

Israel: The Power of Courage and Conviction

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It has become my custom on Yom Kippur to address significant issues of importance to the Jewish people or to assess developments and mega-trends in the Jewish world. It is appropriate on this day when we gather together as a community to consider these matters as they pertain to the nature of what it means to be a member of a covenanted people and of the collective fate and destiny of *am Yisrael*. Consequently, not surprisingly, my remarks often pertain to what is going on in the state of Israel. Needless to say my perspective is sometimes at variance with what is presented in the papers or on the evening news, and may contrast with how things are portrayed in the general media.

Last year, I spoke about why I speak so much about Israel and why its fate is so central to being a Jew in the 21st century, a message which apparently needs to be reiterated, as a recent survey revealed that Israel is not a top priority for a number of American Jews.

The truth is I am not so sure what to say this year: not that there is a lack of issues confronting the Jewish people. Many of us are concerned about the massive well-funded campaign being launched by Jews for Jesus in our own community and elsewhere around the country. This outreach to the Jewish community is offensive for so many reasons. It is deceptive and but the latest chapter in the ongoing centuries old effort to convert Jews and pry us away from Judaism. Heavily funded by Christian groups, including the Presbyterian Church, with whose leaders I will be meeting on Sunday afternoon, it is an affront to every Jew. They even have started using Hebrew names for their places of worship and in their services, wearing talleisim, and speaking with Yiddish accents in their ads – to which I can only say: *Oy gevalt!* But as vexing and disturbing as this problem is, it is not something I choose to address in detail this evening, other than to say – Be wary, and if you are tempted to fall for what they are saying, call me first.

Another issue hanging over our heads is the canard about AIPAC, which now appears, due to the outstanding investigative reporting of our member Edwin Black, to be exposed as little more than another attempt on the part of an overzealous government bureaucrat to taint Jews with the brush of dual loyalty and to intimidate us so we will refrain from activities on behalf of Israel. It too is important, alarming, and disturbing, but there is not much more to say about it other than to caution you not to assume that unsubstantiated allegations and accusations about spying and espionage are true. Let not such scurrilous charges diminish our exercising our rights as citizens in this great democracy to advocate on behalf of the State of Israel.

Elsewhere, we continue to worry about the continuing rise of anti Semitism in Europe and around the world. Justice is still elusive for the perpetrators of one of the most devastating attacks outside the Middle East, in Argentina where 93 Jews were killed over 10 years ago at the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires.

But as we enter the fifth year of a war against Israel, it remains the main focus of our attention and concern. The problem is, I am not sure what there is new to tell you. I have been there three times since we convened last Yom Kippur. In certain respects, the story of resistance and resilience is by now, old news.

Some Israelis I spoke with who had heard about our problems with the sniper and how activities were cancelled and everything was shut down in Montgomery County asked me, incredulously, “You had how many guys out there shooting at people?” It was as if they were saying – you have no idea what we deal with on a daily basis. Why can’t you learn from us to refuse to allow terror to take over your lives?

How many times and how many different ways can I tell you that the restaurants, shops, malls and coffeehouses are full. We arrived this summer on a Wednesday night, in the middle of the week. A wedding, which started at 10 pm, went on until the wee hours of the morning. There were fireworks, with people dressed like they were going to the Academy Awards. We went to an outdoors street festival on Ben Yehuda Street, that was packed with tens of thousands of people. If anything, one of my worries about Israel is that the country is sleep-deprived.

I had read about and even mentioned in a sermon the memorial across from the Dolphinarium, the site of a terrible attack, where over 20 young people were killed in June of 2001. I must tell you, however, there is nothing like the impact of actually seeing it. I was very moved this summer when my daughter Margalit and I walked past the makeshift pillar, draped with ribbons, candles and flowers. People stop and look, reflect and read the names of the young people killed all listed, in Hebrew, as well as in Russian. And over it the three powerful words, “*Lo nafseek lirkod*: We will not stop dancing.”

So what is new this year, and what can I share with you, in the context of a sermon and message for the holidays?

One new development is that unfortunately, other nations now share our fate. There was a time when the victims of terrorism were only Jews and Israelis, and for some incomprehensible reason, it was tolerable and tolerated. In 1970 in one of the first dramatic acts of terrorism, Palestinian gunmen barged into a school in Ma’alot, in the northern border of Israel and killed 17 children. Israel, in retaliation, went into Lebanon, where the raid had been launched and blew up an airplane. At risk to their own lives, they saw to it that everyone was safely escorted away so that no one would be hurt or killed. The next day, Pope Paul VI and the United Nations condemned Israel for the destruction of property and invasion into the sovereign territory of another nation, while not a word was said about the loss of the lives of the Jewish children. Things have not gotten any better in the last 30 years. The attacks have escalated. The murder of Jews has continued unabated. Sadly, it is still met with apathy and silence by the rest of the world, a moral stain on the world’s conscience.

But what they don’t realize is that we are the proverbial miner’s canary, warning of imminent danger, for what happens to us, eventually will happen to others. Rather than

feel that an assault on one member of the world community, is an assault on all, the world chose to turn a deaf ear to the indiscriminate killing of Israelis and Jews. Thinking that non-Jews were somehow immune, the world has now learned the painful lesson of ignoring such attacks and attempting to appease extremists and extortionists. It is little comfort to know that the fate of Jews as targets and victims is now shared by others. The Russians are the latest to discover, as have too many others around the world the unfortunate consequences of Islamic fundamentalist violence. Even France with all its efforts at appeasement has found that blind support for Arabs does not spare them from the harsh and cruel brutality of hate-mongers.

The spread of terrorist activity across the globe brings to mind the powerful warning of Pastor Martin Niemoller who cautioned against complacency at the time of the Holocaust. His haunting words testify what can happen when one deludes oneself by thinking he will be excluded from the list of victims. He said – “First Hitler attacked the Jews, and since I was not a Jew, I did not speak up. Then he came for the industrialists, and since I was not an industrialist, I did not speak up. Then he came for the trade unionists, and since I was not a union member, I did not speak up. Then he came for the communists and since I was not a communist, I did not speak up. Then, when he came for me, there was no one left to speak up.”

Now that Arafat’s War has been waged for four years, it is possible to view it in a larger context, for it is an attempt to weaken the will and spirit of the people of Israel, to win additional concessions, and to drive Israel out of the Middle East. Let us never forget, and let us continue to remind others that this is the true intent of Israel’s enemies. The root of the conflict today is not Israel’s presence in Judea and Samaria, but remains what it has been from the start - Israel’s very existence, and the refusal of the Arab nations to accept that bit of reality. This is why they do not shake hands with or acknowledge Israeli diplomats, refuse to compete against Israel in sports matches, and seize every opportunity to denounce Israel in hate-filled anti semitic terms. And the world lets them get away with this. Contrary to their own regulations, for example, no punitive actions were taken against Iran for its wrestler refusing to participate in a match against an Israeli. Other athletes did not stand in solidarity with Israel for this blatant violation of protocol, policy and decency.

It is all this, and more. It is a battle between two conflicting and contrasting world-views. It is not oversimplifying to say that the struggle can be seen in terms of a clash between a culture which celebrates and embraces life and one which glorifies death. We must always remember that Israel is a democracy engaged in an armed conflict, defending its existence and the lives of its citizens against people willing to blow themselves up and who use women and children to kill and maim as many men, women and children as possible. Through their actions and rhetoric Israel’s enemies have shown that they represent a culture that celebrates death. Am I being overly harsh in describing the Palestinian and Moslem culture as a culture of death? I don’t think so. Look at the many massive celebrations in the streets when Jews or Westerners die, the passing out of candy, singing, dancing, and shooting off rifles in the air. After the massacre in Beslan, Russia, New York Times columnist David Brooks, called it a cult of death which takes pleasure

in killing and dying for the sheer sake of killing and dying. We are still surprised that unreasonable people don't act reasonably.

It is not the first time in our history we have been engaged in such a struggle, against a culture which celebrates death. Now, as then, we shall prevail. A number of commentators here in America, and in Israel, have noted in recent months, that Israel has already won this war.

Part of the victory is that life goes on. And part of it is that Israel has resisted the temptation to become like its enemies. Despite the claims of Palestinians and their supporters about alleged Israeli "atrocities," it is precisely the determined Israeli effort to avoid unnecessary loss of life that is so striking. The Palestinian tactic is to goad Israel into targeting civilians, hoping to provoke an international outcry. Yet Israel goes to great lengths to avoid unnecessary Palestinian casualties as illustrated in the terrorist stronghold of Jenin. There, two years ago, Israel lost twenty-three of its own soldiers in house-to-house combat rather than bomb from the air and risk innocent Palestinian casualties, speaking volumes about the moral compass of Israeli society.

The way Israel has waged this war is something the entire nation and Jewish people can be proud of. In light of what Israel has been through the last four years, something no other nation has been subjected to, it is truly remarkable that so few Palestinian civilians have been killed. Mosques, churches, hospitals, schools, children, scatter bombs filled with nails, women and even ambulances have all been tools cynically used by Palestinians to spread terror and perpetrate and inflict as much damage as possible. That Israeli society still strives to treat them decently and to live in peace with them, that calls for massive reprisals, evictions and vengeance are not heard is testimony to the moral fiber and character of the Jewish nation.

Columnist and author Yossi Klein HaLevi said that this war has been waged primarily against Israel's youth. They have been the primary targets of the assassins – school buses, batei café, restaurants, discoteques, ...a university dining hall. He told me there had been concerns as to whether or not today's young people would rise to the occasion or not, for after all, they were raised in a more comfortable, materialistic post-Zionist society. But they have risen to the occasion and fought as well, if not better than previous generations of soldiers.

Rabbi Donniel Hartman in a lecture this summer said this has been Israel's finest hour. Zionism was predicated upon the notion that no longer would people be able to kill Jews with impunity. Yet despite the premise of Zionism, the government of Ariel Sharon patiently waited and withheld its response to repeated, escalating acts of violence by Palestinians. War raged for over half a year, with numerous assaults on innocent civilians until Israel finally responded. Until the Passover massacre in Netanya in March of 2002, Israel endured repeated infiltrations and killings, responding with token symbolic, minimal acts, such as knocking down a few empty buildings and radio antennas. Reluctantly, and with no other choice, forced to act, Israel responded forcefully, preemptively attacking "ticking bombs" who have either planned massive attacks, or who are on their way to do so. They have carefully tracked down those who

thought they could get away with killing innocent Jewish civilians. Part of the meaning of having a Jewish state in a post-Holocaust world is that people cannot just kill Jews indiscriminately without any consequences or repercussions.

Incidentally, Israel's measured, hesitant response and its efforts to limit casualties among enemy non-combatants, has not won it any friends or acclaim in the outside world. Israel is still singled out for criticism in the United Nations. The fact that Palestinian terrorists are treated in hospital emergency wards alongside their victims has not earned Israel any extra accolades. Prime Minister Sharon is still vilified and demonized throughout Europe and elsewhere as part of a successful anti semitic campaign promoted by Israel's enemies on the left, right and in the Moslem world.

I am not a prophet, but I want to warn you now – sometime in the next year, we will hear about the removal of settlements in Gaza, and we will see pictures of Jews resisting evacuation plans. The reports will not be pleasant, and Jews will be made out to appear as if they are fanatics and obstacles to peace. I would like to suggest that when you hear these reports and see settlers being removed against their will, think about what it means in terms of the extent of the sacrifice Israel is willing to make, and the pain of uprooting families and homes from the communities they have built and lived in for decades.

How to understand what is going on today, and what does it mean? One of the things that I noticed that has changed in Israel is that a sense of reality and practicality has set in. As some analysts have put it, the right has been forced to give up the illusion that it can have it all, while the left has had to come to terms with the fact that our enemies really do wish to annihilate us and wipe Israel off the face of the earth.

We Americans are so used to finding quick solutions for our problems, and become frustrated when complex matters defy easy resolution. But what Israel is presently doing is saying to the Palestinians, in the new found spirit of realism – *Gezunderheit*. The disengagement from Gaza should be seen in this context. The fence, which is not permanent is saying – We have tried. We offered you over 98 % of what you wanted, including major concessions on gut basic issues for us, such as sovereignty over parts of Jerusalem, and instead of accepting the generous offer, or even suggesting a counterproposal, the response was the unleashing of a war. It reminds me of the *hassan*, the bridegroom who is always reluctant to finalize the wedding, and who runs away from the *chuppah* just as the marriage is about to be finalized. As a result, what Israel is saying is -- you go and live your lives, we will live ours. We will continue to build our economy, to create an industrial infrastructure, to lead the world in high tech startups, to push ahead in every field of endeavor, in the arts, science, nanotechnology, to develop breakthroughs in medicine that will save lives, to educate our young people and to prepare them for a time when peace will come.

And when you are serious about peace, when you have a consensus among your people, and have leaders willing to take risks for your people, when you are ready to talk, you know where to find us: We are right here on the other side of the fence. We are not going

anywhere. That is how to interpret and understand the decision of Israel to unilaterally withdraw from the Gaza Strip and build a fence.

The decision of the International Court of Justice further confirmed Israel's contention that it is impossible to get a fair hearing in an international body, and that it is justified to go it alone. Supposedly impartial judges from Arab nations sitting in judgment publicly expressed opinions against the fence, even before the case began. The farce at the Hague contrasted with the brilliant decision of the Israeli Supreme Court, which said that although the fence was a necessity, it must not be done at the expense of the rights of Palestinians. The Israeli Court then required the government to make modifications in the route to accommodate and take into consideration the needs of Palestinians. What a country!

Earlier this summer an entire platoon was on its knees in the Gaza Strip searching for flesh and body parts of soldiers who had been killed. Many Palestinians mocked the Israelis for what they were doing, but there were those who secretly respect and admire such a people, especially when the very same people who have such high regard for human life have the will to fight back so effectively. The Palestinians assumed that a culture which places such a value on life would crumble in the face of such vicious attacks. But somehow it has not. Rather, it is the culture of death which is in decay and disarray.

Israel has prevailed in this war, albeit at painful and considerable cost. In addition to the thousand lives lost, and the families touched by that loss, countless others have been permanently scarred either emotionally or physically by this senseless violence. The only reason the infiltrators have not been more successful recently is because of the security barrier, which incidentally, is a fence, Israel's extraordinary intelligence, and the killing of those who are on their way to carry out terrorist attacks, and of the leaders who plan these attacks. It is not because the Palestinian forces have suddenly had a change of heart. Israel's resistance and resilience has forced some Arabs to reexamine the very premise of their intended goals and tactics. Israel's tactics are working. As a result, it is a beacon of hope to the rest of the free world that terrorism can be fought, if the resolve is strong.

But let us change our focus, from Israel to us. The real question is -- what about the rest of us, we Jews who live in the Diaspora? On this Yom Kippur, let us honestly ask ourselves the tough questions of how we have participated in this war. Sadly, we have not been as active as we should have been in defense of Israel. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it is one of the sins for which we should ask forgiveness on this Yom Kippur. To our *al het*, our list of sins this year, let us add: *Al het she'hatanu lefanecha b'hoser ometz*: For the sin we have sinned against You and our fellow Jews by lack of courage.

Over these past four years, we were afraid to travel to Israel. We did not send our children on youth programs which would have solidified their solidarity with Israel and rejuvenated their Jewish pride. Is it because we believe that the lives of children of Israeli

parents are any less precious than our children? Are we saying – take care of the country, and in a few years, when things are quiet, let us know, and we'll stop by for a visit.

Lack of courage is not the only sin we committed. As Pirke Avot warns, *averah gorreret averah*: One sin leads to another. And so our lack of courage led to the sin of detachment. We went on with our lives and somehow felt that the fate of Israel is not ours.

And this was compounded by the sin of those who have chosen not to stand with Israel in its time of need. How frustrating it is to live in a world which does not distinguish or differentiate between the victim and the perpetrator, between the one who acts out of self defense, and the aggressor who launches a wave of suicide bombings on children and innocent people. But even more upsetting is that at a time when Israel is under attack, and so many anti semites take up the cause of bashing Israel, there are Jews who join in.

This sin of lack of courage has to do not only with our feelings about Israel. I am concerned because it appears that too many Jews today have a lack of courage to be Jewish. People are afraid of the consequences if their child misses a day of school on the second day of Rosh Hashana, or on one of the festivals.

Perhaps I am being too harsh. Maybe it is not a lack of courage. Perhaps it is a lack of conviction. Only, I am not sure which is the more serious offense.

This lack of conviction for Judaism pertains not only to our feelings about Israel, but to how we live our lives. Judaism does not play as significant a role in our lives as it should, nor are we as passionate about our religion as we should be.

Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, Dan Gillerman responded to one of the many lop-sided votes in one of the many one-sided resolutions condemning Israel this past summer. He said, "Thank God the fate of Israel and the Jewish people is not decided in this hall."

Ah, but it is decided in this hall, in this sanctuary, and in synagogues across the world!

We know how our brothers and sisters in Israel have responded to the challenges they face. With courage, conviction and determination they have chosen to prevail and not let the terrorists and those who seek the destruction of the State of Israel win. But what about us – how will we choose to act? Let us strengthen our resolve and our determination. May we have the commitment and the courage to be Jewish, to stand up for our fellow Jews and for Judaism.

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