

“You Mustn’t Show Weakness” – The Blessing of Israel

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Kol Nidre 5782

Sometimes we don’t know whether to laugh or to cry. An Israeli cartoon from May has a man running towards a bomb shelter with rockets flying all around. As he reaches the entrance, he is stopped by an older gentleman, who asks: “כולנו מחוסנים?”, Is everyone vaccinated?” Some even expressed gratitude for the conflict: “The rest of the world is continuing its battle with Covid-19. Thank God we’ve returned to our normal routines.”

Unfortunately, we understand just how “normal” the conflict has become. We understand how normalized an antisemitic form of Israel-bashing has become. And the only response is the Israeli response: *Ein breira*, we have no choice. We have no other land.

I read from a poem of Yehudah Amichai, Israel’s poet laureate until his death in 2000, which presents the typical Israeli mindset: Be strong and look macho on the outside, even if on the inside, there is reason to fear.

Asur l’har-ot hulshah.

You mustn’t show weakness and you’ve got to have a tan.
But sometimes I feel like the thin veils of Jewish women
who faint at weddings and on Yom Kippur.

...

Ha-matzav hu akhshav ka-zeh

This is the way things stand now:
If I pull out the stopper
after preparing myself a bath,
I’m afraid that all of Jerusalem, and with it the whole world,
will drain out into the huge darkness.

It’s a poetic version of the classic Jewish telegram: “Start worrying. Details to follow.” And it feels appropriate for the moment. ADL was already reporting alarming antisemitism numbers since at least 2017; and then came the conflict in Gaza. Antisemitic incidents more than doubled in May 2021 compared to a year earlier. And not just hurtful posts on social media.

On May 18, diners at a Los Angeles restaurant were attacked by individuals in cars carrying Palestinian flags and screaming, “You should be ashamed of yourselves.” On May 22, a Jewish man in Manhattan wearing a Magen David necklace was punched by a man who allegedly asked, “What is that around your neck? Does that make you an f—ing Zionist?” We’ve heard of attacks in Boston and Las Vegas and many places in between.

And on the college campus – Jewish students being told they cannot join certain clubs to fight domestic abuse or racism if they also espouse pro-Israel views. Or professors saying that Zionist views are unwelcome or refusing to support students who wish to study in Israel. Or BDS and other referenda that seek to isolate Israel as uniquely illegitimate among the nations. ...

In 2020, the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly adopted 17 resolutions condemning Israel and only 6 for the rest of the world combined. And that was before Gaza. The pattern has persisted for more than 73 years. In 1975, the Assembly infamously passed its resolution declaring Zionism, the belief that the Jewish people has a right to self-determination, “a form of racism and racial discrimination.” The resolution was revoked in 1991, but the sentiment persists. It is not just a challenge to government policy. To question the basic right of the Jewish people to self-determination is to question a basic part of my identity as a Jew. That is antisemitism.

This week we marked the 20th anniversary of the infamous Durban conference. Its stated purpose was to combat racism but it quickly devolved into a “festival of hate” against Jews and the Jewish state. American and other western delegations walked out and have boycotted similar conferences since, including this year. But the damage is done.

I understand the complexities of the Middle east. I understand the questions about use of force, policies towards non-combatants, and the impossibilities of asymmetrical warfare. There are legitimate questions any government must face, including Israel; and important questions any lover of Israel must ask.

When I returned from a short trip to Israel in June, I raised my own stinging questions about Israel’s failures towards its non-Jewish citizens. The riots in Israel’s “mixed cities” in May were not an *intifada*. These were Jewish and Palestinian *citizens* facing off against each other. It was alarming because Israel’s Declaration of Independence delineates a sacred responsibility “to uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens, without distinction of race, creed or sex.” There are legitimate questions.

But legitimate questions become antisemitic when Jews are targeted or judged collectively for the deeds of a sovereign government. Legitimate questions become antisemitic when they are accompanied by stereotypical allegations that Jews control the media or brainwash world leaders to garner support for the Jewish state. Legitimate questions become antisemitic when they become a tool to deny the Jewish people of our right to self-determination or otherwise delegitimize Zionism. Legitimate questions become antisemitic when they are directed disproportionately at one state, which happens to be the world’s *only* Jewish state.

We can distinguish between legitimate political discourse and antisemitic hatred. And we must be willing to stand up against the hatred.

It isn’t always easy. Amichai continues:

Ba-yom ani matziv malkodot l’zikhronotai
Uvalaila ani oved b’mif-alei Bilam
In the daytime I lay traps for my memories
and at night I work in the Factories of Bilaam,
Turning curse into blessing and blessing into curse.

V'asur l'har-ot hulshah,
But you mustn't show weakness.

I love that phrase: "Factories of Bilaam." You may remember Bilaam, the Mesopotamian wizard who was hired by King Balak of Moab to curse the Israelites during their journey in the wilderness. No matter how hard he tried, his curses turned to blessings.

הן עם לבדד ישכן, There is a people that dwells apart,
ובגוים לא יתחשב, Not reckoned among the nations.

...

מה טבו אהליך יעקב, How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob
משכנתיך ישראל, your dwellings, O Israel.

That is the Factory of Bilaam. Some think it is a curse to dwell apart. Haman said as much: "There is one certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples...". Antisemites have always singled out the Jewish people as uniquely "other." They even cited the Kol Nidre prayer we recited tonight as "evidence." "How can you trust a Jew when he has the ability to annul his commitments by reciting this prayer every Yom Kippur?"

But Bilaam turned that around. Bilaam changed "different" to "distinguished". The Torah calls it holiness: "You shall be holy, קדושים תהיו, for I, Adonai your God, am holy." What does it mean to be holy? Say the Rabbis: פרושים תהיו, You shall be distinct, set apart in the way you celebrate your festive days, in the foods you eat, and in the clothes you wear. The book of Daniel describes how Daniel and his friends serving in Nebuchadnezzar's court were not willing to eat the king's food or drink his wine because it was not kosher. And they aren't chastised for their religious commitments. They are praised for their devotion and faith in challenging circumstances. That is holiness – having pride in our distinctiveness, making it a blessing to dwell apart.

And that is the foundational principal of Zionism – "to work in the Factories of Bilaam." A people that has always dwelled apart, a people that has always been singled out deserves a land where we can thrive. Given the chance, we can make the desert bloom; we can desalinate sea water; we can innovate and assist and make people's lives better. We can be a nation like any other. After 2,000 years of yearning, we deserve to be a free people in our own land.

And to defend ourselves. ... The Bible scholar Jacob Milgrom suggests that "dwelling apart" means living securely. בַּדָּד is equivalent to בַּטָּח. In the wilderness there were clouds of glory by day and a pillar of fire by night, but in the modern world, we have to defend ourselves. Israelis understand that they cannot rely on any benevolent government or the "international community" to protect them.

"There is but one takeaway from the fall of Afghanistan" Nachman Shai, Minister of Diaspora Affairs from the Labor party, wrote on Twitter last month. "להיות חזקים, לא לסמוך על איש", Be strong. Do not rely on anyone else." The American Congress calls it QME, Qualitative Military Edge; and it is law. Our

nation that dwells apart must have the military means to defend itself from attack. Jewish history warns time and again that nobody else can be relied upon to do it for us.

We mustn't show fear. We needn't show fear. Because the State of Israel is strong. And the people of Israel, the Jewish people are strong.

When Israel stands isolated in the international community, we must stand with Israel. When adversaries attempt to turn the blessing into a curse by singling out Israel as the source of all the world's evils – from racism to colonialism to authoritarianism – we cannot cower in fear. We must make plans to visit Israel (after Covid). And find other ways to engage – by reaching out to friends and relatives, reading books and articles, attending lectures and classes (especially with our fantastic Shlichah, Netta Asner-Minster, who has decided to stay at B'nai Israel for a nearly unprecedented third year). We must assign Israel its rightful place in our hearts – the spiritual homeland of the Jewish people.

We can invest in Israel. Every year at Kol Nidre, we conduct an appeal for Israel Bonds. Because we are not all together this year, we also emailed a virtual pledge card. For those who are here, I invite you to look in the envelope on your seat. Israel Bonds are not *tzedakah*; that would be giving your money away. Israel Bonds are an investment – a very safe investment - and a statement of pride in our Jewish state.

Israel Bonds are meaningful beyond the actual dollars, which are obviously important. Because Israel Bonds tell Israel who its friends are. If catastrophe were to strike and other investment avenues were to close, Israel would know where to turn because of Israel Bonds.

Which makes the ask very easy. If you've never purchased an Israel Bond, do it this year. The amount doesn't matter as much because what we really want is to increase the number of purchasers. Consider it an investment in your very own Factory of Bilaam, an opportunity to turn the curses of this year – conflict, antisemitism, isolation – into a blessing of pride, solidarity and connection. It is not an accident that B'nai Israel – our Israel-centric congregation – is always a community leader in its support of Bonds. Because we stand with the nation that stands apart.

We will turn the curses into blessings and we will never be afraid. We will wear the Star of David proudly. We will encourage our college-age children to participate in Jewish life on campus. We will call out antisemitism on social media. We will teach Israel, celebrate Israel, travel to Israel, engage with Israel, identify with Israel because Israel is part of who we are.

On this holiest night of the year, I pray for our holy land with lyrics from the Israeli songwriter Ehud Manor:

אין לי ארץ אחרת, I have no other country.
Even if my land is burning,
Just one word in Hebrew
Pierces my veins and my soul.
Even with a painful body and a hungry heart,
This is my home, כאן הוא ביתי.

Gemar Hatimah Tovah, May our fate and that of all the people of Israel be sealed for good in the book of life. Amen.