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RISK ASSESSMENT: A JEW TODAY

This past summer, the fiftieth anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing called to mind the greatest achievement of the American space program, the fulfilment of the pledge made by President John F. Kennedy in 1962, to land a man on the moon in that decade. The commemorative broadcasts at the time of the anniversary captured the nervous anticipation during the dangerous mission, the success of which was far from assured until the lunar module's lift-off from the moon on July 21 1969, and its safe return to earth three days later.

During such moments in history it is customary for American presidents and other world leaders to be prepared for every eventuality. Usually, we are told, two speeches are prepared for the president, the one that he hopes to deliver following a safe return; and the other, the God-forbid version, should disaster result. In fact, while doing research at the U.S. National Archives some twenty-five years after Apollo 11, Los Angeles Times reporter Jim Mann discovered the speech written for President Nixon by presidential speechwriter William Safire, should the lunar module have failed to relaunch, leaving the astronauts abandoned on the moon's surface. The speech that Nixon thankfully never had to deliver began as follows:

Fate has ordained that the men who went to the moon to explore in peace will stay on the moon to rest in peace. These brave men, Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin, know that there is no hope for their recovery. But they also know that there is hope in mankind in their sacrifice. These two men are laying down their lives in mankind's most noble goal: the search for

truth and understanding. They will be mourned by their families and friends; they will be mourned by their nation; they will be mourned by the people of the world; they will be mourned by a Mother Earth that dared send two of her sons into the unknown. In their exploration, they stirred the people of the world to feel as one; in their sacrifice, they bind more tightly the brotherhood of man. ¹

Sadly, in three subsequent instances in the U.S. space program, it was the God-forbid speech that had to be delivered.

This summer, we also observed the 75th anniversary of the Normandy Invasion, that turned the tide of the war against Germany, leading to the ultimate Allied victory. As it happened, the future U.S. President, but then Allied Commander-in-Chief General Dwight Eisenhower, had written his own speech, should the mission have failed. Thankfully, of course, this very short speech was never delivered. These were his unspoken words:

Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the air and the Navy did all that bravery and devotion could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone. ²

These undelivered speeches are more than a little unsettling, in that they remind us of the precariousness of life, that even in moments of great success, of victory, a tragic alternative may have been narrowly averted. History is filled with missions, often dangerous, with less than optimum chances of success.

¹ Shaun Usher, *Speeches of Note*, 2018, p. 170

² *Ibid.*, p. 346

Space exploration we know to be highly risky, and many were not as fortunate as Armstrong and Aldrin fifty years ago. And how many thousands upon thousands, seventy-five years ago, fell at the shores of Normandy, where success came at huge human cost?

Some three decades before the darkness of the Holocaust enveloped the world and destroyed so much of our people, groups of young Jews, moved by the Zionist idea that was being spread in many of the *shtetlakh* and communities of Eastern Europe, left the homes they had known for the uncertainties and hardships of untamed Palestine.

One such group, part of what was known as the Second Aliyah of 1904-1914, primarily from Russia, chose to pursue agriculture in the north of the country. In 1910, ten men and two women formed the first *kevtzah* (a word meaning “group,” that would later evolve into “kibbutz”). Their settlement, situated on the southern end of the Sea of Galilee, would be known as Degania. These twelve young people with no previous knowledge of farming whatsoever, in a very inhospitable climate besieged by locusts, excessive summer heat, in between bouts of malaria, learned to work the land. And were the climate, the unfamiliar environment, the great distance from all they had known previously in life, not enough to make their lives extraordinarily difficult, they were also surrounded by neighbors who, to say the least, did not want them there.

It is no accident that one of the early debates among the settlers concerned the raising of children. Would they raise children in the accustomed way, or would they look towards some form of collective child-rearing, that would later become typical of many of the kibbutzim? But being the first kibbutz, there was another debate that superseded the first. Would it not make sense, some

argued, for the fledgling settlement, in at least its first five years, to ban marriage, so that there would be no children in the short term? Given the harshness of the physical environment, the incredibly difficult circumstances, that opinion carried some weight, and was seriously considered. Maybe it would have made sense to delay births until a greater measure of security would be achieved.

That argument, ultimately, was rejected. Irrespective of the hardships, the uncertainties, there would be marriages and babies would be born at Degania. And so, in the very early hours of May 4, 1915, the first baby born in Degania, indeed the very first baby ever to be born on a kibbutz, came into this world. And yes, you may have heard of him. His name was Moshe Dayan.

History, both that of the world at large and our own Jewish history, prove that life provides very few risk-free zones. Sometimes, as in the case of space travel, or military invasions, the risks are obvious, and enormous. Sometimes, similar to the birth circumstances of Moshe Dayan, parents bring new children into the world surrounded by uncertainty, never knowing which speech, in the course of time, will need to be delivered, never knowing how their offspring will cope with the challenges they will face, both in the day-to-day ordinary issues of life, and in the more extreme moments of crisis that are thrust upon us.

Many here tonight entered the world not surrounded by the comforts and luxuries we have now become accustomed to expect. Many of us were born into modest circumstances at best, when economic conditions were tough, when parents struggled to make a living, when devastating childhood illnesses prevailed, when, as Jews, we were less than welcomed into greater society. We must be grateful, notwithstanding the challenges we faced along the way that our parents, our grandparents, took the risk of seeding future generations when

uncertainty prevailed, who labored long and hard so that their descendants could earn advance degrees in fields whose names they could not even pronounce, who had faith that their children, their grandchildren, those who would follow them in their family lines would prevail in this world, as citizens, as Jews, willingly and enthusiastically.

It has taken me a while to get to Yom Kippur. Look, were we to seek to identify the ritual that, more than any other, has galvanized the hearts and minds of the Jewish people through the ages, without a doubt it would be the recitation that we completed several moments ago, that of *Kol Nidrei*. It is no accident that *Kol Nidrei* is the peak moment of synagogue attendance of the year – your early arrival and struggle for seats tonight attest to it being the singular occasion in shul that no one wants to miss.

Ironic, of course, in light of our people's passionate embrace of *Kol Nidrei*, is the fact that the text itself is highly problematic. *Kol Nidrei* is not a prayer, it takes the form of a legal declaration, through which we seek to be absolved of seven types of vows specified in their Aramaic names; נְדָרֵי – dedicatory vows, אָסָר – oaths, הֲרָמֵי – vows promising avoidance of a given entity, קוֹנָמֵי – vows offering substitute sacrifices, כְּבוּיֵי – substitute legal promises, קְנוּסֵי – similar to קוֹנָמֵי, substitute offers of sacrifice, and, lastly, שְׁבוּעוֹת – oaths made invoking God's Name. Making this more complicated than it already seems, is the fact that according to Jewish law, none of these types of vow can be abrogated through a synagogue recitation, no matter how striking the melody or passionate the feeling it arouses. Sometimes נְדָרֵי can be annulled through a ritual called הַתְּרָת נְדָרֵי, when one would seek to be absolved of a *minhag*, a community custom that had become inconvenient, or a ritual commitment that was no longer possible to fulfill. But none of the other specified vows or promises, once made,

could ever be annulled.³

Yet textual problems notwithstanding, year in and year out, we make it to *Kol Nidrei*, withstanding the crowds, the seating crunch, the uneasy anticipation of twenty-five hours of fasting. Something about the *Kol Nidrei* experience itself transcends linguistic analysis, legal considerations and textual problems. That one could even argue that the recitation we struggled and sacrificed tonight and throughout the ages not to miss, doesn't make sense – has not deterred us one iota from being here, from listening, with our eyes glistening with tears in the process.

I think that the difficulty of the text of *Kol Nidrei* is what makes it so central to our spiritual lives as Jews, and the glue that holds us together on this sacred night. Our lives are complicated, our history, and our remaining part of history notwithstanding what we have endured, borders on the incomprehensible. The risks that our forebears, that those who came before us, that many of you seated here tonight who have lived lives of quiet courage have taken, enabling future Jewish generations to live fulfilling and safe lives – are part of the magnificent mystery of Jewish survival. Like the age-old prayer that we love without understanding it – we don't have the answers to explain how it is that we are still here, but we are here. The unread speech of the ages, that our enemies had long prepared, proclaiming the end of Jewish history, of the Jewish people, has been replaced by the annals of our people, ever alive, ever determined to be part of human history for the long haul, למרות הכל, notwithstanding the price that has been paid, the risks taken, so that the Jewish tomorrow would forever remain within our grasp.

³ c.f. Lawrence Hoffman, ed., *All These Vows*, Jewish Lights 2011, esp. pp. 89-96

I will end with a reflection of a personal experience, that occurred almost four decades ago, just two weeks before my rabbinic ordination. I had spent Pesah that year in the Soviet Union, visiting with *refuseniks*, who had suffered greatly for their expressed desire to make *aliyah*. The first night of Pesah, I attended Seder at the tiny Moscow apartment of Yuli Kosharovsky, ע"ה, a leader of the underground Hebrew studies program. We were crowded around a table, reciting the liturgy that celebrates freedom, with some twenty Jews who, at the time, could only dream of freedom, of *aliyah*, of Israel, while literally enslaved and oppressed. The *Haggadah's* words: "השתא עבדי, לשנה הבאה בני חורין" – this year we are slaves, next year may we be free" – seemed to have been written long ago with that very Seder in mind.

That night, at Yuli's apartment, I met a young man my age, twenty-seven year old Lev Gembom, the one and only Hebrew teacher in the city of Novosibirsk, in Siberia. Periodically, he would come in to Moscow to study Hebrew with Yuli, his mentor, and then take back what he had learned to his students in Novosibirsk. I struck up a conversation with Lev. He told me, in his very serviceable Hebrew, about his work as a computer programmer, about his dream of making *aliyah* and about the two refusals he had already received. He then asked us what I do. I told him that I was just days away from being ordained as a rabbi.

"אני לא מבין," he replied. "I don't understand." "אני אהיה רב," I repeated. He still seemed puzzled, so I turned to Yiddish: "איך וועל זיין א רב – I'm going to be a rabbi." He was quiet for a moment, then seemed to tear up. He then said: "אתה יודע – you know – זה פעם ראשונה – this is the first time – שראיתי רב – that I have ever seen a rabbi."

That moment has stayed with me these past thirty-eight-plus years. Yes, I have

been a rabbi for a long time, and I have cherished the experience. But it has occurred to me that all of my extensive training in New York and Israel that prepared for me for the rabbinate would have been worth every second, even if all that I ever did as a rabbi would have been to meet Lev Gembom that Seder night in Moscow, so that he, for the first time in his life could meet a rabbi, his own age, demonstrating to him that the tradition to which he had never been exposed, was living, vibrant, and there for him and his generation to receive.

There have been many of those moments when one could have imagined, in terms of Jewish history, the God-forbid speech having been delivered. But then somehow, *פינטעלע ייד*, *דאס* emerges, the often hidden spark of the Jew, and a Lev Gembom decides to learn Hebrew, to prepare for *aliyah*, to discover and embrace his identity as a Jew. And then, the dire words of despair are set aside, and the words spoken, the message delivered, becomes for all to hear, a resounding *עם ישראל חי*, a fervent commitment to a Jewish future, and a declaration that our best is yet to come.

