

Rosh Hashanah 5778/2017, Rabbi Edward Elkin "David and Goliath"

My late father Harry Elkin z"l was a fan of the New York Giants. Not the football team, but the baseball team that had decamped for California along with the Dodgers in 1957. As I grew up on Long Island, and came to learn a little bit about baseball, and about the geography of New York, I came to realize that his choice of team was anomalous, because you see -- my father had been born and raised in the Bronx. Now if you were a Bronx native, the baseball team you'd most naturally root for was -- the Yankees. The Yankees were the Bronx Bombers, the winningest team in baseball history. During my father's childhood and early adulthood, Yankees players such as Babe Ruth, Mickey Mantle, Joe DiMaggio, Lou Gehrig, and Yogi Berra powered the team to pennant after pennant, championship after championship. The Yankees have won more titles than any other franchise in all four major North American sports leagues. To be a Yankees fan was to be constantly rewarded with the satisfaction that comes with victory, with power, with success. The New York Giants, on the other hand, were perpetual losers. And yet my father hated the Yankees, his local team, and loved the Giants, who played across the Harlem River in Manhattan. In my time, which was the controversial George Steinbrenner era for the Yankees, his animosity towards the Yankees only grew, and he held onto his nostalgia for the New York Giants, who had abandoned New York so long before.

As for me, I confess I didn't actually care that much about sports altogether, it wasn't my thing. But I really wanted to understand my father. As part of my effort to "get" him, I was curious as to why his baseball sympathies lay where they did. His explanation, I remember, seemed odd to me. He told me he hated the Yankees precisely *because* they always won. My father liked to root for the underdog. The narrative of a rich team with strong players winning year after year just didn't do it for him. It wasn't a story line that touched or inspired him; in fact, the opposite -- it irked him no end. The story line he favoured was the scrappy team that had no chance but worked hard and lost and lost and kept coming back for more in the hopes that this might be The Year, and then, once in a while, actually did win.

As I grew older and learned about his political leanings, I realized that it all added up. In the political realm too, my father favoured the underdog. He favoured workers over management, poor people over rich people, lonely crusaders for the environment over corrupt and venal corporations, Vietnamese peasants over the American military of which he was a paradoxically proud veteran. If an issue or a problem could be analyzed as a binary between those with power and those without, he consistently favoured those without. In baseball, that was the New York Giants, and the more they lost, the more passionately he would root for them to win, which on a rare occasion they actually did.

The underdog narrative certainly goes back a long time, way before Major League Baseball. The classic story from our Jewish tradition that is often cited to illustrate the heroism of the underdog is the story of David and Goliath from the Book of 1 Samuel. Small Israelite shepherd boy armed only with a slingshot and five stones versus a Philistine giant with armor and javelin who had already vanquished or intimidated all the men of valour on our side. "When the Philistine caught sight of David, he scorned him, for he was but a boy, ruddy and handsome." "ויאמר הפלישתי אל דוד הכלב אנכי כי אתה בא אלי במקלות?" "And the Philistine called out to David, 'Am I a dog that you come against me with sticks? Come here and I will give your flesh to the birds of the sky and the beasts of the field'" (1 Sam.17:42-43). We all know how it ends. Goliath is felled by David's first stone, and the Philistine army flees. David eventually becomes King of Israel. And the whole incident becomes an archetype. David comes to exemplify the victory of the noble underdog against all odds; Goliath the man of overwhelming power who gets his comeuppance. That archetype comes to be applied over the course of generations to many types of human interactions from politics to sports to the battlefield to the courts to the family, and many more. And it came to animate much of my father's approach to the world as well.

It's an inspiring story. In due course, however, I came to find two problems with seeing the world through the lens of the David and Goliath narrative. One is that it isn't actually always obvious in every situation who is David, and who is Goliath. I mean, it might feel obvious at the time – but when you zoom out on a situation you often realize that human power dynamics are complex, and the David and Goliath model requires you to put the parties into exactly two boxes, one marked "David" and the other "Goliath". So any discussion of the strengths possessed by the David character, or the weaknesses of the Goliath character, going into their confrontation spoils the storyline, takes away from the nobility of the surprise victory, and therefore usually ends up getting suppressed. The second problem is, what do you as a fan of David do when David actually wins? Now there is certainly euphoria initially at the unexpected triumph. David's victory feels like a miracle. You sincerely wanted him to win. But how long after he wins does the actual David remain "David" -- the archetype of the underdog? How many times can David win before David becomes "Goliath"? At what point does the person who likes to root for losers start to feel some sympathy for the now-vanquished Goliath character?

I've been thinking about these questions a lot this year as we observe the 50th anniversary of the Six Day War. I don't actually remember the war; I was only four years old at the time. But as I came into consciousness and I started going to Hebrew School and Jewish summer camp, I heard many stories about the war. And the way it was told to me was very much a David

and Goliath narrative. A mere 22 years after the Shoah, the tiny Jewish state was surrounded by powerful and implacable foes vowing its destruction, its struggling economy being suffocated by the blockade of the Straits of Tiran. The Soviet Union was hostile, the 1956 allies Britain and France were neutral, -- as was Canada – which was avowedly impartial¹ – and the US, which declared itself “neutral in thought, word, and deed”². With talk of war in the air during this period, called in Hebrew *tekufat ha-hamtanah*, the waiting time, the civilian population prepared schools and community centers for use as morgues for the expected mass casualties to come. Jews the world over worried about a second twentieth-century Holocaust for our people. As I came to learn about the war, it was always clear to me who David was in this conflict. In six short days it was all over. Unexpectedly, the ruddy and handsome boy had vanquished the arrogant and ugly giant. It is an amazing story of redemption, and the word “miracle” is often used in our telling of it. On the seventh day, Israel, rested.³ In the aftermath of the war, the hot poster was of a Jew in a phone booth, changing from Clark Kent into Superman -- with the Hebrew letter shin on the front instead of the iconic English S.⁴ It’s a story that has sustained the admiration of many Diaspora Jews for the state of Israel over the last 50 years.

I am not a historian and it is not my purpose here today to advocate for or against the truth of this narrative about the war. There have been many books and articles about the lead-up to the war and about the war itself, and doubtless more such studies are on the way. Military and diplomatic historians can duke it out over the strengths and weaknesses of the various parties to the conflict 50 years ago. Nor am I so interested in focusing today on the effect the Six Day War continues to have on Israel and its neighbours five decades on, however much we all may care about the occupation and settlements and security and Jerusalem and refugees and borders and terrorism and all the other key issues that are still unresolved in this tragic conflict.

Rather, as we welcome a new year together as a community once again, a moment when, in keeping with Jewish tradition, we try to become more conscious, more aware, awakened by the sound of the shofar to consider who we are and what makes us tick, I want to express a rabbinic concern about the David and Goliath narrative as applied to the Six Day War, about

¹ Derek MacKay, *The Evolution of Canadian Diplomacy Towards the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, pp.24-25.

2. FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1964–1968, VOLUME XIX, ARAB-ISRAELI CRISIS AND WAR, 1967

³ Jonathan Mark, “Once There Was a War” *Times of Israel*, May 17, 2017.

⁴ *Ibid.*

the possibility that we may be hanging on to it even though it no longer applies, because we don't know what to substitute in its place. This uncertainty has led to what is for me as a Zionist a worrisome distancing of many Diaspora Jews from Israel. It's a complex trend, but at least two causes seem to be at play -- one on the Israeli side, one on the Palestinian. In one, our problem seems to be that we had a great narrative, by George; how dare Israel do things which upset our narrative?! And as for the other, we know that the David and Goliath analysis has become important in the Palestinians' narrative of the conflict as well -- with the roles of course reversed for them. How dare the other side appropriate our narrative? The emergence of the Palestinians-as-David narrative has led at times to a bitter and, in my opinion, fruitless debate between those who claim the David mantle for Israel and those who claim it for the Palestinians, especially -- but not only -- on university campuses. We fight over who is the true underdog, because whoever is the underdog is seen as the more virtuous combatant, and we all care so desperately about preserving a sense of our own virtue. So we hang onto that story tenaciously. It's understandable -- consciously or not, we all use stories to help us make sense of the world and organize all the conflicting information that comes our way. But if it's too dissonant with other facts, the narrative we choose doesn't actually help us; it can rather hinder, and alienate. (Parenthetically, I've been thinking a lot about Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar in this context -- another great example of someone whose actions aren't fitting into the narrative we have about her. Apparently she too is more complex than the story we've told about her, and we in the west have lots of strong feelings about that as well.)

Back to Israel -- however we understand what happened 50 years ago, we know that in the eyes of the world, and in the eyes of many in our own community, Israel in 2017 is not David. Israel is not weak. Israel, with its air force and its tanks and its Patriot missiles, and its backing from Washington, and its nuclear deterrent, and its First World GDP and start-up nation tech sector, is not the scrappy underdog. Right or wrong, fair or unfair, that is the perception. When conflicts flare in Lebanon or in Gaza, and the victim counts are so lopsided, people stop thinking of Israel as David. How do we as Diaspora Jews deal with that fact? Do we double down on the David narrative, emphasizing all of Israel's very real vulnerabilities in the context of the whole Middle East, especially Iran -- despite media coverage that points in the other direction? How dependent on the Israel-as-David narrative is our support for Israel anyway? What do we lose if we come to think of Israel as a winner, or if, at the very least, we acknowledge that putting the two sides into boxes, one marked with a D and the other with a G, just doesn't seem plausible anymore -- because actually, each side has very real strengths, and each side has very real weaknesses?

As a rabbi, as someone who fiercely loves Medinat Yisrael, I have a fear about what we could lose if we insist on holding on to the David and Goliath framework. I have a fear that if our support for Israel is utterly dependent on the narrative of Israel-as-David, a narrative which is inevitably reductionist and simplistic, then that support will start to crumble the moment it encounters the actual complexity of a decades-long conflict in which Israel has enjoyed great military successes. If the only two choices are Israel-as-David or Israel-as-Goliath, then we're in real trouble when we open our newspapers or favourite websites and read about the suffering of those living under Israeli military rule in the West Bank, or about the expansion of settlements. And the same is true on the other side. I worry that if the Palestinians, and their allies who oppose the occupation, maintain a Palestinians-as-David narrative, that will make it harder for them to see their way clear to making the painful compromises that will be necessary for peace, or at least a sustainable accommodation between the sides. If that's the goal, and it's one that I refuse to give up on, then the David and Goliath narrative becomes even more problematic for people on all sides of the conflict, because accommodation requires messy, unsatisfying, compromise -- and how do you compromise with Goliath? That move just doesn't fit into the story. The only thing you can do with Goliath is to kill him and chop off his head as David did. A winner and a loser, a zero sum game. Is that really a helpful model for thinking about the Middle East conflict in 2017?

I want to share two more thoughts on this jubilee year of the Six Day War, and then conclude with some more general reflections on the role the David and Goliath narrative plays in our lives.

First, to be clear, I'm glad Israel won the Six Day War. I'm glad Israel is militarily powerful; in that dangerous neighbourhood, their security depends on retaining and enhancing that military power. I'm glad that the kids who had grown up in kibbutzim and moshavim in the Galilee who had spent their childhoods in bomb shelters could, after 67, walk freely outside and sleep soundly in their own beds, knowing the IDF was now on the Golan Heights and not the Syrian army. I'm glad there was an enormous buffer now between Israel and the Egyptian army, one that was ready to be given back in exchange for a peace treaty when the time came. I'm glad that Israelis could say הר הבית בידינו -- Jews could now freely go to the biblical holy sites in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria as well, sites from which they had been barred for 19 years, ever since the establishment of the State. Jews spent 2,000 years without military power, and I'm glad we traded that in for the inevitable dilemmas that go along with attaining it.

I'm happy that Israel has tremendous strengths and I feel that Israel needs to continually build on its strengths and address its weaknesses -- in the military, but also in the economic, cultural, societal, scientific-technological,

and diplomatic arenas. Sometimes Israel makes things worse for itself in these areas; a notable example this year that has been particularly emotional for many Diaspora Jews, including me, was the renegeing by the government on the agreement to provide an egalitarian prayer space at the Kotel – a decision which jeopardizes the good will of many of Israel’s allies in our pluralistic Jewish community. Another is the treatment of African asylum seekers who are not given a path to legalize their status as refugees in Israel. But, despite these and other disappointments, if there are armed conflicts to come, God forbid, I hope Israel wins and wins again. I’d rather Israel, with all its flaws, be the Yankees and not the Giants, especially when this isn’t actually a game and the stakes are so enormously high. I dread further conflict because I know how much suffering that entails, but I’m not looking for more even body counts in wars as a way to shore up my sense of Israel’s virtue. Letting go of being “David”, acknowledging Israel’s strength, doesn’t mean we no longer think of Israel as being good or noble. It is those things, and it’s also other things too, including being a political state with a strong determination to survive -- which inevitably has an impact on its neighbours, that impact not always so good or noble. As Rabbi Donniel Hartman said this summer, “If you need a naqba to happen to me, in order to fix your naqba, count me out.” The Palestinian tendency to focus on the catastrophe that happened to them in 1948 is not getting them anywhere in 2017. I hope they come to realize and appreciate their own strengths and their own successes in such a way that will help them to achieve their national goals, although whether they come to that realization or not in regard to their own victimhood is of course not under our control. Israel is not just going to fold up, and it will continue to require both the strength of a Goliath and the courage and smarts of a David, given the security situation it faces.

My second reflection, though, is that we need to remember that while physical/military strength is important, it can come with a price-tag in the form of a dangerous arrogance, something Goliath found out in the story and something Israel found out tragically only six years later in the 73 war. Rabbi Haskell Lookstein has observed that Jews who walked around with the posture of a question mark before 67 were able to strut like an exclamation mark afterwards.⁵ Well, strutting may feel good for a while, we’re only human. But it also comes with a cost, especially when the questions that led to the question mark have not actually been fully addressed. Because it turns out that there are other attributes to keep in mind when we consider the strength of any individual or community, besides physical prowess. In Israel’s case that includes its democracy, its compassion for its own most vulnerable inhabitants and civilians on the other side, its generosity, its

⁵ Ibid.

humility, its wisdom, its friends and allies, and its courageous willingness to take conscious risks to advance its goals because it understands that there are risks inherent in the status quo too. The rabbis in Pirke Avot reflected on this issue of strength 2,000 years ago. They asked איזה גבור? That term, gibor, is usually associated with Samson -- it means a hero, a mighty man, a tough guy. That's what makes the rabbis' answer to their own question surprising. Who is a gibor? According to Ben Zoma in Pirkei Avot, it is not Shimshon but rather מי שכוּבֵשׁ אֶת יָצְרוֹ "one who conquers his desires" (4:1). Now that's a very different kind of gevurah than that displayed by either David or Goliath. It's a different kind of gevurah than what won us the Six Day War, preventing another Holocaust. This rabbinic gevurah recognizes that we have a yetzer, we have our desires, there are things that we want, things we may even think we deserve. These desires aren't shameful. But we are not comprised only of our impulses and desires; we also have the ability to choose, sometimes, to conquer those desires in the name of some other value we possess. In the case of Israel, I personally share the desire to hold on to every inch of the historical Land of Israel for the Jewish state. I think I can make a good case that we deserve it, and that our retention of these territories is justified. But I also believe that Israel can choose, out of a position of strength, to let part of it go (or at least keep the option open of doing so) in the name of the hope, not certainty, of achieving something better for itself than it's had for the last 69 years, and something better for the millions of Palestinians who have been living under military occupation for the last 50. Such an outcome is not in the hands of Israel alone to achieve; its enemies would also have to let go of their David narrative and make some decisions which acknowledge their own strength – so far there's precious little sign of that. But a decision by Israel to sincerely try for such an outcome would be a kind of gevurah, a kind of heroism that reflects a mature understanding of its own strengths and weaknesses relative to those of its enemies, and sadly there's been precious little sign of that either.

My theme this Rosh Hashanah is larger than just the Middle East. In many areas of conflict in our lives, we have a tendency to think in terms of David and Goliath. In the context of the culture wars in our own society here in Canada, does our tendency to fight over which group is actually the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, who is most entitled to claim the mantle of "David", get in the way of the very necessary work we need to do to move our society forward for all? In the context of our own personal lives, and the conflicts we experience in our families, in our communities, in the workplace, does our determination to see ourselves as the noble underdog sometimes get in the way of our ability to recognize the power that we do have to make our situation better? Can we let go of the good guy/bad guy narrative if it's not helping us achieve what we want? Hardest of all, but so crucial at this

time of year, can we let go, even just a little, of our tenaciously built up sense of our own virtue?

These are our Days of Awe, a time in the year dedicated to the spiritual task of *heshbon ha-nefesh*, taking an accounting of our souls. This new year, let's think about our precious State of Israel but let's also think about the power of the David and Goliath narrative in the way we conduct our relationships with other people and the conflicts we experience in our lives here. Are we sometimes falling into a trap that is unhelpful to us, of putting ourselves and our "enemies" into boxes which are not reflective of the complexity of our reality? If this is something that we do, let's ask ourselves -- are we really as vulnerable and powerless and noble as David? Is the person or people with whom we're in conflict really as strong and oppressive and evil as Goliath? Is investing a whole lot of energy in the enterprise of shoring up our own status as David actually getting us closer to where we want to go, or is it perhaps hindering our ability to recognize the ways in which we have contributed to the conflict, and the ways in which we can use our strengths to actually help make things better? We should remember that even David didn't stay "David" forever; the brave boy with the slingshot evolved into the King of Israel, one who at times abused his power as kings often do. We too are usually more complex than any one story reflects.

In challenging the David and Goliath narrative, I'm not saying that everything is relative, we're all equally guilty, there's no ability to discern good from bad. Stronger groups of people do sometimes, even often, use their advantages to exploit and oppress weaker groups – we can think of many examples from our own society, and there is a place for naming this historical truth. Another anniversary we're marking this year, Canada's 150th, is a good opportunity for this country to engage in that process, especially vis a vis our indigenous neighbours. Historians have an important role to play, all the more so at a time when Holocaust deniers and white supremacists are portraying the Germans as having been the real victims of the rapacious Jews in the 1930's, and promoting the notion that the "white nation" in Europe and North America is vulnerable and threatened. A time in which white Christian men march in the streets of North American cities claiming to be beleaguered and threatened by more powerful forces arrayed against them, and by all accounts sincerely believe it, is a time in which we can safely say that these categories are more compelling than ever, and more counter-productive than ever.

So historians should do their important and very difficult work, which helps us to gain a deeper understanding of injustices and oppression which have occurred, and there is a time and a place for activism to counter that oppression. But this isn't a history class, or a political rally. This is Rosh Hashanah, and we're gathered here today in the presence of each other and

in the presence of our God, and our work here is to acknowledge that human relations are rarely so simple as David and Goliath. We may have a strong desire to tell that story and to slot ourselves into the noble and virtuous underdog "David" category, but it is rarely actually helpful to us -- and we have the ability לכוּשׁ אֶת יִצְרָינוּ -- to conquer that desire. Our spiritual goals are rarely advanced by dwelling on our weaknesses in the hope that they will be miraculously overcome, or by denying our many faults and flaws, or by blaming others for our problems. We are stronger than we sometimes give ourselves credit for, and that's a good thing. We are David, and we are also Goliath. And we're also Moses, and we're also Pharaoh, we're also Isaiah, and we're also Jonah, and we're also Kohelet, and we're also Nebuchadnezzar. What a wonderful spiritual exercise it would be this Rosh Hashanah, either on one's own or with friends and family, to consider which biblical characters you channel in your life and why. I'm guessing you'd conclude that you channel more than one, because you have many strengths, and also lots of weaknesses and fears -- some very legitimate, some perhaps distorted. Our Yamim Noraim are a good time for us to surface all of these feelings, in the hopes of letting at least some of them go.

I worry a lot about what I need to do as a rabbi in order to strengthen my community's connection to Israel 50 years after the Six Day War -- how I can encourage more people to go on tours or volunteer there, more young people to go on Birthright or other longer term Israel programs, more people to contribute time and money to Israel-related causes, more people to subscribe to Israel-oriented periodicals or read Israeli literature, more people to study Ivrit, more people to participate in the Walk for Israel, more folks to get involved with and support programs like the UJA shinshinim program. These are some of the key indicators of a strong Zionist identity among Diaspora Jews in the 21st century, and I feel some of them are slipping, especially among young people. I don't care if you're left wing or right wing, two categories which are also pretty simplistic by the way. I mean I do care -- I have my political opinions like everyone else -- but I mostly care about maintaining and building the connection with a state that I love and which I think is so essential to Jewish life in our time. I believe that a story of complexity will be more honest, and thus more effective, in doing so, than a simplistic narrative -- at least, I confess, I *hope* it'll be more effective, because it's the only narrative I *can* tell, and the stakes are so high.

God, help us this Rosh Hashanah 5778, 50 years after the Six Day War, to find the capacity to support Israel in all its complexity, and to face ourselves, and You, squarely and honestly in all *our* complexity, with our strengths, our weaknesses, our fears, our desires, things we've done wrong, things we've done right. The real us may or may not make for a feel-good story. That's okay; we're strong enough to tell the story either way. We certainly hope that those with whom we are in conflict, whether geopolitically or in our

personal lives, will also engage in such an honest accounting of *their* souls – but let's not let our willingness to fulfill this Jewish religious obligation depend on the willingness of others to do the same. At the end of the day, we can only take responsibility for ourselves, and it is we who are on trial here. In this Rosh Hashanah court, let us recognize that even as You God judge us, You are also on our side, rooting for us, as long as we are prepared to honestly do the spiritual work of these days. We acknowledge that the end of the story for us, or for Israel, may not be the come-from-behind Bobby Thomson New York Giants home run that wins the 1951 pennant in the bottom of the 9th, however dramatic and satisfying a narrative that may be -- but rather the story may consist of a cycle of triumphs and setbacks, slogging through our work and our issues, sometimes feeling like we're making progress, and sometimes feeling like we're falling back -- until we die. That may not be the most inspirational story line in the world, but a team that is able to tell this complicated story about itself is one that I'd be proud to root for, even be a part of. That is our Jewish team at its best.

Shanah Tovah.