

YOM KIPPUR

RABBI VERNON KURTZ

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We are an amazing, exceptional and unique people. I am convinced that there is no people ever created on the face of this earth anything like the Jewish people.

A story is told that a few years ago at a Russian war college, an Instructor General lectured to his class of officers of potential military conflicts and resulting strategies. One of the officers asked, "Sir, in your opinion, will we someday have to fight in another major war?" "Yes, comrades, in all likelihood you will," answered the General. "Who will be our enemy, sir?" another officer asked. "The likelihood is that it will be China." The class was alarmed. Finally, one officer asked, "Sir, we are only 150 million people and the Chinese are about 1.5 billion. How can we possibly win?" "Well," replied the General, "in modern war it is not the quantity, but the quality that is key. For example, in the Middle East, 5 million Jews have fought several times against 50 million Arabs, and the Jews have won every time." "But sir," asked the concerned officers, "do we have enough Jews?"

Unfortunately, the world does not have enough Jews, not really to fight wars but for us to fulfill our G-d-given mission of being a light to the nations, witnesses to the unity of G-d and a people whose mission is to create an ethical society and a just world. Perhaps if the world had left us alone and there had not been pogroms, expulsions, persecutions, and the Holocaust, we could have fulfilled G-d's promise to Abraham that

we would be as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore. However, history has shown that we have not been allowed to grow at our own pace. Instead of quantity, we have had to worry about quality.

And quality we have produced. Think of all the Nobel Prizes that have been won by Jews in the last century. Think of all of our contributions to society and the world. In the book *The Gifts of the Jews*, Thomas Cahill, has written that “what Jews gave the world is immense, not just the monotheism of the Bible, but an entire set of new attitudes that revolutionized humanity’s perceptions of the universe itself. These attitudes include the idea of a cosmos regulated by universal law, the concept of time as linear rather than cyclical, our sense of the private human self and its importance, the belief in the equality of all men before Divine and human law, the notion of democracy, and the logical conclusion of man’s ability to change and improve the world rather than merely endure it.”

While we continue to concentrate on our quality, we are still concerned about our quantity. Theodor Herzl believed that Zionism would solve the Jewish problem. He was convinced that all the nations of the earth would be very pleased for the Jews to leave their countries of origin and to assemble in the ancient land of Palestine where they would establish their own community and their own society. This would end the Jewish problem for the world and would allow the Jewish people to build its own future. Herzl was wrong. In some ways the establishment of the Jewish state has made hatred of the Jews as a people and as a faith even more pronounced.

Only two weeks ago, Iranian President Mahoud Ahmadinejad stood at the podium of the United Nations and offered words of hatred to those who live in the State of Israel and to all of us. He has already called for the destruction of Israel, or as he calls it “The Zionist Entity.” He has claimed that the Holocaust never occurred and that the world would be a better place without the Jewish state.

This time as he stood addressing the world, he stated that: “The Zionist regime is on a definite slope to collapse, and there is no way for it to get out of the cesspool created by itself and its supporters.” He dwelled on what he described as Zionist control over “international, financial and monetary centers.” It reminded us of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion which was used by the Nazis as a pretense for the destruction of 6 million Jews in the Second World War.

Our survival is not yet assured; we still must be concerned about our quantity in this world. Yet, we are convinced, like all of the tyrants of the past, Ahmadinejad will be destroyed and we will continue to thrive. We have to be on our guard, we must work to make the non-Jewish world aware of the threat, not merely to Israel, but to all of Western society should Iran gain the nuclear bomb. But, I am convinced that we will in the end be victorious and the Jewish people will endure.

Frederick the Great of Prussia once asked a Lutheran minister for proof of G-d. The minister thought for a moment and then replied, “The Jews.” The fact that Jews are alive today practicing their religion is probably the greatest of all historical miracles. As the Haggadah reminds us: “In every generation there are those who sought to destroy us.” Yet, we continue as a unique faith and people, as an eternal tribe.

Simon Radowidowicz wrote an essay entitled “*Israel – The Ever Dying People.*” He writes that in each generation the Jewish people thought of itself as the last generation on the face of this earth. Times were difficult, persecutions were many and there was a tremendous danger that the Jewish people might be wiped out. However, we are still here. The miraculous survival of the Jewish people is truly something to behold.

Each time I travel to see a Jewish community around the world I am amazed at what we have accomplished against almost insurmountable odds. In late January, I visited Belarus and Ukraine. As a member of a rabbinic mission sponsored by the Jewish Federation, I spent a few days in Minsk where we saw, under an oppressive regime, that a Jewish community continues to exist. But a generation after the Holocaust we saw living proof that Jews can continue to learn from their heritage, grow in their Judaism and have a close tie to other Jews around the world.

From Minsk I traveled to three Ukrainian cities: Kiev, a sister city of our Jewish Federation, Dnepropetrovsk and Odessa. As co-Chairman of the Former Soviet Union Committee of the Jewish Agency for Israel, I was accompanied by Alex Katz, our Director. It was an amazing journey. In each of these places there are growing Jewish communities. In each of these places not only are there many survivors of the Shoah, there are survivors of the Soviet regime. What the Nazis tried to do physically, to eradicate the Jewish people, the Soviet regime attempted to do culturally and religiously, to destroy Judaism, if not the Jews. Yet, but 20 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, in each of these communities, I was uplifted by what I saw. I visited Ulpanim where young

Jews were learning Hebrew, I experienced Israeli culture through the forms of art, music and drama, and I saw Jewish faith communities being re-established on foreign soils.

In Dnepropetrovsk I spent a most unusual Shabbat. Hosted by the Chief Rabbi of the town, Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetsky, I was at services throughout Shabbat, including Shabbat morning where I delivered a D'var Torah in Hebrew translated into Russian. The community is training teachers to travel throughout the Former Soviet Union to teach Hebrew and Jewish life. I saw day schools and youth groups and throughout the three cities in Ukraine I saw Mikvaot, schools for Shechita and for writing Sifrei Torah and Mezuzot. The Jewish community takes care of its own and has its own Hevra Kaddisha and there are kosher restaurants in each city. In fact, Odessa, a city replete with Zionist history, with at the most 20-30,000 Jews, now houses three kosher restaurants. One is a dairy pizza restaurant and the others are two very fine meat restaurants. So how can they maintain two kosher meat restaurants? There are two major Orthodox communities there. Each of them is led by a charismatic rabbi. One is Habad and one is Lithuanian Orthodox and, needless to say, neither rabbi talks to the other. But, the community benefits and so did I – with dinner at one and lunch at another. I was somewhat envious that we can't do the same here in Chicago.

The Nazi regime has been eradicated, the Soviet Union has fallen and yet Jews remain and Judaism has begun to flourish once more. Many of the young people have visited or moved to Israel. They have been participants in the Birthright Program and many times their parents follow them as well. Young people want to identify in a place where it was only 20 years ago downright dangerous to do so. They are learning of their

roots and interested in expressing openly their pride in being part of an ancient people. Against all odds, they are creating Jewish communities anew, where old Jewish communities, almost totally eradicated, were established.

At the beginning of August, fighting broke out between Georgia and Russia. The Jewish community in Georgia, especially in Tblisi and Gori felt themselves in immediate danger. The Jewish world sprang into action. Every day of the war I was receiving updates from the Jewish Agency office in Tblisi and from Alex Katz, who immediately traveled to Georgia from Israel. Gregory Brodsky, JAFI emissary in Georgia, flew to the Georgian towns of Batumi and Kutaisi to meet Jews living there. He had to fly through Kiev and Turkey, as all roads were closed due to the conflict. Those Jews who needed transport out of harms way were removed under the most treacherous of conditions. Immediately, those who wished to go onto Israel were transported there. The Tblisi airport was closed, except for El Al airplanes that flew in and out of Georgia to evacuate Jews from the war zone. The Joint Distribution Committee, under the most extraordinary of circumstances, reached out to help Jews in these very difficult places and either supplied them with food and shelter or made sure that they could leave their places of conflict. Young people were immediately evacuated to Israel where they became part of a makeshift summer camp which gave their parents a sense of security knowing their children were well cared for. Over the course of the conflict, the Jewish world reached out to help its own and in doing so, helped others as well. No matter where a Jew was, he or she was contacted by Jewish relief organizations.

There are remarkable stories of JAFI and JDC emissaries who put their lives in danger in order to reach out to elderly Jews and young families who were caught in the conflict. Think of it. One day you are sitting in your own home under difficult conditions, but able to live your own life. The next day, with nothing more than a few bags and the clothes on your back, you have to be transported out of a war zone in fear of your own life and taken to a new country with a new language and culture. Challenges for these families are many and yet, had it not been for the care and concern of one Jew for the other, many of them either would have been killed in the conflict or become permanent refugees.

Is there any other people around the world who cares for its people like we do? Is there any other nation on the face of this earth who immediately opens its doors to refugees and begins to take care of them like the State of Israel? Is there any kind of extended family who truly understands the adage: “All Israel is bound one to another” besides the Jewish people? I don’t know of any and I am very proud to be part of a nation which is willing to extend itself under the most extraordinary of circumstances to save its own and, in doing so, also reaching out to care for others as well. The remarkable stories of what occurred in Georgia are only now being told and I am convinced, as they are written, they will be the most miraculous of stories in the annals of human history portraying bravery, courage and steadfastness to a global mission of saving the Jewish people wherever they may reside.

We may not be in numbers a great people, but we make up for it in quality because we truly care for our own and are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. For two

years, this congregation prayed for the safety and well-being of Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, seized savagely by Hezbollah in Israeli territory near the Lebanese border. For two years, there was no news; no one was allowed to visit with them. The two families went through indescribable horror as they attempted to learn of the fate of their loved ones. Karnit Goldwasser was here at this congregation and spoke from our pulpit on a Shabbat morning. She told us that all she wanted to do was to see her beloved Udi once more. I promised her then that Udi would not be forgotten and until his release we would continue to recite prayers each Shabbat and Festival morning at this congregation. I presented her and her family members with a button and a dog tag that we had distributed to members of our community demonstrating that their family members were always in our hearts and minds. In Israel I visited with both families a number of times and expressed personally, on behalf of myself and our congregation, our abiding concern for the welfare of Udi and Eldad.

As you well know, this summer while I was in Israel, a deal was worked out for their release. It was not easy or simple. Hezbollah demanded amongst the detainees Sami Kuntar, an unrepentant murderer of a 4 year old child and her father in Nahariya, on April 22, 1979. Kuntar represents the worst that humanity can produce and Hezbollah rejoiced at his release with thousands of people heralding him as a hero. But Israel was determined to go forward so that the Goldwasser and Regev families could find out what happened to their boys.

Shira and I sat in our apartment living room in Jerusalem this summer watching live television as the Hezbollah representative told the whole world, including the

Goldwasser and Regev families, for the first time, what had happened to Udi and Eldad. He produced two black coffins, placed them on the ground and said: “This is all that remains.” It was merciless, it was vile, and it was horrific to watch. The dreams of Karnit for her husband and the dreams of the Goldwasser/Regev families had been destroyed. All of Israel mourned their loss and thousands of people attended the funerals.

With the help of the Jewish Agency I traveled to the northern part of Israel to visit the shivas of the Goldwasser and Regev families. In Kiryat Motzkin I visited with Tzvi Regev and his family mourning the loss of their son and brother. As soon as I entered, Tzvi acknowledged my presence with a warm smile. We gave each other a warm handshake and I conveyed condolences from myself and our congregation. A number of times throughout the course of the last two years Tzvi and I have talked. Since he doesn't speak English, at public meetings, we gravitated one to other so he could express his innermost thoughts to me in Hebrew. As I told him of my sadness, he said to me: “Now the tough part really begins. Eldad will never return home.” He was now a father who had lost a son at war. The best I could do was offer my love and concern.

I then traveled to Nahariya to visit the Goldwasser family. As soon as I walked in, Karnit's father, Omri Avni, recognized me from his trip to Chicago and to Beth El. He stood up and gave me a warm hug and thanked me so much for coming. I told him of my sorrow and that of my congregation and he said to me that my visit was extremely helpful. He expressed in words how extremely saddened they were by what had happened to their beloved son, son-in-law, husband and brother. Now it was time to move on. I expressed to Karnit and to Udi's parents our continuing love and support and

Miki Goldwasser, Udi's mother, said to me these words: "And now, it is Shalit, Shalit, Shalit. Tell your congregation never to stop working for his release."

Gilad Shalit is the third member of the trio of Israeli hostages. He was taken by Hamas in Israeli territory just outside the Gaza strip. As far as we know, he is still alive, but what Hamas is requiring for his release so far has not been acceptable. It is very difficult for the family and for all of Israel to know that there is a captured Israeli who is not being allowed to return home for a third Rosh Hashana. I stood in Israel at a demonstration asking for his release and we will continue to recite a prayer for his safe return to his family each Shabbat and Yom Tov.

What a remarkable people we are. Here I was half way around the world meeting families with whom I had a personal relationship, who thanked me for coming to pay a condolence call. We have not forgotten them and we never will. As part of a larger family we will continue to work for Gilad's safe release and we will continue to mourn with the Goldwasser and Regev families on the loss of their loved ones.

What a privilege it is to be a link in the chain of this great enterprise. I, like most of you, am really a Jew by birth, by fate. My parents, and in particular, my mother was Jewish. Therefore, I was born Jewish. But, in fact, we are all Jews by choice. We willingly choose to be part of our history, of our people and our faith. We must never take it for granted. We must add our contribution to strengthen that link to the past and to create a vibrant and exciting future for our people. We must grow in our Judaism, we must study and observe, learn and teach our generation and the generations to come. We cannot rely on others. We must become immersed in the destiny of our people at home,

in Israel and all around the world. We have only ourselves on whom to rely.

Ahmadinejad and his ilk threaten all of us, those who hate Israel hate all of us as well.

Yet, on this Yom Kippur day, I am convinced that we will succeed, that we will be here long after Ahmadinejad and other tyrants are wiped off the face of this earth. We are not part of an ever-dying people, we are a part of an ever-living, growing, thriving people and against all odds and historical precedent, we will continue to exist. And even as we continue to survive we must work to preserve and enrich Jewish society both here and around the world. There is no Jewish community that does not need improvement. We are, after all, only human beings with faults and weaknesses on which we must work. There is much work to be done to create model Jewish societies here and in Israel.

I wish to tell you a story which I think says it all. We may be a small people, but if we are proud of our heritage, work for our faith and our people, our shining star will rise and our future will be bright.

Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Prize winner and Holocaust survivor, made a trip to Saragossa, Spain back in the early 1990's. Before 1492, this was a thriving Jewish community but now there are no more Jews there. When Wiesel was at the Cathedral in Saragossa, a man approached him and started speaking to him in French, which Wiesel speaks and writes fluently. He offered to be his guide for no fee and was very proud to show Wiesel around. They started talking and the man asked Wiesel some personal questions. When it became obvious that Wiesel was Jewish and he knew Hebrew, the man said to him: "There have been no Jews here for almost 500 years. I've been waiting to meet one so I could ask for some help. There is something I want to show you at my

home.” The two of them walked off to a small apartment on the third floor and the man took out a fragment of yellowed parchment. “Is this Hebrew?” he asked. Wiesel examined the yellowed document and as he started to read it he was visibly shaken. These were not only Hebrew letters, but they had been written over 500 years ago. He started to read and translate for the man: “I, Moses, the son of Abraham, forced to break all ties with my people and my faith, leave these lines to the children of my children and theirs, in order that on the day when Israel will be able to walk again, its head high under the sun without fear and without remorse, they will know where their roots lie. Written at Saragossa, this 9th day of the month of Av, in the year of punishment and exile.” The year of course was 1492, the year of the Spanish Inquisition.

The man explained to Wiesel that this document was cherished by his family and passed on almost as an amulet from one generation to the next. He wanted to know more about his past. So Wiesel took many hours to explain who the Jewish people were and what had happened to them. He then left Saragossa to continue his travels.

A few years later Wiesel was walking down a street in Jerusalem when suddenly a man ran up to him and said: “Shalom, Shalom, do you remember me? Saragossa. Saragossa.” There he was on the streets of Jerusalem this man, but he wasn’t speaking French this time, he was speaking to Wiesel in Hebrew. “I have something to show you.” He took Wiesel by the hand and led him up to his apartment. Up three flights of stairs they walked and Wiesel saw that yellowed parchment in a picture frame on the wall. But this time the man read it to Wiesel in Hebrew. He had come to Israel, had learned Hebrew and had redeemed his Jewish tradition.

Wiesel said, "Please forgive me, I'm so embarrassed I didn't recognize you." Jokingly the man said to Wiesel, "Maybe you need an amulet like I have to help you not to forget." As Wiesel was about to leave, the man said, "You forgot to ask my name. I want you to know my name. My name is Moshe ben Avraham. My name is Moses, the son of Abraham. He is alive after 500 years."

Let us never forget the words of the liturgy in the early morning service:

"How good is our portion, how pleasant our lot, how beautiful our heritage."

On this Yom Kippur day we acknowledge our debt to the past. We are grateful to be part of a people, the Jewish people, whose history is replete, yes, with pogroms and persecutions, but also moments of miraculous survival. And we pledge to ourselves and generations to come that the link in the chain that we represent will be strong, vibrant and vital so that for all eternity the Jewish people will exist, that our G-d-given mission will be enriched and that our faith in a bright Jewish future will always be constant.