From Antiochus to Assad

Or, On the Ridgewood Menorah

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On Rosh Hashanah Rabbi Litwin mentioned the town hall meeting we had here on the question of a public menorah in Ridgewood, and just two days ago I stood before the Ridgewood Village Council asking for permission to erect a menorah. I told the Council—with apologies to Mayor Aronsohn who is here worshipping with us this evening so has to hear this twice (well, actually, there I had a three-minute limit and here, I have, let's say, greater lattidue)—that the Hanukkah menorah is a symbol of the victory of religious freedom over a dictator from Syria. That was Antiochus and today we have Assad. How much has changed, I ask, in the intervening 2100 years? The balance of power has shifted, but we still have dictators in Syria, and for some reason, their names still start with A. But more importantly, we are still struggling for security, both on the physical and the spiritual planes.

The seven-branched menorah is the most ancient symbol of Judaism, far older than the so-called Star-of-David. The candelabrum of seven branches is described in the Bible as the sacred lampstand for the inner sanctum of the Holy Temple. The Eternal Light that every synagogue has lit above the Ark is an echo of the ancient Menorah and its symbol of God's eternal presence and blessing among the people. We can see what the Menorah looked like as there is a picture of it on the Arch of Titus in Rome, the most visible symbol of the Jews being carried off by the victorious Roman armies in the year 70 CE. The Menorah can also be found inscribed on the facades of ancient synagogues and on ancient Jewish tombstones and sarcaphogi. In the Talmud the Rabbis teach that we should light a nine-branched menorah—or eight plus the shammes—on the eight nights of Hanukkah, adding one light for each night. Hanukkah commemorates the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian Seleucid army, when Judah

Maccabee gained control over the Temple, purifying it of idolatry and relighting the menorah with sacred oil that lasted for the eight day festival. The Hanukkah menorah was lit by Jews throughout the centuries, in their windows so that they could advertise the miracle, proclaim to the world that despite the seeming challenges of Jewish life, that even at the darkest time of the year, and especially then, God's presence is ever present and God's blessing and promise of redemption never forgotten. Then, in the twentieth century, just after the catastrophe of the Holocaust, the founders of the State of Israel chose the ancient menorah, as depicted on the Arch of Titus, as the symbol of the new state, marking the renaissance of an ancient people rising like a phoenix out of the ashes of Europe. And these days, during Hanukkah, when one passes the Knesset in Jerusalem, the parliament of Israel, one can see a giant menorah atop the roof with the words proclaiming in Hebrew for all to see: "a great miracle happened here."

As those of us who attended that town hall meeting here a few months ago, we learned how much the menorah means to different people. I want to tell that story here, because it is a story not only about the ancient symbol of an ancient people, but also because it tells us who we are as individuals, as a congregation, and as a village. I also want to tell the story of my own involvement with this process and how I felt about it. I did not speak personally at our town hall meeting. But I knew that I would have a chance here. But also because I needed to hear and learn from everyone else, and continue on this journey.

It began when a group of Ridgewood residents approached Mayor Aronsohn in the summer of 2012 to explain how important a public menorah was to them, and the mayor and I met with them here at Temple Israel to discuss the question. The mayor came to me not only because I am the rabbi of the only synagogue in Ridgewood, but also because I chair our local interfaith clergy group, the Interfaith Religious Leaders of Ridgewood. I knew that the question of a public menorah raised a number of important and difficult questions regarding the respective roles of church and state, the public display of religious symbols, and the way that we celebrate difference in Ridgewood. At the mayor's suggestion I

brought the question to the clergy group and we spent several sessions discussing it. The reactions were very understandable. We were concerned with going the way of other towns where acceptance of other religions is accomplished through a plastic supermarket-style display of a series of symbols, some secular and some religious, in front of a town hall. We were concerned because we, as the clergy, understand it as our role, as the religious leaders of the community, to establish religion in our respective houses of worship and in the homes of our congregants and parishioners. That is not the town's role. That is why there ought to be that "wall of separation" between church and state, a "wall' that is meant to protect the church from the state more than to protect the state from the church. And we were concerned because those plastic displays are plastic in more ways than one. We take great pride in the interfaith services that we hold in Ridgewood; the Thanksgiving service, the Holocaust memorial service, the Martin Luther King service and the disabilities awareness service. How many towns and villages have four broad interfaith services each year? And it's not just the number, it's what we do at those services, how we celebrate each tradition, each approach to God. I don't believe in interfaith liturgy that avoids all Christian references so as not to be offensive to Jews, and all specifically Jewish references, Muslim, Hindu, etc. We are left then with generic platitudes without color or sound. At Ridgewood's interfaith services, on the other hand, one hears prayers in Hebrew and Arabic, Hindi and English, music from all our traditions, and a collegiality among the clergy that is extraordinary. So much so, if I can add an aside here, that last year when a broad umbrella of church leaders wrote a letter to Congress questioning the US support of Israel with military equipment if Israel uses it for what they claimed were unethical purposes, I was, with a single, simple email, able to bring Ridgewood's Presbyterian, Methodist and Quaker ministers to meet me for breakfast at Daily Treat so that I could register my disappointment with the anti-Israel activities of their denominational leaderships. Or, one can go to St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church and ask Rev Hartnett to see the olive wood chalice that I brought him as a gift from Bethlehem, when I visited that Christian holy city a little over a year ago with Tina Polen. And so we, the clergy of Ridgewood, were concerned

about trading in the cathedral of religious voices we have constructed for the plasticity of displayed symbols. But on the other hand, the clergy of Ridgewood did not want to be unsupportive of something that was important to the Jewish community, seeing it as a part of their sacred duty to work in friendship with us, the Jewish community of Ridgewood. So the question then arose as to what the Jewish community wanted.

At this point, I realized that I was facing a political question in the pure sense of the term: how does the body politic make decisions? What does the Jewish community of Ridgewood want and who represents it? Was it me as the rabbi of the synagogue? Was it the synagogue leadership or the synagogue membership? Was it the Jewish residents who formed a menorah committee as a grass roots movement? Was it the rabbis of the four synagogues that serve Ridgewood residents—we are the only synagogue in Ridgewood but there are other synagogues that some Ridgewood Jewish residents attend—or was it the entirety of the Jewish population? Rather that decide this unanswerable question which was more fitting for a college seminar than a real town process, we pursued each and every access point to determine what "the Jewish community" wanted, and through this process we found that we were building a community to a new security and identity than it ever had before.

First, I invited the grass roots menorah committee to a meeting of the Executive Committee of Temple Israel, where we spent an intense hour sharing our views on the role of the government of a Christian majority in caring for a Jewish minority. Would a menorah help strengthen Jewish identity, or would it increase the pressure of winter holiday celebrations on individual consciences? The Executive Committee decided then to poll the membership of the synagogue, and we all owe a thank you to Bob Obeiter for the professionalism that he volunteered in conducting and analyzing a respectable scientific opinion poll for us on this question. While the synagogue leadership was certainly prepared to pursue any clear direction from the membership, the survey results indicated a statistical split down the middle between those who supported the proposal for a menorah and those who did not. We devoted the bulk

of a meeting of the synagogue board which Mayor Aronsohn attended to a discussion of the results, and Bob also wrote them up for the following issue of Temple Talk. At the same time I reached out to the rabbis of the three other synagogues that serve Ridgewood residents: Rabbi Elyse Frishman of Barnert Temple, Rabbi Ken Emert of Temple Beth Rishon and Rabbi Ruth Zlotnick of Temple Beth Or. The four rabbis met for coffee several times to discuss this question, and one of the several positive outcomes of this journey for me was to opportunity to build a closer relationship with my neighboring rabbinic colleagues and to work with them in building a kind of Ridgewood rabbinate in a way that never existed before. Along those lines, the idea of the town hall meeting came out of those coffee meetings of the four rabbis, to invite all of the Jews of Ridgewood to come together and discuss a question of interest together, as a community. I was proud to host that meeting at Temple Israel, because while we are but one of the four congregations, ours is the one in Ridgewood and we were able to serve as the Jewish community center of the wider Jewish community. That meeting was attended by about two hundred people coming from all four congregations and some unaffiliated individuals. We had a wonderfully engaged discussion moderated by the four rabbis who sat in the front.

Besides the inspiring experience of communal gathering that we who were there experienced, the important result of that meeting was the opportunity to clearly hear the concerns of all sides of the question. The menorah was critically important for many people who felt excluded by the Christmas tree and needed the public symbol of the menorah to feel included and valued by the wider community. The church and state issues remained very important to others. And then others questioned the need for a public celebration of Hanukkah over the private home celebrations. Still others felt the apparent competition with Christmas to be unseemly. The morning after that meeting I realized that we had reached a new phase of this political journey. The first phase of the political process is consultation and debate. The second phase is reaching consensus. How would we want to move as a community? I realized that we had spent a couple months deliberating and the time for movement, or action, had come.

And the first step in movement is achieving a working consensus. And so I engaged in a kind of shuttle diplomacy more common for diplomats than rabbis, going back and forth between the various parties, the Temple Israel executive committee and board, the grass roots menorah committee, the rabbis of the other three congregations, the interfaith council and the mayor, in finding agreement on a proposal that could go to the Village Council. Josh Holden was especially helpful behind the scenes in helping to craft the terms of the proposal that could reach consensus within the community. We agreed to join together in asking the Village for permission to have a menorah, but that the menorah and the attending lighting ceremony would be privately funded rather than provided by Village funds, that the Menorah would be lit only for the eight days of Hanukkah, that the Menorah would be located in front of Van Nest Park, and that we would work on agreeing to a style other than the standard Chabad-style diagonally-lined candelabrum. Why these points? The presence of the menorah is very important to many within the community. But by having it lit only for Hanukkah and at a location separate and distinct from the Christmas tree, the menorah would not stand in competition with the tree and Judaism would not stand in competition with Christianity, but each would exist with dignity in its own location, much like the philosophical approach to interfaith celebration that I described earlier. The idea of privately funding the menorah and the celebration is not to put any extra burden on us but rather to respect and preserve that wall between church and state. And why the interest in the style of the menorah when Chabad can come in and put one of theirs up in a day? Because if there is to be a menorah in Ridgewood then it should represent the Jewish community of Ridgewood, not an outside party, as well meaning as it may be. And besides, while the Chabad style of menorah is legitimately based on the opinion of Maimonides on what the original menorah looked like, we know better than Maimonides because, while he may have been the greatest rabbi who ever lived, he had never been to Rome and never saw the Arch of Titus. And so we formed a special committee consisting of the grass roots menorah committee and the rabbis and other representatives of the four congregations, and worked over the summer to reach the third phase of the

political process, for consultation and consensus are followed by action. One month ago the proposal for a menorah, endorsed by the clergy council, was formally presented to the Village Council and it was discussed two nights ago at Village Hall.

But before we get to that I want to return to the question of Chabad, that Hasidic sect that has made it one of their missions to erect huge public menorot around the world. I decided to learn more about Chabad and why the menorah was so important to the late rebbe, who charged his Hasidim in the mid 1980s with building menorot claiming that such would hasten the coming of the Messiah. This intellectual detour culminated in the session I taught at the Tikkun Leyl Shavuot in the late spring on Chabad messianism. And while the more I learned about their extreme messianism, the more I was convinced that it was important for me to stand up as the rabbi of Ridgewood in this instance, it also taught me not to be so dismissive of the power of the menorah as a symbol. It is not plastic. While Rabbi Litwin was absolutely correct in her remarks last week, that a public menorah is no substitute for a committed Jewish life, it can symbolize and give power to that life.

This insight is a central component of the traditional halakhah of the menorah that I happened to have been teaching last year to my rabbinical students in Berlin. It is called *pirsuma denisa,* the commandment to publicize the miracle. There are times when that cannot be done. I mentioned my recent trip to Bethlehem. At an earlier trip, back in my college days, I want with a half dozen friends from the overseas program at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem to Bethlehem for Christmas. We rented a room at a hotel overlooking Manger Square, and while it was Hanukkah and I brought a menorah, I was nervous to put it in the window as is the traditional custom. We had to pass through several security barriers to get to where we were, and the menorah would belie our “story” as Christian tourists and we did not want any trouble at that time when Jewish-Palestinian relations were so tense. And while not as potentially violent, Ridgewood was once like that. As I mentioned two nights ago at Village Hall, there was a time not so long ago when Jews could not live in this town. The Ridgewood Historical Association

has been putting together what promises to be an extraordinary exhibit at the School House Museum on Ridgewood's not so brilliant history of diversity, when property would not be sold to "Negroes, Mongols and Semites." Look how much has changed since then! There I was two nights ago at the Village Council sitting in the front with Rev. Hartnett and Rabbi Frishman. Would we have seen the Episcopal priest standing beside the Conservative and Reform rabbi in the past? Would we even have seen the Conservative and Reform rabbi standing together in the past? Look how much has changed. Would we have, years ago, seen the Ridgewood clergy council resolve to support the display of a menorah on public land, and have its voice so articulately represented by anyone like Rev. Hartnett who wrote a piece for the Ridgewood News and spoke publically this week? And while I talked about respecting the wall of Church and State, let us not lose track of this historic moment when the representative of the Church of Ridgewood, that is, the clergy association, is a rabbi, and the representative of the state, that is, the Village, is a mayor, who are worshipping together at Temple Israel this evening! Or as our member Nicole Cohen explained so eloquently before the Council two nights ago, that she had always thought of the menorah as important for the children until she met the Holocaust survivor Hannah Landau sitting in the front row of Ridgewood citizens at the Village Council meeting who had been waiting for a menorah to be put up in Ridgewood for sixty years. Or in the words of Englewood resident Ephraim Weinstein who emailed me yesterday to express his joy at reading about the menorah discussion in Ridgewood, telling me how he grew up in Ridgewood in the 1940s, that his family was the first Jewish family on the "other" side of the tracks and that he and his sister were the only Jews at the GW school, and what a wonderful evolution this is for Ridgewood. Or how Councilwoman Walsh spoke about how she grew up in a Catholic home that treasured a menorah among its sacred items and how, quote, "ridiculous it is that Ridgewood will not have had a menorah until now."

Look how much has changed since the days of King Antiochus of Syria 2100 years ago, when it was thought that one had to tear down a menorah in order for Jerusalem to enter the modern world.

Today, Ridgewood is looking to construct a menorah, as was the unanimous consensus of its Village Council two nights ago, in order to move beyond its past. And yet there are still dictators in Syria. We live in an imperfect world in constant need of redemption. But what I discovered through this year-long journey is that politics can be a road to that redemption. We too often denigrate politics as something to be embarrassed about when it should rather be seen as a virtue. Consultation, consensus and action are the three stages of the political process. Sometimes we get caught in the first or second stage and find trouble reaching the third. The discussion over what to do about the current Syrian dictator, as an example of that, has been an unfolding drama for us to watch, as we remain concerned about America's ability to keep dangerous foes from crossing red lines, an issue with Iran as well as Syria, both of great concern to the wider Jewish community because of Israel. And we are especially sensitive to the red line of poison gas, remembering, as the White House has been keen to remind us, of its uses against us by the Nazis in the Holocaust, the Zyklon B gas. But while images of the gas chambers instill in us a sense of the tragedy of helplessness, we should remember that here in this country we are not mere bystanders, but have a place to be directly engaged in the political process. While local politics often go by unnoticed, every voice is critically important, as the direct involvement of the citizenry was so important in the Village Council's deliberations on the menorah two nights ago. And even on the larger scale, we should know that every vote counts. Allow me to take this moment to remind us that we have a special election for a United States senator on October 16th. As that is a Wednesday and not Election Day, do not forget to vote. If voting in precinct will prove difficult on that day, anyone can request a mail-in ballot but that must be done by Oct. 9th, or one may vote in person in Hackensack at the County Clerk's office from 9 to 3 on the day before the election. Especially, but not exclusively, given the critical situation in Syria, don't forget that each of our voices contributes to who represents us in the United States Senate.

Can politics be redemptive? Can politics bring us together instead of tearing us apart? The question of the menorah has given me a sense of how we can come together as a community and a village

in ways I never imagined before. At the same time that this question was brewing I saw Steven Speilberg's *Lincoln* in the theatre. It affected me so much I immediately bought the book *Team of Rivals* that it was based upon by Doris Kearns Goodwin, although that did take me some time to finish. Both the movie and the book were inspiring for their unique portrayal of Lincoln as a genius of politics, and for the portrayal of politics as a virtue. The processes of consultation, consensus and action can be cumbersome and frustrating, and at times difficult and painful. But without them how would we be where we are? While Syria still has Assad, Syria is no longer the Great Power that it was in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BCE. The great power of today is here, thanks in great part to that masterful politician Abraham Lincoln.

One thing that can be learned from Lincoln--and with this I will close--is that politics is always about people, and that we should never ourselves get lost in the seemingly endless road to redemption, but take solace along the way in the company of friends, and in the smile brought by laughter. As he stayed up all night with his aides waiting for news of the deadly battles of the civil war, he would tell jokes to keep up their spirits. One of them was this: the tale of the preacher who ascended the pulpit and confessed that he had intended to write a short sermon, but then got lazy and kept writing.

Thank you for your indulgence.