

Israeli moviegoers have a notorious reputation for being excessively loud audiences. Several times this summer, in a vain attempt to beat the Jerusalem daytime heat, Rick and I escaped to Cinema City, an eight floor, 20,000 square meter complex that houses, from the roof down, City of the Bible (a life size Biblical story park), a Jewish film museum, an indoor mall, kiddie play areas, conference rooms, VIP reception rooms, a gargantuan Kosher concession stand, mezzanines with hundreds of statuettes of famous movie characters and, last but not least on the bottom two floors, 19 minimally air-conditioned theaters. It was during our 3rd movie in 5 days that we experienced the stereotypical Israeli audience. In addition to the usual crunching of popcorn, crinkling of candy wrappers, and slurping of soft drinks, some nudnik in the audience refused to turn off her cellphone, and each time it rang, she answered it. Of course this prompted a lot of loud shushing until, fed up with the repetitive annoyance, a woman in the audience screamed in Hebrew:

אם את היית רוצה לדבר בטלפון, היית צריכה להישאר בבית!

If you want to talk on the phone you should have stayed home!

In recent months, the Israeli media was fixated on local movie theaters. Not only were ticket sales through the roof, but, according to

ushers, an unusual phenomenon was sweeping the country. Audiences were breaking into raucous applause during certain parts of an action-hero film. This cheering on of a super-hero was unprecedented. And bless her heart, Israeli actress Gal Gadot -- Wonder Woman -- deserved every ovation!

Israelis were in a self-congratulatory mood this summer not only because of Wonder Woman, but also because 2017 marks the 50th anniversary of the Six Day War. Jerusalem, specifically, was on a Zionist high like I've never experienced before. Flags commemorating the 50th anniversary of the liberation and reunification of Jerusalem flew from every street pole. Blue and white bunting decorated store fronts and patios. Crowds of Israelis and tourists descended on the Old City day and night. For weeks on end, thousands of people congregated outside Jaffa Gate, Sunday through Thursday night, to watch a 35-minute multimedia extravaganza recalling the resounding military victory of the Six Day War and celebrating the incredible city that Jerusalem has become. Truly, the presentation -- projected on the very walls liberated 50 years ago -- was inspiring. It was moving. It was thoughtful and uplifting and rejuvenating.

And it was the perfect antidote to the realities on the ground, for the Zionist dream to build a Jewish homeland in *Eretz Yisrael* is not yet complete.

Well we know that Israel, still a relatively young country, is grappling with a significant number of unresolved challenges. It goes without saying, but the heated controversy between the government of Israel and liberal Jews is far from resolved. Over the summer I gave the benefit of the doubt to the government of Israel when it socked a double punch to liberal Jews in one day. First the government froze a decision to create an official egalitarian prayer section at the Western Wall. Then the government advanced a bill that will further empower the country's Haredi, Ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate, to decide who is a Jew. I called these speed bumps and growing pains in this 69 year old country that's still trying to figure out what it means to be a Jewish and democratic state.

Now I'm not so sure I should have been so kind. Recently I attended an Israel symposium for Rabbis during which an Orthodox colleague insinuated that it's the fault of Reform and Conservative Jews in the diaspora that liberal Jews in Israel are experiencing such *tzoris*. It's our negligence, he implied, because we (I) don't push *aliyah*. If we did, he suggested, Israel would be inundated with Jews who would build liberal

synagogues and vote in Israeli elections, thereby effecting change in both the government and in the religious establishment. I'll give him the benefit of the doubt that this scenario could affect positive change, but I was shocked at his insinuation that it's our own fault. For once at such a gathering, I was not quiet.

Not only is it indecent to blame the victim, but it has been crystal clear to everyone that Netanyahu's shenanigans this summer were a selfish move to keep himself in office by preventing his government from imploding. Netanyahu caved in to bullying by a small, Right-wing minority that only is part of his coalition to cement his government. By casual observation it's obvious that non-Ultra-Orthodox Israeli Jews far out populate the number of Ultra-Orthodox.

Secular is the wrong word to describe this non-Ultra-Orthodox populace because secular implies non-observance and that's not how most *chilonim*, Israeli "secular" Jews, describe themselves when asked about their Jewish ritual practice and religious belief. What they describe I call **Israeli Judaism**, and it's unique to Israel.

Outside of Israel, the synagogue, by and large, is home base for our identification and engagement as Jews. It's different in Israel. There, Jews don't need a synagogue to remind them of their Jewish identity. In Israel, Judaism is in the air and on the streets and in the food and on the map and in the language. It's on the television and in the clothing and on the calendar and in the supermarket. Judaism is all pervasive, even among those who don't identify as Jews.

Please know I'm not going to harangue you about the importance of immigrating to Israel. I've been on the receiving end of such diatribes and it's not pleasant or fair. Israel needs people like us living in the diaspora to advocate for her, to explain to her allies why she needs strong military defense and intelligence systems. Just look at yesterday's news. Israel needs friends like us to combat BDS and anti-Zionism. She needs supporters like us who will make sure that the Jewish population of the world, most of whom live outside Israel, form deep, emotional attachments to the Jewish State. If your heart is set on making *aliyah* I won't deter you, but there's no sign up sheet in the hall, there's no bus outside waiting to take you to DIA, and for sure I won't guilt you into thinking you're a "bad Jew" if you don't move to Israel.

What I will urge you to do, however, is to join me in speaking out against such inflammatory rhetoric and, most important, to join me in continuing to support Israel. Why is your support so important? There were a lot of calls this summer by Jews in the diaspora for us to refrain from supporting Israel both financially and in person. I think this is wrong and counterproductive. Israeli Jews and the Israeli government need to hear our voice. They need to know that these issues are Jewish concerns, not just Israeli concerns. If we withdraw from the conversation, if we cease supporting Israel by withholding donations or by refraining from visiting, if we turn our backs and give Israel the silent treatment, then we not only are missing an important opportunity to help change the status quo, but we truly are hurting Israel and the 7-plus million Jews who live in Israel and need our friendship and support. If we give up on Israel, then we truly are at fault and deserving of rebuke.

Hopefully you read the Snippets and Keshet articles this summer about my experiences in Israel. If you haven't, they're still online. Those messages, as well as this, will end with a *nechemta*, a word of comfort.

I have not given up hope that the government of Israel will get its act together and one day respect and protect the rights of liberal Jews. I have

not given up hope that the government of Israel will be empathic to half of the Israeli population and acknowledge that Jewish women, like Jewish men, deserve safe environments in which to pray and accessible venues in which to engage in meaningful Jewish learning. I have not given up hope that the government of Israel will recognize that a minority's monopoly on any decision, especially decisions involving human rights and personal status, is detrimental to democracy and antithetical to basic Jewish values. I have not given up hope that one day things will be better.

Why haven't I given up hope? Because I believe in the power of the Zionist dream. We saw the dream fulfilled 120 years ago in August 1897, when Theodor Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. There the dream of Zionism took on the political momentum that in 1948 resulted in the establishment of the Jewish homeland in *Eretz Yisrael*.

We saw the Zionist dream fulfilled 100 years ago on November 2, 1917, when the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, in which it viewed "with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people," and promised to use its "best endeavors to facilitate" that objective.

We saw the Zionist dream fulfilled 70 years ago, on November 29, 1947, when the Jews of British Mandate Palestine overwhelmingly supported the United Nations Partition Plan that called for the establishment of a Jewish state alongside an Arab state.

We saw the Zionist dream fulfilled 50 years ago, in June 1967, when the Six Day War culminated in Israel's remarkable victory over a seemingly invincible Arab alliance bent on eliminating the 19-year-old State, and Israeli paratroopers liberated and reunited Israel's historic capital, Jerusalem.

Still today we see the Zionist dream in action. Last week, an Israeli colleague wrote:

My personal experience is mirrored by that of my colleagues across the country. Repeated opinion polls demonstrate that there is widespread support in Israel for Reform Judaism. The establishment Rabbinate is, to put it mildly, held in low esteem. Things are moving in our direction and we get a very favorable press. Unfortunately, it is Israel's flawed electoral system that enables the religious parties to hold any coalition government to ransom and ensure that equal rights are not enjoyed by all religious streams. However, the good news is that people are voting with their feet.

The Zionist dream להיות עם חופשי בארצנו - "to be a free people in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem" - is a powerful incentive. Will this dream be fulfilled completely in my lifetime? Who knows? Change takes times. Fortunately, we Jews have a legacy of patience. But we also have a legacy of being intensely stubborn and taking action when action is called for.

Perhaps Wonder Woman said it best: "If it means interfering in an entrenched, outdated system to help just one woman, man or child...I'm willing to accept the consequences." It is this call to action that caused Israeli movie audiences to erupt into spontaneous and raucous applause. It is this renewed fervor for the Zionist dream of Israel as a strong Jewish and democratic State, felt so keenly in the aftermath of the Six Day War and reawakened by Gal Gadot as Wonder Woman, that is inspiring renewed strength, among Israelis and among Jews worldwide, to stand up and speak out against injustice.

I'm no Wonder Woman, but I too am willing to interfere and to fight for what's right because I believe in the Zionist dream for all Jews "to be a free people" in the land of Israel. That's why on Sunday, June 25, Rosh Chodesh Tammuz, I davened at the Kotel with Woman of the Wall, where I

endured the derisive efforts of Ultra-Orthodox Jews bent on disrupting our worship: Haredi women blowing shrilly on whistles and screaming themselves hoarse; yeshiva students shouting mocking taunts and hurling crude insults. And that's why the following *motza'ei Shabbat*, Saturday night after Shabbat, I stood proudly among hundreds of Israelis outside the Prime Minister's residence in Jerusalem speaking out against the government's backtracking on the egalitarian prayer space and its advancement of the conversion bill. Like Wonder Woman, I'm willing to accept the consequences of interfering in an entrenched, outdated system if it means that I can make a positive difference in the Jewish life of one woman, one man or one child.

On this Erev Rosh HaShanah, this first day of 5778, let us begin the New Year by dedicating ourselves to just causes about which we care deeply. We can't all be super-heroes like Wonder Woman, but we all can use our human powers to make positive differences in this world!