

The End of History

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Rabbi David J Fine, PhD

Four days ago I buried a Korean War combat vet. The young Jewish man from Brooklyn enlisted when the conflict began, served for two years on the front line, and suffered from his injuries and PTSD for the rest of his life. He was first and foremost a patriotic American for all the eighty-seven years of his life. His casket was draped in the Stars and Stripes for the funeral service. The army met us at Cedar Park cemetery in Paramus for the military rites. A soldier played taps on her bugle while two servicemen stood at attention saluting the flag draped casket. They then folded the flag with impeccable precision and presented it to the man's widow "on behalf of the President of the United States, the United States Army, and a grateful nation." As I watched and listened to the military ceremony, moments before my duties would resume with the Jewish burial service, my emotions reminded me of how I felt watching the funerary rites preformed for a president of the United States almost a year ago. My eyes welled up as I watched the funerary rites on television for George H. W. Bush. Although I don't remember particularly appreciating him during his administration, I joined most of our fellow citizens in mourning the integrity, life-long commitment and sense of duty that marked his character. The last of the World War II veterans to serve as president, he reminded me of the service my grandfathers offered their county in that great conflict. Both of my grandfathers were in the US Army and Alla's grandfather was in the Soviet army during the war. The death of the elder President Bush marked for me the end of that generation, a generation that gave us all so much.

And there was yet another reason why my tears flowed as the president's flag-draped casket was carried down the steps of the Capitol and the military band played "Hail to the Chief." President Bush led the world in the year that an acclaimed historian once famously dubbed "the end of history." 1989

was the year of what should be called the European Revolution. The Soviet Bloc fell apart that year as communist regimes disintegrated across central and eastern Europe. A month from now marks the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and with it, the Iron Curtain and the end of the Cold War. Democratic states and new economies were constructed out of the remains of failed communist systems, and within two years the Soviet Union itself was dissolved. Most of us in this room remember watching that history unfold on our television screens each night as we tuned in to the evening news. (We didn't have cable news or cell phones or an internet back then. If we did the revolution that happened would have unfolded at an even faster speed.) We knew we were watching history, and yet it is so difficult to recognize the greatness of events while they are happening. Watching the funeral of President Bush, I said to myself, "Wow, to think what took place under his steady watch." The world could have exploded. Instead it just changed.

I would grant that it was not George Bush nor Ronald Reagan but Mikhail Gorbachev who was most responsible for 1989. But Gorbachev is the classic tragic hero. He wanted reforms, not revolution. His dream was to save the Soviet Union. Instead, he presided over its disintegration. He knew that the system he inherited was not sustainable. He knew that political change was necessary to solve the economic problems. But in the end the process of change could not be steered from the Kremlin like a controlled economy, and Gorbachev was not able to hold the Soviet Union together or maintain his own grasp on power. But he is a great man for his accomplishment in setting such change into motion with extraordinarily little bloodshed. When each decision point came he chose not to use force against the free wishes of the people. Thankfully the world was led at the time by competent leaders who were able to grasp the moment of change, with George H. W. Bush at the helm. We saw the end of the Cold War, the re-unification of Germany and the dissolution of the USSR in an extraordinarily short period of time. All in George Bush's single term in the White House! It is dizzying to remember how much had happened then.

1989 and its quick aftermath saw the end of one union and the creation of another. The end of the Warsaw Pact and then of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics saw the expansion of NATO and, more significantly, the transformation of the European Economic Community into the expanded and expanding European Union. The world most of us grew up in, a world divided into two camps, was no more. Global cooperation, European unity, a single European currency, and George H. W. Bush's vision of "A New World Order" marked the promise of that time. "Out of these troubled times," President Bush said in his famous speech to Congress, "a new world order can emerge. A new era—freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace. An era in which the nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony. A hundred generations have searched for this elusive path to peace, while a thousand wars raged across the span of human endeavor. Today, that new world is struggling to be born, a world quite different from the one we've known. A world where the rule of law supplants the law of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak. This is the vision that I shared with President Gorbachev."

It was a beautiful vision, but Gorbachev and Bush could only do so much. Bush found himself without a majority in the next presidential election, while Gorbachev found himself without a country. The peace that US-led forces sought in the Persian Gulf was not long-lived. The hopes we shared for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process that began in those heady years have been disappointed. The threat of terror, the elusiveness of justice and insecurity of peace have returned with a vengeance. It seems easier now than ever to dismiss the thesis of Francis Fukuyama who famously celebrated 1989 as "the end of history." He did not mean that things would stop happening. His point was that the main force of, at least recent, history was the struggle of the principles of liberty and equality over its competitors. In 1989 the liberal egalitarianism of the West, in both political and economic terms, had triumphed over

communism, its last great competitor. Influenced by the Hegelian philosophical perspective that history can be read as the arc of an idea across time, 1989 marked the close and resolution of that arc.

But as I said, it seems easier now than ever to disagree with that almost eschatological reading of the meaning of 1989. Can we claim with certainty that the capitalist system is the surest way when our government is entrenched in a trade war against Communist China—yes, Communist—and when we have suffered through a recession and know we cannot count on the comfortable retirement that our parents may have enjoyed? When we look at what has happened over the past thirty years, from ethnic genocidal conflicts in the Balkans and Rwanda, to explosive murderous terrorism, to the continued irresponsible destruction of the environment, and to the resurgence of hatreds we thought long buried, an irrational fear of immigrants, a jingoistic populism of national self-interest that has spread like a plague through the world, and an alarming increase in antisemitism, it is easy to laugh at the idealism that George H. W. Bush shared with Mikhail Gorbachev. But President Bush was not wrong to share that vision. And that was why I cried as I watched our country bid him farewell.

The belief in the positive resolution of history is a foundational pillar of our religion. אני מאמין באמונה שלמה בביאת המשיח, I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the messiah, our brethren said as they walked into the gas chambers. אם כל זה אחכה—even though he may tarry—אף אל פי שיתמהמיה. This was Maimonides' twelfth principle of faith, the hope in the future, and the redemption of the world. 1989 did not mark the end of history. We did not find full redemption. But we got a glimpse of it.

When I entered the Seminary to study for the rabbinate, we asked our theology professor, the late Dr. Neil Gillman, why he thought that belief in the coming of a messiah and the end of days was important for the modern liberal and critical American Jew. This was at the time when the Lubavitcher rebbe was first being declared messiah and the Habad movement became exposed to ridicule. “But we

must believe in an end of days,” Professor Gillman told us. “Why?” we asked. “Because if we have no beginning, and we have no end, then we have no middle,” he told us. He did not necessarily intend to impart a riddle. What he sought to teach us was that we can only truly understand our place in the world if we can understand where we are coming from and where we are going.

We are not yet there, but we are going somewhere. That is a foundational principle of the Jewish worldview.

Alla and I were just in Israel a couple weeks ago for our cousin’s wedding. We happened to have been there for election day—or Election Day II we should say—who says Israelis don’t observe a second day of holidays? Anyway, in addition to being bombarded by the huge campaign banners that decorated every intersection and billboard, I also saw the familiar Habad billboard of the picture of the rebbe with the Hebrew announcement *ברוך הבא מלך המשיח*, “Welcome, King Messiah!” At the wedding, which was wonderful, my father got to speak a few words to his niece and husband before reading the ketubah, but the officiating rabbi was a Habadnik who invoked the rebbe’s presence and blessings. If the messiah had really come, I thought to myself, then it would not be illegal for my father to be the actually officiating rabbi, as it is illegal now for any Conservative or Reform or Reconstructionist rabbi to officiate at weddings in Israel. If we were really in a messianic age we would not qualify our reference to the State of Israel in our liturgy as “the beginning of the flowering of our redemption” -- *ראשית צמיחת גאולתינו*. Redemption remains a work in progress.

When I studied Chinese history in college, I was struck by how the Chinese understood history to flow in cycles rather than on a linear plane. Like the pessimistic author of Ecclesiastes, the Chinese believed there was ultimately nothing new under the sun, and that each progression and regression was marked by the end of one dynasty and the start of another. Not so in the West. We believe that history has a beginning and an end, and that we are somewhere in the middle. We don’t have to look to Hegel,

or Fukuyama, to learn that history has a purpose. It's in our Bible. It is the essence of our Torah. God created the world so that a covenant could be forged with Abraham. God took the Israelites out of Egypt so that they could receive the Torah at Sinai. God led the Israelites to the Promised Land so that they might preserve the covenant in peace and prosperity. History moves forward with purpose. But at the same time it never quite ends. On Simhat Torah we read the conclusion of the Torah, which leaves off on a cliffhanger. Moses preps the people for their new life in the Promised Land, then climbs Mount Nebo and looks out at the promise. And then he dies. The journey, the hopes, the purpose, are left incomplete and unrealized. And if we read through the rest of the Bible the story never really ends. Because life goes on. But we should not lose track of where we are going.

History went on after 1989. There were ups and downs as there always are. But what marks the person of faith is the belief, the conviction, that history will find its way through, that things will get better, even if the path is hard to see. Even if it is much harder to see now than it was thirty years ago. If anything, we are thirty years older, and hopefully thirty years wiser.

We each live our own histories. Yom Kippur helps us put them in perspective. Yom Kippur teaches us to look back, to look within, to examine our ways, to take account of what we have done and what we have yet to do. Yom Kippur reminds us where we started from. And more importantly, Yom Kippur reminds us where we are going.

The man I buried four days ago earned the Stars and Stripes that draped his casket. He served for two years on the front line in Korea in what was one of the hottest points of the long Cold War. He came home wounded and scarred. But he got married, worked in construction to support his family of three children, and lived on to enjoy the love of five grandchildren. We still worry about the North Koreans. But we are grateful for his service, and we know that he and his fellow soldiers fought to get us from there to here.

אני מאמין. We believe in the end of history, even it may tarry. Even so we wait for it, for even today things could get better. That's why we gather together and fast on Yom Kippur. A new year has dawned. We look back and find that our mistakes are overwhelming. But we do not give up. We neither say, "this is the best it can be," nor "it can't really improve." Rather, we fast in audacious protest that we will improve, that we can be better, and that we demand a new slate for the new year so that we can continue to pursue that lofty goal.

Let us not despair at history. Let us not give up on leadership, on engagement, on politics, on the ability to achieve the right and the good. And not let us not give up on what we have yet to do in our own lives. The game is not over. We are still here and history continues.

Thirty years ago history responded to Ronald Reagan's famous words from Berlin, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" But the fall of the Berlin Wall was not the end of history. George Bush shared with Mikhail Gorbachev a vision for what a better world could look like. What vision do we share with each other?