

Israel
Yom Kippur
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This past year the world witnessed what is being called the “Arab Spring”. Beginning in January dictatorship governments in Egypt, followed by Syria, Lebanon, Libya and Jordan, were forced from power by people taking to the street in protest. Israel’s neighbours have an Arab Spring about once every 50 years, where they take a moment to look carefully at their lives and their destiny and try to change something. We do something like this every fall, we call it Yom Kippur.

It’s the Jewish way to strive to be better, to acknowledge our significant progress as well as our imperfections. As individuals we do this each year, a cheshbon hanefesh – an accounting for our souls. We ask ourselves where have we missed the mark, where have we gone wrong, where could we have done better. We ask forgiveness for our mistakes and pledge to try to do better in this year ahead and ask god to be written for goodness in the book of life.

What is unique about Israel is that she is probably the only country in the world that also has to do teshuvah because she is always under the microscope. Almost every Arab country is run by an oppressive dictator, but no one noticed until the spring of 2011? And what do people ask, what is Israel’s reaction? It’s as though every time the Middle East sneezes, Israel has to offer a tissue. With the hyper-sensitivity the world places on our tiny Jewish piece of real estate, we know how important it is to constantly reform and refine.

What other country constantly fights battles and after each one puts together a report on how she did? Whether it’s a defensive war or an offensive war, Israel constantly analyzes her behaviour in the arena of security to understand what she did and how she can do better. Last summer the Turkish ship Mavi Marmara tried to illegally break the Gaza naval blockade. This was a terrible ordeal as you remember, when our navy boarded the boat they were attacked by the supposed “peaceful activists” with knives and lead pipes. Our soldiers returned fire and killed some of the protestors. In the aftermath of the event, the army analyzed what happened and how to prevent the needless loss of life, and acknowledged her mistakes. But we also knew that it was right to board that ship that was trying to break through the blockade. And our suspicions of nefarious cargo below deck were proved correct because cases of missiles, guns and bullets were found in that ship. The UN report on the incident backed up Israel’s actions. This past summer, having learned from experience, Israel again repelled a planned blockade running ship using political pressure without firing a shot.

Israel politicians also do teshuvah and get second chances. Ariel Sharon was a military hero in the 1960’s, but vilified for his role in pulling the Israeli army of the Lebanese refugee camps in the 1980’s allowing militants in to slaughter thousands. By 2005 he was back on top as Prime Minister. Ehud Barak sat down with Arafat in 2000 at Camp David and nearly had an agreement, giving up nearly 98% of Judea and Samaria in return for peace, but was rebuffed. The Israeli public lost faith in him and he was left in the political dust, but now he’s back in the race to be the next Prime Minister. And of course our current PM Netanyahu, held the PM spot, was pushed from power for years and then saw each of his political adversaries fall by the wayside and there he is again, back on top. *Only in a Jewish state does everyone get a chance at a second coming.*

Israel also took a hard look at herself this past summer leading to what is being called the “tent protests”. Israeli’s finally began to protest the vast economic disparity after nearly three decades of fiscal conservatism at the expense of social services such as education, health and welfare along with the eroding salaries and steeply rising prices for good and service. It began innocently enough with one young woman, Daphne Leef, setting up a tent in Tel Aviv to protest the lack of affordable housing. Within a month, 150,000 people had taken to the streets, in 12 different locations around the country, demanding social justice. The protesters were made up of many in the 20-30’s, the backbone of the future of our homeland and a demographic that we must listen to and understand. Without violence, this group of people wielded a deadly threat – if the government does not act on their wishes, the best and brightest of this age group might just pick up and leave for other countries where there is no defence burden and it’s easy to make a living.

Israel for a long time has needed to do teshuvah and examine her economic trajectory. Israel finds herself at its strongest economic position ever in her young history, yet never have so many young people been frustrated at their own financial position. One reason is our country does not have a constitution, just a set of basic laws that don’t address basic social rights – such as the right to housing, education, health and welfare – all the elements of welfare system where the state takes care of the individual. Secondly, the last two decades have seen a governmental commitment to free market forces and outsourcing social services, accompanied by weakened trade unions and the erosion of working conditions and salaries.

The result is owners and mega-salaried executives becoming richer and the middle class becoming poorer. Banks, energy companies, supermarket chains and media properties are all concentrated into the hands of a few. The price of food, apartments and cars has spiralled out of control. A typical Honda Civic might cost \$19,000 in Oakville, its \$35,000 there. A gallon of Israeli gas is \$8. Small apartments in major cities go for \$400,000. Those in the technology sector do very well; medical professionals do fine, but what about the rest? Nurses and teachers are among the lowest paid, not just in Israel but compared to every other 1st world country.

In May 2010, Israel’s economy was robust enough to be rated as one of the world’s strongest, yet Israel has one of the world’s largest gaps between rich and poor. I often get solicited for donations to Israel. It used to be for trees or Reform Judaism or *Tzahal* veterans. I knew something was wrong when solicitations are now for Israeli food banks, women’s shelters and soup kitchens. I had assumed a country would take care of those needs for its own people but unfortunately the rising cost of living and poverty line mean donations are needed from overseas to help the needy.

There are many reasons for the lack of social funding in Israel. Israeli governments for years spent money on the West Banks settlements that should have been used internally. A lot of shekels are funnelled to the growing Orthodox community, many of whom don’t work or serve in the army yet take subsidies and welfare cheques. Moreover Israel has a low tax rates for the super rich tycoons. You might have thought these concerns would have risen to the surface sooner, but how could they with most concerned about terrorism and security and peace making, those always took priority. In re-examining herself, Israeli’s, especially young people, turned their focus to the socio-economic system and demanded change. The platform for change includes more public housing, tax reforms especially for the rich, and a shift in budgetary priorities, such as transferring part of defence budget to social services, and compliance with world averages when it comes to numbers of doctors, police and firemen and school classroom sizes. Netanyahu, despite his typical approach to simply maintain the status quo, has at least set up committees to examine the issues and negotiate with the protestors. Can we go back to the days of the welfare state, which our labour Zionist founders dreamed of a century ago? Can we lower the gap between rich and poor? These questions must be addressed and answered. Different social coalitions, students, unions, political parties – are coming together, and with new commissions and recommendations. I hope this year we will see changes and our prophetic call for justice and care for our neighbours can become a reality.

In contrast to Israel, I believe that the Palestinian people and their leadership have not taken a hard look at their situation, but instead constantly look for the easy way out. Not that finding peace in the Middle East is easy. Probably everyone knows the old joke about this touchy subject.

A man is walking along the beach alone when he stumbles across something gold in the sand. He bends down and picks up an ancient looking gold lamp. He rubs the sand off and suddenly a magic genie appears.

"Your wish is my command" says the Genie.

"Amazing, a magic lamp. But don't I get three wishes?" says the man.

"Don't get greedy," says the genie. "And don't be selfish either; the High Holydays are coming soon."

"All right," says the man. "Listen, I have been a Leafs fan all my life. They haven't won anything in decades. My wish is that they win the Stanley Cup this year."

"Are you kidding?" says the genie. "Have you seen the Leafs line-up? They can't score, their defence is unreliable and even their goaltending leaves a lot to be desired. I'm only a genie. Try a different wish."

"Okay," says the guy. "The Israelis and the Palestinians are trying to get back to the negotiating table.

How about if you make it so they actually succeed in reaching a permanent and satisfying agreement for both of them."

The genie thinks for a minute and says, "Do you want the Leafs to sweep the Stanley Cup Finals or win in 7?"

Israeli's and Palestinians want peace. But I feel that this recent ploy, asking the United Nations to recognize its claim for statehood, without negotiating peace with Israel, was hasty and illogical. The first step towards finding peace would be for the Palestinian leadership and people to acknowledge the state of Israel, and this has simply not happened.

Abbas, in comments this past spring, made mention of the catastrophe of 1948; when Palestinians were forced from their land. He conveniently left out of his warped history that when the UN first proposed a partition plan for the end of the British Mandate with two states – one Jewish, one for Arabs, the Arabs rejected the offer. The Jews accepted and within the year, the UN voted to accept Israel as the Jewish state, and we declared independence. The Arab countries surrounding Israel responded by attacking the newly created state, but lost the war. Our claim to Israel is justified and legally created by the nations of the world. If Abbas cannot start with this fact, then how can we proceed?

Secondly what would happen if a Palestinian state were simply created without negotiations? Israel tried such an experiment in 2005 when she pulled all military and civilian personnel from the Gaza Strip and allowed the Palestinians to create an independent entity. What was our reward? Daily missile attacks. We have tried to control our borders with Gaza, but the southern border with Egypt is porous, allowing weapons to be smuggled in daily. Facing a constant barrage of missiles directed into our towns and villages – hitting school, homes, playgrounds and hospitals, naturally Israel had to send the military into Gaza to establish a buffer zone and eliminate the missile launching sites. Gaza at least is a narrow strip of land along the sea that has a specific border. The West Bank is a large land mass, extending from Beer Sheva up to the Sea of Galilee. If a Palestinian state was established without a signed peace treaty, an end to the conflict, and agreement to a demilitarized country, what is to prevent a similar outcome? Only this time missiles would be fired from hilltops into Jerusalem, Haifa, Tel Aviv and every other major Israel population area. This would be a catastrophe and must be prevented from ever becoming a reality.

What many have failed to recognize is that lately there has been, for the most part, peaceful coexistence in the West Bank. Since the security fence went up a few years ago, and suicide bombers stopped, Israel reduced the 44 roadblocks to 16 and invested 10s of millions of shekels in infrastructure. Israel has partnered with Palestinians businesses to establish industrial zones, electric generator projects, and easing customs procedures. Tourism has sharply increased. And perhaps this one story can speak volumes. After the horrific murder of the members of the Fogel family in Neve Tzuf in the West Bank, by Arab terrorists, the family sat shiva. One of the shiva nights, a Palestinian taxi suspiciously raced into the entrance to the settlement, but it turns out a young woman in labour was facing a life-threatening situation, the umbilical cord was wrapped around the baby's neck. The quick action of settler paramedics and IDF troops deployed in the area saved the mother's and baby's life, prompting great excitement and emotions. The Israeli ambulance driver, Orly Shlomo, said, "I was touched to see the face of the new baby, but I also thought about the face of the murdered baby." Yet she did job and looked past the political issues to the human beings in trouble. The Palestinian villagers were so thankful they named the baby "Jude". Corporal Levin, who was first on the scene and freed the baby girl recounted, "It was an amazing feeling, to hold the girl that was just born in my arms, and to know that in this complex place we did something good."

I understand and believe that eventually we must have a two state solution to the Arab-Israel problem. If we continue to maintain the status quo, then the conflict continues and this is not fair to the Palestinians who live there, to settlers who are unsure of their long-term status, to soldiers who have to police this region or to Israel who needs the money from this conflict to address the social issues apparent from this summer's tent protests. If we annex the entire area, we are faced with a situation where our Jewish state will be half not Jewish. If everyone has an equal vote in our democratic state, that will be the end of the Jewish nature of our homeland. The Palestinians need a state of their own, but based on a comprehensive peace agreement. So while I understand that Abbas would like the UN to recognize a Palestinian State, he cannot do so without recognizing Israel's right to live in peace within secure and recognized borders, as required by UN Resolution 242. Canada, along with Israel and several EU countries, opposes the UN bid. President Obama who captured the essence of Abbas's ploy recently said, "Symbolic actions to isolate Israel at the United Nations in September won't create an independent state. Palestinian statehood will come to fruition only when Palestinian leaders commit to a final peace agreement that secures the aspirations of two states — a Jewish homeland alongside a Palestinian homeland.

If only it were as simple as a genie in the lamp who could solve the complex problems of the Middle East. Instead we have regular people, like a woman who sets up a tent in Tel Aviv because she couldn't afford rent and a revolution begins. Or a man who saves the life a baby, not seeing her religion or ethnicity, but just her humanity. Or two politicians who come from different sides but can see each other face to face and bravely work out agreements for their people that includes compromise and negotiation. Israel, and Israeli's are capable of deep reflection and Teshuvah, as we all do at this time of year. May we all see a year ahead full of changes and agreements, of justice and peace, of goodness and joy.

Shana Tovah!