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Len Levin

To mend the rifts in the Jewish people

My Yom Kippur sermon

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So here we are again.

The Jewish people is divided.

We have seen this before.

And as so many times before, the dilemma is posed to every Jew:

Is it a higher priority to fight for what I believe is the right course for the Jewish people? Or to preserve the unity of the Jewish people, even if it means toning down my demand that it act in the way that I believe is right?

In the parallel case in American history, it is the dilemma that Abraham Lincoln faced when he began his presidency: Is it more important to free the slaves, or to preserve the Union? You will recall that he placed a higher priority on preserving the Union, until midway through the Civil War he decided that the only way to preserve the Union was by freeing the slaves, and so he issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

Let's turn to the recent history of Zionism and Israel and roll the camera back to before October 7, maybe back to 1967, or 1948, or even back to the Balfour Declaration of 1917. There were many factions in early Zionism, but let's oversimplify and reduce it down to two. One faction was in favor of a Jewish homeland, with the stipulation that it would not prejudice the rights of the existing non-Jewish populations. The other faction thought the Jews

should rule all of Palestine, by conquest if necessary, and the non-Jewish population would just have to make do with Jewish rulership.

The choice was eventually made not by us but by the militant Arab leadership, led by the Husseini clan (and later by Arafat and the PLO). They refused to share the land with the Jews and conducted a series of campaigns, leading to the 1947-49 war, which tried unsuccessfully to uproot the Jews from the land. Eventually, in the Six Days War, Israel occupied the territories of the West Bank and Gaza. This put the problem back in the Israeli's lap: should they incorporate these territories, replete with Biblical history, into Israel? Or should they use them as bargaining chips, trading land for peace, and facilitating the emergence of an autonomous Palestinian state alongside Israel?

This dilemma has occupied the politics of Israel, between left and right, for the past 60 years, even before October 7. Ten years ago, the Shalom Hartman Institute put together a class, titled Jewish Values and the Israel-Palestinian Conflict, on which I am drawing for the course in Judaism and Pluralism that I will be teaching in the coming semester. Briefly, the Hartman approach to this set of issues is that there are two conversations here, one about political policies, the other about core Jewish values. On the policy side, they sketch five different approaches, as follows:

1. Two states as a moral imperative, to recognize the human rights of the Palestinian people.
2. Two states as a policy imperative, to defuse a difficult problem and clear the way for Israel's diplomatic progress in the world.

3. Two states as an ultimate aspirational goal, while recognizing that circumstances at present render that goal impossible of achievement.
4. One state as a policy imperative, for the sake of Israel's security.
5. One state as a moral imperative, because the land of right belongs to the Jewish people (or to all its inhabitants in common).

So much for the policy breakdown. On the values side, they recognize a series of Jewish values that have a pull on all Jews, and that can serve as a bridge for Jews who disagree on policy to recognize what they have in common, and strengthen inter-Jewish bonds through dialogue. These include the values of peace, of justice, of self-preservation, of the land of Israel itself, of Jewish exceptionalism, and of compromise. Without going into the details, you can see how the conversation over values is more likely to lead to harmonious dialogue and less recrimination than specific policy disagreements.

So far, the Hartman Institute advanced the discussion ten years ago.

Then came the Smotrich-Ben Gvir cabinet, and then October 7.

You may not recall the conflict in Israel over the Supreme Court four years ago. Let me remind you.

Israel does not have a formal constitution. They have what they call "basic laws" that form a bedrock within which ordinary laws operate. They also have a Supreme Court, that on occasion will say the government is wrong about such-and-such an issue. Among the issues that would come before the Supreme Court were cases where the settlers and the Israeli government would encroach on the boundaries and rights of Palestinians living in the West Bank and say, the Palestinians have rights, too. The

latest Israeli cabinet found this frustrating. So they initiated a judicial overhaul law, by which the Knesset and cabinet would have the power to remake the composition of the judiciary and override it in specific cases—basically, to neuter it and make it subservient to the ruling government. This aroused stormy opposition among liberal Israelis, and they came out and demonstrated every Saturday night for months. The proposed overhaul law was never passed, but put on hold after October 7.

Then came October 7. Whoever has followed the story of the Palestinian extremists from 1920, through the Mufti of Jerusalem, through Arafat, through the various intifadas, and to the present, will be familiar that Hamas has represented this extremist element, rigidly opposed to any lasting peace settlement with Israel, since it took over this line from the PLO in the 1980s and 1990s. It was Hamas suicide bombers that put a stop to the momentum of the Oslo accords in 1996, the year that Margie and I lived in Israel, and I lost a classmate and his fiancée to a suicide bomber. By the summer of 2023, Hamas had been playing quiet for a while, engendering the illusion that all would be smooth sailing ahead. On October 7, it was revealed that they had put the lull to use in constructing a diabolical labyrinth of tunnels as a staging point for launching an equally diabolical plot to ensnare Israel between its survival needs and its moral aspirations. For the worst part of the October 7 attack was not the murders and rapes per se. It was not the hostage-taking per se. It was rather the dilemma that it put Israel in: choose between your moral ideals and your survival. If you wish to survive, you must bomb Gazans, at the cost of thousands of civilian casualties that will tarnish your reputation and make you a pariah among the nations of the world. If you wish to maintain your

moral purity, you must resign yourself to the loss of your hostages and the possibility of recurrent deadly attacks that will make your country unlivable.

Had Israel been at its best self when this challenge was delivered, it might have responded more creatively. But if truth be said, Israel was very far from its best self. It was ruled by the faction within Zionism that was the most militant, dictatorial, and exclusionist. The Ben Gvirs and Smotriches had no qualms about destroying cities and neighborhoods with the maximum ferocity, with no qualms for civilian lives or welfare, using starvation as a weapon, and falling back if necessary that all of Gaza's housing complex was one vast human shield filled with Hamas perpetrators at every school, hospital, and housing complex. Ben Gvir also had no qualms about using rhetoric that implied that the destruction of the entire Gazan people was a legitimate objective. It is no wonder, given this, that the consensus of genocide scholars in the world, including Jews and former Israelis, pronounced Israel guilty of the G-word. Of course, Israel's defenders chalked this up to antisemitism (and who can deny that there is too much antisemitism in the world, and that it has been on the rise since October 7?). They point out, rightly, too, that every modern war involves civilian suffering and deaths. The devil is in the details. How much collateral damage is acceptable to achieve military objectives? The Hebrew for "collateral damage" is *nezek agavi.* The acronym—*Naza*—rhymes with Gaza, and is the title of the latest controversial movie on the subject to arouse a furor, both among Israel's enemies and its defenders. But even the most energetic defense on an issue like this leaves Israel's reputation bloodied and sullied in the eyes of much of the world. That result is, I believe, fully within the intentions of the diabolical Hamasniks who planned

and executed the October 7 attack. But if we played into their hands by the unmeasured ferocity of our counter-attacks, that is at least partly on us. As for the Israeli soldiers on the front lines, they deserve only our fullest respect and gratitude for doing their duty to their homeland and the Jewish people no matter what their private political opinions, many at the cost of their lives or limbs.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we bow down at the words of the Aleinu. The Aleinu is one of my favorite prayers, partly because for me it encapsulates the duality of Jewish existence, mediating between the poles of universalism and particularism. To be Jewish is to belong to a particular people consecrated to the universal God. Our scriptures have been adopted by half the world as the story of the human race. Our prophets clamored for the reform of their own people but also projected a Messianic vision for all of humanity that is inscribed on the cornerstone of the United Nations. Zionism in the majority of its forms was a universal aspiration for the Jews to be part of the remaking of the world that would eventuate in world peace. Yet the Jews also suffered the greatest tragedy of any nation in modern times, and the survival of the Jewish people in however unfriendly a neighborhood has become an urgent concern for all Jews today.

The universalists of the world have been propagandized for the last 50 years that Israel was an unjust enterprise from the start, because (in their view) the existence of a Jewish homeland in their ancient land was somehow incompatible with the coexistence with the indigenous non-Jewish population. In our view, the facts speak otherwise; the alleged incompatibility was a fiction thrust on the situation by the corrupt

landowners and terrorists who inspired the anti-Zionist agitation of the past 100 years. But be that as it may, the universalist hearts of many young Jews were drawn to the cry of the oppressed and failed to assert the legitimate Jewish agenda of national self-renewal that Zionism represented. They represented the best of universalist Judaism without its balancing particularism. To win them back, we must affirm the Jewish values that we have in common with them.

The Jews whose mantra is to stand with Israel at all costs also have a valid claim. They rightly point out that the accusations against Israel in world opinion are so colored by propaganda and outright antisemitism that it is hard to see the forest for the trees. I would say to them, however, that voices that I respect within Israel itself testify to the imperfections of the current Israeli regime that need to be addressed and corrected. I have faith that my cousins in Israel and their friends will muster enough support in the coming elections to bring a turnabout, however cautious and tentative it must be under the current trying circumstances. On this, we may agree to disagree, and in any case, the Israeli people will decide its future course. To these Jews, too, we must affirm the Jewish values that we have in common, and among these values, the unity of the Jewish people itself must stand preeminent. Also the respect for the traumas that we Jews have suffered in common, both in the Holocaust and more recently. We have suffered together; we have grieved together; and we are committed to healing together.

Also among these common Jewish values is the value of peace. Rabbi Donniel Hartman says that much of the classic Jewish articulation of the value of peace is aspirational. If the laws of nature have to be changed in

order for the wolf to lie down with the kid, does this mean that peace is so far off that it is impossible to realize it? That we ask God to bring peace because it is too hard for us to achieve? Still, we can be advised by Rabbi Tarfon, that even if it does not fall to you to finish the job, you are not exempt from starting it, and doing what you can to bring it about. We also take heart from the Talmudic saying that humans are partners with God in creation of the world. So let us close with the time-honored formula in our prayers in this spirit:

עושה שלום במרומיו הוא יעשה שלום עלינו ועל כל ישראל (ועל כל יושבי תבל) ואמרו אמן

May the one who makes peace above also make peace for us and for all Israel (and for all the world) and let us say Amen.