

## **The American Jew and Israel: This Is Not the Time for Ambivalence**

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This is a time of "stern sobriety." Israel is once again under savage terrorist attack by the Palestinian authority and its extremist allies – Hamas, Islamic jihad and Hezbollah. The al Aksa intifadah is a premeditated act of Palestinian armed aggression against the Jewish state.

Having closely observed Hezbollah's success in forcing Israel's unilateral retreat from Lebanon two years ago, the Palestinian authority now seeks to replicate that success, trying to compel Israel's unilateral retreat from the West Bank and Gaza through lethal force: suicide bombings, grenade attacks, and sniper fire on Israeli soldiers, police and, especially, civilians.

This is a calculated effort to force Israel to make all the painful compromises and the Palestinians none. It is a cold-blooded strategy designed to take from Israel through violence and propaganda what it could not win from Israel at the negotiating table.

My heart goes out to the people of Israel. You must understand what life is like for Israelis right now:

Imagine what it would feel like if your hopes for imminent peace with your enemy were dashed by the spilling of your own blood.

Imagine how you would feel if you had to seriously worry about your own personal safety in downtown summit: you might be shot at, shelled by a mortar, or blown up.

Imagine what it would be like if neither your elected officials, nor the army, nor the police could absolutely guarantee to you the safety of your children at the movies or the mall.

Imagine what you would feel if your baby was shot dead by a sniper shooting into your own living room.

This is the nightmare that the people of Israel have been going through. There have been 66 suicide bomber attacks, exacting an enormous emotional toll. And since Israel is a small country, everyone knows at least one person who has been killed or grievously wounded. Israelis have not known one moment of rest, one moment to let down their guard for over one full year.

Although it has been 53 years since the United Nations divided the land of Palestine into two countries, one Jewish and one Arab, the Arab world remains openly hostile to the existence of a Jewish homeland in the Middle East. The Arab world and its supporters still actively seek to delegitimize the right of Israel to exist at every turn, of which the campaign to brand Israel a racist state at the United Nations' World Conference on Racism two weeks ago is the latest and most pernicious example.

Let us not forget who comprises the population of Israel. Israel is a country composed primarily of Holocaust survivors from Europe, refugees forcibly expelled from Arab lands (who are, by the way, the completely forgotten victims of this conflict), and Jews who escaped the clutches of Communism in the former Soviet Union.

It is an outrage to the entire Jewish people, that Jews who survived Nazi death camps or brutal Islamic anti-Semitism or Soviet repression must now worry that their grandchildren and great-grandchildren are no more safe, that they could be blown to bits by a suicide bomber at any time and at any place.

It is an affront to the entire Jewish people that the citizens of Israel, so many of whom suffered so much under Nazi, Arab, or Soviet regimes, that they be accused of racism by the Arab League at the UN conference. What a shameful example this is of the victimizer blaming the victim!

For those of us who care deeply about Israel, this is no time for apathy. For those of us who feel distanced from Israel, this is no time for your ambivalence. This is a time when American Jews need to stand up and speak up for Israel. And if not now, then when?

Israel desperately needs our political solidarity and our emotional support. The American Jewish community must get our act together and come together on behalf of our Jewish brethren in Israel. "Our task now," says Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement, is "to embrace Israel, to hold it near, and in so doing, to reconnect our future with our most sacred past."

But there is another reason that calls us to "stern sobriety." In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Arab anti-Semitism has superseded Christian anti-Semitism as the most dangerous threat to Jews around the world.

The American Jewish Committee reports that "not since the 1930's have Jews worldwide been exposed to the displays of hate heard and seen in the streets of major cities around the world [since the outbreak of the second Intifadah]."

From Washington to Ottawa to Paris, pro-Palestinian demonstrators have chanted in Arabic for the 'slaughter' of Jews. Across Europe, the Americas, Australia, and South Africa, dozens of synagogues, schools and other Jewish sites have been attacked."

The fight between Israel and the Palestinians is not just about the conflict between two different nationalisms. It is not about anti-Zionism. It is about anti-Semitism. It is about the Arab world's hatred of Jews. Hidden behind anti-Zionist rhetoric, the truth of this hatred sometimes slips out.

Were you aware that some Arab groups actually distributed anti-Semitic literature at the United Nations World Conference on Racism, including posters of Jews with big noses and bloody fangs?

Did you know that Syrian President Bashar Assad greeted Pope John Paul II in Damascus last May by comparing the Israelis' treatment of Palestinians to the Jews' "betraying and torturing of Jesus"?

Have you not heard that after the breakdown of the Camp David peace talks, Sheik Ahmed Yassin, spiritual leader of Hamas, told worshippers at Friday prayers: "Have no mercy on the Jews, no matter where they are, in any country. Fight them where they are. Wherever you meet them, kill them."

The Arab Middle East is rife with anti-Semitism. Egypt is the largest producer of anti-Jewish literature in the world. Many Arab governments sanction state-sponsored anti-Semitism. The Arab world teaches anti-Jewish hatred through school textbooks, government-controlled newspapers, and Friday sermons in mosques calling upon the Muslim faithful to "eradicate the Jews from Palestine."

The Arab world continues to scoff at the Jewish attachment to Jerusalem or the Temple Mount and to "deny, trivialize or laud" the Holocaust. Appearing in the Egyptian-government-sponsored newspaper Al-Akhbar was the following statement: "Thanks to Hitler, of blessed memory, who, on behalf of the Palestinians, revenged in advance against the most vile criminals on the face of the earth. Although we do have a complaint against him for his revenge on them was not enough."

So if you thought the Arab-Israeli conflict was about Zionism and had nothing to do with our lives here in America -- think again!

Israel needs American Jews and the rest of world Jewry to stand by its side right now. But American Jews and the rest of world Jewry also need Israel to be by our side as well:

There must be at least one secure refuge for Jews of every color and nationality. Israel provides that safe haven.

There must be at least one sovereign state that will protect Jewish lives. Israel saves Jews.

Had the state of Israel existed in the 1940's, I daresay that the 6 million Jews who perished in the holocaust might still be alive today.

There must at least one place on earth where our Jewish holidays, language, and symbols prevail in the public sphere. In the diaspora, our minority Jewish culture must always accommodate to the majority Christian culture. But in Israel, Jewish culture is the majority culture. Even if you don't go to synagogue on Shabbat, you still feel that it is Shabbat, in Israel.

There must be one place where it feels easy and natural to be a Jew. Here in America there are times when it feels lonely to be a Jew. It cannot be denied. But in Israel, you never feel alone as a Jew. When you are in Israel you feel at home.

For all these reasons and more, Israel deserves an esteemed and valued place within our Jewish lives.

Speaking very personally, I love Israel. But I think you already knew this about me. I cannot imagine living my Jewish life without Israel. Having lived there twice for a year each time – including during the 1973 Yom Kippur War -- my love for Israel is unconditional.

At the same time, and without any contradiction, I feel for the suffering of the Palestinians. I feel for them as a human being, and I feel for them especially because I am a Jew.

As a Jew, I know the sting of living under an occupying power, I understand the intimidation, the humiliation, the injustices big and small that must go on in the lives of Palestinians at the hands of some Israeli soldiers and settlers, perhaps even daily.

I will be the first to concede that Israel sometimes treats the Palestinians harshly and unjustly. The American Jewish community should not be silent when Israel expands or builds new settlements in the administered territories, when Israel expropriates Palestinian land, when Israel bulldozes the homes of innocent Palestinians in acts of collective retribution, when Israel blockades Palestinian towns so that Palestinians cannot make a living or put food on the table, when Israel engages in other acts that serve only to legitimately incite or humiliate the Palestinian population.

I recognize the legitimate grievances of the Palestinian people. I sympathize with their yearning for a country of their own.

But I unequivocally reject the stance of some in the Jewish community who justify their alienation from Israel, or their unwillingness to be financially supportive of Israel, because of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians.

What about the Palestinians' failure to bear their own share of responsibility for peace?

The American Jewish community should not be silent when Palestinian mosques and media daily instigate incitement for holy war and glorify martyrdom against Israel, when Palestinian schools indoctrinate their children to hate Israelis and paramilitary camps encourage teenagers to be "human shields" at the frontlines of the intifadah, when the Palestinian police and militiamen who were supposed to protect the peace open fire on their Israeli counterparts, when the Palestinian authority fails to use the considerable assets at its disposal to alleviate the suffering of fellow Palestinians languishing in refugee camps, when yasser arafat duplicitously calls for peace in english but inflames his people to commit violence in Arabic.

The mutual sense of bitterness and grievance between Israelis and Palestinians is so thick that not even moderates can stomach to talk to one another very much. But talk to each other they must. For the absence of such dialogue creates a vacuum that the extremists on both sides would be only too happy to fill, to keep the five million Israelis and the four million Palestinians headed on a collision course.

Since Camp David, the Israeli government and public have demonstrated their readiness to make painful compromises for the sake of peace. Is the Palestinian leadership prepared to discuss not just what they will get but also what they will give up? Will Arafat educate and ready his people on the street for peace and co-existence?

Only time will tell. In the meantime, the Israeli people have resolved to hang tough. They are determined never to reward Palestinian terrorism. Without falling into a sense of hopelessness, they are reconciled to taking the long view.

So what can we do? There are four concrete actions we can take:

American Jewry can publicly hold Palestinian leaders morally accountable for their strategy of terrorism and urge the united states congress to impose economic and political sanctions upon the Palestinian authority until it implements a complete ceasefire and returns to the principle of negotiated settlement with Israel.

We must unequivocally condemn the Palestinian reign of terror against Israeli civilians, especially the targeting of Israeli children. The premeditated murder of innocents can never, ever be morally justified. It is heinous. It is despicable. It has nothing to do with justice; everything to do with vengeance.

So too, we must unequivocally condemn the appalling Palestinian practice of deliberately pushing children and teenagers to the front lines of the intifadah in order to exploit the inevitable casualties for propaganda purposes.

The American Jewish community can demonstrate visible signs of solidarity with Israel and make Israel's case before the court of world opinion. We can be certain that the enemies of Israel will be watching to see whether or not they have succeeded in driving a

wedge between Israeli and American Jews through their propaganda efforts. A strong showing on our part will quash Arab ambitions to isolate and intimidate the state of Israel.

I hope you will join the Temple Sinai delegation to the solidarity rally for Israel on Sunday, September 23, in New York City. At this time, we have \_\_\_\_\_ people going. Your presence will be tremendously important to the morale of the Israeli people. Israelis are unbelievably resilient, but they are also only human. They need us to help bolster their strength to resist terrorism, to take comfort in knowing that someone else shares in their pain.

It is not enough for us to feel close to Israel. We must become more actively and concretely engaged with Israel and we need to foster more face to face contact between American and Israeli Jews. I therefore propose, in light of the many times that Rabbi Emeritus Morrison Bial took Christian clergy to Israel, and in celebration of our upcoming 50th anniversary, that Temple Sinai "adopt" a sister reform congregation in Israel.

In fifteen years or less, the Zionist dream will come true. Israel will become the home of the largest Jewish community in the world. It is crucially important that we build strong institutional and human relationships between diaspora and Israeli Jews. The time is nigh for American Jewry, for this Temple Sinai, to forge a new and more honest relationship with Israel, to get to know and to appreciate the living Israel, the real Israel, in all its sometimes bewildering complexity.

Finally, this. The American Jewish community can financially support the many Israeli-Palestinian institutions that promote pro-peace and pro-coexistence attitudes and endeavor to build bridges between the new generations of Israeli and Palestinian youth. Among them are: interns for peace, seeds of peace, Neve Shalom (a joint Israeli Jewish and Israeli Arab village), Givat Haviva, the Adam Institute For Democracy And Peace, The Abraham Fund, the interreligious coordinating council in Israel. In my annual list of tzedakah opportunities that appears in the December issue of the temple bulletin, I will give you a fuller list of local grass-roots organizations that I commend to you for your financial support.

I call to your attention that the American founder of interns for peace, dr. Bruce Cohen, and Mr. Hisham Kullab, the Arab founder of the Palestinian branch of interns for peace, will be our guest speakers at the Shabbat service on Friday, October 5. I hope you will make a point of coming to services that evening to hear their informed perspectives on the future of peaceful co-existence between Palestinians and Israelis.

It makes no difference whether you are a religious Jew, a cultural Jew, or a secular Jew, Israel has the power to sweep you off your feet! One cannot fail to be awed by the land where our ancestors walked, amazed by the sight of Jews of every color and nationality living together, mesmerized by the sound of a vibrant Hebrew language. Israel is the national homeland to which our people have prayed to return for 2,000 years. Israel is our collective dream come true.

On this Rosh Hashanah morning, it is incumbent upon each of us to reassess our own personal relationship to the state and to the people of Israel. At this moment, Israel is being tested by her enemies and so are we. Neither our apathy nor our ambivalence toward Israel will do.

Sixty years ago, as the Nazi nightmare was unfolding in Europe, American Jewry was painfully slow to rise in defense of our Jewish brethren across the Atlantic Ocean. We did too little and we acted too late. Sixty years later, will we make the same mistake again? Because life is so good for us here will we once again respond with complacency and indifference to the suffering of Jews elsewhere?

Or will we finally recognize that an attack on Jews anywhere is an attack on Jews everywhere?

While it is not like us Reform Jews to speak with one voice about anything, the urgency of the hour demands something more from us:

It requires unity. As Israel defends itself against brutal Palestinian aggression and yearns for a partner in peace, it is the responsibility of every Jew to support Israel with all your heart and soul. "Some moments define who you are as a Jew. This is one of them."