

Pushing Buttons
Yom Kippur Morning, 5765
Rabbi Joseph R. Black
Congregation Albert - Albuquerque, NM

My Dear Friends,

Last February, during my Sabbatical, I came across an article in the New York Times that I want to share with you:

For years, at thousands of New York City intersections, well-worn push buttons have offered harried walkers a rare promise of control over their pedestrian lives. The signs mounted above explained their purpose:

- To Cross Street
- Push Button
- Wait for Walk Signal
- Dept. of Transportation

Millions of dutiful city residents and tourists have pushed them over the years, thinking it would help speed them in their journeys. Many trusting souls might have believed they actually worked. Others, more cynical, might have suspected they were broken but pushed *anyway*, out of habit, or in the off chance they might bring a walk sign more quickly.

As it turns out, the cynics were right.

The city deactivated most of the pedestrian buttons long ago with the emergence of computer-controlled traffic signals, even as an unwitting public continued to push on, according to city Department of Transportation officials. More than 2,500 of the 3,250 walk buttons that still exist function *essentially* as mechanical placebos, city figures show. Any benefit from them is only imagined.¹

Can you believe it? For all of these years people have been pushing those buttons, thinking that they actually did something – and they were being fooled. Oh well, I guess we shouldn't be that surprised. Things change in the world. Life goes on. We can't live in the past anymore.

There are times when we wish we could live in the past, aren't there? Just for a little while, it might be nice to return to a time when "Walk" buttons actually worked, when "have a nice day" actually meant "have a nice day," and when we had hope that we would see peace between the State of Israel and her neighbors in just a few years.

It's hard to believe that it was only four years ago, on Rosh Ha Shanah morning, when I spoke to you about traveling to Israel with my Confirmation Class. That was a hopeful year for the State of Israel. Peace was in the air. Ehud Barak and Yasir Arafat had just signed the Wye Accords. Plans were being drawn up for what was to become the

¹ NY Times, February 27, 2004 "For Exercise in New York Futility, Push Button" by Michael Luo

boundaries of a new Palestinian State. Jews were shopping in the markets in Jericho and a booming tourist trade was being created between Tel Aviv and Amman. Israel’s High Tech economy was the envy of all the world markets. Reflecting on the fact that the trip I took with our students took place 25 years after my first trip to Israel, I said the following from this pulpit just four years ago:

The students who traveled to Israel this past summer were present at what can only be described as a turning point in the history of the Jewish State: [the dawn of a new era of peace and cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians.] Their experience, although different in tone and itinerary than what I experienced [on my first trip 25 years ago] was nonetheless life-changing and remarkable.

The question that Israel faced 25 years ago was, quite simply: *Can Israel survive the threat of war?* Today we ask a different question: *Can Israel survive the promise of peace?*

As we know all too well by now, the promise of peace about which I spoke four years ago was brutally shattered by the reality of the second Intifada. So many of us were so blinded by the prospect of peace that we naively *hoped against hope* that Yassir Arafat would seize the moment to hold out the olive branch and abandon his history of corruption, self aggrandizement and the fomenting of hatred and murderous despair among his people. As we know all too well by now, he chose, instead, to squander both the promise of peace and the lives of thousands of Jewish and Arab young men, women and children in an ever-increasing orgy of bloodletting and hatred.

It is now very clear that the act of hoping against hope for a peace that we dreamed was on the horizon four years ago was almost the equivalent of pressing a “Walk” button on a busy Manhattan street. I say ‘*almost equivalent*’ because in the case of the New York street corner, eventually, the traffic light will change. For those of us who still cling to a hope of peace – and I count myself among them -- we are still standing, (*pause*) still waiting (*pause*) and still pushing buttons.

This was not a good year for the State of Israel and those of us who love and support her. On the bright side, Israel’s security situation has vastly improved. The overall number of terror incidents has sharply declined- especially since the Israeli Government began building the controversial security fence. And yet, Israel faced other kinds of attacks this year that, while not the equivalent in loss of human life, were still very dangerous and destructive. These attacks against the Jewish State took place not on the *streets*, but in the *courts*, the *debate* halls and in the *pronouncements* of anti-Israel and anti Zionist sentiment by a variety of organizations and governments led, in particular by the United Nations.

A story is told about an American, a Frenchman and an Israeli who were flying on a plane over the Pacific Ocean. All of a sudden, the plane’s engines stopped functioning. They crash landed on a remote Pacific Island and the 3 were immediately captured by a tribe of cannibals, who tied them up and brought them to their chief..

The Chief told the 3 men that they were “civilized” cannibals. While it was their custom to eat their captives, before they ate anyone, they granted them their last wish, no matter how extravagant it might be. He turned to the American

and asked, "What is your last wish?"

The American replied: "I want a 2 inch thick steak with all the trimmings. I want a big baked potato and a case of Beer." The Chief motioned an aide who immediately ran into the jungle and came back with the steak, the potato and the beer. The American ate his meal and, after he had finished, he was thrown into the pot.

The Cannibal chief turned to the Frenchman and asked: "What is your last wish?"

He replied: "I want a case of Dom Perignon – 1965, and a big plate of escargots cooked in white wine sauce.

The chief motioned to another aide who immediately rushed off into the jungle and brought back everything the Frenchman had asked for.

The Frenchman ate and drank his fill, and then, he too was then thrown into the pot.

The Chief then turned to the Israeli and asked, "And what is your wish?"

The Israeli looked the Chief squarely in the eyes and replied: "I want you to kick me in the *behind* as hard as you can." The Chief was bewildered and asked the Israeli again, only to receive the same reply: "I want you kick me in the behind as hard as you can."

And so, The Chief shrugged his shoulders, turned the Israeli around, and kicked him as hard as he could.

At that moment, the Israeli pulled out a gun, shot the chief and rescued his comrades.

The American and the Frenchman got out of the pot, looked at the Israeli and said: "If you had that gun all along why didn't you do anything *sooner*?"

The Israeli replied: "What? And risk being condemned by the United Nations for insufficient *provocation*?"

This past March, as many of you know, Sue and I co-lead a remarkable interfaith Solidarity Mission to Israel –along with Rabbi Flicker from B’nai Israel, leaders of The Jewish Federation of Greater Albuquerque and the Christian group, “Bridges for Peace.” Our children came along with us – as well as many members of Congregation Albert, the greater Albuquerque Jewish and Christian community. During the course of our mission, we visited the controversial security fence which is rapidly being erected to separate the Occupied Territories from the rest of the State of Israel. This was my first encounter with the fence. Two years ago, when I was in Israel -- during the bleakest time of this most recent Intifada – there was no fence. There was, however, a brutal barrage of suicide bombings of buses and restaurants. In March 2002 alone some 130 Israelis were murdered -- the proportional equivalent of 6,000 Americans, or *twice* the number of innocent victims murdered on Sept. 11. Since the security fence has been built, the number of successful attacks has dwindled to a fraction of that amount. Notice that I used the words, “*successful attacks*”. While the fence has proven to be an excellent deterrent against suicide bombings carried out in Israel, this doesn’t mean that the terrorists have stopped trying to kill innocent men, women and children. In one of my e-mail letters from Israel to the congregation last March, I wrote the following:

.....during the past 3 weeks over 5 terrorist attacks have been prevented by [the Israeli Army]. One of these thwarted attacks, in particular, deserves mention. *Fattah* - the Palestinian terrorist faction under the direct command of Yassir Arafat - recruited an 8 year old boy to carry a bomb across the border from the territories into Israel.

"Recruited" is perhaps the wrong word to use since the boy did not know that he was carrying a bomb. It is beyond my ability to understand such a callous disregard for human life. This was not an act of desperation by a desperate people - as PLO propaganda would have us believe, rather it was an act of abusive manipulation by murderous cowards who have no regard for either human life or a peace process and whose only goal is to spill more Jewish (and Palestinian) blood. The greatest aspect of this tragedy is the fact that these murderers and abusers do not represent the *true* aspirations of the Palestinians. They are victimizers of their own people.

Shortly after I sent out that e-mail, another young boy –this time 16 years old -- approached an IDF outpost and shared the fact that he was wearing a suicide bomb vest and that he was sent to blow himself up – but he had a change of heart and did not want to die.

This was not an isolated incident. These type of events happen every day. Israelis hate the fence – as much – if not more than the Palestinians hate the fence. Israelis hate the fact that they are forced to see it every day. They hate the fact that it is a constant reminder of the precariousness of their situation. They hate the fact that it causes the Palestinians to hate them even more. And yet, they know that it is necessary – for now. They may disagree about it's location and dimensions – as a matter of fact the Israeli Supreme Court recently ruled that portions of the fence did, in fact, infringe unjustly on the lives of Palestinians and needed to be moved -- but, with the exception of the smallest minority of the most extreme leftists, everyone in Israel agrees that the security fence is absolutely essential in order to save lives.

But, it would appear that Israeli lives don't account for much in world opinion. This past summer, the International Court of Justice in The Hague passed a resolution condemning Israel for constructing the security barrier. The judgment read, in part:

"The court accordingly finds that the construction of the wall, and its associated regime, are contrary to international laws,"

It continued.....

"The court is of the view that the United Nations, and especially the General Assembly and the Security Council, should consider what further action is required to bring to an end the illegal situation resulting from the construction of the wall."

In one brief reference, the court said the construction of the barrier should be seen in the context of "the succession of armed conflicts, acts of indiscriminate violence and repressive measures" taken by Israel since 1947, when Israel declared itself a state.

In other words, it's all Israel's fault. The Palestinians are merely victims of oppression, occupation and persecution. If Israel were to end the occupation, withdraw to the pre-1967 borders and make peace –everyone would be happy. It's simple. Why can't those *Jews* – pardon me, I mean '*Israelis*' – just be nice and do like they are told? But this is not a *surprise* is it? We've come to expect this kind of behavior from the United Nations. After all, any organization that would allow *Syria* – one of the most corrupt regimes in the Middle East and a major supporter of world terror – to sit on the Security Council can't be expected to have any *credibility*, can it?

But unfortunately, it is not only the United Nations that is attacking Israel in the court of public opinion. Recently, the national assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) passed resolutions which, among other things, condemned the security fence and recommended that their official church body seriously consider initiating
“...a process of phased selective divestment in multinational corporations operating in Israel....”²

Three Days ago, the Anglican Peace & Justice Network -- the social action arm of the International Episcopal Church -- issued a one-sided statement that condemned Israel for oppressing the Palestinian people and demanded that Israel withdraw from all occupied territories. They said, in part:

We offer not only our solidarity for a just peace, but also our observation that it is the Occupation in its many facets that foments the violence and fuels the conflict. Collective punishment of the Palestinian people must be brought to an end³.

In other words, once again Israel is to blame for all of the violence. No *matter* that the leadership of the Palestinian people rejected out of hand the real offer of peace that Ehud Barak was prepared to give them four years ago. No matter that these same leaders have *continuously* extolled the virtues of armed struggle. No matter that corruption in the Palestinian Authority has been well-documented and rampant.... No matter – it is *Israel's* fault – and *Israel* should bear the brunt of world scorn and criticism.

My friends, we can no longer sit on the sidelines and push broken buttons in a vain attempt to recapture what once was. Israel is being attacked – from all sides. And we must get involved. Now.

Recently, a group of us began the process of instituting a formal dialogue with the Presbytery of Santa Fe – the local arm of the National Presbyterian Church – and members of the Jewish Community. It looks as though we will need to expand our outreach to the Episcopal Church as well. And there will be others – mark my words....

In light of this, each of us must understand that we are ambassadors. When you hear remarks about Israel, listen closely; refute the arguments that Israel is the oppressor. Write letters to the newspaper. Call your congress people and urge them to stay the course and support our only true ally in the Middle East.

² PCUSA 216th General Assembly, Section 7 of Overture 04-32. July, 2004

³ Anglican Peace and Justice Network Statement on the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict. September 22, 2004

More importantly, once again, I urge you to consider traveling to Israel – bring your families. This past March, Sue, Elana, Ethan and I had a life changing experience. We traveled the length and breadth of the country – both with the solidarity mission and on our own. During our trip we were embraced by everyone with whom we came in contact. Israel needs us – and we need Israel – now more than ever. Sue and I hope to lead a family mission to Israel -- perhaps as early as next summer. Join us.

Upon leaving the sanctuary this afternoon, you will receive a card from the Israel Ministry of Tourism and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations that encourages you to seriously consider traveling to Israel in the near future. Fill it out, send it in. You’re not obligating yourself to anything. Go to the website listed on the card and imagine how such a trip could change your life.

I want to conclude my remarks this morning with the words of my colleague, Rabbi Ron Kronish who made Aliyah 25 years ago. He writes, in part:
I have not shed all my ideals, despite the horrible violence that brought on so much depression and despair during the last 4 years. In particular, I still believe that we can -and we will - reach a peaceful solution to our conflict with the Palestinians sooner or later. (I've actually joked a lot about starting a new movement called "Peace Later" because I think that most people will want to join it!).

Just as other bitter and "hopeless" conflicts in other parts of the world –in Northern Ireland or South Africa or Bosnia and Kosovo-have come to an end, so too our conflict can and must be brought to an end. And then the *real* challenge will begin: we will then need to work very hard at learning to live in peace with one another. This will not be easy, nor will it be quick. But I believe that it will become the historical imperative of the times. This will require tremendous human and financial resources. But it can be done, if we -both sides to the conflict - set our minds to it and see the great benefits of peace for both peoples.”

My Dear Friends, we have a great deal of work to do to support the State and People of Israel. On this Yom Kippur – this *Shabbat* of *Shabbatot* – let us pledge to do all that we can to preserve and sustain the vital legacy of the Jewish State. Let us understand that we can no longer live in the past – but that we can never stop looking to the future. *Oseh Shalom bimromav, Hu Ya-aseh Shalom Aleynu, V'al kol Yisrael. Vimru Amen*
May the One who makes Peace in the Heavens, send peace to us, to Israel and to all the world, and let us say, AMEN.