

Israel: The Threat to Her Existence

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My friends, I have a heavy heart tonight, as I am sure, many of you do as well.

We join our fellow Jews around the world this evening, in prayer. But we also join with a sense of anxiety, concern and anguish over recent events in the Middle East.

For some of us, the feeling is eerily familiar. It is reminiscent of a Yom Kippur 27 years ago when we first learned that the state of Israel was attacked and under siege. The current situation is equally grave, as once again, the state of Israel is under siege and attack, and its very existence is threatened.

Tomorrow afternoon, at the avodah service, we will recall the ancient ritual which was celebrated on Yom Kippur by the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest. We recreate the drama as we read the liturgy which was proclaimed once a year in order to achieve expiation for the people of Israel. It was the only time that the name of God was pronounced in its full form. Only one time, by one person, in one place. And that place is in Jerusalem. It is known as Har haBayit, the Temple Mount.

For over 2,000 years we have held this place to be sacred. It is the holiest place for us as Jews because this is where, according to legend, Avraham was prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac. This is why the Temple was built on that site. Where better to build the Beit Mikdash where our people would come to implore God, than at the very spot where generations earlier, Abraham had shown his willingness to serve God so totally and so willingly, with such complete devotion and faith.

When the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E. and the Jews were exiled from their land, we carried with us the hope that one day we would return to Zion. The longing was so strong that a number of rituals were formulated to ensure our eternal connection and association to this Holy place. Jews would leave a portion of the eastern wall of their homes unpainted and unfinished as a sign of loss and incompleteness. A glass is broken at the end of every Jewish wedding ceremony to signify our sorrow over the destruction and to remind us that we live in an incomplete, shattered world.

Since 1967, the city of Jerusalem has been in the hands of Israel. Prior to that time, from 1948, when the old city was in the hands of Jordan, Jews were not allowed to visit the ancient city. Jewish synagogues and holy sites were routinely and systematically destroyed. Since its capture during the Six Day War, Israel has protected those sites which are revered by all religions. Free access has been guaranteed and granted to all, which brings us to the conflagration of the past two weeks.

I am sickened and saddened by what is going on, but I must tell you, I am not surprised.

When I was in Israel this past year, there were several times when I saw first hand and up close the angry look of hatred and the contempt which Palestinians have towards Israelis.

I saw a group of angry Arab youths pushing and attempting to provoke Israeli soldiers, and I saw the restraint of these young men. A shopkeeper standing next to me witnessed the melee, and asked me rhetorically, “where else in the world would soldiers have to show such restraint in the face of constant attacks.”

I am not surprised because I remember reading this summer in the New York Times about the 25,000 Palestinian teenagers who went to summer camp. It wasn't the kind of camp that your kids or my kids go to. Rather than teach these underprivileged children computer skills, or something that would alleviate their suffering, they were trained to attack Israeli military posts. Most kids in summer camps around the world have an art project. The art these kids learned was the art of kidnapping, ambushing and how to use assault weapons, with some anti-zionist, anti-semitic propaganda thrown in for variety. The director of the 90 camps, is not an “Uncle Ted or Bob”, but a veteran of the armed struggle against Israel. The young people were indoctrinated with the notion that they will be the generation which, in his words, “is being trained to plant the Palestinian flag on the walls of Jerusalem.”

No, I am not surprised by the outbreak of violence, because it is clear that Arafat has done nothing since the signing of the Oslo peace accords on the White House lawn in 1993 to prepare his people for peace. He has not prepared them for compromise or for the prospect that they will have to give up part of their dream, the part that entails supplanting all of Israel with a Palestinian entity. He has not said anything or made any gestures which would help them understand that their goal of ridding Israel of Jews is illusory, unattainable, immoral, unproductive and which must therefore be forsaken.

On the contrary, he has consistently and unrealistically raised their expectations. While signing a peace accord with Israel, and supposedly becoming a partner for peace, he has continued to incite his people with promises that all of Jerusalem will be theirs. He has compared the Oslo treaty to the treaty Mohammed made with the Quraysh tribe. It was a ten year interlude of peace, followed by the abrogation of the treaty and Mohammed launching a surprise attack and defeating the Quraysh tribe, who had been duped into taking Mohammed on his word.

Palestinian schools teach a curriculum which does not recognize any rights on the part of Jews to any part of the land of Israel. State-run Palestinian television does nothing to further understanding or cooperation between their neighbors. It broadcasts messages of hate. Newspapers are filled with anti-semitic images and absurd Nazi-like accusations against the Jews. So-called religious leaders continue to call from their mosques for jihad, a holy war to annihilate the Jews of Israel.

You may say that the same could be said for Israel. You could say that, but it would not be true. Israeli textbooks have recently been rewritten to present history in an evenhanded manner, which takes into account the Palestinian and Arab perspectives. Arab nationalist poets are read in Israeli schools. No media outlet in Israel, whether electronic or print, disseminates vile anti-Arab propaganda. In fact, last year, a young Israeli girl was sentenced to a three year prison term for a drawing that was considered potentially offensive to Moslems. There is such a yearning for coexistence, that Prime Minister Ehud Barak tried first to give the entire strategic Golan Heights to an unwilling

receptient, Syrian leader Hafez el Assad, asking for almost nothing in return. When that effort failed, he looked elsewhere. He was willing to consider the unthinkable and discuss relinquishing exclusive control of Jerusalem. Here again, the partner he was trying to give the store to refused to accept the offer, and demanded even more.

It is clear that since Oslo, the more Israel has given, the more Israel has shown it is willing to yield, the more the stakes are raised and the more is demanded. There has been little, if any reciprocity.

Israel has repeatedly recognized that Jerusalem has significance to other religions. That simple fact has not been accepted by the Arabs. Israel has attempted to find ways to share the disputed territory and has strived to respect all sides. The same cannot be said of the Arabs who also lay claim to Jerusalem, even though Jerusalem is mentioned a grand total of zero times in the Koran.

And I am not surprised because when I was in Israel an outrageous provocation occurred, which received little if any attention in the media. Israel allows the Wakf, a Moslem religious council to administer the Temple Mount, and rarely interferes. This past January the Wakf brought bulldozers to the Temple Mount and removed tons of dirt from an area of critical archaeological importance, which may date back to the time of King Solomon. Without fear of recrimination or repercussions, they carted away 200 truckloads of dirt. They did this in an area which should be combed with a comb, and without any riots or demonstrations and barely a whimper of a protest from the government of Israel, or an international outcry.

One of the so-called Palestinian moderates, Saeb Erekat, at Camp David denied that there was ever a Jewish presence on Har haBayit, the Temple Mount. Just the other night, I heard a member of the Palestinian legislative body state that there is no such thing as a Temple Mount, that the Jews have no right to any claim upon it. Maybe he should come to our service tomorrow afternoon where we reenact the ancient ritual which took place there over a thousand years before the Moslems went and put up a mosque on that very same site.

The ten Israeli Arabs who serve in the Knesset, Israel's parliament refuse to stand when Hatikvah is recited. Some of them have called for changing Israel's national anthem and for removing the Jewish star from the flag of the state of Israel. It is part of a concerted effort on their part to de-emphasize the Jewish nature of the Jewish state. This would be bad enough, but they were among the main provocateurs of the current outbreak of violence. Can you picture any other country in the world where members of the national legislature would be given a forum for proposals intended to eradicate the essence and *raison d'être* of the very nation they are supposed to represent.

There are those who say that the current situation shows the need for both sides to get back to the negotiating table. I look at it a little differently.

This is a wakeup call to the left and to all those who thought that we were so close to peace. If peace really was so close, this would not have occurred. What kind of peace is it if the basic terms of the dispute remain unresolved? And what kind of peace is that

any time Israel does something the Palestinians do not like, they immediately resort to violence and resumption of armed confrontation. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, “Shalom, shalom v’ein shalom: peace, peace yet there is no peace.”

And please --- Don’t fall into the naïve trap of thinking that this sudden outburst was a spontaneous response to the visit of an Israeli political leader to a site which is supposed to be open, regardless of who administers it, to all. Piles of rocks were prepared in advance. The crowds were worked into a frenzy the next day, and the actions were coordinated and orchestrated by Palestinian leaders. Is this a taste of how the Palestinians would administer the Temple Mount were they given control.

Nor should we fall for the trap that the Palestinian youths are demonstrating out of frustration, or that they are innocent victims. They are aggressively attacking Israelis, fully cognizant of the fact that they are in the middle of a war zone. They are being sent to do battle, and are richly rewarded for their violent acts. As the Israeli daily Ma’ariv stated, “Those who shout ‘slaughter the Jews’ do not want a working sewage system, but a Palestinian state on the ruins of Israel.” Violence against Israel erupted even in areas which have been exemplars of Jewish-Arab cooperation.

Unfortunately, the media does not like to let people know it, for it does not fit their model, but by now, we should all know that Jews are the innocent victims of the violence. Tuvia Grossman and his companions, for example, were yanked from a cab and severely beaten, only to be misidentified by an AP picture sent around the world as an Arab victim. Or perhaps you did not read a story I saw in Ha’aretz about Rabbi Haim Brovender, head of the Hamivtar Yeshivah, as he was driving from Efrat to his home in Jerusalem. He was stopped by Palestinian police and told to get out of his car, and then beaten by them and Palestinians who joined in.

It is time for us to recognize and admit that it does not matter who the Israeli government is. All of this takes place against the backdrop of the most conciliatory government imaginable, which has already made unprecedented concessions. The violence occurs despite the fact that 99% of all Palestinians already live under Arafat’s rule. Whether the prime minister is Yitzhak Shamir, Benjamin Netanyahu, or Ehud Barak, the results are the same, and the hatred does not subside. When left-wing leader Shimon Peres was Prime Minister, terrorist attacks escalated, and Syrian dictator Assad sent a barrage of missiles on northern villages.

What kind of peace is it when one side still refuses, despite all the concessions it has received to declare to its people that the conflict is over? What kind of peace is it if they are unwilling to once and for all renounce all future territorial claims? The lack of a desire to conclude the conflict explains why the Palestinians launched their attacks. Make no mistake about it, the inability to accept the fact that, once all is said and done, the Arabs will have to come to terms with the existence of Israel is the real reason Arafat walked away from the accords. It is also the reason Assad was never willing to accept the Golan Heights. These are not just bargaining tactics. These despots will not accept what Israel offers, because they cannot come to grips with giving up the state of war with Israel. So, let us stop calling upon Israel to give up even more in their negotiations. Soon, there will be nothing left to give.

The stakes are high. The Palestinians have stated that this is the “intifada for the liberation of Jerusalem”. But let us not be under any false allusions. The Arab uprising which is taking place is nothing less than an attempt to dislodge Israel from the land of Israel. They have said that they have their sites set on Haifa, on Tel Aviv, and on all of Eretz Yisrael. It is time for us to realize that, sad as it may sound, there has been no progress toward acceptance of Israel or of a Jewish presence in the land of Israel. In Hebrew, the word “negotiate” means “give and take”. The fact that the Palestinians have not moved or changed a single iota of what they wanted in 1993 leads one to conclude that they are not interested in resolving the dispute. The conflict still comes down to the same issue that has been fought over the last century --- whether or not the Jewish people will be allowed by their Arab neighbors to exist.

It is time for us to not have such short memories. How quickly we forgot that the last round of rage exploded just a few months ago, on May 15th, the day when Israel was granted its independence. As Charles Krauthammer wrote at the time, “The riots were a protest against the birth – the very existence – of the state of Israel...”

And while we are asking questions, since when did the official policy of the United States become one of even-handedness? Israel is our ally, period. The time has come for the President to make that clear and that we will not tolerate violent attacks on her citizens.

We have now all seen how the Palestinian police force which Israel helped to arm and equip has acted. We have seen how ineffective they are at controlling the Palestinian mobs, and how complicitous they are. When entrusted with the Tomb of Joseph, despite their promises, rather than act as protectors of the Jewish holy site, they joined in the melee.

I am sorry if I sound so pessimistic this evening. But on this Yom Kippur, it is important to reaffirm that we stand at one with the people of Israel in this time of crisis. Whatever differences we may have with our brothers and sisters in Israel are insignificant and inconsequential at this time. It is critical to affirm Jewish solidarity.

One of my favorite midrashim is one of the first ones I studied in rabbinical school. It likens the people of Israel to a lamb, for the rabbis taught, that the lamb is a sensitive animal. Whenever any one part of the lamb is in pain, the entire lamb feels that pain. Tonight we feel the pain and anguish felt by our fellow Jews in Israel. We pray on this Yom Kippur, that they may be sustained and that they will prevail. Am Yisrael chai. The people of Israel yet lives.

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