

Israel is in trouble
RH morning 2024
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On Rosh Hashanah, according to Rabbi Kruspedai in the Talmud¹, three books are opened; one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the intermediates. The thoroughly righteous are immediately inscribed in the book of life; the thoroughly wicked are immediately inscribed in the book of death; and those in between are held in limbo until Yom Kippur, when their fate is decided. Life and death are powerful motifs during our High Holy Days. We are supposed to see our lives as hanging in the balance and that any deed can tip the celestial balance in our favor.

This is a teaching that many of you are familiar with. It seeks to demonstrate that we are to see ourselves not as wholly righteous, nor wholly wicked, but as somewhere in between the extremes. We can act in both good and bad ways and so we are to be exceptionally vigilant at this time of the year. Anything we do can tip the celestial balance one way or another. Even as we are to be especially scrupulous regarding our actions, I believe this teaching also applies to Israel at this time because Israel's fate is hanging in the balance.

Last year at Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about the complicated internal struggles in Israel. On the one hand, you have ultra right-wing nationalists who currently control the Israeli government. They want to impose ultra-Orthodox Jewish practice on everyone in Israel. They want to absorb the West Bank and Gaza Strip and fill these areas with Jewish settlements with a messianic zeal. They want government stipends to continue for their yeshiva students to study Torah and to support the many ultra Orthodox men who don't work. They want to avoid their men from being conscripted into the army and to continue to rely on non ultra Orthodox Israelis to continue to sacrifice their lives, children, and livelihood to protect Israel.

On the other side, are Israelis who believe in pluralism and the founding principles as stated in the declaration of Independence in 1948. Here is an excerpt:

“THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.”²

These mainstream Israelis believe their country can be a place for ultra-Orthodox, Reform, and for those who aren't even Jewish. They believe in an equal state where all young men and women serve in the IDF, Israeli Defense Forces, and government funds go to all institutions whether they are Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform. These people participated in weekly demonstrations prior to Oct. 7 and filled the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv to support an independent judiciary. I was honored in February 2023 to participate in two of them. These internal tensions have not abated, but have been exacerbated because now Israel faces existential threats from outside its borders.

It's shocking to think that only last fall, on Simchat Torah, Hamas invaded Israel through land, sea, and by paragliding through the air. These terrorists infiltrated the Nova music festival where thousands of teenagers and young adults were enjoying a concert. Hamas chased many concert goers down, murdered people, raped women, and butchered their bodies. These terrorists also infiltrated the peaceful kibbutzim close to the border. They streamed over fields that were cultivated to grow potatoes, wheat, carrots, and avocados. And then they murdered whole families in their homes. They burned people alive, showing no regard for children or the elderly. They killed 1200 people that day and then they kidnapped over 240 people ranging in age from a 9 month old baby to an 86 year old Holocaust survivor and hauled them like luggage into Gaza.

The horrors of this event cannot be minimized. Hamas terrorists purposely attacked civilians with cruelty and even documented their assault on their phones. Even now, there are still people being held against their will in Gaza. Thomas Friedman, an analyst and frequent commentator in the New York Times, from the beginning, beseeched Israel to slow its response down so that it could be strategic. He pointed out that Israel cannot think straight as long as Hamas holds its hostages and that it was in Israel's interest to make a deal with the devil, aka Hamas, to get them back and then leave Gaza. He even wrote months ago that if Israel did so, Yahya Sinwar, leader of Hamas, would certainly come out of the tunnels in celebration but the day after this, it would be a race to see who would kill him first. Would it be the Israelis or the Palestinians upset in how he started a war with no thought to their well-being. If Israel left Gaza, according to Friedman, such a respite would've be an opportunity to regroup, rethink, and strategize. There was for some time an opportunity to make an agreement with Saudia Arabia and other moderate Arab nations. This could bolster Israel's long term security, marginalize Iran, and give it more allies in its fight with Hamas. Given events of these past few days, it is even more apparent that Israel needs more countries on its side but I will return to this in a few minutes.

For many reasons, Israel has not worked out a deal, nor withdrawn from Gaza. Reason number one is that many Israelis are truly traumatized by the events of Oct. 7. Yosi Klein Halevi, a senior fellow at the Hartman institute in Jerusalem in an interview on National Public Radio last winter, stated it this way. To paraphrase his words, "While the rest of the world has moved past

Oct. 7th, Israel hasn't absorbed it. It shattered so many assumptions regarding security and strength. Oct. 7th was a death blow to our faith in our ability to defend ourselves where our weakest enemy delivered the worse blow in Israel's history. The premise of Israel is that Jews would never die powerless in this country. Here in this safe refuge, a thousand of our citizens died in a state of helplessness in the most grotesque ways that Jews have been murdered and it happened within the borders of the sovereign Jewish state."³

And so to break down Yosi's sentiments is to say that Israel felt helpless to protect her citizens. And now you have a country of people who are terrorized. I know this because even my Hebrew teacher in Jerusalem, quite some distance from Gaza, Rivka Rosner, described her fears of what she would do in case of a Hamas terror attack at her home. She is the mother of two toddlers, and she has enhanced her safe room and procured weapons to protect her family.

And it is this fear of a repeat of Oct. 7th, that has led to Israel's incursion into Lebanon. It hopes to expel Hezbollah terrorists from the border. They were not supposed to be there anyway according to the UN Security Council Resolution 1701 that ended the 2006 Lebanon War. The deal was for Israel to withdraw from Lebanon and that Hezbollah would have no armed troops south of the Litani River. Now fearing for its security, Israel wants to decimate Hezbollah's capacity to launch rockets into Israel and to allow the 60,000 displaced Israelis to return to their homes in the North.

The second reason why Israel has not pulled out Gaza is because Benjamin Netanyahu's government is dependent on far-right wing ministers staying in the coalition. Bezalel Smotrich, the finance minister, and Itamar Ben Gvir, national security minister, are adamantly opposed to any deal with Hamas or Israel withdrawing from Gaza. They advocate for Israel to rebuild settlements in Gaza and to even force the Palestinians to leave. Netanyahu doesn't want his government to collapse because he is facing criminal charges in corruption. He also doesn't want the war to end because when that does, there will be a reckoning. There will be questions as to how the government and military missed such important intelligence about Hamas, why Israeli soldiers were in the West Bank and not on the border of Gaza, and why it took so damn long for IDF to arrive.

In an article on June 18, Thomas Friedman writes that, Prime Minister Ehud Barak, an Israeli former general and politician who served as the tenth prime minister from 1999 to 2001, wrote in the news publication, Haaretz, that Israel faces "the most serious and dangerous crisis in the country's history. It began on Oct. 7 with the worst failure in Israel's history."

"Israel", said Barak months ago, is "risking a multifront war that would include Iran and its proxies. And all this is happening while in the background the judicial coup continues, with its goal of establishing a racist, ultranationalist, messianic and benighted religious dictatorship." Barak warned that if the current government is allowed to remain in power, Israel will not only

find itself stuck in Gaza — with Hamas still able to fight and no Arab partner to help Israel out of there — it will also most likely find itself “in an all-out war with Hezbollah in the north, a third intifada in the West Bank, conflicts with the Houthis in Yemen and Iraqi militias in the Golan Heights and, of course, conflict with Iran itself.”⁴

Sadly, Ehud Barak’s words have become prophetic as we are looking down the barrel of an all out war with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iran, itself. -Yes, I was delighted at the ingenuity of pagers and walkie talkies exploding in the hands and pockets of Hezbollah terrorists. This was awesome Israeli intelligence and ingenuity. We exalted in cries of joy in my household on Saturday morning at the news of the killing of the powerful Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah. And there is hope that Israel’s assertive military response could provide a deterrent in the future. And yet, I am worried that Israel cannot bomb its way to peace. There is currently upheaval in the West Bank, Houthis and Syrian rebels continue to fire missiles toward Israel, Hamas still operates out of Gaza, Hezbollah can fight as a smaller guerilla group, and Iran is now front and center. This cannot continue for much longer. Israel is fighting on all sides with exhausted reservists, an economy in decline, and many of its people displaced from the north and along the Gaza strip. What a sad and tumultuous time we are living in.

When I attended the Central Conference of American Rabbi’s conference this past spring, my colleagues and I spent a lot of time talking about antisemitism and Israel. I intend, by the way, to speak about antisemitism on Yom Kippur morning. Well, one of my colleagues, Rabbi Eric Stark suggested a way of framing our response to Israel is akin to a Chasidic saying. This teaching states that every person should have two pieces of paper in their pocket. One that says, “the world was created for my sake alone,” and the other paper, “I am but dust and ashes.” This is to strike a balance between concern for oneself and having some humility about our importance. Rabbi Stark suggested that we should have two pieces of paper in our pockets regarding Israel. One should state, “I am solely responsible for the survival of the only Jewish state in the world.” And the other, “I am solely responsible for the moral and ethical actions of the only Jewish state in the world.”

I find Rabbi Stark’s saying to be a good paradigm to describe where each of us are at. Let’s start with, “I am solely responsible for the survival of the only Jewish state in the world.” This message speaks to those of us who worry about Israel and see it as under siege. We don’t take Israel for granted but are aware of the miracle of the establishment of Israel in 1948 and how all the neighboring Arab countries tried to destroy this founding state. And then, the Six Day war of 1967 and the Yom Kippur war of 1973 reminded us of how precarious Israel’s existence can be. The rise of the Intifadas in 1987-1990’s and 2000-2005 where Palestinians strapped bombs on to their bodies and detonated in cafes, hotels, and buses to murder as many Israeli civilians as possible further eroded our hope for peace. Hamas, since it took control of the Gaza strip in

2006, never stopped launching missiles at Israel. We followed the Oslo peace accords of 1990s where Arafat walked away from a state of Palestine. And to see Israel signaled out by the international community and judged more harshly than any other country, is deeply disturbing.

Others of us feel compelled by, “I solely responsible for the moral and ethical actions of the only Jewish state in the world,” are mortified by the civilian suffering and deaths in Gaza. Perhaps in the immediate aftermath of Oct. 7th, we felt differently than we did as the months wore on. We are greatly pained at the wide scale destruction in Gaza, the bombings that have taken many lives, and the lack of basic human necessities such as clean water, adequate food, medical, and shelter for the Palestinians. We are appalled by the mistreatment of Palestinian prisoners, the deaths of humanitarian workers for World Central Kitchen and others, and how Palestinians had to risk death as they ran to a food convey in March. It’s been a demoralizing year. And it’s a demoralizing time.

I find myself between these two poles and I am scared about the survival of Israel. I wonder if the government of Netanyahu is really making Israel safer or putting it in a more perilous state. I feel strongly that because Israel is a Jewish state it should strive for the highest of ethics while simultaneously taking needed steps to secure its borders.

I find myself in agreement with Thomas Friedman that the best way for Israel to recover and enhance its security in the long run is to empower the Palestinian Authority which recognizes Israel’s right to exist. They are the only ones who can credibly govern Gaza and this would enable moderate Arab nations such as Saudia Arabia to make a peace accord with Israel. This would isolate Iran. Friedman said back in August that, “Iran would no longer be able to disguise its goal to control the whole Arab world by hiding itself and its proxies behind the Palestinian cause. Iran has long been happy to let Palestinians, Lebanese, Yemenis, Iraqis and Syrians die “for Palestine” but never risk Iranians if it could avoid that. The crocodile tears shed by Iran’s clerical leaders for Palestinians are all a fraud — all just a cover for Tehran’s regional imperialist adventure.”⁵

Right now we are seeing Iran’s duplicity exposed and there is need now more than ever ~~for~~ there to be a coalition of support for Israel from moderate Arab countries and Western nations. Israel has to be strategic on this. It cannot go it alone. Israel cannot survive by itself. She needs allies and support and this necessitates new leadership in Israel that can think beyond the next few months, into the years ahead.

The books of life and death are opened at this time of judgment. Will Israel be inscribed in the book of life where it can flourish, be a leader in technology and medical advancement, and be a light on to the nations? Or will there be massive loss of life and infrastructure, continued war on all its borders and within, as it is considered a pariah in the world’s view?

I am solely responsible for the security of the only Jewish nation in the world. I am solely responsible for the moral and ethical actions of the only Jewish nation in the world. May God help us wrestle with our conscience and our values. May God guide our leaders to make decisions that are on the side of life and future coexistence. May this year bring us hope for a better future for Israel, Palestinians, and those in the Middle East and that all will be inscribed for years of blessing.

Notes

¹ RH 16B

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<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-declaration-of-the-establishment-of-the-state-of-israel>

3

<https://www.kpcc.org/2023-12-20/the-unexpected-friendship-between-an-arab-and-israeli-writer>

Yossi Klein Halevi, Israeli writer and a senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute. His latest book is called [Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor](#). Author of the op-ed [The lonely people of history](#), published in The Times of Israel.

⁴ Thomas Friedman wrote in THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN American Leaders Should Stop Debasing Themselves on Israel June 18, 2024

⁵ [Opinion | America May Soon Face a Fateful Choice About Iran - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)