

What if Goliath Won?

A sermon from March 19th, 2016

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1. David, by Marie Syrkin

In the years 1945-1947 Marie Syrkin (who would later become a Professor of English Literature at Brandeis) traveled to the DP camps in Europe to meet with Holocaust survivors, and then to Israel to meet with the leadership of the Yishuv. There was enormous fear and worry in the Yishuv; they knew a state was forthcoming in the near future, but worried that the neighboring countries would succeed in battle and push Israel into the sea.

In those anxious days of 1947, Syrkin penned the following poem:

David

*Suppose, this time, Goliath should not fail;
Suppose, this time, the sling should not avail
On the Judean plain where once for all
Mankind and pebble struck, suppose the tale
Should have a different end: the shepherd yield
The triumph pass to iron arm and thigh,
The wonder vanish from the blooming field,
The mailed hulk stand, and the sweet singer lie.*

*Suppose, but then what grace will go unsung,
What temple wall unbuilt, what garden bare;
What ploughshare broken and what harp unstrung!
Defeat will compass every heart aware
How black the ramparts of a world wherein
The psalm is stilled, and David does not win.*

This poem in many ways tells the story of Israel. (Benny Morris included it in the prefatory pages to “1948”.)

“Suppose the tale should have a different end.” These are haunting words, written after the Shoah, with a potential sequel of genocide hovering in the air.

Disaster seemed all too likely in those pre-Independence days. Martin Gilbert, in his history of Israel, tells of Ben Gurion’s May 1948 consultation with Yigael Yadin on the Haganah’s preparedness for a possible Declaration of Independence. Yadin responded: **“if I wanted to sum it all up and be cautious, I’d say that at this moment, our chances are about even. If I wanted to be more honest, I’d say that the other side has a significant edge.”**

Nearly 70 years later, we stand on the cusp of a three day conference, where 18,000 people will arrive in support of the State of Israel.

I, along with many of you, will be there.

And I am going to AIPAC because I still wonder: what if Goliath had won?

2. Could We Have Withstood Another Tragedy?

Had Goliath won, I think the covenant would have become too difficult to bear for too many Jews.

Through the ages, Jews have been beaten by Goliath, but we have never defeated by Goliath.

And no matter what, we continued to hold firm to our covenant, our love affair with God.

But the Shoah is the one time Goliath came close to defeating us. Goliath came and destroyed six million innocent souls. And we as a people were broken, and broken hearted.

Theologians have long grappled with the Shoah. There are multiple issues to be considered; why do bad things happen to good people? How can the human heart harbor such sadism and wickedness? But for Jews, there was always another question: What happened to our covenant with God? Does he still care for us? For the first time in 2,000 years, Jews questioned whether we still had a covenant with God. And theologians like Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim and Yitz Greenberg were willing to consider a taboo subject: is the covenant over?

Now what would have happened had the Arab armies destroyed the Yishuv?

Would our souls been capable of handling it? Perhaps. Perhaps. But only perhaps.

We need to consider how the creation the State of Israel made a profound difference to all Jews in the post-Holocaust years. And in particular, it made an enormous difference to those who survived the Holocaust.

More than once I have heard survivors talk about how Israel was their hope and consolation. One friend of mine, a survivor, likes to say that “**Israel was our nechamah (consolation)**”. And for those who had seen the depths of exile, the blue and white flag of redemption was nothing short of miraculous.

My survivor friends are expressing an idea that would feature in the theology of Eliezer Berkovits and Rav Soloveitchik: the State of Israel is God knocking on the door of his beloved, a reminder that God continues to hold fast to His covenant with the Jewish people.

In 1948, with David’s victory, we heard God’s voice. And I still hear it.

3. Hearing David's Song

But there is another lesson here as well. If Goliath had won, a meaningful tradition would have been lost: the love of life above all.

It is the hallmark of the Jewish people to love life, even the lives of our enemies.

Dr. Jose Faur in an article "Jewish and Western Historiographies: A Post-Modern Interpretation," (Modern Judaism 12 (1992), 23-27) notes that the Western type of historical narrative that is told only from the perspective of the victor, who glories in the exercise of power. Faur quotes a Marrano writer (Samuel Usque) describing the crowds at the auto-de-fe of the Spanish Inquisition "**exult and rejoice at seeing...limbs burn in the bonfire**".

This type of sadism is antithetical to the Jewish tradition.

We revere life.

We do not exult in the fall of our enemy (Proverbs 24:17).

We care for ourselves and our enemy too. And that's the way it should be.

Even when Israel has had the military advantage, she has always held her hand out in peace; and Israel has made peace with any neighboring country willing to do so.

And Israel has offered peace, right from her Declaration of Independence, the only Declaration of Independence ever to ask for peace!

But this is something that isn't fully understood by our enemies. They think if you love life and love peace, you must be weak; you must be lacking in courage and conviction.

Even Anwar Sadat told Nicolae Ceausescu that the fact that Israelis mourned every soldier meant he could defeat Israel in 1973, because they could not tolerate the losses a major war would impose upon them. And this idea remains a favorite among Israel's enemies, and is oft mentioned in Arab media. (See "The Rav, Volume II" by R. Aharon Rakefet, page 126)

In recent years, this has become the catchphrase of Hamas PM Ismail Haniyeh, the ruler of Gaza. He repeats over and over: "**We love death like our enemies love life! We love Martyrdom, the way in which [Hamas] leaders died.**" [Al-Aqsa TV (Hamas), July 30, 2014]

Haniyeh should know how much Israel loves life, because Israeli hospitals have treated virtually his entire family in recent years - that's how much Israelis love life. Since 2012, Israelis hospitals have treated Haniyeh's mother in law, sister, daughter and granddaughter. (It might be time for him to take out a Kupat Cholim card.)

But to understand how significant this tradition of loving life is, imagine if Netanyahu's family were in a Gaza hospital. Tragically, you don't have to wonder what would happen then.

We are proud of our values, of our absolute love of life. As Rav Soloveitchik put it in a lecture: **"In Judaism when someone dies, a whole world... collapses"**.

In the summer of 2014, I was speaking with my friend Stuie in Tel Aviv. a young man from his neighborhood, Guy Algranati, had been killed while entering a boobytrapped UNWRA clinic to check for Hamas fighters. As the funeral was about to start, several ambulances pulled up; everyone was a bit shocked and uncertain as to why the ambulances were there. And then the paramedics opened the doors of ambulances, and out came wounded soldiers, on stretchers. These were Guy's comrades in arms, coming straight from the hospital to pay tribute to his life.

This heroic tribute to a fellow soldier is one more example of how much we love life, and how heartbroken we are by death.

Love for life is David's song. And had Goliath won, a nation that persists in the pursuit of life in middle of a war zone would have been lost.

4. What if Goliath attacked, and you did not help David?

But we need to consider one more question. The question of "what if Goliath won?" has a second part to it, which is: "what if Goliath attacked, and you did not help David?"

Jews have answered this question the right way, and answered this question the wrong way. Even in the Bible, we get it wrong and we get it right; Joseph is sold by his brothers, yet after that, Joseph reconciles with his brothers in Egypt.

And in the 20th century, we have gotten it wrong, and we have gotten it right. Jews in the United States did not do nearly enough during the Shoah. Rabbi Lookstein, in his book "Were We Our Brothers' Keepers?: The Public Response of American Jews to the Holocaust, 1938-1944" reviews the halfhearted actions of the American Jewish community during the Shoah. His final sentence concludes: "The Final Solution may have been unstoppable by American Jewry, but it should have been unbearable for them. And it wasn't".

During the Holocaust, we were not our brother's keepers.

Yet 20 years later, the Jewish community changed. The activists of the Soviet Jewry movement insisted on being their brother's keepers. They remembered the lessons of the Shoah, and refused to repeat them. Yaakov Birnbaum, the founding father of the Soviet Jewry movement, spoke at the initial meeting of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry on April 27, 1964. In a speech that launched a historic campaign to release millions of Soviet Jews, Birnbaum declared **"we, who condemn silence and inaction during the Nazi Holocaust, dare we keep silent now?"**

And due to Birnbaum's exhortations, American Jews were not silent. Twenty years later, American Jews would finally learn how to be their brother's keepers.

It is this spirit of solidarity that we must continue. We must always be our brother's keepers.

Rabbi Sharon Shalom, (an Ethiopian Rabbi and author) related a wonderful anecdote when he spoke at my synagogue in Montreal last year. In the early 1980's he was rescued by the Mossad from a refugee camp in the Sudan. He was a child of 8 or 9, and Israel was smuggling groups of Beta Israel children to Israel by spiriting them in middle of the night to a beach, where they were carried onto a waiting boat that took them to the Sinai. Sharon remembers being picked up and hugged by a big Israeli commando, who carried him to the boat. As he carried Sharon, the commando had tears streaming down his eyes. Sharon remembers as a young boy, how he couldn't understand why the big strong soldier would be crying - what does he have to be afraid of? Now, of course, Sharon understands. The soldier was crying because he was picking up his younger brother and saving him from danger.

This is the spirit we must have today in the United States. We must be our brother's keepers. We must continue to support Israel, which faces existential threats from multiple aggressors, whether it be Iran or Hamas or Hezbollah. Even today, Israel remains a David facing Goliath.

What if Goliath wins? He won't, not if I can do something about it.

That's why I'm going to AIPAC.