

Israel, Us and the Rest of the World

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The Yiddish language, rich in so many expressions and nuances, makes an interesting distinction between different kinds of sighs. A wordless expression of sadness is called a “*krech*.” A *krech* comes from deep inside the *kishke*. Although it usually is just a sound, it may or may not be accompanied by the expression, “*oy*”, as in “*Oy*.” By way of definition, Leo Rosten tells a story in “The Joys of Yiddish” about a guy who asks a friend he hasn’t seen in a while, “Nu? So how’s business?” The guy doesn’t say a word, but instead just lets out a *krech*. The first guy says, “You know, for this time of year, that’s not too bad.”

In a similar vein, there is a story about three women who get together regularly, every day at the same place and same time for coffee. One day, without saying a word, as soon as she sits down the first woman lets out a heavy sigh, a real *krech*. A moment later the second woman gives out an equally heavy sigh. The third one, who hasn’t said anything at all yet, turns and says to her companions, “I thought we agreed we weren’t going to talk about the children today.”

If I were to stand before you this Rosh Hashana and let out a *krech*, a heavy sigh, without elaborating, explaining or saying a word, I think you know me well enough to know what I was thinking about and what I am referring to. It is the sigh of Jewish angst, the sigh of concern over the state of what is happening in the world, especially over what is happening to our people around the world.

Like the women in the coffee house, although I had not intended to speak this year about Israel, with all that is going on, and after this summer’s events in Gaza, how can I not do so?

The precipitous rise of anti-Semitism in Europe is cause for serious concern. Earlier this summer a group of Moslem protestors in Paris went on a rampage and staged a pogrom terrifying Jews inside a synagogue. Israeli products have been banned and in some places physically yanked off grocery store shelves in Europe. Just a few months ago four people were shot and killed outside the Jewish Museum in Brussels. In Britain in July, there were about 100 anti-Semitic incidents, double the usual number. Based on projections of current trends Norway will soon be Judenrein. There are Moslem neighborhoods in European cities where Jews feel they cannot walk freely. Calls for Jews to be gassed have been heard in Germany. In many European countries Jews are afraid to wear a keepah or any outward signs that would identify them as Jewish.

A recent State Department report found that, “throughout Europe, the historical stain of anti-Semitism continued to be a fact of life on Internet fora, in soccer stadiums, and through Nazi-like salutes, leading many individuals who are Jewish to conceal their religious identity.” Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan charged that Israel’s defense against Hamas rocket fire amounts to “barbarism that surpasses Hitler.”

I do not wish to be alarmist or to belabor the point, but we dare not become used to such widespread hostility and complacent about the belligerence. We cannot accept this as normal, nor can we tolerate the current state of affairs and allow it to become the new status quo. Rather, we must be vigilant and concerned about the safety and well-being of our fellow Jews who are being threatened, attacked, and intimidated throughout Europe. The situation calls not just for a *krech*, but for a more forceful expression of exasperation and desperation to convey frustration and a resounding cry against injustice. It calls for an all-out *shrei*.

We are witnessing a multi-front, sophisticated assault against the Jewish people. To gain a cloak of respectability the charges may be thinly veiled as opposition to Israel's policies, concern for the downtrodden, or as anti-Zionism, as if to distinguish it from good old fashioned blatant anti-Semitism, in the hope it will appear more palatable and respectable. While the attacks on Jews may be precipitated by certain policies and accusations of Israeli misconduct, the focus on Israel's actions to the exclusion of grievances against other nations or parties, as well as the intensity and excessively hostile nature of the criticism are sufficient reason to arouse cynicism about the purity of the motives of many of Israel's harshest critics. Some do not even attempt to hide their true motives or intentions.

When it comes to Israel, reality is stood on its head. With 80% of Israel under rocket attack, the victim of the unprovoked, indiscriminate attacks is portrayed as the aggressor for defending itself. After a barrage of missiles from Gaza, Israel initiated Operation Protective Edge to neutralize the threat posed by thousands of Iranian supplied rockets in the hands of the terrorists. In the course of its operation Israel discovered the extent of the elaborate labyrinth of tunnels Hamas had built along with plans for a massive attack on Israeli civilians and targets including kibbutzim and nursery schools scheduled to take place on Rosh Hashanah.

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed a vision in which swords would be turned into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Unfortunately Hamas has inverted the prophecy by turning plowshares into swords and pruning hooks into spears.

The book of Exodus speaks of one's right to self-defense when an intruder tunnels into your home. With Hamas building tunnels into Israeli territory, placing rockets, missiles and weapons in schools, mosques and hospitals, Israel was left with little choice but to respond. As leftist Israeli writer and peace activist Amos Oz asked, what would you do if someone across the street from you held a child on their lap and shot at you from their balcony? And what would you do if your neighbor digs a tunnel from his nursery to your nursery in order to blow up your home or kidnap your family?

I am reminded of the time I was driving with my family through the tunnel on I-95 on our way to New York and I explained to the children how a tunnel worked. After I told them that there was a river on top of us, one of the kids piped up and asked a question that appeared to be so blatantly obvious to an innocent youth. "Why would they put a river on top of a tunnel?" Similarly, we may innocently ask – why do they put rocket launchers in schools?

They do it because they know they can win public support and sympathy through these tactics and the images they produce. It is the same reason that concrete is used to build tunnels rather than using it for housing and infrastructure. They do it because it works.

Opinions are influenced by the images we see, and the pictures of the devastation this summer were disturbing. Now that the fighting is over, a number of the journalists in Gaza have admitted that they were threatened and intimidated by Hamas, who only allowed the images they approved to be disseminated. This is one of the reasons why there is an inverse relationship between Israel's success on the battlefield and its success in the realm of PR. Many of us complain about Israel's poor PR, but with the conflict covered the way it is, how can we expect any better. Journalist Matti Friedman wrote a heavily researched and well-documented critique of his fellow journalists. Detailing how the war was covered he wrote, "Hamas knew it could rely on the foreign media's cooperation – that it would not show rocket launches or combatants or speak at all about what Hamas wanted to accomplish."

Based on the number of reporters stationed in Israel, Friedman says one would think this is the most important story on earth. Comparing the sparse coverage assigned to other hot spots around the world he notes that, "News organizations have decided that this conflict is more important than the more than 1,600 women murdered in Pakistan last year, 271 after being raped and 193 of them burned alive," as

well as China's repressive actions against Tibet and its Islamic minority, or countless other places where the death toll is much higher and the cruelty, oppression and conditions are far more grave and many more people suffer and are affected.

No nation would look good under the intense scrutiny Israel is subjected to.

I have often wondered what would have happened if other campaigns were covered the way Israel's confrontations with its enemies are covered. If journalists would have described the bombing of targets behind enemy lines during World War II the way this war was depicted, they would have overlooked who was the aggressor and not report on what the Nazis were doing and why the US was fighting to defeat them. Public opinion and support for the troops and war effort may have been swayed. But we need not go back in history – look at the way Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and other conflicts going on today are covered. None of these are covered by a constant 24/7 barrage of pictures showing the impact of the destruction. It is not too difficult to recognize that by any standard there is no comparison with how Israel is treated and how the rest of the world is treated.

An honest and fair investigation would be welcome by an impartial, objective organization, like, say the United Nations. The UN Human Rights Council has established a commission to investigate and issue a finding on what transpired this past summer. Not surprisingly the resolution establishing the commission makes no mention of Hamas. It calls for an investigation of Israeli violations of human rights law, thereby stating the conclusion they are expected to reach before a single session has been convened.

Well, at least we can expect that the members appointed to serve on the commission will be fair and open-minded. After all, one of them is a Jew, so we can be confident he will be sure Israel's side is heard. The only problem is that David Schabas, the person selected to chair the three person panel and who is Jewish, has already let his feelings be known. In a BBC interview this July about the number of civilian casualties on one side and virtually none on the other, he declared "prima facie there is evidence of disproportionality by Israel." Never mind that Israel uses its resources to protect its citizens, whereas Hamas uses its citizens to protect its weapons.

With this as its predetermined mandate, and a judge who has already arrived at his preconceived conclusion, it is déjà vu of the Goldstone Report all over again. It reminds me of the superintendent who told police officers to arrest the usual suspects and they would figure out the charges later.

The reality is that Israel's attacks against Hamas targets were confined to areas which harbored Hamas missile launching grounds, command posts, terrorists' homes, operational bases, and places which stored weapons and tunnel entrances. Israel demonstrated exceptional unreciprocated restraint and sought to minimize collateral damage by urging civilians to evacuate ahead of bombings, thereby willingly forfeiting the element of surprise. Hamas however concentrated its terror facilities in densely populated areas and deliberately targeted Israeli civilians. 15% of their rockets and mortars fell short and hit their own civilians inside Gaza. Anyone who mourns the loss of innocent lives, as we all do and should, should place the blame where it belongs, with Hamas, for placing children in harm's way and for using human shields to protect their military targets.

In light of all that appears to be so obvious, and the justness of Israel's cause so apparent, we may ask, why is it that there are those who so vehemently question Israel's behavior? The dissent comes not just from sworn enemies of Israel, but from within the Jewish community as well. Whereas at one time Israel was a source of unity in the Jewish community, many today are torn and feel their right to express their concerns or objections are hampered and thwarted. Charges of McCarthyism are leveled against Jewish organizations by Jewish critics who accuse the organized Jewish community of stifling debate about Israel and its policies. An article just the other day in the New York Times, (a "fair" newspaper if

ever there was one,) dealt with the difficulty rabbis have of speaking about Israel. Finally, we are told that young people are being turned off to Israel because of the lack of ability to criticize Israel.

Answering the last point first – at best it is an illogical tautology and non-sequitur. Somehow we are to believe that if we are more openly critical of the Jewish state then young people will start to feel more positively about Israel?! I fail to see the logic of such thinking. If anything, fomenting and promoting criticism of Israel will lead to greater distance, not more positive feelings. This suggestion has the potential of being self-fulfilling. This approach will not engender greater affection, for it does not take into account the large number of young people who have returned from Birthright as enthusiastic supporters and lovers of Israel, and who have discovered a new found passion for their roots and for the homeland of the Jewish people.

Israel has more than its share of critics. At a time when Israel is being unfairly assailed, criticized, condemned, and ostracized for its actions, when it is demonized and compared to Nazis, charged with committing genocide against the Palestinian people, and when its people feel isolated, I believe we must choose to stand with and in defense of Israel.

We can do so confident that Israel's democratic institutions, vibrant tradition of public debate, free press and active and engaged citizenry committed to principles of fairness, justice and ethics ensure that self-critical analysis and corrective measures are in place.

When it makes mistakes, she investigates, and when warranted, takes responsibility, as well as corrective steps and punitive actions. Israel obviously is not perfect, nor is it without fault or problems. No nation is. But the difference is that other nations are not defined by their failures or shortcomings. More importantly, critiques of other countries do not result in their legitimacy being questioned, nor do they undermine those nations' right to exist. We need to be careful and resist the temptation to be so busy pointing out Israel's shortcomings that our criticisms of Israel are louder than our expressions of love.

We can't project the reality we wish for and act as if that is the situation. I will never forget the time I was with Ambassador Michael Oren and a 12 year old child asked him, "Of all the countries that hate you, who hates you the most?" That is the reality Israel must face every day.

Despite the ceasefire, Israel must prepare for the possibility of another attack from Gaza. Almost 90% of Palestinians support Hamas, an organization whose *raison d'être* is destroying Israel. The 51 day war in Gaza was but another chapter in a long-term ongoing struggle. At the same time it is dealing with Hamas, there is concern among Israeli intelligence about a possible attack from Hezbollah in the north which has accumulated thousands of missiles. Isis is moving close to Israel's border with Syria in the Golan Heights and threatening to take over Jordan.

Yet these are not even the most serious threats facing Israel. Iran, which remains the primary threat to Israel and to regional stability and global security, continues to support international terror organizations and its pursuit to acquire nuclear capability while taking steps to weaken international resolve to maintain harsh sanctions against the regime.

And let's not forget that what happens to Israel cannot be viewed in a vacuum. It needs to be seen as part of a broader effort to restore Moslem hegemony to the region. Daniel Williams, former researcher for Human Rights Watch and Washington Post correspondent, wrote a recent column about the end of Christianity in Iraq. He tells of a priest who had been kidnapped and ransomed for \$85,000 a few years ago. The priest was warned by a Muslim acquaintance in Baghdad, "Saturday's gone. Why are you still here on Sunday?" meaning that Jews were no longer in Iraq, and that Christians were next. ISIS, a Moslem fundamentalist group that wants to wipe out all non-Muslims, that was not on anyone's radar

screen as recently as a few months ago, that rounds up and murders tens of thousands of the Yazidi minority, and beheads westerners has suddenly caught our attention. ISIS, as well Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, Al Shabab, Hezbollah and other extremist groups are all from the same ideological cloth as Hamas.

With forced conversions, kidnappings, evictions and bombings of churches we are witnessing the end of 2,000 years of Christianity in Iraq and other Arab countries in the Middle East. Inexplicably, the Presbyterians and academic groups who pass resolutions critical of Israel and calling for divestment and boycotts have nothing to say about what is being done to their co-religionists in the region.

Most of the deaths in the Middle East do not have anything to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More violence and deaths are caused by the internecine tribal rivalries or the contentious Shia-Sunni struggle, all of which is independent of Israel. In the three years of war in Syria, millions of people have become refugees and approximately 200,000 people have been killed, about 80,000 more than all who have died in the Arab-Israeli conflict since it began a century ago. Yet just as there is no outrage, demonstrations or calls for boycotts against China, Russia, Libya, North Korea or other repressive totalitarian regimes and perpetrators of violence, the world does nothing about Arab on Arab or Moslem killings of Moslems, even though it is a far graver problem. Clearly there is an obsession with Israel and with Jews.

It is hurtful to hear the accusations hurled against Israel and its soldiers. I know the young men and women who fight in the IDF and can attest to their decency and morality. I know many of the decision makers and know that they are guided by concern for human life and that they strive to act in accordance with Jewish law and are guided by Jewish ethics.

Inability to criticize Israel? McCarthyism?! If anything, speaking up on behalf of Israel in Jewish settings is what takes courage these days. Those who speak up for Israel are subjected to ridicule or boycotts. Some entertainers who have performed in Israel have been blacklisted.

We can argue about Israel's settlement policy and prudence of the timing of announcements of new residential areas, and Jews do discuss these issues in many fora. I look forward to the day when similar debate will take place about Arab intransigence, its xenophobia, intolerance of minorities, lack of a free press, poor treatment of women and minorities and abysmal record on human rights.

Peace will come when the world will help the Palestinians and Arab nations realize they have nothing to gain from continuing to try to deny the Jewish people a Jewish homeland and when they stop promoting and promulgating hate and instead prepare their people to accept and live in peace with their Jewish neighbors.

The attacks upon Israel in the academic world and elsewhere should be viewed in the context of a broader global effort to undermine the Jewish state's right to defend itself and its right to exist. These affronts are a threat not just to Israel, but to the western principles of freedom and democracy.

Throughout history we have been the proverbial miner's canary. Israel was the first country to be the victim and target of international terrorism. Since the world thought the problem was confined only to the Jewish state, it looked the other way. It did even more than that. The Jewish Prime Minister of Austria, Bruno Kreisky freed Palestinian terrorists who had hijacked the Achille Lauro. Later Italy also released terrorists. These nations and all the world now knows no one is immune from extremism, Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism.

The situation is reminiscent of Lutheran pastor Martin Neimoller's powerful oft-quoted message from the 1940's: "First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak out for me."

With so many disturbing events around the world, it may be good to conclude on a hopeful note, and with a joke. First the joke.

The joke is about a rabbi who told a congregant that he wanted him to enlist in the Army of God. The man objected and said, "But Rabbi, I already am in the Army of God." The rabbi asked the man, "So if that's the case, how come I never see you in shul?" The congregant whispered to the rabbi, "That's because I am in the secret service."

We need to not be undercover agents or in the secret service. We need to be activists and advocates on behalf of the only Jewish state in the world. I urge you to purchase an Israel bond at our appeal next week. Show your support for Israel by joining Aipac and coming with me to the Policy conference in March. We will also launch a campaign on Yom Kippur to purchase a mobile bomb shelter for the community of Halutza on the border of Gaza through the Jewish National Fund. And finally, one of the most important things you can do is travel to Israel. Come with me this summer or on October 19 for a special solidarity mission to show our support.

The hopeful note is that in the 21st century Jews were confronted by the two totalitarian regimes which caused more death and destruction than any other ideology in the past several hundred years – Nazism and communism, both of which sought to wipe out Judaism and the Jewish people. We resisted their efforts and survived despite their power and might. Just as we withstood Pharaoh, Ahashverosh, the Romans, the Spanish Inquisition and other efforts to destroy the Jewish people, and we survived them all, we will prevail again today as well.

Let us recall that when we stood up for the Jews of the Soviet Union and demanded their freedom our advocacy and activism on their behalf resulted not just in their being liberated, but ultimately led to the collapse of the Iron Curtain. We succeeded in bringing down communist regimes and freedom for others as well as for our people because we were united in working to achieve our goal and we were united by our love for our fellow Jews. We must stand tall today, as we did then. We should be proud, united and resolute in articulating our support for Israel. Too much is depending on us, for not only our fate, and not only the fate of the Jewish state, but the world needs us to lead the way.

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