

**YOM KIPPUR**  
**“A COURTROOM DRAMA”**  
**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2009**

“J’accuse,” cries Satan, “I accuse the Jewish people of willful self-destruction. They are not interested in their own survival. They are destroying themselves from within. I, therefore, submit, O Lord, in your judgment for the year 5770, you wipe the Jewish people off the face of the earth.”

This is the accusation of Satan in the celestial court. Our tradition teaches us that during this period of the High Holy Days, G-d judges us as individuals and as a people. It pictures G-d sitting on the Throne of Judgment listening to the arguments of the accuser and the defender. The accuser is Satan, who has been the enemy of the Jewish people throughout history. In the Bible and in rabbinic literature, he has been depicted as the accusing angel whose function it is to act as the adversary of the Jewish people before the heavenly tribunal.

Lest you think that I am entering into the realm of superstition, of folklore, yea even of heresy, I would remind you that some of our liturgy over the High Holy Day period reminds us of Satan’s true purpose. Last week, as we prepared to sound the shofar, we recited six Biblical verses, the initial letters of which form the acrostic, “Kerah Satan,” “tear Satan.” One of the purposes of the blasts according to Rabbi Isaac is to confound and confute Satan. In the moving and deeply stirring prayer of the Hazzan before the Musaf Amidah, the Hinneni prayer, there is a sentence in which he pleads, “And rebuke Satan that he accuse me not.” In the Selichot of Yom Kippur Eve we ask G-d to silence Satan. And, last evening we recited a Piyut, a poem, “Omnam Ken.” It is attributed, according to most scholars, to Rabbi Yom Tov ben Isaac of York, who lived in England in the latter part of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. He describes a scene in which before the Throne of Judgment, the accuser stands ready to recount our many misdeeds which testify that we have been unfaithful to G-d. But G-d is good and forgiving. He silences the accuser and invites the defender to plead on our behalf to elicit the verdict, “Salachti”, “I have forgiven.”

Therefore, during this period of the year and, in fact, perhaps on this very day, at this very hour, an important courtroom drama is taking place. It will decide our fate for the coming year. Come with me, therefore, to the heavenly tribunal. Let us sit in the courtroom and watch the proceedings unfold. Let us return to the accusations of Satan.

“O Lord, as You sit on Your throne this day, I will bring evidence which shall support my accusations. I will prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the Jewish people do not deserve to exist and, in fact, is leading itself down the road to its own demise. But enough of words, of innuendos, let me present the facts.

“In Your graciousness You allowed the prophecies of the ancient Israelite prophets to come true. In 1948, the State of Israel was reborn in the Jewish people’s ancient homeland. While it has not seen a day of peace since that time, its policies at this

time, along with those of the Jewish people who portend to support it, are now calling into question their readiness to sacrifice for the land and its people. Only a few days ago in Tehran, at a rally to mark Jerusalem Day, when the Iranian regime expressed solidarity with the Palestinians, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said the Holocaust was a 'lie' and that Israel's days were numbered. "The pretext for establishing the Zionist regime is a lie," he said, "A lie which relies on an unreliable claim, a mythical claim, and the occupation of Palestine. The Western leaders launched the myth of the Holocaust. They lied, they put on a show and then they support the Jews. Israel's days are numbered and its regime is dying." And this past week from the podium of The United Nations he stated that it is unacceptable for a small minority to dominate the politics and economy of much of the world through private networks.

"The Jewish people should have learned that words are dangerous. They have heard them before. Only a generation ago, another leader stood up and said that there would be a final solution to the Jewish problem. He had written earlier, while he was in prison, of his plans. Yet, the Jews of Europe and indeed throughout the world did not take the message seriously. Instead when many of them could flee, they did not. When many people around the world heard what was happening in Eastern Europe, they were silent. Before the gates of Palestine were closed by the British mandate, very few immigrated. When the United States and most of the Western world closed its gates to fleeing Jewish refugees, the Jewish communities were mostly silent. The Jewish people has not learned its lesson.

"Iran is attempting to gain nuclear weapons and the Jewish people is silent. Why are they not demanding of the countries of the world severe sanctions against the Iranian regime? Why are they not in the streets protesting the tirades of Ahmadinejad? They simply don't understand the possibilities that are inherent in the hatred of the Iranian regime for Israel, for the Jewish people, and all that it stands for. Enough is known of the dangers of Iran's nuclear program to make not only the tiny State of Israel but all of the surrounding Middle East countries and much of Europe quiver with fear. Yet, the world is silent. When, O Lord, will they wake up to the possibilities of a nuclear disaster?

"And, in the State of Israel itself, O Lord, where is the prophetic spirit that is supposed to be part of establishing a model society for all of its citizens? Both former President Moshe Katsav and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert have been indicted. Former Finance Minister Avraham Hirschson and former Shas member of the Knesset Shlomo Benizri have started prison sentences. Ariel Sharon and Ehud Barak just escaped indictment and police have recommended indicting Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman. These are the leaders of the country. Where is the morality that is called upon by the prophets of Israel and by the Zionist establishment which created the State?

"Are all people given equal status in the State of Israel? Not the Conservative/Masorti or Reform Movements, to be sure. Recently Religious Affairs Minister Ya'acov Margi stated that if Reform and Conservative Jews want more synagogues or mikvaot, they should build it them themselves with private money and not expect the State to foot the bill. "Since the Conservative and Reform Movements do not

conform to Halacha they are not eligible for State funds,” he stated. “Nor do they have the right to use existing mikvaot and synagogues.”

“It is a sad commentary that in the State of the Jews, Judaism is controlled solely by one group, not merely Orthodox Judaism, but Haredi, ultra-Orthodox Judaism which is becoming stronger in governmental circles and in the society at-large. Only this summer there were riots in Jerusalem led by young Haredi yeshiva students protesting the opening of a Shabbat parking lot outside the Old City, operated by a non-Jew and with free parking. The riots included violent actions against police and security forces, the throwing of objects and the closing down of streets. If this is Shabbat observance and the way to bring people closer to a religious spirit, it will never be successful.

“O Lord, across Europe, in South America and even in North America, anti-Semitism has once more been seen. Last January, when Israel defended itself against Hamas’ missiles launched against Israeli civilian populations, throughout Europe there was a wave of reprisal attacks against Jewish targets. In France, more than one hundred reports of anti-Semitic violence were seen. In Denmark, two Israelis were shot and wounded. In Italy, the leader of the far-left trade union called for a boycott of all Jewish shops in Rome. In Sweden, the Jewish Center in Helsingborg was attacked by arsonists twice in one week and the Israeli Embassy in Stockholm was covered with graffiti. Today, boycotts are called for against Israeli products. Academic conferences are not inviting Israeli academics. And even in North America itself, there have been similar activities. Only two weeks ago, at the Toronto International Film Festival there was an effort to promote an artistic and cultural boycott of Israel following the Festival’s decision to partner with the City of Tel Aviv on the occasion of its 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. In Chicago, signs were seen at a protest against Israel declaring: “Death to the Jews, death to Israel.” Synagogues were defaced with graffiti and a molotov cocktail was thrown at a synagogue. When, O Lord, will the Jewish people wake up to what is happening around them?

“In North America itself, there is an apathy to Israel and to all things Jewish. In a recent study done by Steven Cohen, it has been shown that young American Jews are distancing themselves from Israel. In a study authored by Barry Kosmin and Ariella Keysar, it was demonstrated that there is a steady slippage of Jews who claim to be religiously Jewish. In a research project written by Frank Luntz he learned that “a large majority of younger Jews seem to know little about Israel almost nothing about their religion, and show little interest in either.”

“Finally, O Lord, the Jewish community has not woken up to the deep economic travails that are now part of their lives. The recent economic downturn has created many new Jewish poor. And, Jewish education is suffering as well. Over the past year, six day schools were forced to close their doors, battered by the economic downturn that has occurred in the United States. Enrollment in many schools still remaining open is going down, the impact on recruitment of new students has been seen already this year. There will be, O Lord, no Jewish attachment to Israel, no Jewish future without Jewish

education. When will the Jewish people in the Diaspora wake up to that fact and understand the import of Jewish philanthropy in the areas that truly make a difference?

“Therefore, O Lord, I ask You to decree the verdict for the year 5770. Do not inscribe the Jewish people in the Book of Life. Declare their end. They are not interested in their own survival. End their misery for them and resolve that they should join other fossilized peoples of history.”

“Satan, I have heard your arguments. Your presentation is indeed convincing, but I must now hear the other side. ‘Silence the accuser and let the defender be heard.’ You, the Jewish people, what have you to say on your behalf? Present your case.”

“O Lord, it is true that we have sinned, that we have strayed. It is true the evil impulse does dwell within us. We have erred as individuals and as a people, O Lord, but we can answer the charges. We plan to prove in our presentation that while there is definite room for improvement, we are concerned with our own survival.

“It is simply not true, O Lord, that the Jewish people does not care about the survival of the State of Israel. Let me give you but a few examples. In 1948, when the State of Israel was established and declared its independence, there were approximately 600,000 Jews in the country. Today, there are over 6 million. Though beset by war and security issues on a continuing basis, its doors have remained open to immigrants from around the world. From the Former Soviet Union, from Ethiopia, from the lands of freedom and, even in the last few weeks, quietly from Yemen, Jews continue to come to the State of Israel to live their lives and to contribute to the Jewish future. In 2008 15,500 olim came and the number may be larger in 2009.

“O Lord, I want to take you back to early February of this year. In Tashkent, Uzbekistan, a young bearded rabbi, Rabbi Vernon Kurtz, was present at a facility of the Jewish Agency for Israel on the eve of the departure of ten people making Aliyah to the State of Israel. They came from a variety of backgrounds and were of various ages but all were leaving their homes in order to be part of a Jewish future in a Jewish land. It was a touching moment when he recited Tefilat HaDerech, the prayer for a journey, with all of them. There were tears of joy in the eyes of everyone, even as anxiety and apprehension were present in the room, as well. O Lord, the Jewish people want to live and are ready to make sacrifices in order to do so.

“Young Jews are traveling to Israel and learning about their land and their tradition. On Birthright, on programs of MASA, where they study and learn in Israel over an extended period of time, and on summer trips, young Jews continue to be involved in the Jewish future. In 2008-2009 there were 8,250 participants in MASA. USY and Ramah together sent more than 500 young people this past summer to Israel. The overwhelming majority of these teens coming home are now more deeply connected to Israel, Zionism and Conservative/Masorti Judaism. Yes, there is much more to do. The story of Israel must be told on the college campuses, a love of Zionism must be imbedded in the Jewish people at-large, more people must visit Israel on an on-going

basis, and everyone should learn Hebrew so they can converse with their fellow Jews not only in Israel, but throughout the world.

“Yes, O Lord, religious pluralism is a problem in the State of Israel. But a recent opinion survey conducted by the Smith Research Institute during this past summer to assess current sentiments of the Jewish population of Israel on matters of religion and State may show some progress. 83% support ensuring freedom of religion and conscience; 63% support equal funding for all Jewish denominations; 92% of secular Jews support abolishing the Orthodox monopoly on marriage. It is true that these statistics must be translated into facts on the ground. The Conservative Movement must support its own institutions in Israel and throughout the world. It is not enough to expect others to do so. Inroads are slowly being made, much too slowly, but there are Masorti Congregations, youth groups and schools throughout Israel, Europe and South America. It is proven over and over again that they make a difference in the life of the community and the individuals who attend.

“O Lord, our accuser states that we have been asleep at the switch with regard to Iran. Yes, we have been slow to wake up, but it is happening. The Jewish community in the United States is organizing. There has been a fly-in to lobby Congress in Washington and a demonstration on the streets of New York. Many Synagogue rabbis are raising the specter of a nuclear Iran in their High Holy Day sermons this year. Non-Jewish influentials are coming on board and recognizing that Iran is not only a danger to Israel and the Jewish people, but to the entire free world. Much more needs to be done; much more must be done to wake up the Jewish people and the nations of the world before it is too late.

“Yes, anti-Semitism is still with us. I am afraid it will be with us as long as there is a Jewish people on the face of this earth. We have many friends who stand with us against those who would spout anti-Israel and anti-Jewish rhetoric. Unfortunately, the Internet is not usually our ally and lies can be transported from one computer station to another and then sent out around the world. We do a poor job of defending our own in the media. We must do better. We must stand with people of good conscience, with people who understand what hatred is all about, with people who will support Jewish rights around the world. No, the State of Israel is far from perfect but we are making it clear that the recent Goldstone Report on the Gaza War was biased and prejudiced from the very beginning and is not a balanced view of the conflict.

“Finally, O Lord, we want to refute some of the suggestions of the accuser concerning Jewish education and Jewish ignorance. Yes, we are a long way from having an educated Jewish community. Yes, we need to build up large networks of adult, pre-school, supplemental and day school programs. We must create and support stronger summer camping, informal youth and college programs. It takes money, but most of all it takes the will to do it. Lord, this past summer, Camps Ramah across the country served 9,000 young people, campers and staff. Adult education is growing significantly and Jewish studies on college campuses, almost totally absent a generation ago, are now present on almost every major campus across the country. Jewish education continues to

be the lifeblood of our people and we need to do a better job. But, O Lord, witness the large number of young Jews taking Judaism seriously, look at the significant number studying in Yeshivot, day schools, and serious programs of Judaica which were not available for their parents. And, O Lord, observe the young Jewish families who are beginning to embrace some Jewish rituals in their homes. We know there is much work to do until we have an educated Jewish community.

“Yes, O Lord, we have sinned, we are not perfect. We must work harder and be prepared for further sacrifices. Render the judgment in our favor. Give us that chance to make our hopes and dreams come true. Disdain him who brings evil tales; scorn the accuser’s words, proclaim your judgment, O Beloved One; and declare: ‘I have forgiven.’ Inscribe us in the Book of Life for the year 5770.”

“I have heard the arguments of both sides. After much deliberation, I am prepared to announce my decision. I am prepared to have the Jewish people attempt to meet their challenges this coming year. Satan, I have warned you before. You can accuse the people of Israel any day, but not on Yom Kippur. I would remind you that the numerical value of your name in the Hebrew language, ‘HaSatan’, is equivalent to 364. 364 days of the year you may exercise your prerogative of accusing Israel of its sins, but not on Yom Kippur. For on Yom Kippur, Israel stands before Me in prayer and repentance. Just as the angels neither eat nor drink, so Israel is now fasting. And thus, even as the angels are free of sin, so is Israel cleansed of all transgressions.

“Therefore, Satan, I will not adhere to your requests. Remembering My promises to their ancestors, I declare: I will inscribe the People of Israel in the Book of Life for the coming year. This ends my judgment for 5770, but Israel, my children, I would ask you to remember your mission, learn your tradition, follow My laws, support your fellow Jews, act properly and appropriately, sacrifice for your people and for your State. Fulfill your responsibilities each and every day.”

My friends, we have heard the proceedings in the celestial court. We have followed the arguments of both the accuser and the defender and have heard G-d’s verdict. It is not a time for pessimism, but neither is it a time for complacency. There is much work to be done. Today, this Yom Kippur Day, we are bidden to answer Satan’s charges and fulfill G-d’s wishes.

May we live up to our responsibilities. May this year signal the commencement of a Golden Age for world Jewry, an age in which our people throughout the world shall live in peace, security and in freedom. May we fulfill our common mission of being a holy people and may the Jewish people, Judaism and the State of Israel thrive in 5770.