

Taking it to the Streets: Israel's Fight for Its Soul - Ki Tissa/Purim 5783

After four years of planning and several Covid delays, our shul returned to Israel! And 52 of us enjoyed a fantastic trip full of adventures, history, food (delicious), and spiritual moments.

An opening vignette.

On the second night of the trip in Tel Aviv, Me'ir, Kfir, and I were walking with a family from our group, looking for a restaurant for them.

We found ourselves on Rothschild Boulevard, where Me'ir gave an impromptu tour. We found ourselves in front of Mayor Dizengoff's House where David Ben-Gurion announced the Birth of the Modern State of Israel 75 years ago and where the leaders of Israel signed its Declaration of Independence.



On the next corner, we came across a van with colorful tie-dye graffiti - right out of the '60s; it was blasting religious electronic dance music with a couple of followers of the Hasidic rabbi, Nahman of Bratzslav, dancing in the street.

They preach a very joyous Judaism so we joined them!



Suddenly, a mini-Cooper with a jumbo can of Red Bull stopped by, and the driver started to hand out Red Bulls. At first, I thought it was planned to bring extra energy to the dancers. But it was just a classic spontaneous moment in Israel. Something that repeatedly happens as you bump into people you know, and all kinds of wondrous moments happen in this small country.

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Two days later on Saturday night we found ourselves in the streets of another major Israeli metropolis -- this time Boston's sister city: Haifa.

But we were not dancing; we were protesting.

As many of you know, the most extremist government in Israel's history was formed a few months ago. To say it is problematic is a gross understatement.

[They have pledged to annex the West Bank, give immunity to settlers for anti-Palestinian violence, curtail the rights of those who are LGBTQ, and further curtail the rights of Reform and Masorti/Conservative Jews \(like us\).](#)

But perhaps the most dangerous aspect is passing a law to allow the Knesset (its parliament) by a simple majority to overturn Supreme Court decisions.

This would have all kinds of terrible ramifications, including the ability to take more rights and protections away from Palestinian and Arab citizens in Israel who are already discriminated against. It could also overturn a decision to convict the current Prime Minister, who has several pending criminal indictments against him.

Soldiers are worried because since they will no longer have the Supreme Court to back them up against immoral commands, they could be forced - knowingly or unknowingly - to take part in inappropriate military actions. [And some of them - especially elite pilots and special forces and many commanders are protesting this plan most vociferously.](#)

Hundreds of leaders inside and outside of Israel are taking public stands against this action to undermine the balance of power.



And that's why many members of our Israel trip went to a rally where the atmosphere was upbeat and peaceful.

Little kids were singing a Purim song about Haman's hat, with the words changed to speak about the importance of having three branches of government.

People wore bumper stickers saying: "We believe in the Declaration of Independence."

What does the Declaration of Independence say?



“THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.”

A Jewish and DEMOCRATIC state - with rights for ALL!

Israel's President, Isaac Herzog, has been speaking out, loudly and clearly, in opposition to these proposals, which he characterizes as destructive to Israel.

This is what is under threat. [Michael Bloomberg wrote an op-ed in the NY Times about it last Sunday](#). This proposed judicial overhaul is pulling investors out of Israel, especially the hi-tech and bio-tech industries which are the main drivers of Israel's Start-up Nation economy - putting Israel at significant risk.

Every Sunday there are rallies against the government all around the world. Here in Boston, there is a weekly rally on Sunday mornings - this week it will be on the Boston Common.

[Hundreds of thousands are protesting in Israel including 500,000 on Saturday night, March 11 - 5% of the population](#). That would be the equivalent of an American rally of 16.5 million people!

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But beyond all that, there are worse developments. In response to the tragic murders of two Israeli brothers by Palestinian terrorists, 400 Israeli religious settlers went on a rampage in the Palestinian village of Huwara. While settlers have engaged in violence many times before - graffiti, more minor attacks, destroying Palestinian fields and farms, and orchards of olive trees, this was different.

[Dozens of homes were set aflame with the inhabitants inside. Dozens of cars were set aflame. Many Palestinians were attacked. And one man was murdered. The IDF did not stop them.](#)

This has been referred to as a Jewish pogrom. A pogrom inflicted on Palestinians by Jews. [This use of the word “pogrom” is not mine.](#)

[It comes from centrist Zionist thinkers and leaders like Donniel Hartman of the Hartmann Institute and Yossi Klein Halevi among others.](#)

[And there appears to be little or no effort to bring the perpetrators to justice...](#)

[These seemingly religious Jews sickeningly stopped in the middle of their all-night rampage to daven, to pray Ma'ariv - the evening service and then went back to their violence.](#)

Unbelievable. The values of peace that end every Jewish service were apparently lost on them...

This is a terrible stain on Israel, on Judaism, and on the Jewish people.

But it gets worse; after this pogrom, the Israeli Finance Minister, [Bezelel Smotrich, said: that the rest of Huwara should be "wiped out" but instead of having vigilantes do it, the government of Israel should!](#)

This high-ranking minister of Israel is an avowed racist and homophobe and is only one of those in this new government. [He is being sent to the US to speak at an Israel Bonds dinner.](#)

Fortunately, [the American Jewish World](#) are not allowing him to have other platforms for his hate. [Jewish organizations, including our centrist Judaism - the Masorti/Conservative Movement have come out against inviting Smotrich to our institutions.](#)

[Even more right-wing supporters of Israel, including rabbis aligned with AIPAC know that the line has been crossed and they are standing up against this *hilul Hashem* - this behavior that is a desecration of God's name and its leaders like Smotrich.](#)

They are encouraging their members to speak out against an Israeli government - something they have not done before.

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Now, I want to dig a bit deeper.

Where does this hatred come from?

I think it comes from many places.

First, fear - which is real. There are enemies who wish to do Israel and Jews harm.

Second, it comes from Messianic fervor - the idea that Jews need to take over the entire land of Israel - to bring the Messiah. That leads to frightening behaviors.

And sadly, it comes from a narrow, fundamentalist reading of our tradition.

What happens in the Torah reading this morning?

After the sin of building the Golden Calf - Moses says that God commands the Levites to kill the perpetrators; some three thousand are killed.

But the text of the Torah is not Judaism.

We do not practice biblical Judaism; we practice modern Judaism, where our texts and its values and its practices have evolved over thousands of years.

Two thousand years ago, our rabbis required serious trials for capital cases and rarely, if ever, sentenced someone to death.

They said a court that sentenced even one person to death in a generation is called a "murderous court."

And earlier this week at Purim, we read of violence at the end of the Book of Esther. After the Jewish people are saved, the text relates that the Jews went on a rampage killing 75,000 Persians.

Now, if this is read literally and simply, you can see how it could inspire acts of violence against enemies of the Jewish people.

But the Book of Esther is written as satire, an ancient tale of unrealistic fiction. It takes the genuine phenomenon of anti-Semitism that was already present 2,300 years ago when it was written and turns it on its head.

The Jews were powerless at the time, so this statement was obviously ludicrous. The Jews did not have the power to commit these atrocities and were only saved by the luck of having Esther in the right place at the right time.

But today, Jews have power.

Israeli Jews do have military power. And the test of our tradition and its values is not when we have no power, but now, when we do.

Will Israel use its power defensively, minimally - as it has strived to do over the last 75 years or will it continue to move in the dangerous path it is on now?

That is an open question, and we should do all we can to help it make moral, democratic choices.

We should stand with the demonstrators who understand that this government undermines the very foundations of Israel's democracy.

Protestors on Thursday started to combine the dangers to the Judiciary with the crimes against the Palestinians in Huwara.

[Dozens were heard shouting, "Where were you in Huwara?" at police officers,](#) criticizing their failure to prevent the deadly settler rampage in the Palestinian town last week while they were able to come down much harder on anti-government protesters.

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All of this is hard to take in. Especially for those of us who are passionate Zionists like me. Like many of you. How can we love this precious state? Like a dear friend making bad choices, we have to try to help - even and especially when it's hard. Even when we have to be critical.

But I want to leave us on an optimistic note.

In the middle of the rally in Haifa a few weeks ago, a group of religious Israelis marched in. We watched as they were cheered by the secular Israelis who were already there.



They carried a large banner that read "Yahadut V'Democratia B'dibbur Ehad - Judaism and Democracy in one utterance." Riffing off of the Friday night Kabbalat Shabbat song - *Lekha Dodi* - they were saying that Judaism and Democracy go hand-in-hand - you can't have one without the other.

We later found out the secular organizers of the rally postponed it until after Shabbat so this group could attend.

A symbol of religious and secular coming together to stand up for justice.

A sign of hope.

May it only spread.

