

A month ago I had the opportunity to see whales up close. There is something remarkably humbling about witnessing these majestic creatures; over 40 feet in length, coming up for air just a few yards away. Graceful and gigantic, whales seem immune to any harm. Of course, we know that isn't the case as some species of whales have almost been hunted to extinction.

It is not we in our age alone, however, who understand that the whale had something to fear. In the Talmud the ancient rabbis observed that every creature is afraid of something. A small animal, they taught, can terrorize a lion by making itself appear more ferocious than it is. Here, the fear is internal, for the lion, though mighty, imagines its opponent to be stronger. What can make an elephant afraid? A mosquito. It can't kill the elephant, but it sure can drive it nuts. The third fear is one the scorpion has of the spider. This is a real terror, for the bite of the spider can kill its equally lethal rival. A fourth fear is that of the eagle, who is afraid of the swallow, which can get under the eagle and prevent it gaining lift. The eagle wishes to reach the heights, but its struggles prevent it from soaring. And what of the whale (the one called Leviathan)? It fears a small fish that will block up its blowhole. No matter how big and immune from harm the whale seems, the smallest creature can bring it down.<sup>1</sup>

Our sages were not, of course, really talking about animal psychiatry, but were offering a parable about strength and weakness, fear and hope, the mighty and their enemies. We live in an age Jews over the past 2000 years dreamed about – when Jews have a sovereign nation, strong and able to defend itself, capable of defending Jewish interests far beyond its borders. And yet, the Talmud wisely understands, fear can undermine even the mightiest of nations.

As we come together – taking stock and looking forward, as individuals and as a people – this is a natural time to reflect on the state of the world. We are in The Days of Awe, but the Hebrew for that, *Yamim Ha'noraim*, can also be understood as "The Days of Fear." Given this past year it is hard not to feel

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<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 77b; with insights from Rabbi Michael Marmor and Levi Weiman-Kelman

a sense of dread. Like the elephant, driven mad by the mosquito going up its trunk, the tunnels and rockets of Hamas never threatened to destroy Israel, but still drove it to war. We have seen, as if from nowhere, the emergence of a virulent anti-Semitism that used that conflict as a pretext for attacking Jews. Sunni extremists exploded out of Syria, conquering huge swaths of territory. Their primary weapon of choice is fear itself, and the beheading of their enemies terrified hundreds of thousands of people to literally run for their lives. Turkey and Qatar are the countries we "love to hate" right now (and there is reason aplenty to do so), but it is Iran that remains the greatest supporter of terrorist groups in the world (including Hezbollah and Hamas), and continues to build the foundation for its nuclear capacity and capability. Like the scorpion, who fears the one fatal sting of the spider – a truly existential danger – we must not lose sight of the Iranian threat, even if the eyes of the world are focused elsewhere, for just a single nuclear bomb could destroy the Jewish state.

During the Days of Awe we are supposed to make an honest assessment of where we are, for only with that can we see our failings and figure how to move towards better. Given the state of our world, and relationship as American Jews to Israel, I have two great fears – the first is that we will care too little that abandon Israel. I am afraid that we will turn our gaze from the great evil afoot in our world, for we are not safe from it – not as Americans, not as Jews - and Israel is a wall that protects us. So I make a plea to be an *ohav Yisrael* – Israel's lover. Not someday, maybe in the future, but to love "Israel Now." My second fear is that we will care too much and leave aside our humanity (much less our Jewish values). I hope to make the case that Israel is not just for Israelis (it is also the *Jewish State*), and so you have a claim and stake in what it does. It is not enough to support Israel, or be engaged, or fall back on the "we're not there" explanation to sweep what we think is wrong under the carpet. "More than ever" Israel needs us American Jews as partners in making the case for a Jewish and democratic state. Israel Now. More than ever.

**Those who care too little**

A number of people have told me that in response to all that's happening in the world, and the difficulty dealing with Israel, they just "turn off." "It's too much", "I can't stand seeing it", "My kids are too afraid for us to talk about everything going on."

I get it. It is easier to turn aside, to close our selves off; and as Jews we are influenced by a war-weary America. But it is a path that is as misguided as it is false. The communist Leon Trotsky once said, "you may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you." To those of you saying Israel isn't your issue, it isn't *our* issue – take off your blinders, for the proponents of radical Islam continue to remind that they *are* interested – and in *you*. The enemy is a many-headed Hydra that assumes different names (Al Qaida, Hizbollah, ISIS, Hamas – it's like the "hate group of the month club"!), but united in a singular hostility for us, not only as advocates of the democratic values of the West, but as Jews. Here's just one of hundreds of examples: five months ago (before this summer's events) Mehdi Nemmouche, a French citizen, entered the Jewish Museum of Belgium and killed four people. Investigators believe that when he moved to Syria in 2012 he trained with ISIS militants. Hating America, hating Israel, he turned on Jews. *We are at war* – and it is searching for you and me.

Operation Protective Edge this summer also unleashed a wave of anti-Semitism that should be a wake up call to us that our fate, like it or not, is inextricably linked to what is happening in Israel. Those on the Left make the claim that opposition to Israel is not anti-Semitism. I agree. I criticize Israeli policies and actions plenty, but the fine distinctions intellectuals make are lost on many of those who target Jews. The means we ought to use to know if anti-Semitism is real is not how it appears from afar, but how those who live in a place are reacting. That record numbers of French Jews made *aliyah* this last year is the surest sign that a growing number in that country have decided where their future is more secure – and it isn't in the land of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. This summer, in Belgium, a doctor refused to treat an elderly Jewish patient and a café displayed a sign that read, "dogs allowed, but Jews are

not.” And it’s not just Europe. An alarming rise in anti-Jewish incidents occurred recent months in Australia, including teenagers threatening to kill Jewish elementary-school children on a school bus. In Venezuela, President Maduro told a regime-sponsored rally that “the Jews who live in our lands” had the responsibility to stop Israel’s killing of “innocent boys and girls.” Earlier this month a commentator wrote in a Turkish paper that the Jews of that country should pay a tax to rebuild Gaza, a collective punishment that hearkens back to the most pernicious anti-Semitic proposals of the Middle Ages, when Jews were forced to a ransom for kidnapped co-religionists. No wonder we tremble, and Jews around the world feel more anxious this Rosh Hashanah than they did a year ago.

No less pernicious is the moral bankruptcy of much of the Left that turns a blind eye to the violent underpinnings of Hamas, and the ongoing interest in armed resistance amongst Palestinians in general.<sup>2</sup> Much of the anti-Semitism in Europe is coming from its burgeoning Muslim population. We can explain it as a result of poverty or the inability to move up in a rigid society, but no explanation should allow us to accept denying the Jewish people the right of self-determination – the very thing that those on the Left and so many Muslims seek for the Palestinians.

Now – more than ever – it is time to recognize that Israel matters. It is, for all its problems, the strongest example of an open, liberal democracy in a Middle East that has been torn apart by rebellion, civil war, Islamic fundamentalism and corruption. A stable, secure Israel also protects the rights of Jews around the world. You may think you are safe here in the suburbs, in a land where (thank God!) anti-Semitism has not taken hold. But when your children or grandchildren ask why people did not see what was happening before the Holocaust and say anything, how would you answer about what you are doing in response to what is happening now? Jews have never had it so good as they do now in America. Surely a strong, vibrant Israel has allowed, at least

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<sup>2</sup> For an assessment of the current view of Palestinians about ongoing armed struggle, the potential for peace, attitudes on who won the recent Gaza war see <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/492>.

in part, our comfort in this land. At the very least, return the favor with your interest and involvement.

Israel matters - for the ongoing flourishing of liberal democracy. Israel matters – as a haven for Jews as anti-Jewish hatred grows in other lands. Israel matters – for it is now the largest Jewish country in the world, and much our people's future will be made there. Israel matters – for the strength of our Jewish community in America. And so, if you are amongst the uninformed, uninvolved and apathetic – the time to stand aside is over. Israel Now. More than ever.

### **Those who care too much**

Is it possible to care too much? The first book of the Torah is filled with the unhappy consequences of parents who love a child too much, often at the expense of another. It is even possible to love God too much. Abraham, in an act of overwhelming faith, is prepared to offer up his son to God. Yet, in the end, God rejects the offer. And so we turned to a God that values life – even above obedience, submission and faith. We used to think that child sacrifice was a primitive, long-abandoned practice. We see in radical Islam that the zealotry of the old gods, eager for the blood of the young, lives on. *Allah akhbar* the purveyors of suicide bombings, beheadings, and lovers of hate scream out. "God is great". With the *Akeidah*, the God that we affirm shows us a different path – that "God is good."

Ours, then, is an approach of ethical monotheism, rooting faith in a society that is equitable, compassionate and just. Such a vision is not, our traditions teach, for us alone. Last year I spoke of the traditional reading for Rosh Hashanah that places Hagar (the Egyptian) and Ishmael (the father of the Arab nation) at the center. And God hears the cry of Ishmael "where he is."

It is hard in the blood passion of war to speak such things, for the enemy is – indeed – diabolical. Hamas is callous and calculated in the way it puts civilians in harms way, threatens reporters and distorts the flow of information.

Palestinians rejected Fatah because it was corrupt, but they are now in bed with Hamas (given the support recent polls), which is worse, for it is cruel.

I understand the anger and despair I hear. "There will never be peace", many say. "Palestinians never lose a chance to miss an opportunity." "It would have been better to wipe 'em all out." Do we really think killing all the leaders of our enemies will bring us security? Samson tried it, bringing down the temple of the Philistines, yet ancient Israel's struggle continued. Then, as now, military solutions are no substitute for political reconciliation. No army can make peace. Only people willing to make peace can make peace.

A natural response to an external threat is to circle the wagons, to close ranks and seek unity. Circling the wagons too tightly, however, is also a danger. The Talmudic sages understood that the threat to a nation's physical survival is not the only thing to fear. Just as the eagle's preoccupation with the swallow keeps it from soaring, our singular focus on the fear of Palestinians will enfeeble the possibility of Israel being the nation it seeks to be.

After the bodies of the three young Israeli students kidnapped in June were discovered, 16-year old Mohammed Abu Khdeir was burned alive in revenge. Most Israelis were appalled. But it reflects a growingly far right in Israel that is increasingly violent. The same evening Abu hdeir was murdered, a few hundred chanted "Death to the Arabs" as they ran through the streets of Jerusalem, pummeling anyone they spoke to who answered with an Arab accent. one sick, hate-filled individual put p a Facebook a page titled "The people of Israel demand revenge" – and it got 35,000 "likes" in a couple of days before the page was taken down. We can understand the fear and anger, but we dare not excuse it, or pretend these incidents are isolated from larger problems in Israel.

Bigotry finds root when vandals target Palestinians, the army, Christian and Muslim places of worship, and Reform synagogues in Israel with hate-filled graffiti, threatening that there is a "price tag" (threatening a price to be paid) for opposing policies supported by the Right. Hate grows in a society where scores of rabbis, paid by the State, issue a letter saying Jews are forbidden to

rent to non-Jews. Human rights – and the claims made that Israel is a civil society - wither in a land where nearly half of all Jewish Israelis believe, that Jews should have more rights than Arabs.<sup>3</sup> Xenophobia – the fear of the other – will only grow if we, loving Israel too much, turn aside from its darker side.

The Israel we love must be a nation worthy of soaring. It should “foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants ... based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel.” It must “ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants with respect to religion (or) race or sex.” An Israel we must be engaged with – now, more than ever, must “guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.” Oh, and that vision? Too “kumbaya” for you? Too naïve? Well, it’s not mine. It’s how Israel defines itself, for I’ve quoted directly from Israel’s Declaration of Independence.

Some in the Jewish world circle the wagons so tightly that they think everyone’s against us. As the commentator, Yossi Klein Halevi recently wrote, “Israel may well have more active enemies than any other country, but it also has more active friends – and by no means all of them Jews.”<sup>4</sup> Speaking last week at a rally in Berlin last week German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, “It is a monstrous scandal that people in Germany today are being abused if they are somehow recognizable as Jews or if they stand up for the state of Israel. I will not accept that and we will not accept that.” Her words are remarkable. She did not just denounce anti-Semitism. She said hatred of *Israel* is antithetical to the values of German society. Do you know where the largest pro-Israel rally happened this summer? In Calcutta, India. And, despite the concerns I hear from many about the media bias against Israel, American support for Israel remains near record highs, with ever growing military, trade and cultural ties between our two countries.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <http://en.idi.org.il/analysis/idi-press/publications/english-books/still-playing-by-the-rules-the-index-of-arab-jewish-relations-in-israel-2012-english/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/as-we-enter-rosh-hashanah>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/161387/americans-sympathies-israel-match-time-high.aspx>

Finally, as much as we may think progress is impossible, it isn't. I am not optimistic about a new Middle East or peace breaking out with everyone singing *salaam* and *shalom* in one voice. Yet there are many – some out of fear of greater enemies, others motivated by a true devotion to peace, some just worn out by this 100-year struggle – who realize that the downsides of conflict outweigh the benefits of negotiations. Some believe that things can just go on as they are maintaining the *status quo*. But it will not hold (nor, I believe, should it) – and unless we support, even from afar, those willing to lower fear and raise hope, for *both* peoples – I fear the whirlwind that will arise. The West – and Israel – is at war, but let's be clear who is the enemy. It's not the Palestinians. It's radical Islam.

Yes. Love Israel - more than ever – but don't let that love harden your heart. Yes. Help Israel be strong – but don't fall into the trap of thinking that strength only comes from the force of arms. Yes. Israel has accomplished wonderful (I daresay miraculous) things – but don't let that close your mind to being appropriately critical. Now, more than ever, don't allow your fear to define you, but your hope. Israel now, more than ever, needs us not to be advocates for the *status quo*, but proponents of moving forward. But how?

### **Moving Forward**

In the Torah God says to the first man that his partner, Eve, will be his *ezer k'negdo*. The English translation often used that she will be is "helpmeet", but the Hebrew literally means, "help against him." 1000 years ago Rashi taught that teaches who is a real lover. If your partner is worthy – a lover supports and guides them. If you love someone you think is straying from the proper path – be their truest friend by challenging them to turn them to what is good.<sup>6</sup>

Israel does not need cheerleaders (you who care too much). What Israel does need are lovers (you who care too little). And if we truly want to be

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<sup>6</sup> Rashi to Genesis 2:18



*ohavei Yisrael*, "Lovers of Israel" she needs us to be *ezer*, her "supporter" for all she is and *k'negda*, her "challenger" for all she is not, yet could be.

How can we do this?

- First, pledge to vote in the World Zionist Organization (or WZO) next Spring. The WZO is the parliament of the Jewish people – a reminder from the days of Zionism before 1948 that we all have a stake in that nation. ARZA – the Association of Reform Zionists of America – affirms that support of the Land of Israel - our *aretz* – is a central pillar of Reform Judaism. But ARZA needs you – and your vote. The vote will come in the Spring – and you will hear much about it in the coming months. For now, just pledge your support. The financial cost is zero. The cost of not voting will be that others, not as dedicated to the values we affirm, will drive the agenda in the years ahead. Fill out the form today and drop it in boxes at the exits or, if you prefer, fill them out and bring them back on Yom Kippur. But make the promise to be involved. Your voice is needed in Israel now. More than ever.
- Second, act on some of the suggestions on your seats. Take the magnet. Use it as a gentle reminder to keep Israel in mind and to be part of the conversation. Put the magnet on your fridge, in your car, in your locker or work – and to focus in the coming year on positive ways to be Israel's lover. Be informed. Engage in conversation. Invest – and do so wisely. Stop cowering. Face your fears, but don't let them keep you from going to Israel – not "someday", but now.

As we begin this New Year, then, let us not, as Ruth Messinger once said, "retreat to the convenience if being overwhelmed."<sup>7</sup>

Let us be honest. Honest enough to face our fears, to see the evil visage of our enemies, bearers of the spider's sting.

Let us be wise. Wise enough to know that there are fears and there are fears. Survival is not our only worry, but also being stifled by our anxieties,

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<sup>7</sup> Baccalaurete delivered at Stanford commencement (June 13, 2009), [http://news.stanford.edu/news/2009/june17/messinger\\_text-061709.html](http://news.stanford.edu/news/2009/june17/messinger_text-061709.html)

unable to reach the moral height for Israel envisioned by the prophet, "for out of Zion the law will go forth."<sup>8</sup>

Let us be bold. Bold enough to be engaged, to speak to others even if – and maybe especially when - we don't agree.

Let us care. Care enough to know that our fate and that of Israel's are one, yet not care so deeply only for ourselves that we lose ourselves as Jews and abandon our humanity, no longer hearing the cries of Palestinians.

Let us love. Love Israel for the amazing land that it is, and love Israelis for the miracles they show us in our time, yet love Israel as partners in the upbuilding of our people – supporting fully, yet challenging deeply when we believe it is necessary.

This year let us be honest, wise, bold, caring ... and loving. That's what Israel needs from you and me. Not cheerleaders, but lovers.

Israel Now. More than ever.

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### **Background Material**

A particularly powerful article that challenges the bias of the Left against Israel and of the Right that Israel "normalizes" Jewish existence is one by Ellen Willis, "[Is There Still a Jewish Question? Why I'm an Anti-Anti-Zionist](#)". It is dated (she wrote it in 2003), but it is still relevant and one of the best summaries of the current challenges. More recent is "Liberals in the New Middle East" by Ari Shavit. It is available [online](#) to subscribers of *Ha'aretz* or you can contact me for a copy. On the need for a more nuanced approach in dealing with Israel beyond just support is "[For Israel Engagement on Campus: Coaches, not Cheerleaders](#)" by Yehuda Kurtzer.

On bias in the media, and arguing that it is insidious and all pervasive is Matti Friedman's "[An Insider's Guide to the Most Important Story on Earth](#)". A rebuttal is offered by Steven Gutkin in "[My Life As An AP Bureau Chief In Israel](#)", with Friedman's response "[Ongoing Controversy Around the Most Important Story on Earth.](#)"

What lies ahead? Elliot Abrams argues, in his essay "[What Now for Israel?](#)", that Israel is engaged in a "long war" and says that the most that can be hoped for, at this time, is to "endure." A challenge to him, not so much in theory, but in tactics is offered by Robert Satloff's "[Israel's Situation in One Word](#)", who says that Israel should make a concerted effort to the political elite in the West that it is a liberal democracy that has high ethical standards for its soldiers, and show that it is eager in the pursuit of peace. Abrams response to Satloff and others, with some suggestions as to ways forward, can be found in "[Keeping the Status Quo and Improving It.](#)"

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<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 2:3