

**Rabbi Richard Agler  
Congregation B'nai Israel  
Boca Raton, FL**

**January 1, 2010  
16 Tevet, 5770  
Shabbat Vayechi**

## **HIGHLIGHTS OF THE JEWISH DECADE**

**It's over. An entire decade! 2000 to 2010. And a lot happened.**

**For some perspective, I went back to the first "Letter to the Editor" of the New York Times of the decade and millennium. It was the first to appear with a Year 2000 date on it, printed at the top of the page.**

**"To the Editor:**

**Re "1/1/00" (front page, Jan. 1):**

**Let us praise the human race on the worldwide celebrations of the arrival of the year 2000. We showed ourselves to be capable of the best that is within us, articulating and demonstrating eternal aspirations in the spirit of friendship and understanding, while falling victim to neither damage nor destruction.**

**Even if it was only for a day, it was enough to give hope that the better part of the human spirit might prevail in the 2000's."**

**As we know, that "hope that the better part of the human spirit might prevail in the 2000's," was not fulfilled. The decade didn't turn out anywhere near as well as it began. That letter writer was way too optimistic. His name by the way, was (Rabbi) Richard D. Agler of Boca Raton, Fla. Oh well.**

**Since that auspicious New Year's Eve ten years ago, we've endured terrorism, war, political corruption and economic crisis—all on a grand scale.**

**Redirecting the world, it turns out, is much more difficult than turning over a page on the calendar, even when the new page has three zeroes on it. But any student of Bible, history or the human spirit could have told us that. So as we turn the page into this new decade, instead of looking forward with messianic-type hopes, for the moment let's look back on the last ten years--from a Jewish perspective.**

**Sen. Joseph Lieberman started the decade as a hero to many of us when he became the first Jew to be nominated by a major party to be Vice-President of the United States. Had he not been undone by a handful of Jews from Palm Beach County who couldn't make sense out a confusing ballot, who knows, he still might be.**

**September 11, 2001 followed not long thereafter. And it put the issue of Muslim extremism at the center of the world's agenda. As the decade ended, it is still at the top of the headlines. In between, much of the world came to appreciate just who and what Israel has been fighting for her entire national life.**

**Further evidence, as if it was needed, was not long in coming. During the so-**

called “second *intifada*” of 2002-2003, Palestinian terrorists murdered over 1000 Israeli civilians. And after Israel unilaterally withdrew from Lebanon and Gaza in their entirety, rocket fire at civilians and kidnapped soldiers was the response. At decade’s end, peace with her neighbors seemed no closer than it did ten years earlier—it might even be further.

Here at home, and we don’t want to draw unnecessary attention to this—even though no one can honestly say that it was our fault--Jews were everywhere at the center of the financial crisis. In another age or in another land, one in which we were less accomplished or less respected by our fellow citizens, the global financial situation could easily have become a Jewish problem as well as an economic one. We should be grateful that it didn’t and aware why it didn’t.

Still, anti-Semites never want for excuses. It is still widely believed, throughout much of the Arab and Muslim world, that the attacks of September 11, 2001 were the work of some Jewish/Israeli conspiracy. It’s absurd of course but it teaches us, yet again, even at what we like to think of as this advanced stage of civilization, that irrational hatred can flourish and simple truth may not be able to stop it. Another case in point was the United Nations conference in Durban, South Africa, ostensibly organized to promote Human Rights. Instead it turned into a frenzy of Israel bashing and attempts to delegitimize the Jewish state.

The specter of an Iran with nuclear weapons chilled not just for Israel but the whole Middle East—as well as much of rest of the world. Many nations say they understand that the threat is serious. Whether or not they will successfully counter it remains to be seen.

*Lamrot ha-kol*--in spite of all this, in Israel itself, there was much to celebrate. In politics, differences between Right and Left, which polarized the country for so long, significantly diminished. Not because anyone smoked a peace pipe. But because most citizens came realized that in Israel, reality has a centrist bias.

The long-held belief of the mainstream Right, that Israel must hold on to every inch of territory, because a so-called “Greater Israel” was necessary for security or even mandated by G-d, was largely abandoned. As the same time, the Left’s belief that if only enough land were relinquished, peace would surely follow has been given up as well.

The Right came to understand that the more Palestinians Israel ruled over, the less secure she would be. Because the resulting demographics would make the Jews a minority in their own homeland. This was as the Left had always claimed. Ariel Sharon of all people, founded a centrist party, Kadima, whose platform of two states for two peoples has essentially been adopted even by today’s more right-wing Likud government of Benjamin Netanyahu.

And the Left came to understand that the Right was correct when it said that territorial concessions alone would not bring peace. As we all saw, the withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza led to war.

So a broad internal consensus about how to go forward emerged in Israel during the last decade. Borders need to be drawn that will create a Jewish majority democracy on one side and a demilitarized Arab state on the other. Unfortunately no such consensus, much less a partner who can deliver, exists on the Palestinian side. The search continues. As it will into the next decade.

There was other positive news from Israel. Again in spite of everything, Israel experienced a decade of economic growth that was the envy of much of the world. If you haven't been to Israel in the last ten years, you might not recognize the place. High tech industry and development—exploiting what has always been Israel's greatest asset, brainpower--has been a perfect fit with the technological age. Investors like Intel Corporation and Warren Buffet have poured billions of dollars into Israeli industry. During the last decade, Israel cemented her status as a first world country. And all of us who love her rejoice at this.

There was also good Jewish news at home. The Birthright program has been making an impact on the next generation of American Jews that we are only beginning to appreciate. Rarely do programs that are so visionary succeed so well. We've been saying here for years that if we are serious about instilling commitment in the next Jewish generation, we need to get our young people to Israel--because they will not understand what it really means to be Jewish unless we do. Birthright removed the central obstacle to Israel travel—funding. Jewish students between college age and twenty-five are given, as a Birthright, a ten-day journey of discovery in the homeland.

The past decade also saw an explosion of Jewish creativity among young people, much of it generated by Birthright alumni. New Friday night *minyanim* in big cities, text-based Jewish meet-ups, viral Jewish videos on You Tube, online Jewish magazines and blogs, synagogues experimenting and remaking themselves in the face of new technologies and the changing culture—all of these happened in a big way during the last ten years.

I can illustrate with a personal story. Our synagogue has been an early adopter of many of the new technologies. We were among the first congregations in Florida to have our own website. A few years ago I constructed a personal website, [www.rabbiagler.net](http://www.rabbiagler.net). It recently reached a point where it needed some work and with the technological advances, I couldn't do it myself. So I consulted a designer, a savvy young man who took one look at my site and said, "Rabbi, this was good five years ago." So today I have a new web presence. Complete with Blog, experimental Twitter feed, "Gems of Torah" and more. I invite you to follow it as we go ahead to whatever the future will bring us. Because this is where much of the Jewish world will be meeting in 2010 and beyond.

During the past ten years, a number of venerated old-line Jewish organizations that had a great impact during the twentieth century struggled or even declined. What the organized Jewish community will look like as the twenty-first century continues no one can predict. But one thing is clear--there is plenty of life left in

us, and we will meet whatever challenges we face with energy, creativity and drive.

I have one final thought for tonight. It is not specifically Jewish but Judaism has a lot to say about it. Our overall culture changed considerably during the last decade as well. I think it is fair to say that it became more coarse and more vulgar. The boundaries between what used to be private and what is now public have all but disappeared.

Virulence has also overtaken thoughtfulness and respect in much of our national conversation. “The Daily Show” recently ran a clip of a Fox News roundtable in which the correspondents were fulminating about I don’t remember what. The last one to speak was Geraldo Rivera who, as it happened, offered a thoughtful perspective on whatever the matter was. When the clip ended the Daily Show correspondent said, “Yes America, it has gotten to the point where Geraldo Rivera has become the voice of reason.”

Judaism has the power to save us from much of this. Lest we forget, our faith is about more than holiday celebrations and life-cycle events. Judaism is about everyday human interactions. It is about how we speak and about how we shouldn’t speak. It is about how and what we listen to—and about what we should be wise enough to turn away from.

Influential though we may be, we are not numerous enough to remake the culture around us--“Light unto the Nations” or no. But we can, and this is not small, build lives, raise families, choose friends, and busy ourselves with activities that are better than many of the ones we see around us.

To do so we can adopt the prescription that has been around for more decades than we can number--but has lost nothing in terms of currency: *Torah, Avodah* and *Gemilut Chasadim*. We can Learn the Teachings, find Center in our Prayer and Serve One Another.

With these as our anchor and guide, we can surely bring blessing to ourselves and those around us in the decade to come.

Happy secular new year and *Shabbat Shalom*.