

## Nights of Watching

On Tuesday, March 13, at 11:05 AM, what sounded like a howling, gale force wind roared through the streets of Tel Aviv. Our group of nine from Temple Sinai had been advised to seek shelter. It was our first morning in Israel. Safely inside Independence Hall where, almost 70 years earlier David Ben-Gurion declared the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz Yisrael, we sat quietly among other foreign tourists and a group of 4th or 5th graders from S'derot near the Gaza Strip, listening cautiously to the whooshing sound outside.

Last Erev Shabbat at our Passover seders, we read about a similar but more ancient advisory to seek shelter. In Exodus chapter 12, God instructed the Israelites (Ex.12:22):

ואתם לא תצאו איש מפתח ביתו עד בקר

“You shall not go out of the door of your house until the morning.”

Why? Because ליל שְׁמֵרִים הוא לַיהוָה (v. 42). It was dangerous outside. It was a night of watching as מלאך המות, the angel of death would go through the land of Egypt and smite all the first-born in the land, both man and beast. As long as the Israelites remained in their homes on which they'd smeared the blood of the paschal sacrifice on the lintel and doorposts as an אֹת, a sign, God would pass over them. The plague wouldn't harm them when God smote the land of Egypt.

Imagine being an Israelite in ancient Egypt on the eve of the exodus. Imagine the fear of ליל שְׁמֵרִים, the night of watching. Imagine the anguished cries, the putrid smells, and the paralyzing fear. Imagine waking up the next morning, if you could even sleep, to the carnage of the night before. Imagine hurriedly packing up your life to depart -- to where? To what? God's fourfold promise to bring the Israelites out from the suffering of Egypt, to save them from enslavement, to redeem them, and to take them as a nation and to

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be their God" (Ex. 6:6-7), coupled with the aftermath of the 10 plagues, obviously was incentive enough for the Israelites to put one sandaled foot in front of the other and embark on their journey.

The theme of redemption, the promise of a better tomorrow that resonates in both ancient and modern Jewish texts and traditions, helps keep alive our connection to Jews, to Judaism, and to the land and the people of Israel. The concluding words of the Passover seder, לשנה הבאה בירושלים "Next year in Jerusalem!" focus on the future, on moving forward and aspiring to a more hopeful existence. They're a relatively new addition to the traditional Passover haggadah. They were added in the 11th century by a Rabbi in France. It was a timely and heartfelt plea for the deliverance of French Jews from oppression during the First Crusade. Unfortunately, such pleas for deliverance have resonated throughout Jewish history time and time again. And so year after year we recite the words לשנה הבאה בירושלים both in remembrance of our past and as a reminder to be vigilant in the future.

Of course our people are not the only ones who seek freedom and redemption.

Throughout the world slavery and subjugation continue to exist in myriad manifestations. Unfortunately, the media continues to castigate Israel at every opportunity as one of the worst offenders of human rights. The situation with the African asylum seekers isn't pretty and hasn't been handled well by the Israeli government. The on again/off again deportation plan is controversial. A solution must be found that is good for the welfare of the State and good for the welfare of those legitimately seeking asylum. Over 35,000 Africans have poured through Israel's borders. In 2012, Israel put up a better fence to slow down the illegal and dangerous immigration. Still, what to do

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with those already in Israel? They have no documentation. They are, for the most part, not political refugees fleeing oppression. Rather, they are migrants looking for better financial prospects. While Israel has absorbed millions of refugees from Eastern Europe, North Africa, and in Middle Eastern countries, many of whom were destitute and uneducated, it cannot be a viable home for all. Israel is a small State, one of the world's smallest nations. It has limited resources. Indeed, no nation has unprotected borders where all are welcome to waltz in and live without documentation or coordination. That Israel has mishandled the African refugee problem is true. But it also is true that no nation has handled comparable refugee crises well.

Regarding the recent demonstration and uprising in Gaza, countries around the world jumped to express concern over the number of people killed. Headlines like "heinous massacre of peaceful demonstrators" distort the truth that the Palestinians' protest actually is against the Hamas regime. Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas claimed that Israel was responsible for the violence. Israeli ambassador to the UN Danny Damon retorted, saying, "The international community must not be deceived" by this "well-organized and violent terror-gathering" under the banner of a peaceful march. The Palestians' cynical use of the lives of its people to earn public relations victories may be a winning strategy. It most certainly conforms to the blood lust culture of martyrdom that pervades Arab Muslim theology. But history will judge harshly their cavalier abuse of human life. Its media should be ashamed of being willing, if not eager, partners in this heinous Palestinian crime of sacrificing lives not for peace, but for the destruction of Israel.

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Fifty years ago this week, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. As the last century's most ardent advocate for civil rights, he understood the power speech and the importance of taking appropriate action. King was a vocal supporter of Israel and like US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, spoke bluntly against those who distort the truth. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "When people criticize Zionists they mean Jews, you are talking anti-Semitism." Regarding Israel, King also said,

Peace for Israel means security, and we must stand with all our might to protect its right to exist, its territorial integrity. I see Israel as one of the great outposts of democracy in the world, and a marvelous example of what can be done, how desert land can be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and democracy.

Peace for Israel means security and that security must be a reality.

It's pretty well known that I love Israel, that I am a proud and vocal Zionist. One of the most disturbing things I did in Israel last month was attend The 6th Global Forum for Combatting Anti-Semitism. The 3-day conference of was attended by 1,700 delegates. I went to support our son Sam who, as part of his internship in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interviewed scores of presenters. After about three hours of listening to international experts talk about anti-Semitism, I felt sick. I was disgusted by the fact that such a conference even existed and disappointed that the dates for the next global forum in 3 years already were scheduled. My hope is that no one shows up for the 2021 conference, that there won't be a need for such a conference. My fear is that the 2021 conference will commence as planned.

Israel needs supporters. Israel needs us. Israel needs us as partners to dispel negative media bias. Israel needs us to safeguard it from hatemongers, anti-Semites and anti-

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Zionists. Israel needs us to thwart BDS. The age old promise of *לשנה הבאה בירושלים* is both a physical dream and a spiritual quest. Like the ancient Israelites on *ליל שְׁמֵרִים*, the night of watching, Jews need a sheltering presence to call home. Since May 14, 1948, Israel has served that purpose. Israel continues to serve that purpose honorably and with the best intentions. Unfortunately, not everyone agrees with the way Israel conducts its internal affairs. Israel is unfairly judged by standards that most nations around the world can only aspire to. The night of watching isn't over. True redemption for the State of Israel will come only when its neighbors dismantle their weapons. Salvation will dawn when the media focuses its attention on the way Israel helps the rest of the world, through technology and innovation, through medicine, through being an example of a moral and just society. No, the night of watching isn't over, which is why, on our first day in Israel, our tour group was warned to seek shelter. What sounded like a howling, gale force wind roaring through the streets of Tel Aviv on Tuesday, March 13, at 11:05 AM wasn't a force of nature. It was the siren of a mandatory, country-wide emergency drill that sounded again at 7:05 that night. I'm glad we took shelter inside Israel's Independence Hall. It felt right. Israel is our shelter. Israel does and will protect our people. That was the stated mission upon its founding, that is what it has done in the 70 years since, and with our help and support, that is what it will continue to do forever. As we approach the conclusion of this Festival of Pesach, we recall the ancient words of the haggadah that "in every generation, each person is obligated to see himself or herself as though he or she personally came out of Egypt." To that end we must do all we can to ensure that Israel remains our haven and our refuge because the night of watching isn't over.