**There is No Jewish Pope**
**Rabbi Dan Moskovitz**
**Temple Judea - July 16, 2010**

Tomorrow we will read Parshat *D'varim* the beginning of the last book of the Torah when Moses gathers the Israelites around him and shares with them his final words of advice before he dies. In that moment Moses reflects on how he did it, how he managed to lead 600,000 Israelites through the desert without them killing him or each other. And then he remembers the critical moment when he asked God for guidance. He asked "*Aicha* – How can I possibly lead this people by himself, bear their burdens and bickering?" God said to Moses , "You can't, it would not be good for them and it would not be good for you, no one person, no one voice or opinion will suffice to lead this people." And God instructed Moses to choose wise, discerning and experienced leaders from the people and let them share the burden of leadership. Their first duties he explained were to decide justly the disputes between Jew and fellow Jew, to deal with the infighting that was overtaking the camp and the community. Because God saw that it was a cancer, like it the times of Korach, or Cain and Able, or Jacob and Esau and if left untreated would destroy this precious and chosen people.

On Tuesday we will read another book of torah, Lamentations; the woeful song of pain after the destruction of the First Temple and the dispersion of the Jewish people. Lamentations begins with the same questioning word *Aicha/How?*! But this time is God asking his people How did this happen? "How lonely sits the city [of Jerusalem], once great with people?! She that was great among the nations, has become like a widow."

It will be Tisha B'av, the 9th of Av, the day that commemorates the destruction of the first and second temple both of which our tradition teaches were brought down not by the Babylonians and the Romans to whom history gives much credit, but because of Jewish infighting, because of senseless hatred between Jews. Specifically the Talmud explains that it was because a certain man held a dinner party and an uninvited guest attended that the Temple was destroyed.

Instead of welcoming this man as a fellow Jew and brother the host of the party berated and belittled the guest, paid no heed to his word of apology or contrition and kicked him out of his house insight of all of his guests, among which were many great rabbis. The Talmud explains that because the rabbis were silent and did nothing to stop this, the uninvited guest assumed they agreed with the actions of the host. This so enraged the uninvited guest that he went to the Roman authorities to seek justice and that action ultimately led to the Romans concluding that the Jews could not govern themselves. Further they reasoned that such a volatile group was an unnecessary danger to Roman interests and needed to be put in check. Therefore the Temple in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life was destroyed and the Jewish people scattered to the Diaspora.

And there remained and did not return until 1948, when the modern state of Israel was born, on the heels of another great calamity, the Shoah. Led by the many Moses' of its day, Ben Guirion, Golda, Weitzman and others. This group too saw that Jewish infighting was the greatest threat to Israel's renewed existence, even greater than the Arab armies massing on its borders. As hard as that may be to imagine, it is true, Ben Gurion's great concern and the struggle of the Theodore Hertlz and the Zionist Congress in the decades before was how to get the Jewish world, let alone the rest of the world to come together in support of the Jewish state. You have heard the old joke 2 Jews 3 opinions; imagine the discussions on when and where to establish the Jewish state. In the final moments before declaration it was actually the question of how Jewish the Jewish state should be that nearly defeated the state. Specifically the issue was the inclusion of God in the Israeli Declaration of Independence.

The draft document used the phrase "and placing our trust in the Almighty". The two rabbis present Haim-Moshe Shapira and Yehuda Leib Maimon, argued for its inclusion, saying that it could not be omitted, with Shapira supporting the wording "God of Israel" or "the Almighty and Redeemer of Israel." It was strongly opposed by members of the secularist parties. The debate lasted late into the day and at times threatened to unravel the whole process. The room could not agree, should Israel be founded on a document that declared religious faith or should it be a secular charter founded on cultural identity, on Jewish peoplehood. With the hour growing late, and the deadline for declaration less than an hour away the phrase "Rock of Israel" was used, which could be interpreted as either referring to God, or the land of Eretz Israel, Ben-Gurion said to the assembled leaders of Israel "Each of us, in his own way, believes in the 'Rock of Israel' as he conceives it. I should like to make one request: Don't let me put this phrase to a vote." And it was accepted without a vote, miraculously a room full of Jews agreed to disagree the infighting was put to rest so the fighting for independence could begin.

Why the history lesson, because history at least for the Jewish people has a remarkable way of repeating itself. And as the philosopher Satayana taught, those who do not study it are bound to repeat it.

By now I assume that most if not all of you have heard of the crisis in Israel. Not the crisis of security and legitimacy that swirls around the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or the existential threat of a nuclear Iran; but the crisis of infighting amongst Jews in and outside of Israel. The crisis of the ever expanding divide between the Ultra Orthodox Religious community led by the chief rabbinate in Israel and the remaining 85% of the Jewish world, which by the way is all of us, that is being written off as irrelevant and written out of Israeli society as not Jewish enough to live in Israel.

Today, like in times past the question has to do with decides who is a Jew, with who speaks for the Jewish people and how we define 'Jewish'. Next week a bill comes before the Israeli Parliament (The Knesset) that would radically change the Law of Return, the fundamental and founding principle vested in the establishment of the

State of Israel as an eternal homeland to which all Jews as long as they are descendent of at least 1 Jewish grandparent can return, claim citizenship, participate fully in society and live openly and safely as Jews. That criteria of one Jewish grandparent should be a familiar if harrowing formula, because it was also what Hitler used to determine who was Jewish enough to be sent to the Death Camps. Israel was founded by survivors of those camps, they knew what they were saying when they set that broad standard. For all their disagreements over language on this they never waivered, Israel was to be a safe haven for all Jews no matter the color of their yarmulke or even if they wore one at all.

The new law is known as the Rotem Bill for its sponsor David Rotem a member of the hard right wing nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu party. Yisrael Beiteinu is the same party that was elected into government on its platform of loyalty oaths for Israeli citizens. The Rotem Bill would give the Orthodox controlled Israeli chief rabbinate ultimate authority to determine who is a Jew and who is not. Specifically the bill would give sole authority to the chief rabbinate in determining what constitutes a kosher conversion, requiring converts to live an Orthodox lifestyle and mandating orthodox Jewish practice <u>as the only</u> legitimate form of Jewish life.

The bill however is not the real problem, it is just the tip of a much more frightening and dangerous iceberg that Israel and the Jewish people are hurling toward yet again with reckless abandon. **The underlying problem is the real question: will Israel remain a democratic pluralistic state, or will it fall into the hands of extreme groups who run the government?** This question, the nearly complete hegemony of the minority religious right to control and dictate Israeli domestic and foreign policy is at the root of Israel's deep internal conflicts, it underlies the Palestinian conflict, the settlement issue and the barriers on Israel's side to finding an equitable solution to the intractable conflict. It is at the heart of growing divide between the non-orthodox American Jewish community – the largest in the world and the current Israeli government. Increasingly they don't recognize us, our voice, our love, our support, our concern for Israel and we find it more and more difficult to see our Jewish selves in them.

I want to share with you a glimpse of just how deep this divide is, how painful the attacks, how injurious to the Jewish soul the views of the orthodox right have become. Yesterday Haaretz published an op-ed piece in opposition to the Rotem Bill. The response to the column was withering and hateful. A writer who identified himself as Rob a Reform Jew who had converted to Judaism and was living in New York wrote the following:

*As someone who converted in the Reform movement, this law affects me directly. It basically says that to Israel, I'm not enough of a Jew, even after a circumcision, a mikvah, a beit din and years of studying and subsequent years of living a Jewish life. I feel betrayed by a country I have always supported, and cannot tell you how much this hurts.*

Now listen to the responses to Rob post:

"*Converted in the Reform movement?" Why should we pay for your mistake? Didn't your Reform "rabbi" tell you what you were getting into? Your conversion is not kosher why did you not go to an orthodox rabbi?*

*"G-d gave us the Torah and the Oral Law (which is now the Talmud). There are clearly explained laws that say a Reform conversion is NOT KOSHER. If you really care, you'll get an orthodox conversion. You can call yourself whatever you want, but you won't be a Jew until then."*

Rob responded in the end:
*God is the only one able to judge the validity of my conversion, not you, not the Knesset or the Chief Rabbinate. I'll be proud to be a Jew until the day I die, but I'm weeping for what the current Israeli government is doing and what that means for thousands of Jews around the world.*

*Aicha* – how do we restore love, respect, tolerance and pluralism in the Jewish community?

*Aicha* – how do we not once again go down that road of Jewish infighting that leads to our undoing?

My answer is that when it comes to questions of the Jewish people, *aicha*--how can we the Jews of America, Reform Jews, lovers of Israel and Judaism, how can we not raise our collective voices and say that great Hebrew plea of old, Dayanu – Enough already!

For the 2,000 years of exile we had no central religious authority. Each Jewish community, be they Sephardim or Ashkenazim, wherever they dwelled in the world, made their own internal religious decisions based on their place in the long march of Jewish history and their own reading of our Torah and traditions. Even Moses could not be the sole decision maker. He recounts in this week's portion how a system of courts was established to have justice be closer to the people, not vested in just one individual.

The proposed conversion bill, if passed, would formally legislate absolute authority on religious matters in Israel to the Chief Rabbis. With half the world's Jewish population and the only Jewish sovereign state in the world, such a decision has significant implications for all Jews. We have not had a central Jewish authority since the time of the Temples and Kings. There has never been a Jewish Pope and we do not need one today.

What we do need is an understanding that that there are many legitimate ways to be a Jew. We are not obligated to like each other or agree with each other and the Jewish decisions we make. We are, however, obligated to love each other for we are

bound, each Jew to all other Jews, in an eternal Covenant within our own Jewish Civilization.

Israel lives in a tough neighborhood. She needs and deserves our complete support no matter where we choose to live. And, with that support comes the obligation to speak out about the major questions that affect the whole of the Jewish people. Israel needs and deserves our vigorous participation in the debate as to what kind of Jewish state Israel is to be.

The 10th day of Av, which is Wednesday, is also a critical day. It ushers in a period of comfort leading to the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. Let us pray that this year on the 10th of Av the Jewish world has had enough of the divisiveness that leads to destruction and that it has been replaced with comfort that leads to reconciliation.

*Thank you to Rabbi Daniel R. Allen, Executive Director ARZA for the inspiration for this sermon and the closing paragraphs which are taken from his July 16, 2010 letter.*