

The Hope
May 28, 2021

*Kol od ba'le'vav p'nima,
Nefesh yehudi ho'miyah.*
As long as in the heart, within,
The soul of a Jew still yearns,
And onward, towards the ends of the east,
an eye still gazes toward Zion;
Our hope is not yet lost,
The hope of two thousand years,
To be a free nation in our land,
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

It is a strange choice for a national anthem. The haunting melody, the longing, somber lyrics. No rockets' red glare, no "jour de gloire est arrivee." Israel's national anthem is no triumphant victory march. It is also, like so many things about Israel, controversial.

The lyrics of HaTikvah were written in 1878 as a poem by Naftali Hertz Imber, an Austro-Hungarian Jew. The music was written ten years later by Samuel Cohen, a Romanian Jew who based the melody on a Moldavian folk song. It quickly became a popular song among the *chalutzim*, the Jewish pioneers of the early Zionist movement. But the song also had its detractors. Theodor Herzl didn't like the fact that the lyrics were written by Imber, who was, as one contemporary described him, "a vagabond, a drunkard and a Hebrew poet." Others didn't like the fact that the melody wasn't from Jewish tradition. Religious Zionists objected to the omission of God from the lyrics, socialist Zionists objected to the messianic overtones they saw in the reference to a return to the land, and cultural Zionists objected to the minor key, which they described as gloomy and depressing.¹ But in spite of all the objections, HaTikvah stole the hearts

¹ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hatikvah/>

of the people, becoming the de facto national anthem once the State of Israel was established. It finally became the official anthem in 2004.

It's easy to see why people love HaTikvah. It captures the deep love and longing for the Land of Israel that has been a hallmark of the Jewish experience for thousands of years. In HaTikvah, we hear the echoes of our ancestors, those who wept by the rivers of Babylon, those who were exiled and found new homes in North Africa and Babylonia and across Europe, but who still turned towards Jerusalem whenever they prayed. We hear the echo of Yehudah HaLevi, the great 12th-century Spanish poet, who wrote, "My heart is in the east, but I am at the edge of the west." And we hear the echoes of the early Zionists, who envisioned an ancient promise being made real with their own hands.

It might seem ironic that long after the establishment of the State of Israel, HaTikvah remains the anthem. After all, we are no longer dreaming of a Jewish State -- we have one. But it is also clear that the dream has not been fully realized: we are not yet a free people in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem. HaTikvah has not yet been fulfilled.

The Jewish People are not yet free in Israel because of the ongoing conflict with the Palestinian People. I hope that wherever we fall on the political spectrum -- left, right, or "I have no idea" -- we can agree on that. Being free generally does not include having to run to a bomb shelter for cover. The current situation is, to use a technical term, horrible. During this latest confrontation, I heard from so many people not just about their fear or anger, but also their despair. We've seen this before: Hamas firing rockets from Gaza, Israel responding with airstrikes, hundreds of civilians, including dozens of children, killed, and then a ceasefire called until the next time. It's hard to

know who won this round, or what winning even looks like. Both sides can spin the story to claim victory, but even some Israeli military officials aren't sure what they achieved or whether it will prevent or delay another round of violence.² The Jewish People in Israel are not yet free.

They're not free from the threat of physical harm, and they're not free from the political and moral harm that come along with the ongoing occupation of the Palestinian territories. As Dahlia Scheindlin, an Israeli political strategist writes, "The Israeli-Palestinian conflict dominates Israeli politics, muscling out sound policymaking in other critical areas of life. The conflict is suffocating liberal values, eroding Israel's democratic institutions. Israeli leadership at large is collapsing under its weight. It is time to accept that it's not just that Israel controls Palestinians in the conflict. Palestine also controls Israel. The occupation and the festering political conflict since 1948 have permeated every part of our society, political and social institutions, and well-being."³ Scheindlin goes on to describe the many ways that sustaining the occupation dominates Israeli politics and undermines democratic institutions, from coalition-building to the judiciary. We don't have to debate the history that led to the current state of affairs or assign blame to see that the current situation is simply not acceptable for a democratic society. Even in the name of national security, you can't justify occupying the territory of 5 million people and depriving them of civil and human rights, among them the right to move freely, the right to vote, and the right to have access to equal education, healthcare, and other basic human needs. Not for over 50 years. The moral depravity of Hamas does not release Israel from its own moral and democratic obligations. As Rabbi Donniel Hartman writes, "Since most Israelis believe that there is no peace partner, we

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/21/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-war-ceasefire.html>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/20/opinion/Israel-palestine-netanyahu-gaza.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>

have removed the peace process from our public and policy agendas. But why have we removed all discourse about our moral responsibilities towards the Palestinians from these agendas? 'We offered and they said no,' is the accepted narrative, and consequently all suffering they may experience is their own responsibility. Released from any responsibility, we are exempt from blame. Criticism of Israel is either antisemitic (when done by others) or betrayal (when voiced by fellow Jews)."⁴

And here lies yet another form of captivity, the captivity that many American Jews feel when it comes to discussion of Israel. Over the past few weeks I've had numerous conversations with Beth Am members who are struggling to understand how they can both support Israel and remain true to their Reform Jewish values. When they watch the news and think Israel has used disproportionate force in response to Hamas's rockets, they wonder if they're being disloyal. When they are as disturbed by reports of Israelis attacking Palestinians as they are about Palestinians attacking Israelis, they wonder if they're being disloyal. When they voice one of these concerns and are told by other Jews that they're being disloyal, they wonder if they're being disloyal.

For what it's worth, I don't think you're being disloyal. Or, I should say, I don't think *we* are. If we take the teachings of our tradition seriously, teachings about the dignity and worth of all human beings, teachings about choosing life and not oppressing the stranger, teachings about doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God, then these teachings should also apply to our thinking about Israel. How paradoxical would it be to say that in order to preserve the Jewish State, we must leave Judaism out of the discussion?

⁴ <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/i-am-angry-and-i-cannot-put-my-anger-aside-until-things-are-quiet/>

Being Jewish has often come at a high price. Exiles, crusades, pogroms, and attempted genocide -- our people has endured it all. Even today, even here in the Promised Land of the United States of America, we are the targets of harassment and violence. And that is, of course, one of the main reasons Jews have longed for a homeland for all these years, to create a safe haven where none shall make us afraid. It is yet another irony that the behavior of the State of Israel, that supposed safe haven, has become a convenient pretext for anti-semites to abuse us. But we have also longed for the Land of Israel because of what it represents: the covenant between God and the People Israel, the place where the Jewish People can be free to live out its values and fulfill its mission to be an *or lagoyim*, a light unto the nations. To be a free people in our land -- free from harm *and* free to live according to Jewish values and commitments - both are dreams that are still unfulfilled.

It's not up to any of us to figure out how Israel can get out of this moral and political quagmire (though if you have any good ideas, maybe send a letter to the Knesset?). What is up to us is to face the truth about what Israel is and is not, at least not yet, and still remain committed to *hatikvah*, to the hope of what Israel could be. So it turns out that HaTikvah really is still the perfect anthem of the State of Israel.

Od lo avda tikva-teinu,
Ha'tikvah bat sh'not al-payim
Lih-yot am chofshi b'ar-tzeinu
Eretz Tziyyon v'Yerushalayim.
Our hope is not yet lost,
The hope of two thousand years,
To be a free nation in our land,
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.