

Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Memorial Lecture

"Standing Against Terrorism and Standing for Peaceful Coexistence"

Presented by Senator Joseph I. Lieberman

May 21, 2002

Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding

Tenth Anniversary Celebration

United Nations, New York City

Friends,

It's an honor to be here to mark the tenth anniversary of the Tanenbaum Center, and the tenth *yahrzeit* of your inspiration and namesake, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum.

Rabbi Tanenbaum was a precious human being. I had deep respect for his work in reinforcing our common spiritual and moral values. Sometimes we focus so hard on the cracks that threaten to split us apart that we fail to appreciate the glue that holds us together as human beings. Marc did the latter. In these trying times, we miss Marc's voice dearly, and are lucky to have this Center, which bears his name, speaking so clearly and courageously in his stead.

I'm particularly proud to be here on a night you are honoring the life and work of Alan Slifka for his leadership in striving to effect peaceful coexistence in Israel and in Northern Ireland. It is fitting that his award is being presented by Judge Abd-el Rahman Zu'bi, the first Arab to become an Israeli Supreme Court Justice. Both men speak powerfully of peaceful coexistence-and both live lives that are a model for the rest of us.

In that spirit, I want to talk today about two clearly interrelated challenges that are on all our minds today. First, how we in America must, along with our allies, engage the moderate Muslim majority in order to win the wider war against terrorism. Second, how both parties in the Middle East must draw on the common heritage of Judaism and Islam to advance a shared vision of peace and security.

The War Against Terrorism

First, America's war against terrorism. At the moment, our military campaign against terrorism abroad and our efforts to strengthen homeland security are the core of the war we fight.

To prevent another September 11th, or worse, we have no choice but to strengthen our ports, our borders, our skies, and every other potential vulnerability that terrorists will seek to exploit.

In this endeavor, we need to understand that we're all on the same team-and determining how the system failed to prevent those horrific attacks from happening can only strengthen security for us all. Defensiveness won't strengthen our defenses. Perhaps there was nothing the system could have done to prevent the attacks. But in the last week, we've seen that many gnawing questions remain. We must try to answer them thoroughly and honestly. That's why last December John McCain and I called for an independent, non-political, blue-ribbon commission-similar to the commissions formed after America's first day of infamy, Pearl Harbor-to investigate what institutional gaps, overlaps, and oversights caused us to fail to connect the dots. We need to know what all our vulnerabilities are in order to close them, together.

And of course, as President Bush and Vice President Cheney correctly remind us, we also need a strong offense-continuing to root out Al Qaeda and any other terrorist groups that might seek to do us harm, wherever they may be.

But we must not forget that this military and security struggle isn't the whole war. That horrifying day opened our eyes to a wider conflict. The Islamic world is beset by political, economic, and cultural circumstances that over the last generation have limited freedom and increased isolation, repression, and anti-American

anger. These include vast income inequalities, economic and political isolation, cultural balkanization, and little or no democracy through which to constructively channel and resolve this strife.

Islamic terrorism grew in this context-not in a vacuum. We in America are its favorite target-not just because we are large and powerful, but because our cherished values of freedom, opportunity, tolerance, and democracy are its antithesis.

But the tradition of tolerant and moderate Islam practiced-I am convinced-by the majority of people in the Muslim world, is its target, too. In January, I traveled in a U.S. Senate delegation to Central Asia, and in every one of the six nations we visited-in Turkey, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Oman-that mainstream tradition was clear and proud.

In Tashkent, for instance, we sat with the Mufti of Uzbekistan, who showed us one of four copies of the first recorded Qur'an, and spoke of its tradition of tolerance. He said that because of the violence and intolerance practiced by Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda terrorists, he, the Mufti, had declared that they were not Muslims at all.

And in Oman, the Sultan gave me the text of a sermon delivered in December there by the country's leading cleric. It spoke of the condemnation within Islam of imposing one's faith on others. The sermon says that the Qur'an states, and I quote, "There is no forcible belief" and urges Muslims to "invite to the way of creation with wisdom by preaching kindly, and argue your points graciously."

It would be not only a military crisis if virulent, anti-Western Islam were to eclipse this moderate strain that believes in peaceful coexistence. It would be a moral and spiritual crisis as well. Those are the stakes of our current war.

I fully support the President's leadership since September 11th, which has countered the terrorists the only way we possibly can-with devastating and decisive force. But over the long run, we also need the ideas of freedom, democracy, and tolerance to win the battle for the hearts and minds of ordinary Muslims. Through much more open channels of trade, increased diplomatic efforts, an intense public diplomacy campaign, newly focused foreign aid, and more, we have to make clear that this isn't a clash of civilizations.

We cannot leave Muslims with a choice between their religion and ours. We don't want to force them to choose between their culture and American culture. We simply want the 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide to coexist in peace alongside the Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and the rest of humankind. And we want them to understand that the democratic way-the way of the civil society, which respects and protects human rights-is the best road to realizing that vision.

The Israeli-Palestinian Crisis

In the Middle East-as in our conflict against Al Qaeda and other terrorist-the central question is, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, whether we will learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools. Terrorists, with a grim vision of eliminating democratic society, are labeling innocent people their oppressors and using murder to express their grievances. The United States has not allowed it, and Israel cannot allow it either.

In looking at the Middle East, we must not forget its relationship to the broader fight against terrorism. The strongest priority of American foreign policy after September 11th is and must remain the war on terrorism. And the doctrine that President Bush has articulated, the Bush Doctrine, is what correctly guides our policy. That says: either you're with us or you're with the terrorists. That should be our guiding principle in the Middle East, as it is in Central Asia and around the world.

The United States' actions must be aimed not only at achieving a cease-fire and moving back to negotiations for a political resolution, but also at standing with Israel-because it shares our values and has been a victim of terrorism again and again, just as we were on September 11th. In my mind, the question now is whether Chairman Arafat-who time and time again has failed to prepare his people for peace-will now make it clear that his goal in this conflict is Palestinian statehood, which is American policy and America's goal, and not the destruction of Israel, which, of course, America could never accept.

The suicide bombers who wreak horror and havoc on the streets of Israeli cities are cut from the exact same cloth as the terrorists who killed thousands of Americans on September 11th. They dishonor the noble and legitimate cause of Palestinian statehood. They disrespect the people they claim to represent. They exploit their situation, rather than seeking to improve it.

And for that reason, the United States must stand in solidarity with Israel as it roots out the machinery of terrorism, just as we did in Afghanistan. I understand the difficulty of the moment in Middle East diplomacy. But the focus of American foreign policy after September 11th has to be to do everything we can to destroy those who attacked us on September 11th, and to destroy anyone else who would think about doing anything like that again.

Standing for peaceful coexistence means standing strong against terrorism. On that, let there be no doubt.

Conclusion

I know that amidst such sorrow, stress, and strain, it's sometimes hard to be optimistic about the future. But there is reason for hope. There are even examples in our recent history worth emulating.

That's why I want to end this short talk with a story that happened not too long ago. You may remember in 1997, a deranged Jordanian border guard opened fire on a group of Israelis, and killed six school children. It was beyond tragic.

The gunman wasn't praised. No one made excuses for him or shifted blame. He was put in jail. And the government of Jordan did not reward his family. They did something unprecedented.

During the mourning period after the six Israeli children's funerals, King Hussein went to every one of their families' homes. In each one, he asked for their parent's forgiveness. He said: "Words cannot express how I personally feel, how my family feels, how many people feel. We consider this a loss that all of us suffered. I feel that if there is anything in life, it is to ensure that all the children enjoy peace and security. I hope you consider me a brother and a member of the family."

The King was right. Muslims and Jews are brothers and sisters, children of the same God, descendants of the same father, Abraham-with a common moral and spiritual heritage.

One of those parents named their newborn daughter, "Yarden," Hebrew for "Jordan." I continue to believe, even in these difficult times, that there are millions of people throughout the Islamic world who want to live in peace with America and Israel-and who yearn for the freedom and opportunities of a society built on personal freedom, common tolerance, and democratic rule. I continue to believe that the majority of Palestinians and Israelis want to live in peace with one another, alongside one another, in secure and sovereign nations.

Let us pray that their day will soon come, and that soon, we shall see the words of Psalm 133 come true, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"

Thank you, and God bless you all.