

**Hukat(--Balak), July 4, 2009**  
**New North London Synagogue**

I have been invited to speak *inyana de-yoma*, and this being the Fourth of July, and my being an American transplant, I ask you to indulge me to begin my message by sharing part of a sermon from another Fourth of July Shabbat that I describe in the Preface to my recent book, *Jewish Preaching in Times of War, 1800 – 2001*.

I would like to take you back exactly 146 years. July 4, 1863 was a Saturday, and Sabato Morais, a Sephardi immigrant from Italy serving as religious leader of the Mikveh Israel Congregation in Philadelphia delivered a Shabbat morning sermon as he did each week. This particular Sabbath was unusual, for three reasons.

- It was the American Independence Day, an occasion for Americans to celebrate a distinctive national identity.
- In the Jewish calendar, it was the Seventeenth Day of Tammuz, the traditional day of mourning and fasting, commemorating the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem (though when it comes on the Sabbath, the actual fast is postponed until the following day. We're five days behind his year.)

This contrast in moods between the American and the Jewish calendars created a special challenge for the preacher.

But there was a third component that made the 1863 date unique: it was in the middle of the Civil War, and it followed immediately upon the conclusion of the Battle of Gettysburg, 106 miles away. The fighting actually ended on Friday evening, but Morais had to write his sermon during the day, and even on Saturday morning, in the absence of mobile phones, Internet, and 24-7 coverage, the news of the outcome of the battle was not yet accessible to Morais in Philadelphia. (It would be published

in special-edition newspapers that afternoon.) When he prepared the text of his sermon, and when he delivered the words from the pulpit, it was still unclear to the preacher and his congregants whether the Confederate Armies that had penetrated into Pennsylvania would break through the Union lines and threaten Philadelphia, Baltimore, or Washington D.C., before the following Shabbat.

Morais says that—both because of the date in the Jewish calendar and the bleakness of the current military circumstances—he cannot give the up-beat, inspirational, patriotic address that some in the audience were undoubtedly expecting. The prevailing mood (which would change so dramatically in just a few hours) is reflected in the preacher’s choice of a biblical text, words said by King Hezekiah during the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem.: יום צרה ותוכחה ונאצה היום הזה , *This is a day of trouble, of rebuke, and derision* (Isa. 37:3).

He continues to present a gloomy picture of contemporary events, alluding in a highly rhetorical passage, to the great battle he thought was still raging: “The murky clouds which have long hovered all over the American horizon, gathered at length menacingly nearer to our houses. The thunder was ready to burst upon our heads, and we—in our mad security—neglected to set up the lightning rods, wherewith to blunt its violence. Behold, my hearers! the deplorable consequences and weep. The dust raised by the feet of invasion has tarnished our escutcheon. Havoc and devastation rage in our borders. . . ‘. Needless to say, very few of us speak that way from the pulpit these days.

Despite the despondency of his biblical Text as applied to the contemporary situation, the preacher cannot totally ignore the occasion being commemorated throughout the northern states on that day. And so he says, on the Fourth of July, ‘I am not indifferent, my dear friends, to the event, which four score and seven years ago, brought to this new

world light and joy'. Three days later, Abraham Lincoln spoke to a small group; according to the transcript printed in several New York newspapers on July 8, he said, 'How long ago is it?—eighty odd years—since on the Fourth of July for the first time in the history of the world a nation by its representatives assembled and declared as a self-evident truth that “all men are created equal.”’<sup>1</sup> Morais also could have said 'eighty odd years ago'; instead he used a phrase echoing the King James translation *threescore years and ten* (Ps. 90:10), evoking a unique event with what was then a highly unusual phrase. Needless to say, Abraham Lincoln elevated the level of his discourse from 'eighty odd years' to 'four score and seven years ago' for the dedication of the Gettysburg cemetery some three months later, very possibly borrowing from the published text by the Philadelphia Sephardic preacher.

I learned something else from the sermon material dating from the American Civil War section of my book. It is about **leadership** and it relates to *parashat Hukat*. In our tradition, Moses and Aaron appear to be the greatest leaders our people have ever known. And yet—the default model of interrelationship between the Israelites and the man who led them out of slavery was of complaint – bitter, vindictive complaint, attacking his judgment, his character and his competence. This begins at the very outset of his public career. **מי שמך לאיש שר ושופט עלינו?** “Who made you chief and ruler over us?” says one of the Hebrews when Moses tried to intervene in a fight (Exod. 2:14). “May the Lord look upon you and punish you for making us loathsome to Pharaoh” say the Israelite foremen, whose work loads have been increased because of Moses’ well-intended activities (Exod. 5: 21).

“Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?” they say

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<sup>1</sup> *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, 1953), 6: 319.

at the shore of the sea (Exod. 14:11). “You have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death” they say, in the chapter immediately following *Shirat ha-Yam* (Exod. 16:3). “Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” comes in the following chapter (Exod. 17:3). And we are only in the first half of the book of Exodus; we haven’t even reached the dramatic events of *Sefer Be-Midbar*.

In *parashat Hukkat* we have the familiar picture: the people, thirsty, turn bitterly against Moses, “Why have you brought the Lord’s congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt?” (Num. 20:4-5). In this context, even some of the rabbis pile on in an interpretation of the verse,

ויבא משה ואהרן מפני הקהל אל פתח אהל מועד ויפלו של פניהם.

“Moses and Aaron came away from the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and fell on their faces” (Num. 20:6). That might seem to have been an appropriate reaction to the emergency: seeking divine guidance and support, demonstrating their own humility and helplessness through their prostrate posture.

But some of the rabbis understood this as leadership in withdrawal, an escape from responsibility, fleeing toward a place of security. In a stunning analogy, they say that turning away from the people and going to the Tent of Meeting was like a noble when the people in his province are stirred to rebellion, and instead of confronting them, he flees for protection to the royal palace.

This default model of complaint and rebuke toward Moses continues virtually until the day of his death – when the people observe a 30-day period of wailing and mourning, and the process of post facto exaltation begins—eventually including the honorary ordination given by the Sages (making him Moshe Rabbenu)—began.

Before preparing to annotate one of the other Civil War sermons in my book, I had not appreciated the degree of hostility, antagonism, even hatred for Abraham Lincoln, not only in the southern states that were in revolt, fighting—they claimed—for the same right of freedom to determine their own destiny that their ancestors had fought for in the American Revolution, but also in the North. Lincoln's refusal to apply the Emancipation Proclamation to slave-holding states that remained in the Union, the suspension of Habeas Corpus, the unprecedented Conscription bill which subjected all males between 20 and 45 to the draft, generated fierce criticism and would generate deadly anti-draft riots in New York City.

Lincoln was denounced by passionate, thoughtful, eloquent political figures who accused him of dictatorship.<sup>2</sup> He may have been the most abused political figure of his age. John Wilkes Booth, who assassinated Lincoln on Friday night, 14 April 1845 in Ford's Theatre, Washington DC, justified his deed with the words *Sic semper tyrannis*, "thus always with tyrants". It was not until after his death that the antagonism abated, and we find contemporary Jewish sermons idealizing him in even messianic terms. But even today, there are those who make a fetish of collecting statements made by Lincoln about blacks or native Americans that do not pass muster by our standards of political correctness, and using this material to tarnish the image of his character.

*Morai ve-rabbotai*, During the past month, I have become increasingly aware of a similar dynamic in Jewish media with regard to Barack Obama. Exaggerations of his virtues seem now to have given way to even greater exaggeration of his faults, including a tendency to detect

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<sup>2</sup> Harper's Weekly, March 14, 1863: 'The President of the United States has, in effect, been created Dictator, with almost supreme power over liberty, property, and life—a power nearly as extensive and as irresponsible as that which is wielded by the Emperors of Russia, France, or China.' Defends it as necessary in present circumstances.

faults where they are not all obvious. The Internet is filled with vitriolic condemnation of hios Cairo speech from the far right of the Jewish spectrum: Obama is “throwing Israel to the international wolves”, Obama “threw Israel under the bus”, “threw Israel over the cliff”. ‘For the past six months . . . [Obama] has been showing Israel a mailed fist’ (not something sent by Royal Mail, but the image from medieval warfare, implying the threat of brutal military force). Obama is a described as a ‘pro-Islamist President’ – [which is like describing Lincoln as a ‘pro-Confederacy President’ because he asked a military band to play “Dixie” following the formal surrender of Confederate forces].

We all treasure the right of freedom of speech and of the press, especially when used to criticize important and powerful political leaders. But by the very nature of their position, every political leader will have to make decisions that will leave some people dissatisfied, disappointed, perhaps even infuriated. In my judgment, criticizing our leaders with hyperbolic phrases and violent metaphors such as those I have quoted corrodes political discourse and undermines the possibility of reasonable debate. They may drive even the most talented and high-minded leader to an irresponsible outburst—like that of Moses in our *parashah: shim’u na ha-morim*, “listen now, you rebels”.

Wherever we stand on the political spectrum, I hope we might agree that the vituperation of the Israelites toward their leader is not a healthy model for us to follow. Let it rather be the style of Aaron, who like his sister dies in *parashat Hukkat* , and was mourned by the entire House of Israel for having been, in his behaviour and in his language, *ohev shalom ve-rodef shalom*.