

## Lessons from the Invasion of Ukraine

Watching what is going on in Ukraine, I cannot help but feel it is déjà vu all over again. Scenes we thought were relics of the past and images and outtakes from old movies -- of an army invading a neighboring country unprovoked, of a country with superior fire power running roughshod over its neighbor as the Nazis did at the outset of WW II, have shattered our illusion that this kind of war of conquest ceased with the end of World War II and the 20th century. The Cold War confrontation between East and West, between an aggressive Russia and a free world that resists its bellicosity is back.

It turns out Mitt Romney was right when during the 2012 presidential debate he said that the greatest threat to world stability was Russia, N Korea and Iran. He is owed an apology by Barack Obama as well as the media who smugly dismissed his warning and derisively mocked him as being out of touch for resurrecting an obsolete foreign policy of the 1980's. It turns out he was right not to be naïve about Putin and his expansionist intentions to conquer territory he claims belongs to Russia.

One cannot help but watch in horror and disbelief and feel sympathy for the people of Ukraine as it is being shelled and attacked by powerful Russian forces and for the civilians rushing to leave or take cover from the onslaught. The other day Volodymyr Zelensky, the president, said in an emotional video address to his nation after midnight, "We have been left alone to defend our state." He asked, "Who is ready to fight alongside us? I don't see anyone. Who is ready to give Ukraine a guarantee of NATO membership? Everyone is afraid," he added.

The history of the Jews in Ukraine goes back over a thousand years. It was the birthplace of the revival of modern Hebrew literature, of great Zionist thinkers Ahad Ha'Am and Leon Pinsker, a center of Talmudic studies and Hasidic life and thought. With an estimated 40 – 60,000 Jews still living there, it is the 3rd largest Jewish community in Europe. Although we lived there for a very long time, and many important contributions to Jewish life and other prominent Jews came from there, our history was troubled, anything but idyllic, with frequent outbursts of scapegoating Jews for all the peasants' economic and social problems, leading to anti-Semitic persecution, discrimination and pogroms.

Prior to WW II there were over 1 ½ million Jews living in what is now Ukraine, almost 5% of the total population. In some urban centers the Jewish population was as high as 30%. But a million Jews were killed in the Holocaust, often the result of cooperation by the local population with Nazis seeking to exterminate the Jewish population of the world. (An article by Jeffrey Veidlinger in Tablet magazine I just read says that between 1918 – 1922 over 1,000 anti-Jewish riots resulted in the

deaths of over 100,000 Jews.) At the end of the 20th century, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, almost 80% of the Jews who survived made aliya and moved to Israel, leaving behind a mostly elderly and poor population.

I had occasion to visit Kiev, where my father's family comes from, twice – once in the late 1980's when it was still under the Soviet communist regime, and once after its collapse. The first time I was on my own with another local rabbi. We were clandestinely sent by the JCRC, as emissaries of our local Jewish community on a mission to meet, teach and give hope to Jews seeking to escape the yoke of Soviet oppression, and to bring back information about the community and the activists

wanting to leave. The second time I visited, I went with a delegation of rabbis, when I was the Chairman of the Rabbinic Cabinet of JFNA, the Jewish Federations of North America.

On the second visit I met two types of Jews – elderly Jews, who were barely surviving, who lived in impoverished substandard housing conditions and whose packages and visits from representatives of the Jewish community truly sustained them. In fact, I remember on one such visit to a woman in a tiny apartment we learned that other residents in the building wished they were Jewish, because they saw that the meager portions she received as a pension from the government were supplemented by what she received from the Joint, the Jewish organization that helps to rescue and support Jews around the world.

And the other population we encountered were young Jews, many of whom had only recently discovered that they were Jewish.

After the double whammy of the Holocaust which sought to exterminate the Jews and then communist efforts to extinguish Judaism, many of those who remained behind were afraid to openly practice Judaism or admit they were Jewish. They hid their Judaism from their own children. But many members of a new, young generation, inspired by Israel and by educators and the Jewish summer camps they attended, supported by the Jewish Agency of Israel and the Joint Distribution Committee, the overseas arm of the American Jewish community, were hungry to reclaim and learn more about Judaism.

Upon my return I told you some of the stories of those who were interested in reclaiming their lost identity – such as the time a child was sent home from school for beating up and bullying another kid who was Jewish. When he got home his father told him not to ever beat up another Jewish kid again. When he asked his father why not, and why he was so upset with him, his father told him, “Because you are Jewish.” There was the teenager who watched a television show with his father and didn't

understand why his father was crying as he watched scenes of Jews being murdered, only to learn for the first time, that the reason his father was so emotional was because he revealed to him something he had never told him before – that we are Jews.

I was there to help in some small way to encourage and nurture the fire within the soul of what we call a “pintele Yid”, the spark that is in every Jew, sometimes dormant, to remain a Jew.

And so, once again, we are called upon to do what we can, and what we have always done throughout our history – to support our fellow Jews under siege, for we are one, we are a people, and we are responsible to care for each other, kol yisrael arevin zeh b’zeh. The Jewish Federations of North America, JFNA has undertaken a campaign, using funds it raises to support the following worthwhile work:

The Sochnoot (the Jewish Agency) sends shlichim to Ukraine and elsewhere throughout the world to sustain and encourage Jewish life. At a Havdalah program in a JCC I saw first-hand cultural programs for young Jews who had a thirst and desire to learn more about being Jewish. At JCC’s, synagogues, the Jewish camp at Szvartz, amazing work is being done to renew and revive Jewish life in a place where it was thought to be dead. Our contributions bring Ukrainian youth to Israel for immersive programs, including Birthright and support the Aliyah of Jews from at-risk communities. ORT provides

vocational training and the Joint runs 1,000 Hesed centers to help support the vulnerable population with critical welfare services, food and medicine.

So if you feel the need or desire to do something to help respond to the humanitarian crisis, I urge you to contribute through the Federation, where you can be sure your donations will be put to good use and will directly help those in need.

There are two other important points and lessons I need to share with you this morning as we witness with frustration and horror what is going on in Ukraine.

One is that, as refugees flee the bombings in Kyev and elsewhere, the Jews of Ukraine who are able to get out know that there is one country in the world that will take them in and welcome them with open arms. Whereas during WW II, they had nowhere to turn, let us be thankful that we live in a time when there is a country that in its very Declaration of Independence states:

“Eretz-Israel the Jewish State, opens the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew and confers upon the Jewish people the status of a fully privileged member of the comity

of nations... The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles... “

Throughout Israel's 74 years it has lived up to that promise, rescuing Jews around the world, and keeping its doors open and but doing even more, actively working, often in precarious, dangerous situations, to bring those fleeing persecution home, to Eretz Yisrael.

The second lesson we must insist upon is – no more naiveté in regard to the nefarious intentions of totalitarian dictators who boast of their plans to destroy or conquer or destroy another nation. Jews and other good-hearted people who dismiss or minimize the threat posed to Israel by Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah and other enemies of Israel who seek its demise and to destroy the Jewish state must be taken seriously and not be allowed to acquire the means to carry out their plans.

If there is any one lesson for Jews after witnessing what is happening in Ukraine and the world's impotent response, it is that Israel must remain strong and have the means to defend itself, and that it dare not rely on international promises to come to its aid.

I now better understand better the meaning of the words: “Adonai oz le'amo yetan, May the Lord grant strength to His people, Adonai veyarech et amo b'shalom, May the Lord bless His people with peace.” I think the prophet was asking God to grant us strength so that we are able to withstand aggression, to defend ourselves, for then the second part of the phrase will be fulfilled – we shall be blessed with peace.

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To donate to the Federation's Ukraine Emergency Fund which provides humanitarian aid and assistance directly to meet the critical needs of Ukraine's Jews, please click here: [Ukraine Emergency Fund - The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington](http://UkraineEmergencyFund-TheJewishFederationofGreaterWashington.org) (shalomdc.org)

February 26, 2022

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