

The following is the text of a lecture delivered by Aryeh Rubin at the Wyman Institute's national conference, "The Failure to Bomb Auschwitz: History, Politics, Controversy," held on September 13, 2009 at Fordham University School of Law. Mr. Rubin also chaired the conference.

Mr. Rubin's lecture, "Lessons to Learn from 1944," focuses on the shortcomings of Jewish leadership during the Holocaust and continuing through the present, the threat posed to Israel by Iran, the complicity of European nations who are providing parts for Iran's nuclear program, and the position taken by world Jewry today. The text of the lecture is followed by Mr. Rubin's bio. Text from the lecture may be reproduced in whole or in part only if taken in context, with proper credit given, and with a link to the pdf of the full text on the Targum Shlishi website at www.targumshlishi.org. Please note that there are slight variations between the written text and the spoken lecture. Comments may be sent to info@targumshlishi.org.

Lessons to Learn from 1944

By Aryeh Rubin

I'd like to thank the Wyman Institute's Professor David Wyman and Dr. Rafael Medoff for organizing this important conference. Before I begin speaking on the topic of "Lessons to Learn from 1944," I'd like to make it clear that this talk represents my point of view, and not that of the Wyman Institute, its staff, or its board members.

Introduction

In recent years, when speaking on Holocaust-related issues, I have often said the following: I believe that if a Holocaust victim could rise up from one of the mass graves for ten minutes and speak, he would ask three questions: **One**, Why didn't the Jews of the world move heaven and earth to stop the massacre? **Two**, Why was so little done to bring the Nazis to justice after the Holocaust? **Three**, Why didn't we as Jews have the self-respect as a people to find the mass graves, to discover where and how the Jews were killed and to say *Kaddish*? **Today**, I am adding a

fourth question: Is American Jewry, in its misguided complacency, repeating the same mistakes it made prior to and during the Holocaust?

A few hours ago, I asked you what actions you would take if you could travel back to 1939 armed with today's knowledge. Today, we can look back at that time, just before the Holocaust devastated the Jews, and we can see how things could have been done differently to avert the Shoah. There is one area I would like to focus on: American Jews could have spoken up, rocked the boat, made themselves heard by the country's leaders, and not relented until action was taken. The fact that the masses in large part remained silent had horrific consequences. American Jews during World War II were not without power and resources – they *could* have made a lot more noise. At the very least, they could have pushed for one bombing run on the tracks to Auschwitz. But they didn't.

Today, American Jews are more powerful than we were in 1939 and arguably more powerful than at any time in the past two thousand years. We are powerful because the Jews of the Diaspora have a voice in the United States and Europe, and we are powerful because of Israel's military strength.

And yet, today we are facing enormous threats to Israel that are every bit as serious and in some ways more frightening than in 1939, with the potential for devastating consequences. One nuclear device can do the unthinkable in an instant. Israel's very existence could be at stake if Iran attains a nuclear weapon.

Unfortunately, as I'll argue in this talk, I don't believe we've learned our lessons from 1944. The threat from Iran, its satellites, Al-Qaeda, and the Arab world is real; the militant Arab leaders are making their intentions clear, and there is no doubt that they mean what they say.

If we do not take responsibility to stop it, the consequences could be horrific for Israel, by extension for the Jewish people, and ultimately for the entire Western world. We need to do everything in our power to raise the alarm. We need to speak up, to agitate, to make the world take notice. At the same time, we must respect Israel's autonomy, its right to steer its own course and make its own decisions.

I believe that American Jewry is in danger of repeating mistakes of seventy years ago in the way it is responding, or rather not responding, to the current American administration's position – and I feel this despite the hopeful sign of this past Thursday's coordinated effort of hundreds of Jewish leaders and activists going to Washington to urge the Obama administration and Congress to take action on Iran.

The United States is the only power broker of consequence, and in a major change of direction, this administration is putting unusual and unwarranted public pressure on Israel. American Jewry's attachment to pacifism is often admirable, but currently is not in Israel's best interest. There are many critical lessons to be learned from World War II. One is that sometimes it takes war to end evil, as it did with Hitler. The lack of visible action to date vis-à-vis the Iranian threat – as a community and as individuals – suggests that we have not yet integrated these lessons.

Personal background

Lest you think I'm a right-wing Republican, I'd like to briefly discuss my own background. I have solid credentials on the left. During Oslo I was a member of the Israeli Policy Forum, which was set up at the request of Rabin and Peres to promote the peace process with the Palestinians. I've met with the Palestinian Authority leadership including Arafat. But after the intifada began, and the lynching in Ramallah took place in 2001, I began to wonder if perhaps too many of us were too quick to assume that a new, peaceful Middle East had dawned. I came to believe that the IPF, along with a number of other Jewish organizations on the left, were not protecting Israel as they should. I withdrew from the IPF and took the left to task in an op ed piece in the *Jewish Week* entitled "The Left is No Longer Right."

I am among those who believe that Oslo, while a failure, was not a mistake. And I further believe that we continue the process until the Palestinians are ready to deal in earnest. I support the two state solution as recently proposed by Prime Minister Netanyahu. I support programs that help Israeli Arabs, Druze, and Berber populations in Israel and in Djerba, Tunisia. I would have been thrilled if today we

could have celebrated the sixteenth anniversary of the famous handshake between Arafat and Rabin on the White House lawn that took place on this date, September 13, in 1993. Unfortunately, we have nothing to celebrate, not today, not yet.

The Iranian threat

Today we have cause for fear. A nuclear Iran is looming on the world's horizon. Iran has made no secret of its intent, which is to exterminate Israel. Because of its size, Israel could be obliterated with one bomb, which means it could be imperative that Israel attack preemptively.

I believe that when Ahmadinejad declares that "Israel must be wiped off the map," he is declaring his intention, just as Hitler made his intention clear in *Mein Kampf* in 1925. When Hitler declared that his aim was to destroy the Jews, he meant it. He spelled out his intention. And nobody listened.

When Hezbollah's Nasrallah says that it's good that Jews are gathered in one place, in Israel, because, "it will save us the trouble of going after them worldwide," he means it.

When Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said, on Iranian television in 2000: "Iran's position...is that the cancerous tumor called Israel must be uprooted from the region," he meant it.

In a significant respect, our enemies today are potentially more dangerous than our enemies of yesterday. The Nazis wanted to live, to enjoy food and music and art in their *Judenrein* and Aryan wonderland. The radical Muslims, our enemies today, are not interested in life. They are suicide bombers, willing to sacrifice large numbers of people. That means that the military strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction (or MAD), so effective during the Cold War with the Soviets, may not hold with a Muslim nuclear power. In fact, Iran's former president Rafsanjani said in 2007 that it would be OK to lose an estimated fifteen million Iranians in response to the nuclear destruction of Israel that would kill five million Jews. That, he said, would be a small "sacrifice" from among the more than one billion Muslims in the world. And Rafsanjani is considered by the West to be a moderate.

Many strategic experts believe that if Iran gets the bomb, it or its surrogates will use it to attack Israel. Any destruction undertaken today will occur at warp speed in comparison to the Holocaust. We have very little time left to act. We certainly don't have the leisure to take a wait and see approach.

The lesson learned from World War II is that waiting is not the answer. Imagine how many lives would have been spared, how much sooner World War II would have ended, if the United States had gone to war against Hitler in 1939, instead of waiting two years and two months until Pearl Harbor. As it was, fifty million were killed (some say the number is as high as seventy-five million). Countless Jews and tens of millions of gentile civilians would have been saved if the United States entered the war at the outset. But instead, the isolationists in both parties held sway, much as they are today.

Europe and the United States

One of the most important questions to consider in the event of a crisis facing Israel is whether the free world will stand with Israel today, or whether it will abandon the Jews as it did seventy years ago.

Can Israel count on the Europeans? I have my doubts. Despite friendly heads of state with Sarkozy in France, Berlusconi in Italy, and Merkel in Germany, their policies tilt toward the Arabs. Their sales of weapons to Arab and Muslim regimes that are hostile to Israel speaks for itself. Historically anti-Semitic, the European masses are largely anti-Israel and I believe there is a very thin line – probably no line at all – between today's anti-Israel sentiment and yesterday's anti-Semitism. Europe's rising Muslim population and its complete dependence on Arab oil indicates that these European countries will not play any meaningful or constructive role regarding the Iranian threat to Israel.

In all of this, the United States is a key player. It may be too early to tell, but our current administration seems to be changing the rules of the game. I am concerned about the one-sided criticism of Israel, the constant pressure for more Israeli concessions without any signs of concessions from the other side.

Given the situation, it is clear that we must be proactive in making sure that the administration understands what Israel may have to do and that any action Israel takes to defend itself upholds the interests of the United States and the Western world, as well. We must not be silenced in deference to an administration that is reluctant to get involved. We must not repeat the mistakes of the 1930s and '40s.

American Jewry's commitment to liberalism

World War II taught us that there are times when it is necessary to fight back. As so eloquently pointed out in the current issue of *Commentary*, in a piece on Jews and liberalism, the Jewish people have historically found intellectual sustenance and a modicum of physical security from those expressing universalist ideas. And those universalist ideas were most often part of the ideology of the left.

As such, the majority of the Jews, and I count myself among them, have remained loyal to the platforms of the left. This despite the fact that the evolution of the American right has become more philo-Semitic and more pro-Israel. And the hawks and evangelicals among them are the most fervent and committed supporters of the State of Israel. From the perspective of our own survival, we should gravitate towards those who wish us well and support our standing in the world.

Let me make my position clear. An attack on Israel is effectively an attack on the Jewish people. When they're coming to chop our heads off, the items that Jews care about as a matter of political heritage and *tikkun olam* – issues such as women's rights, reproductive rights, universal health care, separation of church and state, education, diversity, the arts, and all other agendas must come second. The sanctity and security of the well-being of the State of Israel and the well-being of its citizens are what count and are of paramount importance.

Despite the pacifist attitude held by many children of Holocaust survivors, despite the anti-war rhetoric spouted by many of the 1960s Jewish baby boomers, despite what for many of us is an innate leftist opposition to war, ultimately it is only the strength of the State of Israel that make our enemies respect us. It is not our

intellect, not our Nobel prizes, not our supposed financial acumen. As the Italian-Jewish intellectual Alain Elkann has put it so well, the only antidote to Auschwitz is Israel – and its military might. As such, Israel is fighting not only for itself, but for all Jews – and I would argue that by extension it is fighting for the well-being of the Western world and its values.

The United States is the greatest country in history, and many would argue that Jews in the United States are living in a Golden Age, perhaps in the best time to be Jewish in history, that we have little to be worried about. I would argue that there have been other Golden Ages in Jewish history. Jews flourished in Germany until the late eleventh century, medieval Spain was a wonderful home for Jews, sixteenth century Poland was called a “paradise for the Jews,” Jews in France after Napoleon and before Dreyfus experienced growth and prosperity that could be considered a golden era, and of course, Jews in pre-Hitler Germany were integrated into society and felt very German. There’s a lesson here – golden ages have no protection to offer.

And yet, time and again throughout history, the Jewish community and its leaders have had false confidence in golden ages.

Jewish leadership during World War II

Looking back, the failure of American Jewish leadership during World War II is no doubt due in part to a desire to hold onto the relatively newfound security of living in America, a safe haven and an ocean away from the turmoil of Europe.

Rabbi Stephen Wise, a reform rabbi, a founder and leader of major Jewish organizations, a man who had access to the White House, a friend of Roosevelt, blocked the Bergson group’s attempts to meet with Roosevelt, despite the valiant work that this grassroots group was doing on behalf of Europe’s Jews. There were other groups trying to rescue Jews and they were also essentially silenced by America’s mainstream Jewish leadership. Wise, like many of the Jewish leaders of the era, did far less than he could have, and should have, to protest the killings. The motivation for his complacency? One can interpret his inaction in one of two ways. One is that he was concerned that any agitation would result in a backlash of anti-

Semitism and that he believed that the best way to save world Jewry was to be quiet and let the United States win the war in its own way.

The other interpretation of his silence is to surmise that he had a reluctance to rock the boat, that he did not wish to draw attention to himself or the larger Jewish community, that he had the Diaspora mentality of wanting to continue his life in the golden age without interference. I would argue that in some Jewish circles, with some minor differences, we are in a similar situation today.

In reading the book *A Race Against Death* by conference organizers David Wyman and Rafi Medoff, I was struck by a footnote detailing how even during times of crisis, Jewish leaders rigidly adhered to their comfortable schedules. They would interrupt accounts of genocide to go to lunch at their favourite restaurants. They would be unavailable for meetings on Friday afternoons because they headed off to their regular weekend outings to the country. While these leaders were having tea in the Rockaways, thousands of Jews were dying that afternoon in Europe. The Jews of Europe were being exterminated as American Jews were leading their comfortable, quiet lives.

I'm not saying that there wasn't insecurity on the part of Jews in America – ask any of the old timers about the insecurity about being a Jew in a pre-Israel universe – ask them how they felt when they heard the rantings of Father Coughlin or Joseph Kennedy's support for Berlin, for example.

Nevertheless, Jewish leadership failed us during the Holocaust and it's failed us since. We had a rare success with Soviet Jewry and we should learn from that.

Soviet Jewry movement

But even with the success story of the Soviet Jewry movement, the establishment did not lead. They were dragged. The rabbinical leaders believed that keeping quiet was the best way. The Israeli leadership was preoccupied with its own survival. The Jewish organizations for whatever reasons did not undertake to stop the Soviets. It took a grassroots uprising catalysed by the Englishman Jacob Birnbaum and his group of ragtag students at Yeshiva and Columbia universities for the

establishment to finally step up. When it did, the establishment was extremely effective – we witnessed the possibility of unified action, the potential of the Jewish community to influence the course of history. We need to do it again, and we need to do it now.

Today's Jewish leadership

What of today's Jewish leadership? Has it learned from World War II? From the Soviet Jewry movement? We have Jews in the White House, Jews who have the President's ear. How will they deal with today's crises? Will they show courage, or will they be like the *shtadlanim*, the court Jews of old? Throughout history, we've had court Jews who did what they thought was best for the Jewish community. Today is no exception. Today's agenda in the White House is being set by people who *do* care. They care so much that they believe they are the authorities on what is good for Israel and that they know better than Israel's elected officials, who face down rabid enemies every waking moment of their lives.

And this conviction of knowing what's best for Israel is not limited to our leaders. There are plenty of American Jews who think they know what's best for Israel. But while seventy-eight percent of American Jews voted for Obama and believed he felt strongly about Israel's safety, a recent poll found that only four percent of Israeli Jews believe that Obama's policies are pro-Israel. This disconnect between the perceptions of American Jews and Israeli Jews points to a disconnect between Jews on the front line and Jews in America.

Israel's right to self-determination

All signs are pointing to a near future in which Israel will face many difficult choices regarding Iran. As for the action Israel should take to defend itself, that is up to Israel. And shame on any of us outside of Israel, who are not faced with being blown up when we go out for a meal, who are not in the Army reserves, whose sons are not engaged in Gaza, and whose daughters are not on serving on the Lebanese border, to begin to think that we understand what it's like to live in Israel. Many American Jews identify with Israel, feel strongly about Israel, and think they know what is best for Israel.

Those of us sipping cappuccinos at Starbucks on the West Side of Manhattan, drinking cosmopolitans in Chicago, bicycling in the Bay Area, sunning ourselves in Miami, or praying in Borough Park are not qualified to impose our political will on Israel.

Given that the last Israeli election resulted in a more right wing government than in the recent past and that Meretz, the avowed left wing party, received less than three percent of the vote, perhaps the Israelis know a bit more about the neighbourhood they live in than do the policy wonks in Washington.

Israel has the right to make its own decisions. If Iran gets the bomb, it could be the end of the Zionist dream. Even if Iran doesn't use the bomb, blowing up a small nuclear device as a test in the desert could result in the emigration of hundreds of thousands of Israelis. A recent poll found that twenty-three percent of Israelis would consider leaving the country if Iran got the bomb.

Grassroots activism in today's Germany

In April of this year I met in Berlin with several idealistic young Germans from an NGO called Stop the Bomb. They are working feverishly to stop Iran's atomic program and are demanding unilateral economic and political sanctions against Iran. I liken them to members of the White Rose, those young German, non-Jewish college students who protested the Third Reich during World War II. Stop the Bomb is holding protest meetings and conferences, speaking at schools, generating petitions, and establishing websites.

They are disseminating information, including the fact that Germany is providing Iran with a shockingly high percentage of the precision parts needed to produce the fuel for the bomb. Two-thirds of Iranian industry is dependent on German technology, and every third machine comes from Germany. And note that currently, more than 1500 German companies still do business with Tehran and the German government still gives state credit guarantees for export deals to Iran.

Frankly, the members of Stop the Bomb aren't being heard. For all their efforts, the precision parts keep getting delivered to Iran. And, I might add, Germany is considered Israel's best friend in Europe.

Members of Stop the Bomb asked for my thoughts. I told them they should consider adopting the methodology used by other protest movements. I said that it takes action to be heard. I told them that they should interrupt commerce in Germany's three major cities, Berlin, Munich, and Frankfurt. How? Rent 50 cars in each city, drive to traffic flash points during Tuesday morning rush hour, stop the cars, turn off the engines, and throw away the keys. Traffic would come to a standstill, business would grind to a halt, money would be lost, people would get angry, the media would pay attention, and, bottom line, they would be heard. Shut down those three cities and you'll get the attention of the German people. I also suggested a second type of protest. I told them to go to a butcher's shop and get bags of blood and stage a protest by throwing the blood onto members of a symbolic group, such as the musicians in a visiting Iranian orchestra or on the German legislators who refuse to put boycotts with teeth in place. The stakes are high. Petitions are not enough.

Do these measures make you queasy? Too graphic? Are they extreme? Illegal? Radical? Perhaps. But remember the question I asked earlier – what would you have done in 1939, armed with today's knowledge? Given Germany's record, I feel perfectly justified in recommending for consideration civil disobedience in Germany to get that country's government to impose effective sanctions. Germany has a moral and ethical responsibility to stop the madness.

I am not suggesting a campaign of civil disobedience in the United States. At this point, we hope that President Obama will be successful, and if he isn't that he will change direction quickly. For our part, though, I hope that we have learned our lesson from 1944 in this regard, which is that if the United States is not doing the right thing, and Israel is in danger, then we must protest, as our grandparents should have done in the 1930s and '40s. If ever a situation called for civil disobedience, it was the United States' abandonment of the Jews of Europe during the Shoah.

Take away lessons

So, what lessons can we learn from 1944?

First, our survival as a people depends on a change of course. If we do things as we've done them in the past, the results will be the same. If we behave as we have in the past, during World War II and in many of our crises throughout history, we are in deep trouble.

Second, the world should not appease tyrants. Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy was disastrous, yet the western world went along with him and gave in, thinking that by signing the Munich Agreement, by granting Germany the Sudetenland, Hitler would be appeased, and he would stop his aggression. Today the West is appeasing terrorist regimes. Stop. It won't work.

Third, Jewish leadership has failed us in the past. It is failing us now in Iran. The call to action, with few exceptions, has been feeble, and in a meeting at the White House this past August, the Jewish leadership, according to reports, was largely non-confrontational in pressing its issues with the President. We need to light a fire under our leaders.

Fourth, presidents are not infallible. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a popular and revered president, took a stand on not bombing Auschwitz, on not providing havens for escape, on not letting the *SS St. Louis* dock and unload its passengers, he was wrong. The eventual result was that millions died. If President Obama, another popular president, pushes his own agenda in the Middle East, and we believe that it may be detrimental to our people, we have a duty as American citizens and as Jews to challenge him and his administration.

In conclusion, for the Jewish people, Israel is our haven and to many of us, central to our beings as Jews. Yet Israel is also the canary in the coal mine – as goes Israel, so goes world Jewry and the values of the Western world. We must make Israel and the survival of the Jewish people the *raison d'être* of our political activity. Whether we agree with Israel's politics or not, each of us has a personal stake in

the outcome. We need to reach within ourselves to find the grit we had in 1948, not the complacency of 1939.

Let me close by repeating my initial question from this morning. If this was 1939 and you knew then what you know now, what would you do? Whatever your answer, keep it in mind. Let us hope and pray that we won't have to implement your ideas.

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Aryeh Rubin's bio

Aryeh Rubin is the founding partner and managing director of The Maot Group, an investment company established in 1991. Previously, he was the publisher of the New York-based KSF Group, a medical publishing company. In 1974, Mr. Rubin visited eleven concentration camps throughout Europe, an experience that helped influence his decision to found and publish *Jewish Living* magazine in the late 1970s.

Mr. Rubin is also the founder and director of Targum Shlishi, a foundation dedicated to fostering positive change in the Jewish world. Targum Shlishi has undertaken several initiatives related to Holocaust knowledge, awareness, and justice, including: conceiving and funding Operation Last Chance through the Israel office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a campaign that provides a cash award for information leading to the arrest and conviction of Nazi war criminals; spearheading a fundraising initiative for Father Patrick Desbois, a Catholic priest who is systematically locating mass graves of Jews massacred in Ukraine and Belarus and uncovering the history that occurred there; and sending out 1500 complimentary copies of David Wyman and Rafael Medoff's book *A Race Against Death: Peter Bergson, America, and the Holocaust* to decision-makers in the Jewish world. Targum Shlishi's recent grants awarded include support for video documentation of an archeological investigation of Sobibor, the concentration camp in Poland that was closed in 1943 after a successful revolt; Voices from the Ashes, a project to translate and publish very early Holocaust testimonies from a

previously unexplored archive at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw; and a forthcoming documentary on the history of Nazi hunting by Jonathan Silvers.

In addition, Mr. Rubin is the editor of *Jewish Sages of Today* (Devora Publishing and Targum Shlishi), forthcoming this October. His opinion pieces have appeared in *The Jewish Week*, *The Jerusalem Report*, and *Moment Magazine* and he has been profiled in articles in several publications, including *The New York Times*, *The Miami Herald*, *The Daily Business Review*, and *The Jewish Star Times*. His opinion piece “What Did You Do After the War, Dad?” appeared in *The Jewish Week* and has been downloaded multiple thousands of times. Mr. Rubin received a B.A. from Yeshiva University. He is married, has three daughters, and lives in Florida.

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