

Elie Wiesel, Madness, the Middle East and the World

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Writer, master story teller and modern day prophet Elie Wiesel left us earlier this year. In the words of Holocaust scholar Michael Berenbaum, although Weisel had no institutional base and did not hold office in any major Jewish organization, he was the voice and moral conscience of our people and a leader on the world stage. He had a tremendous impact not just on Jews, but on the world. A passionate lover of the Jewish people, our stories and our heritage, he transformed Holocaust survivors from victims to witnesses, almost singlehandedly forcing the world and reluctant survivors to confront and let the world know of the horror they lived through.

It is appropriate to tell a haunting and compelling story about Sodom and Gomorrah. If not one of Wiesel's stories, it is surely reminiscent of the kind of stories Wiesel loved to tell.

The Biblical city of Sodom and Gomorrah was destroyed because it was the epitome and embodiment of evil and lascivious immorality. But since the Bible offers little information about what was so reprehensible and despicable, it is left to the Talmud and Midrash to supply details about the selfishness, greed and cruelty that characterized the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. By way of example the Midrash says it was a crime in Sodom to welcome a stranger, feed a starving beggar or offer alms to help a poor person.

The Elie Wiesel-like story is of an old man who goes throughout the streets of the town shouting against the evil that permeates the community. Someone confronts him and says to him, "Silly old man don't you realize there is no point to your condemnations. You cannot change these people." The old man replied, "Long ago I gave up on trying to change the people who live here. Now I cry out to make sure they do not change me."

It is a powerful story, which reminds me of the Chasidic stories Wiesel told about people who went mad because of the insanity that surrounded them, such as Moshe the shamash in his first book *Night*. Later he wrote a play called "Zalman, or the Madness of God" about a character who is haunted by the devastation and cruelty he has witnessed. In a speech he gave when he received the David Ben Gurion Award from the UJA many years ago he told a story about a king who learned that all who will eat of the next year's harvest will be struck by madness. His chief advisor suggested that since last year's harvest has not been exhausted, the two of them should eat it.

The king rejects the proposal because he refuses to separate himself from the fate that will befall his people. The king decides instead that the advisor shall eat of the uncontaminated crop and be the sole individual to escape the curse. But it will come at a price, for the king tells his faithful, trusted adviser he will become a wanderer and a messenger who will be doomed to go to towns and villages, from country to country, telling tales and shouting with all his might: Do not forget.

I have read the speech numerous times to try to understand what the messenger's mission is. It is not clear in the telling of the story if the messenger's task is to let people know that they are mad, or to remind them that there once was a time when they were not mad. Is it to let others know what the kingdom once was like, or is his purpose to raise consciousness so others will come to help the doomed kingdom? Perhaps his purpose is not to enlist sympathy or support, but just to tell the story.

The ambiguity of the story is what makes it so intriguing. Although the adviser was the friend of the king, he did him no favor. Entrusting him with this thankless role condemned him to a life of solitude. Weisel explains the parable, "I believe that from the very origins of our adventure in history we never ceased to shout to people not to forget that their madness is destructive... Winds of madness blow through history and somehow we Jews are always among the victims."

Wiesel likens the solitude, the wandering and being a victim, along with the responsibility to shout out against madness to our calling as Jews. It falls upon us as our thankless task to be that solitary voice in the world speaking out against the madness that engulfs our world. Indeed, there is much to shout about.

Over 50,000 lawyers, journalists, teachers, even police and judges have been rounded up and arrested in Turkey since this summer, imprisoned because they are suspected of opposing the rule of Erdogan.

The death toll in Syria continues to climb and is approaching a half a million, with the civil war having displaced about 6 ½ million people to date. Russia has joined forces with the Syrian army, targeting and destroying hospitals, relief convoys, and schools in Aleppo where residents have been given an ultimatum, "Surrender and you can eat again." In Yemen where over 10,000 have been killed and millions suffer from lack of food and water a Saudi-led coalition airstrike killed over 100 people and injured over 500 just the other day at a funeral procession.

I could go on, but you get the point. It is not as if these hotspots are unknown. But there are no campus boycotts or calls to boycott or ostracize Turkey, Syria, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Yemen or others. The world does little to stop the carnage or express its outrage against Russia or others involved in the killings.

There also are plenty of atrocities you probably have never heard about. By way of example, a few sentences buried in the inside pages of the world roundup last month, which could have been easily missed, mentions in passing that more than 100,000 Muslim members of a group called Rohingya in Burma have been forced to flee their homes to live in decrepit camps. 100,000 refugees and barely a word about their plight!

They are a small fraction of the 60 million displaced by persecution, wars and conflicts. But somehow the only refugees that matter are Palestinians. They are the only ones who have an entire agency at the UN devoted to their plight. It is the only agency which reports directly to the Secretary General. They are the only ones for whom the goal is not resettlement, but perpetuating their status as refugees. They are the only ones whose refugee status is conveyed to children, grandchildren and beyond. It is not true of the other 60 million, nor is it true for the 800,000 Jewish refugees from Arab lands. Only those who left almost 70 years ago and their descendants, now numbering in the millions have this unique status.

And the only conflict that matters and garners attention is when the Jewish state is involved. I ask you, is this not madness?

It is as if there is only a limited, finite amount of moral outrage to go around, and it is all reserved for Israel. The strongest possible terms are used -- whether it is to condemn the building of houses in disputed territory or the actions it takes to protect and defend its citizens.

Israel is not beyond repute, but should not the disproportional intensity of the criticism, especially when compared to the tepid reaction to terrorist attacks resulting in the loss of lives be of grave concern to those of us here tonight?

Those who are quick to criticize Israel do not recognize the very real security threats she faces each and every day, be it stabbings, tunnels, cyberattacks or the potential for nuclear armed enemies launching an attack; be it from individual terrorists, organized cells, nations bent on its destruction or extremist groups seeking acclamation and recognition by killing Israelis.

These critics who claim not to be anti-Semitic would have greater credibility if they displayed concern about the stabbings of Jews, or about the incitement and vicious anti-Semitism in official organs of Palestinian society, and if they condemned the celebration and adulation and the calling of murderers heroes. Were they to express concern about the mass buildup and stockpiling of weapons and missiles on Israel's borders we would believe their sincerity. These critics of Israel would have greater credibility if they expressed some concern about the kidnapping, raping and murder of Christian Yazidis, honor killings that take the lives of innocent women in Arab and Moslem countries, or injustices done to people other than those who are the enemies of Israel.

Is this obsession to condemn Israel and ignore other problems not a madness, against which we must shout out about? At times it feels as though we are the only ones who have not eaten the contaminated crop.

It is as if there is a fraternity of miscreants in international bodies who protect each other, and extend a kind of professional courtesy to their fellow oppressors. It reminds me of the three survivors stranded on a desert island surrounded by sharks. They do not know what to do, or how to get back to the mainland, or how to send for help since others who tried before them were all consumed by the sharks circling in the water. One guy says he will go and swim to the mainland to get help. Sure enough, the sharks let him pass, forming a protective circle around him to ensure his safe passage. When he comes back to rescue his friends as promised, they ask how he got past the sharks. "Easy," he replied, "As a lawyer the sharks extended professional courtesy to me."

This week UNESCO, using only the Arabic name for the Temple Mount and referring to Israel as occupying Jerusalem, will vote on a resolution brought by Jordan and Palestinian delegations which attempts to define the capital of Israel, as a supranational city to which Muslims, Christians and Jews have equal claim. They bring this resolution denying a uniquely Jewish connection to Jerusalem even though it was established by King David 3,000 years ago, and only twice in history has the city served as a national capital. Both of those times were when it was held by Jews. It never was the capital of an Arab or Moslem country, nor of a Palestinian Arab state for the simple reason that there never was a Palestinian Arab state.

The resolution is part of the continuing ongoing attempt by Palestinians, and Arab and Moslem nations to deny the undeniable ties of Jews to the land of Israel. When Mahmud Abbas speaks at the United Nations and before the entire world omits and denies any Jewish connection to Eretz Yisrael he is intentionally rewriting history and denying our narrative. These are the same Palestinians with whom Israel is supposed to make concessions and reach an agreement, yet who cannot bring enough resolutions and find enough international bodies to condemn Israel.

In fact, Abbas has written and said that the reason they seek statehood is to be able to have standing to pursue claims against Israel in international bodies, thereby seeking to perpetuate rather than resolve and end the conflict. It appears that they are more interested in hurting Israel and its reputation than they are in helping their own people. On numerous occasions Arab countries have refused academic or medical help from Israel, truly cutting off their nose to spite their face.

It is especially important to keep these inconvenient truths in mind because June of this coming year, will mark the 50th anniversary of the Six Day War, when Israel acquired East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights and Sinai desert. I anticipate there will be articles and efforts to rewrite history, so let us restate now and remind ourselves and others that the war broke out as a result of the attempt by Israel's Arab neighbors to destroy Israel. It is because they lost, that they lost territory.

Prior to the Six Day War, when the Jordanians and Egyptians occupied Gaza and the West Bank, no one made the claim that the land annexed by Jordan was occupied or that it was supposed to be a Palestinian state, nor was there even reference to a Palestinian people. Only after the defeat of Jordan and Egypt, who joined Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq in trying to eradicate Israel were calls heard to create a country which had not previously existed.

Without going into too much detail at this time, let us not forget what precipitated, preceded and led to the war in 1967. Egypt's dictator Gamal Abdul Nasser rallied millions of people in the streets of Cairo in May and June and incited Arabs across the Middle East to complete Hitler's work. Only 20 years after the Holocaust, he called upon his fellow Arabs to join in the effort to push the Jews into the Sea. He made it amply clear that he wanted to bring about the Final chapter of the Final Solution.

While we recall how Israel came into possession of the disputed territories, let us also not forget what happened to the land it acquired in what was a defensive war. The Sinai desert was returned to Egypt after Anwar Sadat and Menahem Begin negotiated a peace treaty between the two countries. Israel unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza strip in 2009, hoping that the Gazans would take advantage of the opportunity to build a peaceful society. Instead, greenhouses, schools and community centers were destroyed. Cement intended to build housing was used to build tunnels to attack Israel and other building supplies material was used to make rockets. Only the Golan Heights and the West Bank, the biblical area of Judea and Samaria, territory which never housed a Palestinian state, and where the vast majority of Palestinians currently live under the rule of the Palestinian Authority remains under Israeli administration.

Although the situation was not created by Israel but was the result of Israel successfully repelling an attack by Jordan, the stalemate exists because Israel's generous offers were declined by Palestinian leaders. Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert offered 95 and 98% of the West Bank, only to have the offer turned down. Reminiscent of the old Henny Youngman line, "Take my wife. Please," it is as if Israel's leaders have been spurned when they have said, "take the land, please."

These offers were made even though anyone would be hard pressed to name an instance in history when a country that started and then lost a war against its neighbors then demanded to be compensated with territory to form a nation which had not previously existed. And people say we Jews have chutzpah?!

True to form, Mahmoud Abbas did not take advantage of the unprecedented ten month settlement freeze put in place by Bibi Netanyahu. The simple unpleasant reality is that Palestinian leaders have more to gain by letting their people languish in poverty and perpetuate hatred and a sense of victimhood while they enjoy the largesse of the corruption from money that flows to their coffers than they do in bringing the conflict to an end. Lest we forget, California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and Texas were all captured during the Mexican-American War of 1846-48, a war of aggression waged against Mexico under the banner of "Manifest Destiny", not to mention other lands seized forcibly from Native Americans and incorporated into the territory of the United States. Calls are not raised to return these

lands, nor is the United States referred to as an “occupying power.” Nor for that matter does criticism of the United States threaten or question our right to exist.

As we know, sadly, anti-Semitic condemnations of Israel are rampant on college campuses.

The situation is so bad, writing in the NY Times just last week, Benjamin Gladstone a junior at Brown University describes how he was barred by other students from participating in a campus protest on behalf of Syrian refugees because he is involved in Jewish organizations. Anti-Zionist students at Brown prevented a transgender rights advocate from speaking because one of the sponsors was the Jewish campus group Hillel.

While Israel, like every other country in the world is certainly not perfect, and we can hope that some kind of means can be found to resolve the conflict with the Palestinians, we can ask does it really deserve the amount and the intensity of the criticism it receives? There must be something else going on here.

It is all part of a larger effort, called BDS, to get colleges and others to boycott and divest from Israel. The larger goal is to isolate and ostracize Jews, Israel, Israelis and supporters of Israel. So absurd and all-encompassing are these actions that even hummus has become politicized. Anti-Zionists in various places have demanded that hummus produced by a company with Israeli ownership not be served. Even the Black Lives Matter movement which is concerned with internal domestic matters has been hijacked by pro-Palestinian groups and used to advance anti-Israel propaganda. In their position statement about local policing policies and actions, *mit n drenin* they *schlepped* into their platform statements accusing Israel of genocide and apartheid. The absurdity of the accusations is so easily disproven by facts and logic – how can it be genocide if estimates place the Palestinian Arab population at about a million in 1948, and around four million today.

If Israel’s critics were truly motivated by concern for justice, why the silence on the other problems around the world? The goal of BDS and its supporters is to destabilize support and sympathy for Israel, to thwart normalization at every turn. Taking their cue from the Palestinian Authority, they are more interested in denigrating Israel than in advancing the cause of peace or helping Palestinians. Why else would they insist on boycotting a factory in the West Bank that employed hundreds of Palestinians in good paying jobs alongside of Jews just because the factory was owned by a Jew?

One cannot help but wonder what is really motivating college students who protest mistreatment of gays but give a pass on Palestinian behavior? They call for the creation of a state on Israel’s border that at best imprisons gays and at worst executes them. The idealistic students who support equal rights for women on their college campuses picket and boycott Israel on behalf of a culture that sells twelve-year-old girls into marriage and puts to death teen age girls who become pregnant after being raped. Excusing the lack of a free press, religious tolerance and free speech, and setting aside concerns about rampant corruption that thwarts money from going to the intended recipients, these progressives oppose the only country in the entire Middle East which protects and safeguards human rights.

Could it possibly be that the problem with Israel is not that Jews are occupying land, but perhaps that they are occupying any land and any space at all?

We must call out and identify anti-Semitism for what it is and not allow people to hide behind labels of anti-Israel or anti Zionism. None of these three should be considered politically correct or acceptable behavior.

Israel with all its faults, is still far and above, despite all the writings to the contrary among the most moral nations of the world.

American Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin Dempsey, said of Israel's war in Gaza that the Israelis, "did some extraordinary things to try and limit civilian casualties, ... the IDF is not interested in creating civilian casualties ... they are interested in stopping the shooting of rockets and missiles out of the Gaza Strip and into Israel", which is why he sent a team of US officers to Israel to learn how the IDF does it.

What is especially upsetting about the critiques and actions of those who work against the Jewish state is that there are those among our own people and even some supposedly Jewish organizations, with titles like, Jewish Voices for Peace, who accept and adopt the negative positions about their fellow Jews and about the Jewish state.

Most of these Jews are about as Jewish as the Olive Garden is Italian.

Comments made during the summer by Bernie Sanders, the first Jew to win national primaries in a Presidential election are not atypical of the attitude of other progressive Jews critical of Israel.

Not allowing facts to get in the way of his preconceived inaccurate notions he called Israel's response to the wanton shelling of its citizens and Hamas rockets disproportionate. He incorrectly inflated the number of casualties by almost 1,000%. He claimed that 10,000 were killed in Gaza, when the real number was closer to 1200, the vast majority of whom were militant un-uniformed combatants and terrorists. He gave this inflated number because I believe this is what he, like so many who have knee-jerk reactions against Israel believes is what it is.

Ignoring facts and reality, he, like many others like him confused the aggressor who provoked and initiated the confrontation with the side that was defending a civilian population under siege. The massive network of tunnels Hamas had built into Israeli territory to smuggle weapons, and to attack civilians didn't bother him. Hamas fighters and commandos embedded themselves in densely populated civilian areas, precisely so that guys like him would falsely conclude that Israel was purposely attacking civilians. Because his default narrative is that Israel is the aggressor he did not recognize that Israel acted with caution in pursuing military targets, whereas Hamas indiscriminately attacked civilians.

Friends, this is the madness we must speak out against.

The summer Olympics gave us a chance to see the true face of Israel's adversaries. An Egyptian, from a country with whom Israel has a peace treaty refused to shake the hand of his Israeli opponent. A Saudi woman forfeited a match for fear she might have to face an Israeli in the next round, and the Lebanese delegation refused to let Israel's delegation get on the same bus with them. This kind of behavior shows that the animosity towards Israel is ingrained and institutionalized.

I trust and have faith in Israel.

I trust and have faith that she can solve great problems. One million immigrants landed from Soviet Union in the 1980's. They were absorbed, not kept in refugee camps, and now it is one of the reasons Israel is the startup nation. I have seen Israel turn around triple digit inflation, and find creative solutions to pollution and environmental challenges. Faced with a serious water shortage, it now is the leading recycler in the world of waste water, reusing close to 85% of its water. Spain in second place, reclaims about 18%.

I trust and have faith in Israel that she will do the right thing.

Again, not because she is perfect, but because I know the people and I know the values that guide them and their leaders. Over 3,000 refugees from the Syrian civil war have been brought to Israeli hospitals for treatment. Syrians who were raised to hate Israelis have been surprised to find the Israeli relief team in Greece has rescued countless refugees. As one of them said, "The people we are supposed to hate save us, and the people who are our brothers are trying to kill us."

African nations have begun to realize they have more to benefit from being at peace with Israel and accepting its generous offers of help, tapping into its tremendous technological advances and know-how than they do in boycotting Israeli companies and academics. Israel has already dispatched aid teams to help hurricane victims in Haiti. Many of you may recall the extraordinary work Israel did the last time disaster struck the impoverished island. After the earthquake in Nepal Israel sent teams who found people under the wreckage when others had given up, performing 85 life-saving operations and treating 1600 patients, while bringing in 95 tons of supplies. This is why I have faith in Israel.

Amir Gilboa's song from an earlier era, sung by Israeli singer Shlomo Artzi captured the innocence and hopefulness of the Zionist dream and the return to the land, with his song, *Pitom Kam Adam*.

*Pit'om kam adam baboker
umargish shehu am umatchil lalechet,
ulechol hanifgash bedarko koreh hu 'Shalom.'*

*Suddenly a man wakes up in the morning
He feels he is a nation and begins to walk
And to all he meets along the way he calls out 'Shalom!'
. . . to the glory of a thousand years flowing forth from
the hiding places,
a thousand young years in front of him
like a cold brook, like a shepherd's song, like a branch . . .
he sees that the spring has returned
and the tree is turning green . . .*

I am always touched by the song's hopeful lyrics and its simple, beautiful innocent refrain. "To all he meets along the way, he calls out shalom." Would that it were so. But as we all know, this naïve hope was not the fate our people encountered. While they called out shalom to all along the way the answer they got was anything but shalom. And yet the dream of peace with her neighbors has not died.

At the 1993 ceremony signing of the ill-fated Oslo accords, Shimon Peres said, "Our land is small, so must our reconciliation be great. I want to tell the Palestinian delegation that we are sincere... Let all of us turn from bullets to ballots, from guns to shovels. We shall pray with you. We shall offer you our help in making Gaza prosper and Jericho blossom again."

So what are we to do? As American Jews we have an obligation to stand by and strengthen our support for Israel. Let us support and join those Jewish organizations which strengthen our alliance and the state of Israel, such as Aipac, Jewish National Fund, Friends of the IDF and others. While others seek to divest, let us invest in Israel. Tomorrow you can show your support by purchasing an Israel bond. Contribute to our JNF campaign to support a special needs unit in the IDF, the only army in the world to have a unit for individuals with special needs.

As we remain steadfast in our support of the only Jewish nation, we need to be like Wiesel, a steadfast lover of Israel proclaiming and sharing its virtues with others. And like the madman in the Weisel stories, let us speak out against the madness in the world, so that the enemies of Israel and the Jewish people do not change us.

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