

February 23, 2023

## Weekly Message from Rabbi Peltz

This past Tuesday, we hosted an important conversation, in partnership with Congregation Beth El, about what's been happening in Israel with Dr. Yizhar Hess. Yizhar is the Deputy Director of the World Zionist Organization and the former Executive Director of the Masorti/Conservative Movement in Israel. If you missed the program, you can watch a recording of it by clicking [here](#). It was a conversation that none of us wanted to have, but we knew that we must have. As lovers and supporters of Israel, we are used to standing up for Israel in the face of external threats. We are proud to support Israel in our communities, by giving *tzedakah*, lobbying the US government, and with many other projects. We are planning a wonderful celebration for the incredible milestone of Israel's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, on April 28-30. But what is happening inside Israel today is deeply concerning, scary even, and because we love and support Israel, we seek to better understand the situation, and to learn how we can help.

When we scheduled this call with Yizhar last week, on top of our agenda were the positions and proposals taken up by Prime Minister Netanyahu's government with regards to judicial reform, relations with the Palestinians, and religious pluralism. These issues were concerning enough. Hundreds of thousands are protesting in the streets and in front of the Knesset each week in opposition to this government's proposals. And then, earlier this week, we mourned with Israel and the families of Hallel Yaniv and Yagel Yaniv, and later of Elan Ganeles, who were murdered by Palestinian terrorists. In the midst of this, we were appalled by those Israelis who took the law into their own hands and stormed the Palestinian village of Huwara, killing one, injury many, and destroying homes and property. As President Isaac Herzog said in condemning this violence – "this is not our way". He was right, but it feels like Israel is losing its way, as the situation continues to deteriorate.

This Shabbat is Shabbat *Zakhor*, the Shabbat of memory. It falls every year before Purim, which we celebrate with our Purim Extravaganza on Sunday and our Megillah reading and feast on Monday night. The special Torah reading for this Shabbat speaks of our obligation to remember how Amalak viciously attacked our people as they were leaving Egypt, and to blot out their memory because of it. The special Haftara for Shabbat *Zakhor* continues this story, recounting the prophet Samuel's call to King Saul to carry out this command to destroy Amalek – which Saul fails to fully fulfill. While the Amalakites were certainly enemies of the

Israelites, the Torah's command to wipe them out raises a moral dilemma: how could the Torah demand that we blot out an entire people? We are not the first to wonder about this question, an ancient *midrash* already offers a solution: "Rabbi Hanina said: 'The Holy One Blessed be He never punishes anyone until He presents the charges against them...that is why we first learn about Amalek's attack on the Israelites in Exodus (17:8), we are told to remember that attack in Deuteronomy (25:17), and finally God says that they will be punished in the book of Samuel.'" Rabbi Mordecai Silverstein writes that this *midrash* claims that God followed due process in punishing Amalek. The three different times Amalek is mentioned in the Bible, according to Rabbi Hanina, indicate the stages of proper judicial process involved in their punishment: first they came and attacked Israel, then God presented the charges against them, and only afterwards were they punished. Rabbi Hanina could not conceive that true justice was not done even with a people as evil as the Amalekites. Consequently, he read the sources such that a legal process was followed. He could expect no less from God, and we should expect no less from ourselves. We live in a world with real enemies, but we can't just eliminate these threats on a whim. Our tradition and our values, understand the importance of law in tempering our emotions, of process over passion. This is what our special readings on Shabbat *Zakhor* remind us, and what ultimately allows us and all of Israel to stand before God with integrity.

After this week, it feels like that integrity is being called into question. There are those in Israel who are taking the law into their own hands or even seeking to change the law for their own benefit. For the sake of Israel, this needs to stop. We join in the statements made by the [Jewish Federations of North America](#) and our own Conservative Movement for the government and the opposition to take up President Herzog's offer to sit down and negotiate a compromise.

There are those who might say that we do not live in Israel, so we in the US have no place in this debate. But I disagree. As Rabbi David Hartman once said, "Israel is too important to leave only to Israelis." Israel is the dream and the hope of the entire Jewish people. What it does impacts and matters to all of us. And we all not only have a place, but a responsibility, to lift our voices for the Israel we believe in. An Israel that fulfills its founding principles by being a Jewish and Democratic state.

Besides learning more about what's going on, what can we do? Yizhar made a few suggestions. First, we can reach out to friends in Israel to express our support. A small reach can make a big difference. Second, we can give *tzedakah* to the Masorti movement and other organizations in Israel that work to promote Israeli democracy. Third, like we have during past crises, albeit different ones, we can continue to stand with Israel and look for opportunities to help support our Jewish homeland. May we, along with all of our fellow *hovvei tzion*, lovers and supporters of Israel, continue to work to bring the dreams of Israel closer to reality.