

Gaza and Jerusalem
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Yehudah HaLevi, living in Muslim Spain in the late 11th and early 12th Century wrote:

My heart is in the East
But I stand at the furthest reaches of the West.

This past week, we who live farther west than Yehudah HaLevi might have ever imagined, found our attention drawn to the East. Most of our time recently has been focused on the chaos and crises all around us close to home. But if you happened to turn on TV in the last few days you were confronted with the split-screen dichotomy of a celebration at the new U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem on one side and, on the other, the rioting and violence in Gaza some forty miles away.

First, let me speak about the embassy in Jerusalem. I would love to celebrate the opening of the American embassy in Jerusalem. I absolutely love the idea. Indeed, I love it so much that I want TWO U.S. embassies in Jerusalem, one for Israel and one for the State of Palestine.

That was the dream of Oslo. A shared Jerusalem as the capital of two states was always part of the plan for a final status agreement between the two parties. That idea was reaffirmed by the Clinton administration as well as the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. On the Israeli side, this goal was supported by Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Ehud Olmert, and Ariel Sharon. The opposition to moving the embassy to Jerusalem at this time is based on the implied recognition of Israeli sovereignty over all of Jerusalem, Jewish and Arab. The State Department did, in fact, emphasize that the opening of the new embassy did not change the American position on sovereignty or the geographic divide of Jerusalem, but, for many, the optics of the event implied a major change in long standing American policy.

I was also unable to celebrate the embassy opening along with Reverends Robert Jeffress and John Hagee, as well as the Chabad rabbi who led Jewish prayers. The three of them represent a form of Messianism which requires that all the Biblical land of Israel be settled by the Jewish people without regard to the rights of any other inhabitants. Those Evangelical ministers have often spewed the biased words of anti-Semitism, anti-Islam, anti-LGBTQ, and anti women's rights. This was a party to which I was glad I was not invited.

Turning on CNN, I was confronted with the split screen of a beautiful sunny, cloudless day in Jerusalem in contrast to clouds of tear gas, lethal gunfire, and rioting young Arab Palestinians from Gaza. Once again, the optics left startlingly vivid impressions. I want to make clear that the Gaza demonstration was organized by the terrorist group Hamas and was really not about the opening of the embassy.

This demonstration had been going on for a number of weeks. It is called the March of Return. It is not a protest against the Occupation of 1967 but rather of the Occupation of 1948. It is not about Israeli sovereignty over ALL of Jerusalem but of ANY of Jerusalem. The rioters were hoping to surge to the fence and break through so that they could return to their homes in Jaffa and Haifa. That was the goal and promise that Hamas made to them.

And the Israel Defense Forces responded with deadly force. The Israelis perceived that this was a very real threat to break through the border fence and attack civilian populations in the nearby villages and kibbutzim. But once again, the optics of the split screen was not kind to the Israeli position. Israel came out the loser in this propaganda war. Asymmetrical warfare is often like that. Snipers and drones do not call on the world's sympathy in the same way as slingshots, stones, wire cutters, and Molotov cocktails attached to kites. The Gaza rioters were the Ewoks in this battle.

Not surprisingly, Hamas succeeded in rallying residents of Gaza whose lives have become desperate and untenable. Life is unlivable without sewage treatment, electricity, and with joblessness and dire poverty. To many in Gaza, death and suicide is more attractive than the life they are experiencing. We can condemn the very real corruption of Hamas and recognize the internal battle between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, but the people know that the world responds to the plight of Gaza only when there is conflict, violence, terror, or war.

David Brooks in the *New York Times* quoted Yossi Alpher of *HaAretz*, who reported that the Israeli defense establishment had been warning Netanyahu and Lieberman for months that Gaza was about to explode. Many foresaw this event. It should have been no surprise.

In 2014, I stood at the border of Gaza as Israel was battling with tanks and planes the Hamas rocket fire and tunnels during that most recent war. Israel succeeded in stopping those attacks, but there was no long-term strategy to deal with the continuing threat from Gaza. Israeli author, Amos Oz, said that it is as if Israeli leaders are driving a speeding car with the windshield completely painted over in black. The only way they can navigate is by means of the rear-view mirror. Another common Israeli axiom is that, "If the only tool you have in your tool box is a hammer, every problem is a nail."

We, standing in the West, watched the juxtaposed images of Jerusalem and Gaza. But there is another split as well. The Jewish people is a two-headed being. Jewish existence is schizophrenic. Today the Jewish nation lives in two primary locales, America and Israel. For most of the 20th and now the 21st Century, American Jewish identity managed to balance the act of standing in the West with one's heart turned to the East, but that tightrope act is under threat. There is a very real danger of a wedge being driven between the two camps. The "bromance" of Netanyahu and Trump does not play well among the majority of American Jews. We do not identify with the prayers of Evangelical Christian Zionists like Reverends Jeffress and Hagee.

Too often the Israeli government seems willing to write off the progressive Jewish community of the United States, and similarly undermines the historic bipartisan support of Democrats and Republicans.

For those who love Israel, and love especially its people and land, these are potentially dangerous times. Israel will not be defeated by fiery kites or hurled stones. Yes, there is great danger in what is now occurring in Syria and the presence of Iranian troops so close to Israel. But in the long term, Israel's greatest existential threat may be the result of governmental policies that undermine the Zionist dream of a Jewish democratic state based on equal rights and human dignity for all. Mostly, I fear that Israel is weakened when the historic ties are severed that bind East and West in the heart of the Jewish people. I pray that we continue to stand here in the West with our heart drawn to the East.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem,
May those who love you prosper.
Psalm 122