceral determination to change the course of events and prevail.

Indeed, this challenge is greater than that faced by our predecessors 80 years ago. They founded Mizrachi in the growth phase of the Zionist movement. Zionism was new, the ideal of Return to Zion had a certain freshness about it, and thus was born Mizrachi. It is far more difficult, more painful, more arduous to rebuild than to build. The old is far more impervious to the creative gesture than the new. But for the same reason it is more admirable and praiseworthy.

I have often wondered at the fact that we do not celebrate Rosh Hodesh Nisan as the day the Tabernacle was consecrated. Similarly, we have no observance to commemorate the building of the first or second Bet ha-Mikdash. The only holiday we do celebrate with regard to the Bet ha-Mikdash is Hanukkah — which commemorates not the building but the re-building of the Temple. Why so? Because, as I mentioned, rebuilding is more taxing, less glorious, more demanding, and less personally satisfying than building — and therefore more creative and laudable.

That is our task as we attain the age of eighty. It is time for rebirth, re-creation, renaissance. At the age of 80 it is time to resurrect Mizrachi, to breathe into it new life and energy and passion and thus bring blessing not only to religious Jews, but to all Israel — people and State. If we fail to rise to the challenge, then we are guilty of killing off one of the most significant and valuable movements in Jewish history.

How shall we go about this act of the rebuilding of the Mizrachi? I suggest three forms or types of renewal that, to my mind, are of critical importance.

They are: organizational renewal, fraternal renewal, and spiritual renewal.

The organizational renewal of Mizrachi must be based upon a clear distinction between Tenuah and Miflagah, between Movement and Party — for the ultimate good of both. This is something a number of elder statesmen of Mizrachi, especially Mr. Shragai, have been advocating for some time now. For the very health and security of Mafdal, the Party, we must ensure that Mizrachi, the Movement, will not be its handmaiden. Indeed, it is Mizrachi which must be the sanctuary of the values and ideals of our cause and

to do so it must have an independent existence and identity. Only thus can the two, Tenuah and Miflagah, fructify each other creatively.

Only Mafdal may endorse political candidates or engage in partisan negotiations. The Tenuah must never do so. Its responsibilities must be broader: the welfare, both spiritual and organizational, of Jews and Judaism throughout the world. Indeed, members of other political parties should be encouraged to affiliate with the Mizrachi if it is their natural spiritual and ideological home.

The Miflagah must remind us that the State is crucial, pivotal, and central to Jewish concerns. The Tenuah must teach us that it is not absolute.

The Movement embodies an idea; a Party is only a means to achieve and enhance it in the political forum. If there is to be only Mafdal with a Mizrachi, or

with a Mizrachi so weak and ineffectual that is devoid of significance, then one may question whether in the long run it serves the higher purpose to which we are dedicated, and one must undertake a cost-benefit analysis to determine whether its existence is justified. No such calculus is relevant to a national religious movement. Indeed, the Tenuah alone can vindicate the Miflagah.

Political parties must respond to the flux of events, the vicissitudes of government and public opinion and political trends. Its fortunes are linked to external events rather than to internal processes. The Movement must transcend such concerns. As the expression of overarching spiritual and ideological commitments, it has the power to abide all such conditions and endure all such changes, because it is focused on ideas and ideals rather than on persons and structures. Thus, it is conceivable that a two-party system will emerge in Israel and that Mafdal will attach itself to one of them. I am by no means advocating that. But as an illustration, even if that should occur, Mizrachi as a Movement will and must survive, its integrity uncompromised and its mission undiminished.

To effectuate the rebuilding of the Mizrachi, let it seek out a leadership that is preferably uninvolved in the daily rough and tumble of partisan political activity. Its leaders should be the finest and the best of its spiritual and intellectual elite throughout the world — the most able of the Yeshiva world (provided that they not only attend or teach in Hesder Yeshivot but truly represent and are committed to its ideals), the most appealing of the religious academic world, businessmen and professionals whose lives and activities are reflections of the Mizrachi ideology concerning Torah, Eretz Israel, Kelal Yisrael and the modern world. Above all Mizrachi must shun mediocrity.

There is a place for party functionaries — in the Party. There is a need for politics — in Mafdal. The Party must confront and deal with the jagged edges of a stubborn and unmalleable reality. The Movement must stand a bit apart, beyond, and hold aloft the ideals for which the men of the Party work and struggle.

There need not, perhaps ought not, be unanimity of opinion between the two. But the dialogue will be constructive and creative and benefit all Israel.

This leads me to the second renewal — that of fraternity, a reassertion of our friendship, our mutual trust, our cohesiveness.

Most regretfully, Mafdal politics has been rough, too truculent, too ad hominem for too long. It is true that Mafdal is blessed with highly competent leaders, men of competence, personal integrity, and probity. But G-d knows how many people were lost to the cause because of the

unseemly infighting, the slurs, the disrespect and the lack of self-restraint we have allowed to go unchecked.

I am not naive — I know that politics is politics. Indeed, the involvement with personalities rather than issues is more characteristic of a Party than a Movement and a good argument for the revival of Mizrachi as a Tenuah. But certainly a religious party — and most certainly a religious Zionist party — should be more elegant, more civilized and tolerant and forgiving, less

jugular and brutal in its politics — and always aware of the fact that politics must serve the cause, for otherwise it is corrupt.

There has been too little harmony in our ranks. If in America we were for a while too tolerant, even of those unworthy of our trust, in Israel you have been too critical, even of those deserving of leadership roles.

I recall the story of a Jewish professor in Western Europe who spent 15 years researching humor in the Talmud, and could come up with only one joke in all of the Talmud: Talmidey Chachomim make peace in the world.

As a relative outsider to inside politics in Mafdal, I can only plead with its leadership — all of whom I admire and for whom I bear personal affection and

esteem — to heal time breaches of the past, both because of enlightened self-interest and to avoid Chilul Hashem. The times call for statesmanship rather than politics.

Former Secretary of HEW, of USA, Dr. Gardner, once said that one must not be an uncritical lover or an unloving critic. Of course we must be critical — but also loving.

This advice is useful not only for Mafdal, but equally — indeed, much more so — for the other political parties in Israel. The ferocious partisanship has left American Jewsemparassed, deflated, and angry. One recalls the

words of Pogo, a famous American comic-strip character: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Divided opinion in a country is good for its soul. It ensures vigorous debate of great issues that enhance the democratic character of a nation. But when the polemics are so ferocious that they go beyond politics to fratricide, then the controversies are convulsions of feverish and sick people.

The recent reports by two American journalists of a leading political figure who has been telling visitors from overseas that the United States should restrict its economic aid to Israel as a means of weak-

ening Mr. Begin, leave one disgusted and outraged.

When extremist fringe groups like the Neturei Karta publish ads in the American press excoriating Israel, we are indignant at this instance of religious fanaticism. But what excuse is there for a leftist politician to commit the same unpatriotic act? Here there is not even the fig leaf of a venerable religious tradition of quietism, though grievously misread. There is only the nakedness of unrestrained ambition and the self-pity of political powerlessness. With such "leaders", who needs enemies?!