

## **Greetings to Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

August 11, 2005 Orlando, FL

By Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, President  
Union for Reform Judaism

I am honored to be with you this morning. And, as I understand that I am the first non-Christian to address this assembly, I'm humbled by your invitation.

I represent the Union for Reform Judaism, consisting of 920 synagogues and 1.5 million Jews. The work that we engage in is similar to the work that you engage in. Our congregations are places for communal prayer, youth activities and study of Bible and sacred texts. They are venues for bringing comfort to the afflicted, inspiration to the weary and guidance to those who search for God. This is hard work. But you and I know that there is no more important work in these difficult times than creating an earthly home for the divine presence and offering our members a life lit by the flame of faith.

I am particularly appreciative of the role played by the ELCA in forming meaningful relations between Christians and American Jews. You have been path setters in this regard.

And I acknowledge with special thanks the leadership of Bishop Mark Hanson.

I'm grateful for the outstanding materials produced by the consultative panel on Lutheran-Jewish relations. I am moved by the frank honesty of your statement to the Jewish community, in which you wrestle with the reality of anti-Semitism in your own history. And I am delighted by the ongoing cooperation of our two movements in advancing the cause of justice in our nation's capital.

I am here, in part, to join with you in celebrating the 350th anniversary of Jewish settlement in the United States, and I thank you for the just passed memorial.

In 1654, 23 Jewish refugees landed in New Amsterdam. Three hundred and fifty years later, American Jewry has become the freest and most secure Jewish community in all of Jewish history. Here, in this blessed land, protected by the sanctuary of a constitution that safeguards the sacred right to be different, we have lived with our brothers and sisters of all races, faiths and ethnic origins in a pluralism of tolerance unmatched in any place or time in history.

On the occasion of this anniversary, American Jews are thankful for their blessings and for their friends. But we are also looking ahead at the tasks as yet uncompleted. It is our profound wish that we will join with you and with other peoples of faith in covenants of hope and coalitions of decency to meet the challenges that still confront us.

We share deep worries about the moral lives of our children, sexual suggestive images flood the media, and reality TV gets more stupid and more offensive every day.

Still, when millions work full time but can't lift their families out of poverty, when the gap between the rich and everyone else is wider than it's been in more than a century, when jobs are less secure and healthcare costs are out of control, we believe that people of faith need to be worried about more than personal piety and personal morality, as critical as they are.

We believe that this is not the time for governments to be craven toward the economically powerful and vicious toward the economically weak.

We believe that to be a Holy community is not to live in self protective isolation, but to live in loving relationship with other people, which means reminding our countrymen that Americans who are not wealthy always fare better when we share the burdens, rather than face them alone.

We believe, in short, that at this critical moment in our country's history, people of faith must do what we have done so often before: Summon America to a higher vision of its meaning and destiny.

And, finally, a few thoughts on the Middle East, a difficult and sensitive topic in our world.

We see our efforts to assure Israel's security as one of our community's most important accomplishments in our 350 years here.

The Reform Jewish movement is committed to its two state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict. The Palestinians must have a state. We Jews can surely understand this; our history, after all, began in Egypt. For peace to be achieved, territorial compromise will be required of Israel, and unconditional acceptance of Israel as a Jewish state will be required of the Palestinians. We believe that the ultimate terms of a settlement will be negotiated by the two parties in a manner that guarantees the security of each. And we believe that an American role in achieving such a settlement is essential.

As a religious movement, we realize that the government of Israel, like all governments, is an imperfect human creation, and we do not hesitate to criticize Israel's actions when we believe them to be wrong.

Furthermore, we see that the Palestinian people are in pain. And we understand that without dignity for the Palestinians, there can be no dignity for Israel.

At the same time, we know that if anything is evil, terror is evil. It strikes the old, young, and innocent. The deliberate targeting of innocent victims has no defense; it is destruction for destruction's sake and it is born not of despair but contempt. It must always be called by its name. It's not "insurgency," or even "killing civilians." It's terrorism and evil and the words must be used. If we forget that, there is nothing worth remembering.

The events of September 11 left Americans deeply traumatized. Yet in relative terms, far more Israelis than Americans have been killed and directly impacted by terror. Since the rejection of the peace plan between Clinton/Barak, there were 175 successful terrorist attacks against Israeli

civilians. For much of the last five years, life in Israel has been a lottery. You wait for the next terrorist attack, and you hope it won't kill you or your children.

Imagine how Americans would react if they were subject to terror on this scale. And while "peace not walls" is an aspiration that we surely share, as long as the terror continues, we believe that Israel cannot be denied the right to a defensive barrier whose goal is to end the killing of civilians.

Others will not see the conflict as we see it. What we have asked of our many friends in the Christian world is this: Please don't minimize the impact of terror. And do not demonize or isolate Israel, as if, somehow, she alone were responsible for the current conflict.

We now find ourselves at a moment of hope. Israel has withdrawn from Sinai, Lebanon and soon from Gaza. Now is the time for Israelis and Palestinians to look through each other's eyes for an instant and take that critical step for peace. Now is the time for the government of the US to involve itself fully in the search for peace. Now is the time for terror to stop and settlement building to stop. Now is the time for all of us to see that we can achieve through peace what none of us will achieve through violence.

One of the most profound passages of the Bible comes from Moses, just before his death, turns to the children of the next generation and says "don't hate an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land." The Egyptians of course were the task master's and murderers of their parents.

How could Moses say such a thing? Moses knew that to build a Society of Freedom and hope, you have to let go of hate. That is what Moses taught the children of his time, and it's what we must teach the children of our time. I look forward to joining with you in this sacred task.

I thank you again for this gracious invitation. May God bless you and the work of this Assembly.