

The Necklace
Rosh Hashanah Day 5770
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Rabbi Neil Comess-Daniels
Beth Shir Sholom
Santa Monica, CA

Here's an email that began surfacing after last fall's presidential election. The "subject" line says, "Service Interrupted"

Dear World:

We, the United States of America, your top quality supplier of the ideals of liberty and democracy, would like to apologize for our 2001-2008 interruption in service. The technical fault that led to this eight-year service outage has been located, and the software responsible was replaced November 4. Early tests of the newly installed program indicate that we are now operating correctly, and we expect it to be fully functional on January 20.

We apologize for any inconvenience caused by the outage. We look forward to resuming full service and hope to improve in years to come. We thank you for your patience and understanding,

Sincerely,
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

I know this little gem makes most in this room want to shake their heads up and down, giggle and clap their hands. Others, whose membership and participation in this community is truly an honor for me, and all of us, are shaking their heads from side to side, moaning and wringing their hands.

The truth about America is, of course more complex than either head-nodding or head-shaking reflects. Whether we are part of this grand democratic collective by birth, choice or otherwise, we are grateful for the legacy of good works spawned out of America's core values. Particularly as Jews, we are aware of our great fortune to be

part of a nation whose principles so closely align with our own – in no small way because they COME from our own! Despite strongly held and varying opinions about just what are those core American values, Americans agree about a great many of them. For the nearly perfect integrity of our electoral process, and the courage of admitting and repairing our transgression of disenfranchising groups from that process – we should be proud. For the consistency of the peaceful transition of power between incoming and outgoing local, regional and national administrations and our preservation of unique and numerous opportunities to affect governmental policies – we are proud. For American technical ingenuity and the tapestry of spiritual and intellectual perspectives on the ethical implications of applying that ingenuity, the American experience makes us proud.

I read the email quip about the last 8 years many times before sharing it today and I think, no matter if it causes us to nod our heads or a shake them, we're all wrong. Honestly, and contrary to the assumption of the email, the United States has NOT always been the world's "top quality supplier of the ideals of liberty and democracy" at all times other than the last eight years. If we developed a barometer upon which both head-nodders and head-shakers could agree, all of us would be horrified at the inconsistency with which the United States actually delivered liberty and democracy to other nations in the truest spirit of those who carefully expressed those values in our founding documents.

Since our founding, we have sent millions of our young to fight and die battling actual or perceived threats. The result is, at best, a mixture of success and misadventure. Since our beginnings, the "face" America presents to much of the world is the face of the American corporation – face too often guilty of lacking the ability or desire to be concerned with anything or anyone other than its own survival. The ledger of our history reflects the nearly constant expenditure of our human and material assets and resources protecting overseas American corporate interests, although we usually describe those campaigns as patriotic and philosophical defenses of our domestic freedoms.

All any American needs to put America in perspective, is a trip to another country, another reality. I've been fortunate to have a few of those journeys in my lifetime. The most recent was last fall when my wife, Toby, my father-in-law, Lenny, and I traveled to meet up with my daughter in...Vietnam. For those in the community who may not

know, our daughter, Eden, was given the great gift by her grandparents of being a participant in a program called Semester at Sea. Her inspiration was Lauren Hoffman, the daughter of Stan Hoffman and our Temple president, Linda Hoffman who preceded Eden on the program by a semester. Along with 700 other college students, Eden sailed for three and half months during which they circumnavigated our planet, exploring 10 different countries. One of those countries was Vietnam.

More than once during our Vietnam excursion, Toby would shake her head and say to me, "Think of all the energy you expended NOT to be here and look where you are!" I know that in this room today I am looking at many who could not or would not avoid going to Vietnam in the late sixties and early seventies for military service. I applaud and am in awe of your courage and your commitment to the ideal of defending American, democratic values and the people of South Vietnam in their rice paddies and jungles. Your perspective about our war there is no doubt different than mine and today will be part of a respectful dialogue. The perspective of the Vietnamese people on the war is different as well. They call it the "American War" an epithet that should give any of us pause and urge us to take another look at what are probably long-held opinions and points-of-view.

My wife, daughter, father-in-law and I had many collective and individual reasons for being in Vietnam. One goal of the journey was unambiguous and palpable and, honestly, we could we could have achieved it in any country. We needed to give Eden a hug and to do that we would have traveled anywhere in the world. As it turned out, Toby and Lenny departed for Vietnam on the last day of *Shiva* for my mother-in-law, Elaine. Eden left on her voyage at the end of August knowing full well that she would probably never see her grandmother alive again. In the *bershert-ness*, the serendipity, that can be wonderfully supportive, Eden was at the Taj Mahal, one of her grandmother's most favorite places in the world on the day of her grandmother's funeral. Still, being without her family on that day, and, for us, being without her, left a void that we could not fill until the day we all embraced at the port in Ho Chi Minh City.

I arrived in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, about three-quarters of a day before my wife and father-in-law. I asked our guide where I might go for something to eat when my stomach decided it was in need. He pointed out a couple of spots on a map and left me

to my own devices – not a great idea for someone who considers my GPS system to be a combination guardian angel and messiah. Nonetheless, I set out, and eventually found some great coffee, rice and...something else. In the time that remained before Lenny and Toby arrived, I decided to make my way to a compound of buildings formerly known as the Museum of Chinese and American War Crimes.

The museum is a collection of what seem to be previously unrelated buildings of different sizes and shapes cobbled together around a courtyard crammed with captured American armament, ranging from mortar launchers to a jet fighter. The tools of war are not at the heart of why this physically anonymous place is now called the “War **Remnants** Museum.” Since first-hand accounts will all too soon be irretrievable, the innumerable, uncompromising and graphic photographs that occupy most of the museum’s space preserve the scraps and echoes of the war. War photographers are heroes in Vietnam and the Vietnamese people consider photographers who died in action as martyrs.

The tragedy of this country so ravaged by war is immense and the War Remnants Museum is not the only place where there are remnants. They are everywhere – some officially preserved and some less formal. Down the street from our hotel was the compound in which the American Embassy once stood. The infamous building from which those last desperate helicopter evacuations took place is torn down, but the remnants, the surrounding walls and barbed wire that I recalled from so many news reports, still remain. Every time we drove by, remnants of my feelings about Vietnam and the war were stirred up.

Just outside of Ho Chi Minh City are the Cu Chi tunnels, an elaborate maze of tunnels used first by nationalists in the 1940’s to hide from and ambush French troops. During the American War in Vietnam, Viet Cong supporters attacked our soldiers from the haven of the tunnels. The tunnels also served as air raid shelters and housed thousands of people and supporting them with wells, kitchens and even a hospital. Marriages, births and deaths occurred in those tunnels. At Cu Chi, the remnants are underground below camouflaged entrances, still undetectable to the untrained eye. At Cu Chi, the remnants are in trenches filled with examples of the vicious and deadly booby traps that maimed and killed Americans. There were war remnants in the irony and discomfort of viewing these

devices. Also at Cu Chi the sound remnants of war fly through the air with every bullet fired from a nearby firing range, chilling the soul with an all-too-authentic soundtrack.

Life in the Mei Cong Delta has hardly changed from the days of our American war in Vietnam, except for tourism and TV antennas on the roofs of the shacks of corrugated tin in which the people there still live. It was strange and beautiful to see the boats, the people and the backdrop all in their amazing and memorable colors. My only images of Mei Cong were from majority black-and-white 1960's and early 70's war footage. The Mei Cong Delta is a well-preserved remnant where the people still struggle just to feed themselves and their families, and hope and strive for a little improvement.

All the people we met and or who passed us by on the hundreds of motor scooters are remnants as well, even if they were not alive during America's war in Vietnam. They carry with them the scraps and echoes of war, for individuals, families and their nation. The legacy of the war is not a chip on their shoulders, or a badge of honor or moral superiority, or a means to attract pity. It is something ethereal, floating in their eyes and their souls.

The Talmud records that Rabbi Yochanan experienced the deaths of all ten of his sons during his lifetime (Berachot 5b). He wore a tooth from his tenth son on a necklace in order to comfort others, enabling them to feel that they could handle their sorrow if he could handle his. He wore this remnant of his tragedy in order to bring empathy, healing and hope to the lives of others. To do that, he would simply point to the necklace and say, "This is the tooth of my tenth son."

Each Vietnamese person wears a "remnant", a symbolic scrap, an emotional echo of the war on an invisible necklace around his or her neck. Like Rabbi Yonchanan's necklace, the Vietnamese remnant necklaces articulate empathy, healing and hope for their fellow Vietnamese. Even more, like the tooth of his tenth son worn by Rabbi Yochanan, for the Vietnamese, their remnant necklaces are more for others than themselves. Especially for Americans, they are an important part of the way in which the Vietnamese embrace us now as peaceful visitors. They are not stuck in the past, but they know the past is always with them. They are letting us know that none of us can escape the past and...they are moving on. They are moving on in an imperfect country with an inefficient government. They are moving on, determined to do the best they can for

themselves and their families. They are moving on AND they have not forgotten.

And we, head-nodders or head-shakers, who still feel ourselves to be the “top quality supplier of the ideals of liberty and democracy” to the world, we have NOT moved on and we HAVE forgotten. Our nation continues to spread the message of our ideals and values through a gun barrel or via a missile launched from an automaton plane. We still spend our precious resources, especially the lives of our young, defending corporate concerns.

Lenny, Toby, Eden and I brought back many gifts for ourselves from Vietnam – clothing, beautiful art and strong coffee. Today, we give a gift to each one of us here. From this gift hangs a small remnant of war, a tooth, a scream, a torn body, a broken heart, a shattered spirit. Point to this gift when others disregard the real impacts of war. Give this gift to your children so that they will give it to theirs. We bring this gift from the people of Vietnam and all the victims of war anywhere for all time. Take this gift. Take this necklace.