

THE SAME BUT DIFFERENT
Shabbat Behalot'kha
May 28, 2021
Rabbi Norman Patz

After The Last Cyclist was banned by the Jewish Council of Elders in Terezin, the playwright Karel Svenk wrote another play that he called "The Same But Different." That title describes the 11-day war that Hamas launched against Israel: The Same But Different.

THE SAME, the same as the three previous wars: December 2008, November 2012 and July/August 2014. A terrorist organization, labeled as such by the United States in 1997, the European Union in 2014, Egypt in 2015, and most recently by the Organization of American States, Hamas has fired many thousands of rockets and missiles into Israel from launching sites situated in locations in the Gaza Strip heavily populated by civilians, including hospitals and schools. That allows Hamas to claim that Israel purposely kills innocent people when they respond. When these wars end in stalemate and temporary truces, Hamas resumes building tunnels with concrete, using funds that are supposed to be addressing humanitarian needs. Hamas and Israel each claim victory – and prepare for the next war.

A bit of history: prior to 1948, Gaza was part of the British Mandate for Palestine. No Jews settled there, however. From 1948 to 1967, Egypt occupied and controlled the Gaza Strip. Gazan residents, though Arabs, were not permitted into Egypt except in rare circumstances. As a result of their victory in the Six Day War in 1967, Israel took over Gaza. Some nine thousand Israelis created settlements in the northern area of the Strip. And Israel began supplying water and electricity not only to the Israeli settlers but to all of Gaza.

In 2005, Israel's prime minister Ariel Sharon ordered an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. He offered control to Egypt. Sadat refused: Not one inch of that hellhole.

So the Palestinian Authority took over, corrupt then as now, until 2007. In that year, Hamas defeated the Palestinian Authority in the only election ever held by the unfortunate Gaza residents, betrayed and sacrificed over and over again by their cynical leaders.

BUT DIFFERENT! This time, there are differences, big difference. All are important for us to recognize and to figure out how to deal with.

Hamas used unrest over a real estate dispute in East Jerusalem as an excuse to fire rockets on Jerusalem. That dispute was coming to a head during the peak observance of the Muslim festival of Ramadan, which was drawing thousands of Muslim worshipers to Jerusalem to pray in the El Aksa mosque on the Temple Mount and already causing a great deal of unrest. Israel is accused of violating the sanctity of El Aksa by raiding it. What was the reason for the raid? All the rocks and bottles and Molotov cocktails that the pious worshipers had already stored in that sacred space to pelt the Jews worshipping at the Western Wall below.

Hamas's targeting of Jerusalem was the first since Iran's Scud missile attacks in 1991. I find it hard to understand the rationale of firing missiles at a city crowded with Muslims qualifies Hamas's claim, or why no one has pointed out this rather glaring contradiction, but there's more.

Ominously, Hamas by so doing represented itself as the defenders of El Aksa. With this religious claim, Hamas asserted its greater authenticity and effectiveness over the Palestinian Authority. It thereby also appealed to Israeli Arabs, most of whom are Muslims, and it solicited the support of Muslims around the world for destroying the State of Israel, murdering Jews and reestablishing *Dar el Islam*, the universal rule of Islam.

Not so long ago, Hamas aimed solely to replace Israel with a Palestinian state "from the river to the sea." And while we still hear that call, most vociferously from naive Hamas supporters in the West, Hamas's goal now is the whole world under Shariah law: anti-women, anti-LGBTQ, anti-freedom, anti-Western democracy, anti-Sunni, pro-Iran, pro-Shiite, pro-end of the world as we know it. Hamas is an Islamist, absolutist, theocratic branch of the Muslim Brotherhood whose aim is to destroy the West. How so many people in the West don't get this is very weird to me and, I think, very dangerous.

And that's the second difference still emerging from this eleven-day conflict: support from the progressive Left, many Democrats and many young Jews who say they are seeking justice for Palestinians. Their views are amplified unnervingly by well-meaning political ignoramuses in the entertainment industry who have large followings in social media.

However, Hamas in its behavior is the enemy of legitimate Palestinian aspirations. It's not amusing to watch the gymnastic twists and turns progressives undertake to conceal the viciousness of Hamas and its Iranian sponsors. With their focus on critical race theory, progressives reduce every human interaction into a battle of race: white oppressors against victims of color. So Israelis, suddenly all blond, blue-eyed and Nordic, are the oppressors of the brown Arabs, just as we Jews in the United States have become the privileged oppressors of people of color. Therefore, if you think Israel is like Officer Derek Chauvin and the Palestinians are like George Floyd, what is there to discuss? (paraphrase David Suissa) This is the internationalization of intersectionality exclusively targeting Israel, no longer the brave little David against the Arab Goliath but the reverse.

This reversal stems from a propaganda strategy concocted by the Soviets after the Six Day War. The new line went out to fellow travelers in Western Europe and now it's mainstream on American college campuses. Many Jewish college kids are afraid to defend Israel, some of them because they don't know very much, and they've been intimidated by their professors. Others insist that they are just seeking justice, convinced that everything they learned in Hebrew school about Israel was a lie. The unfortunate truth is that too many of our kids and grandkids have been fooled by the merging of the Soviet Israel-as-Goliath line with the progressive

accusation that Israel is the ultimate oppressor. Bob Dylan got it right when he lambasted those who label Israel “the neighborhood bully.”

So simple. So obvious. So few seem to get it.

Remember Hillel’s three-part teaching: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And, if not now, when? The young Jewish anti-Israel zealots embrace part 2 while dismissing part 1 as petty, selfish and irrelevant.

Yes, I feel very sorry for the innocent Palestinians but I can’t blame Israel even though I am severely critical of Bibi Netanyahu and his policies. The blame rests primarily on Palestinian leaders, led by Hamas. But here we are seeing an old Jewish habit, Jewish guilt, in operation. Antisemites know how to exploit it. Why should we feel guilty for Zionism, the greatest success of all the national liberation movements in the 20th century, realization the ancient dream to return to Zion just a heartbreakingly few years too late to save Europe’s Jews!

Natan Sharansky talks about the letter D campaigns used by our enemies to make us feel guilty for existing: DISINFORMATION – the repeated lies claiming Israel’s genocidal aims or its so-called apartheid policies, all used in a

DOUBLE STANDARD way applied to no other government in the world to

DEMONIZE Israel, invoking the old blood libels against Jews, to

DELEGITIMIZE Israel,

DENY its right to be a state, and to

DEMORALIZE Israel’s supporters.

It’s working.

Look at the United Nations and its despicable Human Rights Council and its Jewish supporters of Human Rights Watch which disregard the criminal behavior of governments around the world in order to “reveal” Israel’s “war crimes.” China and the Uighurs? The military coup in Myanmar? The persecution of the Tigrayans in Ethiopia? Boko Haram’s kidnappings of female students? The Syrian government’s government against its own citizens, not just the Kurds? Muslim suppression of Christians in many nations under their control? Hindu aggression against Muslims in India? On and on, persecution after persecution around the world. And not a word of condemnation about the body count in those places which numbers in the hundreds of thousands. The only outrage is expressed against Israel, where the Gazan body count was approximately 200, of which, according to Reuters, more than 50% were Hamas or Islamic Jihad fighters .

Look carefully at BDS and at Jewish Voice for Peace, Jews for Justice in Palestine and Students for Justice in Palestine. Day is night and night is day.

Our enemies have made Israel the Jew of the nations, not to be tolerated. And now Jews in the United States are being beaten up because we are seen as representing Israel in America and are guilty of Israel's "sins." This is a bitter development, as shocking to American Jews as Hitler's rise to power was to German Jews in the 1930s. I have done what I never thought I would have to do: warn my granddaughters who are outspoken, articulate defenders of Israel, to choose their battles carefully and to exercise a high degree of caution in so doing.

All of this has been triggered by Israel's self-defense, but that's not the real cause: it's cynical Palestinian leaders, Muslim triumphalism and Western disdain for Jews – an unholy, dangerous alliance.

So far, American leaders have been outspoken in their condemnation of antisemitism. That's the opposite of Germany in the 1930s, when it was the government leading the charge against Jews. So far, American leaders understand that openly expressed hatred of Jews or Blacks or Asians endangers not only members of the group but is an existential threat to democracy. So far.

A final *novum*: Israel's enemies have succeeded in transforming Israel into an American political wedge issue replacing the nearly universal support for Israel of the past. It's gone. The drop in support is owing to ignorance of history past and recent, of the nature of Hamas, of the unyielding nuclear aspirations of Iran, and of the cleverness of democracy's enemies.

The result: the ending of American Jewry's golden age and the testing of America's resilience. Jews are America's canary in the mineshaft and the level of carbon monoxide is rising to toxic new heights.

There are two summonses we need to hear. The first is the plaintive call of the great Black American poet Langston Hughes, who wrote:

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be....

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where *everyone* is free.

The second call comes from the Torah reading for this Shabbat. When the Israelites in the Sinai wilderness were about to resume their march, led by the holy Ark, Moses would declare:

Advance, Eternal One, may Your enemies be scattered and may Your foes flee from before You. (B'midbar/Numbers 10:35)

In traditional siddurim, this sentence appears the Torah service when the Torah is taken from the Ark. It asserts that God is Israel's most powerful and necessary defender. Reform siddurim have omitted this line, reflecting the early Reformers' unwillingness to evoke belligerence or to acknowledge that we really have enemies and foes. We can no longer afford that optimism or

its companion, complacency. That's why we restored those lines when we published Temple Sholom's prayer book, *Siddur Netivot Sholom*.

Kumah Adonai v'ya-futsu oyvekha – Arise Eternal One and scatter Your enemies!

Two calls to action. Will we figure out how to heed them?

May it be God's will – and ours.

Please read these two clarifications to my sermon of May 28th:

1. The Palestinian population figures I cited – 1 million in 1967 and 5 million in 2021 – refer to the West Bank and Gaza Strip *together*.
2. I meant to include another exacerbating factor, namely that Monday, May 10th was the observance of Yom Yerushalayim, commemorating the unification of the city on the 28th of Iyar in the 1967 Six Day War. In recent years, the observance has featured large parades of flag-waving right-wing Israelis marching in the streets of Jerusalem as well as larger-than-usual gatherings at the Western Wall. Ramadan ended two days later. Israel's political stalemate didn't help matters either.

Further:

An important analysis of this most recent Israel-Hamas war appeared on-line in the June 1st edition of Tablet, "Who Started the Gaza War?" by Tony Badran. Badran asserts that Iran masterminded and directed Hamas in order to sabotage the Abraham Accords and prevent an Israel-Saudi Arabia alliance. The success of the Accords and an alliance with Israel would block Iran's drive for Shi'ite hegemony in the Middle East.

Mr. Badran also sees a serious effort by the Biden Administration to re-engage with Iran and the Palestinians, a "Realignment" that revives the Obama pivot away from Israel and America's traditional allies. In his opinion (and mine), this disastrous strategic move makes America a major ally of the murderous and totally untrustworthy regime of the Iranian mullahs, greatly increases the danger Iran poses to Israel and threatens any stability in the region and beyond.

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