

The Days of Awe are the season when we take stock of ourselves spiritually, atone for past wrong-doing, and seek reconciliation with God and fellow persons. We pray that we, our loved ones and our people everywhere will be granted a year of *chayim, b'racha, v'shalom* – life, blessing and peace. Of particular concern to us are the 40 plus percent of the Jewish people who live in Israel; we pray on these holy days for their security and well-being. Whatever the theological underpinnings of the Days of Awe, they have become for us an occasion also to affirm our Jewish identity; and no such affirmation could be complete without reflecting on past and current events in Israel, which is so central to our identity as Jews.

This past May I had occasion to make a return trip to Israel some twenty-seven years after my previous visit. The two weeks that Nancy and I spent there (nine days as part of an organized tour and the remainder of the time an extended stay on our own) were a rich and rewarding experience. The tour showed us many different facets of Israel – the scenic, the historical, the religious, the cultural and the entrepreneurial. I was able to observe many changes that had transpired in the course of nearly three decades. The bonding and the sense of camaraderie with our companions in the tour group were wonderful. A Jewish heritage tour of Israel is certainly an experience I recommend for those who have not yet been there.

Enjoyable and informative as they were, those two weeks hardly qualify me as an expert regarding the politics and society of Israel or the challenges Israel confronts, both foreign and domestic. Although we read the local newspapers at breakfast and heard several erudite and thoughtful lectures as part of our tour, we saw little first-hand evidence of any conflict with the Palestinians in the “territories” or with radical elements in the Islamic world. Indeed, we felt perfectly safe during the entire two weeks. Nor did we observe directly anything that would testify to the controversy reported in the press during our stay regarding African immigrants who entered the country illegally or to popular dissatisfaction with raising costs of living and economic inequality, such as occasioned the tent cities and protest demonstrations in the summer of 2011. We saw lots of *haredim*, ultra-Orthodox Jews, at the Western Wall and in the streets of Jerusalem, where we walked extensively, but gained no special insight into the knotty and complex

problems of synagogue –state relationships and tensions between religious and secular segments of the population.

Having been a tourist affords me no special expertise, but I do try to follow events in Israel closely on a daily basis. Although my perspective tends to be nuanced and sometimes critical I regard myself as deeply engaged and as a lover of Israel, as I have been for as long as I can remember. It is not criticism and nuance that are the antithesis of love but rather disengagement and indifference. Israel is vital to my Jewish identity. The Zionist project grounded in a renewed emphasis on Jewish peoplehood succeeded in bringing about the return of our people to its ancient homeland and a restoration of Jewish sovereignty and power. The harried and persecuted remnants of a wounded people were restored to a life of freedom and dignity. A nation that endured the rigors of economic austerity in its early years became a pioneer in science and technology and a respected participant in the global economy. This constitutes the fulfillment of a centuries-old dream and is one of the great miracles of our time. Being powerless, as we were for two thousand years, allows one the luxury of making moral judgments without having to bear the consequences of our decisions. Wielding power and being in a position of leadership and of responsibility for the security and well-being of others poses difficult moral dilemmas and sets up moral choices that are seldom black and white.

As I began writing these lines the Iranian regime's quest for nuclear weapons was the primary challenge facing Israel, a lead item in the Israeli press, a source of deep concern and anxiety to Israel, and a serious threat to her long-term security. It has been so for a long time. This is not Israel's problem alone; the Iranian nuclear program is a threat and a source of worry to the United States and to Arab regimes in the Persian Gulf as well. But the virulence of the rhetoric directed at Israel emanating from Iranian leaders, Israel's compactness in area, and her vulnerability to attack by Iranian proxies – Hamas and Hezbollah – all place Israelis in a different and more perilous situation. As I started to write these lines, I considered it a strong possibility that, in the interval before I would share my remarks from the pulpit, Israel might act unilaterally to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, while a window of opportunity still presented itself. The pros and cons of such an attack have been debated ad infinitum, and there truly are a dizzying number of questions surrounding this issue, definitive answers to which may be known only to a

small number of policy-makers. How close are the Iranians to producing a nuclear weapon? Is Israel by itself capable of knocking out the program or bringing about a significant delay in its implementation? If Israel decided to act, would the U.S. offer covert support? In the event of an Israeli strike, would the Iranian people (many of whom loathe their regime) rally around their government out of patriotic motives, and would the Iranians be spurred to pursue their quest for nuclear weaponry with renewed determination? Would a nuclear-armed Iranian regime be constrained by considerations of pragmatism and mutual deterrence, or would the Iranian leaders' fanatical hatred of Israel and the tenets of their radical messianic theology cause them to disregard the devastation their own people and land would suffer in a nuclear exchange? Even were we to be assured that pragmatism would prevail within the Iranian regime, there are other reasons why an Iranian nuclear weapon is unacceptable – it would undermine, if not nullify, the power of Israel's deterrence against Iranian-sponsored terrorist groups operating on her borders; nuclear technology could be shared with terrorist organizations, who might deploy it in the form of a dirty bomb aimed at Western civilians; and a nuclear Iran would lead to the pursuit of atomic weapons by Egypt and Saudi Arabia and to nuclear proliferation in the world's most volatile region.

Threatening and unacceptable as a nuclear weapon in the hands of the Iranian regime is, on the other hand, the possible consequences of an Israeli military attack would be dire – disruption of oil supplies, severe shocks to the international economy, retaliatory attacks by Iranian proxies on Israel and on Jewish targets around the world, and a fracturing of the ties linking Israel to its chief ally America. No wonder that Israeli public opinion is divided. The Prime Minister and Defense Minister appear to favor unilateral Israeli action; while some leading figures who occupy or who in the past have held posts in Israel's military and security establishment have indicated their opposition. It is a situation that is worrisome in the extreme to those who care about Israel's security, cause for sleepless nights. Deciding what to do about the Iranian threat and how to handle it is not a responsibility I would want to shoulder.

A second challenge to Israel emanating from the outside is associated with the chain of events that have been designated as the "Arab Spring". Long-ruling leaders of Middle Eastern and North African countries have been deposed, corrupt and authoritarian

regimes replaced by popularly-elected or supported governments. But as much as we would like to hail democracy and popular sovereignty, Israel and the West view these developments warily. Egypt's Mubarak was a dictator, who failed to solve his country's economic woes and whose departure was cheered by the vast majority of his people, but he did maintain (an admittedly cold) peace with Israel for thirty years, keeping the most populous Arab nation out of active hostilities. One can not underestimate the boon to Israel in terms of security. The ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate to Egypt's presidency raises the question of the new regime's intentions regarding the peace with Israel. Egypt may not be in a position to wage war, but it can ally itself diplomatically with forces hostile to Israel. Moreover, instability in Egypt leaves a vacuum in the demilitarized Sinai Peninsula on Israel's southwestern border that could easily be filled by radical groups such as al-Qaeda. In Syria, the Assad regime has been attempting to suppress a popular rebellion with a brutality that has outraged the world, deploying aircraft, armor, and artillery against civilian populations and inflicting casualties in the thousands. Syrians in the thousands are escaping the carnage and seeking refuge in neighboring countries. While Assad's hold on power is tenuous and his regime's long-term prospects are doubtful, the future of Syria is uncertain. The opposition is a coalition of disparate factions including Islamists, whose ideology and proclivity to violence are frightening. Israel is keeping a watchful eye, as Nancy and I learned when we visited the Golan Heights adjoining the Syrian border. The downfall of Iran's chief ally in the region would be most welcome, but we must also ask ourselves, Is the devil we are not yet familiar with going to be better or worse than the devil we know?

To move onward to a third challenge: there have been no meaningful negotiations now for several years between Israel and the Palestinian Authority regarding the attainment of the two-state solution to the Middle East conflict that both parties subscribe to. Getting from here to there remains as elusive as ever. The fact that the Palestinians are politically divided - with West Bank residents under the rule of the Palestinian Authority and Gaza ruled by the hard-line and intransigent Hamas- contributes to the deadlock. A sad sign, not only of the impasse in negotiations but also of the lack of any realistic hope for progress toward a solution, has been the recent decision of the blogsite bitterlemons, a joint Israeli-Palestinian endeavor that each week published a diverse selection of views

on current Middle East developments, to suspend its weekly publication and cut back the scope of its activities. Terrorism originating in the West Bank and directed at Israelis is negligible to non-existent due to the security barrier and also to continuing cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian security forces. But the deadlocked negotiations are worrisome, because the two-state solution is the most desirable way of resolving the conflict, and the passage of time renders its implementation all the more difficult. A bi-national state, such as would result from Israel's annexation of the territories acquired in 1967 and enfranchisement of the Arab population, would be a disaster, a recipe for bitter and unending internal strife. So-called price-tag attacks, in which radical elements in the settler community destroy or vandalize mosques or Palestinian homes and fields or on occasion physically assault Arabs, to protest the evacuation of outposts and to dissuade the Israeli government from contemplating territorial compromise, are a source of embarrassment and concern for Israel. Israeli authorities have come to realize that they must treat Jewish lawlessness as they treat violence and terrorism perpetrated by Arabs.

Parenthetically (and I resist any judgments as to how this might relate to the continuing occupation of the territories) the ugly and deplorable attack on an Arab youth by Jewish teenagers in Jerusalem's Zion Square several weeks ago brought to the forefront the need to deal openly with anti-Arab racism among some segments of the Israeli Jewish population. This is not a question of whether you're on the left or right of the Israeli political spectrum. Deputy Prime Minister Moshe Ya'alon labeled the incident an act of terrorism. Knesset speaker Reuven Rivlin visited the Arab youth in the hospital. And Education Minister Gideon Sa'ar urged schools in Israel to devote their opening day sessions to the discussion of intolerance and racism. All three are prominent Likud stalwarts, and not peaceniks or bleeding hearts by any stretch of the imagination.

A secure Israel, within safe, defined and recognized borders, living at peace alongside a state in which Palestinians can realize their political aspirations, would be for me the best of all possible endings to this hundred-plus year conflict. It would be the ultimate fulfillment of the Zionist movement's aspirations. I would be deeply gratified to witness such a turn of events in my lifetime. This would not mean the end of all conflicts in the Middle East. It would not dampen the enthusiasm of Islamist radicals for a clash of civilizations with the West. Nor would it disarm the hostility of Israel-haters, who reject

the very idea of a sovereign Jewish state. But the perception that Israel was making renewed efforts toward the realization of a two-state solution would boost her moral standing in the world and earn political and diplomatic capital in the international arena. And let me add as an aside that I recognize that it does take two parties to negotiate. If the Iranian nuclear program is indeed Israel's top priority (and I believe that it is), the political capital gained by progress on the Palestinian issue, will serve Israel well when it seeks support on that issue.

Last but not least, to mention just one of the internal challenges Israel faces, we speak of religious-secular tensions and of issues involving the *hareidi* or ultra-Orthodox community. I have no intention of bashing anyone, because genuine diversity requires a tolerance of different life-styles, and because I also believe that the *hareidi* community in Israel is in transition. Many *hareidim* are recognizing that the present model of large families, dependence on welfare subsidies, educational curricula that fail to prepare students for the modern world, life-long Talmudic study, and non-participation in the work force and in military service is unsustainable in the long run, and they are willing to make accommodations. Some of the extremism we've witnessed in recent years may be the product of rabbinic authorities attempting to re-gain control and circle the wagons against the forces of change. The short-lived merger between the Likud and Kadima political parties that was forged this past Spring presented an opportunity to end wholesale exemption of *hareidim* from the military, but the coalition dissolved without decisive action having been taken. Let me say finally that I would applaud the de-politicization of religion in Israel, the availability of options for non-Orthodox as well as civil marriage and burial, and the separation of synagogue from state, by which I mean not the absence of Jewish symbols and ceremony from the public square but rather the withdrawal of government funding for religious services and the salaries of clergy. Let them be funded voluntarily rather than with tax revenues. Such a separation could only enhance the reputation of Judaism in the eyes of the general public and make possible an appreciation for the beauties of our tradition, unsullied by clericalism. This is, of course, given the realities of the Israeli political system and its dependence on coalition-building, a pipe-dream, but one can hope.

Daniel Gordis is an American-born and trained rabbi, now living in Israel, where he is senior vice president of the Shalem Center, a think tank and research institute that inclines to the right of the political spectrum. I sometimes disagree with what he writes, but I do want to call to your attention a recent piece by him that appeared in the on-line magazine Tablet, “No Jewish people without Israel”. His main point is that the establishment of Israel has given Jews around the world a sense of pride and self-esteem and a degree of assertiveness that we lacked hitherto. Without a secure and thriving Israel, American Jewry would be gravely weakened in spirit and unable to survive. Gordis observes that many Jewish young people, wearied by the endless controversies surrounding Israel (particularly the claims and counter-claims of pro-Israel and anti-Israel partisans that one hears on college campuses), have disengaged and are not as passionate about Israel as the older generation of Jews. And he admonishes us (young and old) that we must not allow our criticism of and our disenchantment with the way Israel is dealing with the particular challenges I’ve enumerated to obscure the larger picture, the miracle of a Jewish state reborn and a people renewed in our own times.

Renewal for each of us as individuals and for our people is the theme of this New Year season. And so we pray for ourselves, entering into a new year with all of its uncertainties about what may lie ahead, for our dear ones, and for Israel, facing so many challenges – renew us, O God, renew our lives, renew our passion, renew our idealism and commitment – *chadesh yamenu k’kedem* renew our days as of old.