

The Price of Freedom
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Seventy-five years ago, on September 1, 1939, German forces invaded Poland, igniting the long-simmering fuse that exploded into the deadliest conflict in human history. If we include war-related disease and famine, 85 million people were killed in World War II including the Six Million of our people murdered by the Nazis.ⁱ

Initially America refused to fight. But after the heinous attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, America could no longer sit idly by while our neighbors bled. Eventually more than 16 million Americans served in the Second World War; nearly 672,000 were injured and over 407,000 were killed.

For those who have stood at the Lincoln Memorial facing the Wall of Freedom, you have seen the 4,048 gold stars etched upon it, each commemorating 100 fallen soldiers; a simple extraordinary message is inscribed beneath: "Here lies the price of freedom."

We who were children seven decades ago or, like myself, were not yet born, we cannot begin to comprehend the experience of those who served. But in his extraordinary book, *D-Day: June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II*, Stephen Ambrose writes: The Allied invasion at Normandy, Operation Overlord, was the largest military operation in the history of the world. The landing involved over 5,000 ships, 11,000 aircraft, and 175,000 men. Many of the first men to storm the beaches were not yet 20 years old. By the end of the day there were more than 10,000 casualties and 4,900 killed.

Eisenhower and his leadership team understood deeply what was at stake. In his famous address to our paratroopers June 5, 1944, Eisenhower said: "You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hope and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you..."ⁱⁱ Eisenhower spent that night among the men loading the aircraft. When the last plane roared off, Eisenhower turned to his driver, Kay Summersby. She saw tears in his eyes. He began to walk slowly toward his car. "Well," he said quietly, "it's on."

The price of freedom was, indeed, extremely high during the Second World War. And unto today, when we recount WWII and our nation's greatest generation, we are overwhelmed by their sacrifice, but also awed by those who gave their bodies and spirits for something so much greater than themselves. Yes, they were fighting to avenge those killed at Pearl Harbor and to stop the Nazi's march of death and destruction across Europe, Asia and North Africa. But the men and women of our greatest generation fought for something so much more.

As Americans, we believedⁱⁱⁱ in an idea that was good and precious and holy, cherishing values that were worth protecting and defending. We treasured our innate rights to liberty, justice and freedom, believing in tolerance, compassion and understanding, living out our Judeo-Christian ethic that we should, did, and do love

our neighbor as ourselves. We believed in a world where the rule of law is imposed by the consent of the governed, where the freedom of spoken or written or artistic expression is sacrosanct, where all people are free to express their religious beliefs as they chose. We believed in the idea that human life is of infinite and ultimate value.

And we still do. We knew it then and we know it now; these are ideals worth protecting. These are values worth fighting for. Much as we detest all that war is, there are times when we are obligated to fight; not only to defend ourselves from aggression and attack, but also to defend the principles that make for a free and good and just society.

I share our nation's history with you tonight because on the eve of our New Year, our world faces a threat no less dangerous than Fascism and we find ourselves in the midst of a war no less significant than the last great world war. How well we know, the forces of radical Islam are meting out terror in every corner of the earth. Whether it is the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; Boko Haram in Nigeria; Ash-Shabab in Somalia; Hezbollah in Lebanon; An-Nusrah in Syria; The Mahdi Army in Iraq; the Al-Qaeda branches in Yemen, Libya, the Philippines, India and elsewhere; Hamas in Gaza; or the Ayatolla and Islamic Republican Guard in Iran, these radical Sunni and Shiya Muslims pose a threat to the civilized world; for they share the same goal -- to destroy every person, ideal, freedom and value we cherish through terror, violence and, ultimately, death to all who believe differently than they do.

Whether inter-connected or independent, all of them seek to create ever-expanding enclaves of militant Islam where there is no freedom and no tolerance; where Muslims, Christians and Jews are decimated, and minorities are subjugated; where political prisoners are executed without trials and hundreds of thousands of men, women and children are butchered just because they believe in freedom and self-determination; in education, the free exchange of ideas and modern innovation; in free speech and a rule of law that is just .

We have all seen the news reports: Boko Haram, in addition to killing thousands of others, kidnapped 234 Nigerian schoolgirls in order to sell as sex slaves for the crime of learning to read; but, this is nothing new, because we've already seen women enslaved or treated as chattel throughout the Arab and Muslim world by the Taliban and Saudi Arabia just to name a few. Iran, which must not be allowed to fulfill its quest for a nuclear weapon, silences its opposition through imprisonment and execution and hangs gays from cranes in Tehran. Hamas uses children as human shields and then executes its own people in the streets. And most terrifying of late, is the Islamic State, who slaughters innocents in Iraq and Syria; raping, pillaging and murdering whomever they please, including beheading American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff; British aid worker, David Haines and, just tonight, a second British aid worker, Alan Henning; and French mountain guide, Hervé Gourdel, executed in Algeria just this week.

We could jump on the blame bandwagon and point fingers at the United States for the mess in Iraq and Syria -- we didn't send enough troops, we left too soon, we should have stopped Assad with airstrikes a year ago -- but it wouldn't do any good. What's done is done. Now, even after recent allied airstrikes in both

countries, we are left with 200,000 dead in Syria and millions more refugees at the hand of President Assad; we have even more radicalized Al Qaeda sects in An-Nusrah and the Khorasan; and we have an Islamic State threatening everyone, including kidnapping Philippine and Fijian peace-keeping forces that had been in place in the Golan Heights for four decades.

Most distressing, is that our hopes for the future have been placed on Syria's moderate Muslims, sometimes called the Free Syria Army or the "Steadfast Movement." While their ideals are noble, they are, unfortunately, an out-gunned, out-trained, out-numbered group fighting amongst themselves for control. The US is trying to help them by supplying limited arms, dollars and training; but even if, and it is a long shot, even if they were to succeed in toppling Assad, there is little confidence that they have the infrastructure, leadership or cohesion to bring order, rather than more violence, chaos and radicalization, to the country.

Understandably, since the United States authorized airstrikes in Iraq and entered into a coalition to do the same in Syria, there has been much discussion about whether or not any of these groups, in general, or the Islamic State in particular, pose an imminent threat to the United States of America. Another way to ask this question is - is this "our war?" So many believe that Operation Enduring Freedom in Iraq and, to some extent, in Afghanistan, did nothing to stop the radicalization of that country or to curtail the growth of militant Islamic strongholds in so many corners of the world. So it is not unreasonable to ask: have we not done enough already? Is it not possible that with the current strong coalition of moderate Arab Muslims, U.S. and European allies conducting airstrikes that the Islamic State will crumble when it faces military might like ours; or that it might fail when its funding sources are cut off and its weapons caches are greatly diminished? The answer is only time will tell.

But another answer to the question of whether or not this is "our war" might be to look at recent history, where there are scores of examples of militant Muslim groups exporting terror and employing violence against ourselves and others. I hope we have not forgotten the Iranian Republic's seizure of the American embassy in Tehran in 1979 and the ensuing 444 day hostage crisis; or Hezbollah's suicide attacks against American troops in Lebanon in the 80s; or the downing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988; or the bombing of the World Trade Center by Al Qaeda in 1993. And, of course, we will never fail to remember September 11, 2001, an unparalleled act of terror on our own land.

It is true that, thank God, we have not had an attack on our soil in the 13 years since then, but there is now a real fear that, when Islamic State recruits, who come from countries all over the world, return to their homes, indoctrinated to spread militant Islam across the globe, we could see violence not only in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza, but also in Europe, Asia, South America and, yes, in the United States. Hardly hotbeds of radicalism, just last week, the Islamic State called for attacks by these lone-wolf fanatics against Australians and Canadians in their countries.

Another way to answer the question of whether or not this is our war could be to look at these radical Islamist groups own publically stated goals. For example, the Islamic State's self-declared caliph, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, said very

clearly just two months ago: "A day will soon come when the Muslim will walk everywhere as a master . . . The Muslims will cause the world to hear and understand the meaning of terrorism . . . and destroy the idol of democracy." The leader of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, General Muhammad Ali Ja'afari, said recently: 'Our Imam, [the Ayatollah Khomeini], did not limit the Islamic Revolution to this country . . . Our duty is to prepare the way for an Islamic world government.'"

And just this past Monday, in trying to convince those countries of the world, who believe themselves to be immune from the relentless forward march of radical Islam, Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu bluntly told the United Nations: "Whether they are radical Sunnis or radical Shiites; whether they want to restore a pre-medieval caliphate from the 7th century or to trigger the apocalyptic return of an imam from the 9th century; whether they operate in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe, South America or the United States; whether they kill each other or target us, they all share a fanatic ideology." In other words, the militant Islamists' clearly stated ambitions for world domination include us.

In spite of all of this, and even under the cloud of the memory of 9/11, I know that what goes on over there can still feel very far away, surreal and not our problem. Since this is *Kol Nidrei*, a time for truth telling, I know that some of you are thinking just this. I know because last year, after I spoke about the Syrian Civil War and our need to intervene, many of you confided in me that you really didn't care what was going on in Syria or Iraq or any of the other conflicts in the Arab world; "To tell you the truth, rabbi," you said on the QT, "I don't really care what goes on over there. Just let them kill each other." Of course you are entitled to your opinion. But as your rabbi, on this the holiest day of the year, I feel obligated to remind you that the Torah teaches we cannot sit idly by while our neighbor bleeds; we are a people commanded to pursue justice and choose life for ourselves and others, as we will hear over and again in tomorrow morning's Torah reading, *Nitzavim*.

As Americans, too, we are the country that has tried, not always successfully, but always tried to honor a set of universal values around which we have organized our lives and our aspirations. Crimes against conscience, crimes against humanity, crimes against the most fundamental principles of international community, these matter to us. These matter to who we are. And they matter to our leadership and to our credibility in the world.^{iv} As Americans and Jews, those are the ideals for which we stand, or we stand for nothing at all.

But, aside from all of those ideological beliefs and religious principals, "let them kill each other," is not a policy option for practical reasons as well. Why? Because the killing does not remain confined: the Syria we didn't bomb a year ago, as I said before, is disintegrating into further devastation and violence; for one, the Islamic State has taken its battle in that country to the Lebanese border and has succeeded in breaching the Jordanian border -- both of which are now immediate strategic threats for Israel and, ultimately, for us all. The same is true of Hezbollah fighters, who have been battling Al Qaeda in Syria for the past three years; these men will eventually return to Lebanon, hardened and emboldened and also on

Israel's border. And we've already spoken of the Islamic State recruits who will return to their own countries, bringing their radical Islamist ambitions with them.

"Let them kill each other" may not be a Jewish or American response or a good policy option, but that still doesn't answer the question of whether or not this struggle is our responsibility. Is this war against radical Islam, often called the War on Terror, our war? And what does that mean? Financial assistance? Military aid in the form of training and/or weapons? Coalition building? Airstrikes? American troops on the ground? Interestingly enough, a CNN poll released this week asked whether or not the American public was really clamoring for this war? According to the data, it turns out that 73% of Americans are on board with airstrikes against the Islamic State. What is more surprising, though, is that 40% of our countrymen polled, think we ought to be sending in ground troops, even though every opinion leader in the country says very publicly that they are opposed.

Of course that means that 60% of Americans are not in favor of ground troops. But some of these opponents fear that "a bomb scare, an atrocity of some kind, pretty much anything -- could tip the balance. They worry that our politicians are in love with war. The public is in love with war. And the press is really in love with war."^v

Their cautions are not unfounded. " As Chris Hedges writes in his book, *War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning*: It is true that war [can be] incredibly seductive, alluring, and addictive; it can be an elixir, enticing, and intoxicating; *war can* give us resolve, a cause. It can allow us to be noble. It can make us feel tremendous power and unleash our need to avenge suffering and injustice. If we are not careful, it can appear, to give life meaning.^{vi} That is why, before engaging in any conflict, we must always beware of and honest about our motives, of what is at stake, of the innocent lives that will be caught up and lost in the balance, of any real prospects for peace, no matter how remote.

But war can also be both necessary and justified even when the price of freedom is very great. I'm not advocating a strategy (I'll leave those decisions to others far more qualified); but I am talking about defending those ideals for which we stand, as Americans and Jews; and sometimes, to protect what is just and right and ours, we need to take the battle to their shores. We are fools if we ignore the terrorists' threats and their actions. And we are even bigger fools if we don't believe that what they've done to their own, they won't hesitate to do to us.

Prime Minister Netanyahu concluded his remarks to the UN saying: "Militant Islam's ambition to dominate the world may seem mad. But so too did the global ambitions of another fanatic ideology that swept to power eight decades ago. The Nazis believed in a master race. The militant Islamists believe in a master faith. They just disagree about who among them will be the master . . . of the master faith . . . Therefore, the question before us is whether militant Islam will have the power to realize its unbridled ambitions."

The New Year 5775 begins with a sense that what is good and right in the world is in peril. And once again, it is upon us and our allies, to protect an idea that is good and precious and holy: to defend our innate rights to liberty, justice and freedom; to uphold an abiding belief in tolerance, compassion and understanding; to insist upon a world where women have equal rights and equal opportunities to

live as they so choose; where the vulnerable and the weak are afforded collective care and protection; where we love our neighbor as ourselves. We fight for a world where the rule of law is imposed by the consent of the governed, where the freedom of spoken or written or artistic expression is sacrosanct, where all people are free to express their religious beliefs as they choose. Whether by air or sea or land, we offer up the best that we have --our brave men and women of the armed forces -- for the idea that human life is of infinite and ultimate value. Here, my friends, lies the price of freedom.

Recall once again the words of President Eisenhower on June 5, 1944, as he bid our country's paratroopers courage and God-speed en route to Normandy: "You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you . . ." The truth of the president's words still echo today. For in a world of biological, chemical and nuclear capability, we are amidst, perhaps, the Greatest Crusade humankind has ever fought. The fearful and widened-eyes of the world are upon us. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with us. United by our reverence for life; our love of freedom; our pursuit of justice; and our conviction that what is good and right must triumph over evil, we will prevail. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ World War II fatality statistics vary, with estimates of total dead ranging from 50 million to more than 80 million. The sources cited in this article document an estimated death toll in World War II that range from approximately 60 to 85 million, making it the deadliest war in world history in absolute terms of total dead but not in terms of deaths relative to the world population. The higher figure of 85 million includes deaths from war-related disease and famine. Civilians killed totaled from 38 to 55 million, including 19 to 25 million from war-related disease and famine. Total military dead: from 22 to 25 million, including deaths in captivity of about 5 million prisoners of war.

ⁱⁱ Stephen E. Ambrose, *D-Day June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994, pp. 170-171.

ⁱⁱⁱ I am grateful to Rabbi Daniel Levin of Temple Beth El in Boca Raton for his Rosh Hashanah 5775 sermon, *War and Sacrifice*, in which he provided the research on WWII from Stephen Ambrose's book, the quote from Chris Hedges book (see citation below) as well as the statement of the Democratic values we cherish as Americans and Jews.

^{iv} From the speech of Secretary of State John Kerry, August 30, 2013, advocating the bombing of Syria's President Assad for the gassing of his own people in March of that year.

^v Greg Sargent, "Is the public really clamoring for war?" *The Plum Line blog*, September 30, 2014.

^{vi} Chris Hedges, *War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning*, New York: Anchor Books, 2002 p. 3.