

Unity: Needed Now More Than Ever (Are we our own worst enemies?)

Most of us are familiar with the beautiful custom of dipping apples in honey at this time of year. As we dip the apple in honey we say a bracha, and wish for each other a shana tovah u'metuka k'dvash, that the coming year will be as sweet as honey.

A lesser-known custom, which has become increasingly popular and more widespread in recent years is of Iraqi origin, and one that my wife, whose family is from Baghdad introduced to me. Iraq was once home to a prosperous, proud and prominent Jewish community dating back over 2,600 years and was a center of great learning where the Talmud was created. Every Rosh Hashana we observe in our home the practice of the Jews of Iraq and say blessings over various fruits and vegetables, each one being a pun on the Hebrew word for that particular piece of food.

So, for example, we hold up a date, which in Hebrew is tamar and say -she'yitamu soneinu – which means – may our enemies perish.

We eat a leek, which in Hebrew is karat and say – she'yeechartu kol mevekshei ra'atenu – which means - may those who seek evil against us be karet – cut off.

For beets, which in Hebrew is selek, we say – she'yistalku oyveenu – may our enemies be driven away.

There are more, but I think you get the picture.

I don't want to give you the wrong impression – there are some positive blessings, such as when we eat seeds of the pomegranate and express the hope that our lives will be as full of mitzvot as the pomegranate is filled with seeds. Overall though, the pattern and theme of a number of the blessings, is a plea that God will annul the plans of those who seek to destroy us.

I do not know the history or origin of the custom, nor how long it has been around. The truth is though, expressing the hope that enemies who plot to harm Jews will fail in their efforts, could probably be said by almost any Jewish community, almost anywhere in the world, at pretty much any time in our history.

Regardless of when the custom began I am certain and confident of one thing. I doubt that there was much debate, dissension, or disagreement among them over how to define and determine who their enemies were.

Yet unfortunately today, it seems we Jews are so divided we cannot even agree on what constitutes anti-Semitism. The left only recognizes anti-Semitism when it emanates from the right, and the right only sees it when it comes from the left.

The lack of unity on this most basic issue is why Natan Sharansky on his most recent visit to the United States earlier this summer asked me to convene a small group of diverse Jewish leaders to see if we could reach any agreement about the eternal external existential threats to the Jewish people.

In response to the rise in anti-Semitism around the globe, in 2016 the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance recognized that “in order to begin to address the problem of antisemitism, there must be clarity about what antisemitism is.” They set out to build an international consensus and to come up with a working definition that diverse parties could agree upon. They undertook the project to give policymakers around the world the tools to identify the problem. After an arduous process entailing much vetting and discussion, what they came up with has met widespread acceptance, having been adopted by over 30 nations, including the United States, the European Union, a number of NGO’s, academic institutions, and local governments and municipalities around the world.

However, since it cites as an example of anti-Semitism, “drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis”, and another clause states that, “denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor”, not everyone is willing to embrace and accept the carefully crafted document.

The opposition has come not just from those who we would expect to oppose it, such as the Arab League, the 57 members of the Organization of Islamic states, or Nazi sympathizers.

Objecting to it becoming official policy of the United States and opposing it being codified into U.S. law is a coalition of groups known as the Progressive Jewish Alliance, which consists of Americans for Peace Now, JStreet, the New Israel Fund, T’ruah: Rabbis for Human Rights, and a few other groups claiming to represent Jewish values.

Although the IHRA definition explicitly states that, “criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as anti-Semitic,” the alliance of Progressive Jewish groups issued a statement that they were concerned that adoption of the doctrine would undermine freedom of expression because it may encourage criticism of Israel to be suppressed.

Yes, you heard correctly – Jewish groups, who claim to support Israel, feel compelled to protect the rights of Israel’s critics!

If there is any one thing we don’t have to worry about, it is that there isn’t enough criticism of Israel and that debate over Israel’s policies might be stifled!

Rejecting the IHRA definition is comparable to a person drowning in the ocean refusing to accept a life preserver because they don’t like the small print on the inside lining of the floatation device.

Something is happening in the Jewish world today, and it is deeply troubling.

In 1975 the late Israeli diplomat Abba Eban wrote in a column in The New York Times that hatred of Israel and the Jewish people are one and the same. Almost 50 years ago he pointed out that the singling out of the Jewish state for the kind of criticism not leveled at other nations is a convenient way for those with contempt for Jews to dodge the charge of anti-Semitism. While they may claim to object to a particular policy or leader, in reality what they object to is Israel’s right to exist. He wrote:

“There is no difference whatever between anti-Semitism and the denial of Israel’s statehood. Classical anti-Semitism denies the equal right of Jews as citizens within society. Anti-Zionism denies the equal rights of the Jewish people its lawful sovereignty within the community of nations. The common principle in the two cases is discrimination (against Jews).”

Or to put it a different way – making obsessive, excessive criticism that focuses almost exclusively on Israel and claiming you aren’t anti-semitic, just anti-Zionist is like trying to explain the difference between lox and nova!

For 11 days in May Israel was bombarded by 4,300 rockets launched by Hamas into civilian areas. Although Israel responded to the indiscriminate launching of a barrage of rockets with precision to destroy specific Hamas targets while striving

to avoid civilian casualties, Israel was the one accused of a disproportionate response!

If anything was disproportionate, it was the intense vitriolic hyperbolic criticism levelled against Israel in social media.

We have become somewhat inoculated and are not surprised that the International Criminal Court and the United Nations, as well as the Yale University Student Council, California Teachers Union, NYU professors and others came out against Israel. We are outraged and appalled, but have become somewhat used to and almost immune to these criticisms.

In a post-Holocaust world where blatant hatred of Jews is unfashionable, I can understand why those who hate Jews would wish to justify their anti-Semitism and disguise their antipathy toward Jews in the guise of anti-Zionism, and claim they have nothing against Jews, only against Israel's policies.

But for Jews to be so focused on publicly criticizing Israel while ignoring other human rights abuses around the world is inexcusable.

When almost 100 rabbinic students in non-Orthodox rabbinic seminaries have the chutzpah to sign a petition objecting to Israel taking measures to defend and protect its citizens and accuse Israel of "violent suppression of human rights", something is terribly wrong.

To make the false claim, as they do that "Israel's actions constitute an intentional removal of Palestinians" shows naiveté and a superficial misguided understanding of the conflict. Ignoring Hamas' genocidal intentions as stated in their charter, these would-be rabbis probably believe the Hamas propaganda that the attack was prompted by seizure of Palestinian property, but which is actually much closer to a landlord -tenant rent dispute being adjudicated in one of the fairest judicial systems in the world, and indisputably in the entire Middle East.

For future leaders of Jewish communities to express a litany of complaints against Israel for defending its people while rockets were still falling, without making a single reference to Hamas' provocations is unprecedented and inexcusable.

We have a problem, and it is not just due to threats from our traditional enemies.

The intent of those who hurl slanders and libel Israel by accusing it of apartheid, genocide and ethnic cleansing is to portray it in a way that makes Israel seem morally repugnant, rendering defense of its people seem unwarranted and unjustifiable.

Jews should not adopt the positions or language of those who undermine Israel's legitimacy. How dare they spread the malicious lies of those who denigrate our people. When our fellow Jews are under attack we should be character witnesses on their behalf. As Gil Troy wrote, these charges are, "...inaccurate and insulting, counterproductive and self-destructive. It hardens hearts and polarizes positions. And in demonizing the Jewish state, it encourages hooligans who target the Jews living in that state and the Jews living everywhere else, too."

The 11 day conflict between Israel and Hamas unleashed a torrent of cries of "Death to the Jews", and attacks on Jews, Jewish institutions and even just places of business owned by or associated with Jews around the world. Synagogues throughout the world were targets of anti-Semitic acts of desecration, because those who hate Israel do not make a distinction between Jews and the Jewish state.

By way of comparison, and to illustrate this point -- When Russia attacked and invaded Ukraine, there were no calls for violence at Russian Orthodox churches; no need for increased security at their houses of worship.

Anti-Semitism takes many forms, not just blatant hateful comments and acts. It can be more subtle, such as denying or downplaying its existence. Last May a Stanford University town hall was zoom bombed with racist and anti-Semitic messages and images. They were equal opportunity offenders as they used the N-word and swastikas. But so as not to overshadow the anti-black racism of what happened, the report of the university's diversity committee omitted reference to the anti-Semitic aspects of the incident.

The time has come for us to demand greater accountability from colleges. A high percentage of Jews attend university. Other than your home, it is probably the largest expense a family has. You have a right to demand that our children not be subjected to vicious verbal assaults or prejudice. Demand that institutions of higher education take measures to ensure that Jewish students are not bullied, intimidated or ostracized for joining Jewish organizations, supporting Israel, or just for being Jewish.

If ever there was a time for clarity and Jewish unity, a time to stand with your fellow Jews in the face of such an outpouring of blatant anti-Semitism and danger, it is now. Yet sadly, some have chosen not to stand with their people.

Motivated by attacks on Jews around the world Elisha Wiesel sought to galvanize a unified Jewish response to the rising tide of anti-Semitism with a rally called NoFear this summer in Washington, D.C. Conscious efforts were made to be as inclusive as possible, to make the tent as big as possible and to invite groups from the right and the left to be sponsors. Because the rally in solidarity with the Jewish people referred to the right of Jews in the United States and Israel to exist in peace and security, a number of organizations with the word Jewish in their name, who purport to speak on behalf of Jews, (for the most part, the very same ones who objected to the definition of anti-Semitism), declined to participate or support it because the platform referred to Israel.

Lest anyone question or think I am not aware of it – I recognize that Israel is not perfect, nor is it above criticism. But I do not love Israel because it is perfect.... Nor does Israel need to be perfect for me to love her.

A story about a king who commissioned a painter to paint a portrait of him puts it in perspective. Upon meeting him for the first time, the artist said, “Your Majesty, I see that you have scars from childhood acne, and I want to be sure you will not be upset if I capture the blemishes, since my style is to paint what I see.” The king replied, “You are welcome to include the blemishes. I only ask that you not neglect to paint my face.”

I do not love Israel because it has no blemishes.

In the early 20th century a member of the House of Lords of Great Britain asked Zionist leader Chaim Weizman when he was working for the establishment of the State of Israel, “Why do you Jews insist on Palestine when there are so many undeveloped countries you could settle in more conveniently?” The Zionist leader replied, “That is like me asking you why you drove twenty miles to visit your mother last Sunday when there are so many other nice old ladies living on your street.”

More than our historical ties to the land, the Israel I know and love is the country that has risen out of the ashes of the Holocaust and is the one place in the world where someone from Poland and Yemen can live together and have a common heritage, language and destiny.

It is the nation that rushes to send humanitarian aid halfway around the world when natural disaster strikes. It is the people who, while fighting for survival defiantly resists the temptation to succumb to the repression of freedom and democracy, as is the case in the countries surrounding it.

It is the country that rescues those rejected by every other nation and despite economic problems of its own, doesn't hesitate for a moment to absorb millions of poor Jews from the Soviet Union or to airlift tens of thousands of Black Jews out of Africa to come home to Israel.

It is the StartUp Nation who shares its medical and technological discoveries with the world; the place where the heads of Pfizer and Moderna, who came up with the vaccine to combat Covid19 studied.

I could go on, for wherever we have lived – whether in Israel, or Iraq, not just in the realm of Jewish life, but in cultural, financial, academic, and other areas, Jews have contributed disproportionately to better the lot, not just of Jews, but for all.

This is the story we need to tell and to be proud of.

There is a midrash about an old man who spends his days prowling the streets of Sodom and Gomorrah crying out against the abuses and depravity, that was so pervasive and that he saw all around him. One day a person came up to him and said to him, “Old man, don't you realize there is no way you can change these people?” He answered, “Long ago I gave up any hope of changing them. Now I speak out against the injustice and immorality so they will not change me.”

Let us speak out so those who denounce Israel so loudly, non-Jew or Jew, do not change us, or diminish our unity or love for our people.

At the end of the meeting I mentioned earlier with Natan Sharansky I told the diverse group that was assembled, when we are united we can do great things. We came together and succeeded in freeing Soviet Jews, which ultimately led to the downfall of the Iron Curtain. And then putting my hand on Natan Sharansky's shoulder, who was sitting next to me I said, “And we got this guy out of solitary confinement in the Soviet gulag.”

In one of his many conversations when making the case for the establishment of the State of Israel in its ancient homeland, Weizman asked British Foreign

Secretary Lord Balfour, “If you were offered Paris instead of London, would you take it?” Balfour replied, “But London is ours,” to which Weizman responded, “Jerusalem was ours when London was a marsh.”

God tells Abraham in the Book of Genesis: **כָּל בָּרֵךְ וְנִבְרַךְ אֶת אַאֲר וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ מְבָרְכֶיךָ וְנֹאֲבָרְכֶיךָ מְשַׁפְּתֶיךָ**. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you.” Let us hope this will soon come to pass, that all on earth, including ourselves and our fellow Jews, will recognize the blessing of being a Jew.

Let us hope that we live to see the day when the blessings we recite over fruits, will no longer be the prayer that the plots of our enemies will be annulled. Let us hope that we will one day be able to just say the blessings that ask that we will be fruitful, and that our merits and mitzvot shall be multiplied, like the seeds of the pomegranate. And may we then be able to enjoy the fruits of peace and security, so that the vision of the prophets may come to pass, “And none shall be afraid.” So may it be Thy will.

Amen.

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