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### Exiled Among Nations

At this time tomorrow, in 24 hours and fifteen minutes it will be the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, one hundred years to the minute that the First World War came to an end. By the end of the war, global empires that had existed for centuries had been dissolved as independent nation states asserted their right to national determination after generations of having those aspirations stifled by those fallen empires. The Great War, as it was known for a generation, was one of the true turning points in history, bringing a hopeful era of peace and cooperation to a bloody end, enlisting tens of millions of men in a global struggle that killed millions, wounded millions more, and set the stage for even worse to come.

The First World War, the decline of the great empires and the rise of nation states had benefits for the Jewish people. The Balfour Declaration was issued in the midst of the First World War. But the world created by the Great War, a world that we still inhabit in some ways, exacerbated dangers that we still need to navigate.

*Sefer Bereishit*, the book of Genesis, is the book of creation. This is obvious enough. The Torah begins with the account of the creation of heaven and earth, animals and humans. But there is another, less obvious, way that *Sefer Bereishit* is a book of creation. Ramban, Nahmanides explains, that *Sefer Bereishit* is also the book of the creation of the Jewish people. The stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs and their struggle to raise their children and protect their families are, collectively, the creation story of the Jewish people. For Ramban, that is not just true in a literal and genetic-biological way, but it is true in a symbolic and paradigmatic way.

*Ma'aseh Avot Siman l'banim* - parents stories mark their children's path. This principle is the central organizing theory behind Ramban's understanding of the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs in *Sefer Bereishit*. The travels and struggles and triumphs of the patriarchs and matriarchs all correspond to some future event in Jewish history. *Ma'aseh Avot*, the actions of the patriarchs *siman l'banim*, foreshadow the experiences of their descendants. We should not be surprised, therefore, to see Ramban using that theory, that central organizing principle of interpretation of this book, to explain Yitzhak's sojourn in Gerar during a time of famine.

וַיְהִי רָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְהָרָעַב הָרִאשׁוֹן אֲשֶׁר הָיָה בְיַמֵּי אַבְרָהָם וַיֵּלֶךְ יִצְחָק אֶל-אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ מֶלֶךְ-פְּלִשְׁתִּים גְּרָרָה:

There was a famine in the land—aside from the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham—and Isaac went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar.

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל-תַּךְדּ מִצְרַיִמָה שְׁכֹן בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֵלָיךְ:

“The LORD had appeared to him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land which I point out to you.”

Ramban wonders why the Torah juxtaposes this famine with the famine that occurred decades earlier when Avraham and Sarah had first arrived in Canaan. He explains that the Torah is deliberately drawing a distinction between these two events so as to highlight the different responses that God wanted Avraham and Yitzhak to make, respectively, to very similar phenomenon.

לדעתי נכלל עוד בענין רמיזה בעתיד כי גלות אברהם אל מצרים מפני הרעב רמז שיגלו בניו שם ולכתו אל אבימלך לא היה גלות כי שם היה יושב ברצונו אבל ירידתו של יצחק שם מפני הרעב ירמוז לגלות כי גלה ממקומו בעל כרחו והלך אל ארץ אחרת והנה היה גלותו ממקומו אל ארץ פלשתים שהיא ארץ מגורי אביו וירמוז לגלות בבל שהוא מקום מגורי אבותם שהיו באור כשדים

“And in my opinion this is a further hint to the future. For the exile of Abraham in Egypt because of famine was a hint that his children would be exiled there... Yitzhak’s exile from his place was to the land of the Philistines which was the land where his father lived. And it hints at the Babylonian exile for this is the place where our ancestors lived for they came from Ur. “

*Ma’aseh avot siman l’banim*, the actions of the generation that created *Klal Yisrael*, foreshadow events in later Jewish history. Avraham and Yitzhak experienced two different forms of displacement because of famine and those two periods of displacement represent two paradigms of Jewish exile, and those two paradigms represent - even today - two different models of prejudice and anti-semitism. The Torah alerts us to pay attention by introducing each exile with an account of displacement caused by famine. By referencing the earlier famine during the second famine **מִלְבַּד הַרְעֵב הָרִאשׁוֹן אֲשֶׁר הָיָה בַיָּמֵי אַבְרָהָם** we are primed to notice the differences.

Avraham goes into exile in Egypt and his descendants went into exile in Egypt. Avraham and Sarah face cruel persecution in Egypt before they leave with great wealth after Divine intervention on their behalf. Just like when we all went to Egypt to escape famine, were mistreated and enslaved, and then brought out of Egypt by God’s hand with great wealth.

Yitzhak goes into exile in Grar, the land of Philistines which is part of Eretz Yisrael, the region where Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Rehovot now exist. Things were tense for Yitzhak and Rivka in Grar. They were frightened. The Philistines were jealous of Yitzhak’s success. But, despite that fear and tension, nothing very bad happened to them and they were treated quite honorably by the king who eventually formed a treaty with Yitzhak. This is just like our exile in Babylonia, a land that was not entirely foreign since it was the land where Avraham was born. And we faced obstacles in Babylonia but not the intense persecution and subjugation in Egypt.

*Ma’aseh avot siman l’banim*. Jewish history is Jewish destiny.

From the time of Avraham and Yitzhak until this very day we have faced persecution and jealousy and we have known fear and we have suffered at the hands of our enemies. But just as Avraham and Yitzhak experienced exile in different places and in different ways, opponents of the Jewish people have taken different forms.

One form of opposition to Judaism cannot tolerate our refusal to blend in with everyone else. This is the anti-Judaism of some ancient Greeks who claimed that Jews were misanthropes because we practiced circumcision and refused to worship the same gods as our neighbors or marry people who were not Jewish. In just a few weeks we will celebrate a victory over this kind of anti-Judaism when we celebrate Hanukkah. Antiochus wanted one culture, and one religion in his empire. Haman’s hatred for Jews is quite similar. We did not join the united culture of the Persian Empire. We had our own religion and our customs and our own language.

Any religion or ideology that thinks of itself as a universal faith for all mankind will, by necessity, come to oppose the Jewish insistence on being different. This is the basis for Christian and Muslim anti-Judaism and it is the basis for the opposition to Judaism of the Communists, their fellow travelers, and successors.

Yitzhak encountered this sort of hatred when he lived in Grar. He was a local, living in the land where his own father had once lived, and living in a land where he intended his descendants to live one day, and yet, despite the clear admiration that the king had for him, he was different and intended to always remain different. This aroused the jealousy of his neighbors. Why did Yitzhak and his family have to be separate? Why couldn’t they blend in with their neighbors?

But there is another source of hatred for Judaism. This is the hatred that we faced in Egypt. Pharaoh subjugated and enslaved his Jewish subjects because he did not trust our loyalty to his kingdom. Since we were foreigners he could not trust that we would be more loyal to him than to any other nation that might

fight against Egypt in the future. He wasn't offended by our particularism, he was frightened by our universalism that suggested we did not belong to, and had no loyalty to, the places where we lived. This is an uncanny presage of modern antisemitism that emerged in the late 19th century in Europe alongside the invention of modern nationalism.

The modern ideology of nationalism claims that people who share a common ancestry and speak the same language and live in the same region share an organic bond that unites them to each other and that should be reflected in how they are governed. So far so good. It's wonderful that Italy became a country in the 1870s after thousands of years. Italy is wonderful. The problem is when nation states lack robust democratic and peaceful methods of working through their disagreements they need a scapegoat to blame for the inevitable tensions and instability that exists everywhere. In the West, the Jews have been that scapegoat.

And so we find ourselves like Avraham, and like our ancestors in Egypt, being hated for being too universal and not part of the nation where we live, and we find ourselves like Yitzhak, and our ancestors who suffered persecution under the Hellenists and by Haman, for being too particular and refusing to join a universal culture. This makes us doubly vulnerable but is also the source of our greatest strength.

I had a conversation on Thursday with someone who asked me what Judaism contributed to humanity. I told him that being situated in between particularism and universalism, this way of showing concern for ourselves and also for humanity, represented an especially effective model for building justice and kindness and community. This model avoids the pitfalls of diffuse universalism that is too broad and amorphous to meet human needs - if you love all people equally you don't know what love means - and that also avoids the pitfalls of chauvinistic concern only for one's own tribe. Human beings are inextricably linked to one another and if you only love those whose are very similar to you then you also don't know what love means. As Hillel taught, "If I am not for myself who will be for me? If I am only of myself what am I?"

I was in Israel last week. While I was there I met up with a bunch of ASBI alumni: Norm and Doris Levitz look as happy and healthy as ever. I had lunch with Anna Pomson and Josh Grob just days before their second child was born. Jeff Mensch is now Professor Jeff Mensch of the Hebrew University. I had a delicious lunch with David Harris and David Desser at a cafe in Raanana where they already have a favorite table and are becoming regulars.

On my last night in Israel I took a long walk with an old friend whom I have known for twenty years who has himself lived in Israel for the past 18 years. He shared with me how, in addition to believing that it is a mitzvah for every Jew to live in Israel, he loves living in a place "where I don't have to pack my own lunch to travel." He can find kosher food in every corner of the country without the need to plan for it in advance. He can live anywhere and do anything and be anything and his needs as a Jew will be met without special accommodations or efforts. I shared with him how much I valued living in a place where I am instantly understood. The way I dress and the way that I live my life and my interest and my values are comprehensible to people and understood by people without the need for elaborate explanations.

The State of Israel has not ended antisemitism. But life in Israel, life among a Jewish majority, with Jewish public spaces, allows us to escape some of the tension of navigating between always being an outsider among the people we live, while at the same time always caring about the welfare of every human being. In Israel we do not need to devote energy to being different. We can be Jewish and also normal in Israel.

This frees us to navigate that spectrum between universalism and particularism on an even larger scale. When I left Israel I noticed a poster in the airport that featured a quote by Theodor Herzl which said, "Zionism encompasses not only the hope of a legally secured homeland for our people...but also the aspiration to reach moral and spiritual perfection."