

Can this Great Shabbat Save Israel? Shabbat Hagadol 5783



On October 6, 1973, [Israel was suddenly attacked by Egypt and Syria](#). It was a surprise attack on Yom Kippur, Israel's existence was held in the balance.

Why?

In the north, the Syrian tanks broke through Israel's defenses, leaving the entire country vulnerable.

And in the South, the Bar Lev line that separated Israel and Egypt was defended by 450 soldiers and a handful of

young recruits who faced 100,000 attacking Egyptians.

What saved the day – and the State of Israel – was the rapid deployment of reservists, who had to be literally called up individually -- in a time before What's App -- and they responded to the call without hesitation.

Eventually, the reservists arrived and Israel survived that onslaught.

If we think about Israel's incredible 75 years, which we are celebrating this month, I can think of a few times when its existence was threatened by external forces - at its inception in 1948, the nuclear threat from Iran and the Yom Kippur War which may have been the most dangerous.

But internally, it's never reached the brink.

Israelis have disagreed but never faced an existential threat from divisions within. Even when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, may his memory be for a blessing, was assassinated, and there was a great chasm between those who supported and those who



opposed the Oslo Peace Process with the Palestinians, it never really reached a level where Israel itself was in danger.

Until this past week.

Leaders in Israel's new government speak openly about their hatred of Arabs, and ministers have called for violence against Arabs. A horrifying racist form of Jewish supremacy at levels we have never seen.

And on the other side, there are the protests over this, and the new government and its dangerous and damaging proposals, and these protests have grown and grown. The government's calls for judiciary reforms brought fear to many Israelis who see the Supreme Court as a bulwark against extremism.

While the courts may need some changes, having these reforms come from a government -- where 4 of the 5 top ministers have been convicted of crimes or are under indictment -- and a government that won its majority by just thousands of votes -- it's probably not the right government to make these changes.

The changes would leave the Court subject to the legislative branch, which already controls the executive branch.

It would be a dangerously monolithic structure.

So, what did we see this week?

Prime Minister Netanyahu continued moving his proposals forward. And the protests have been growing, and there is open talk of a civil war.

Then, after last Shabbat, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, a member of Netanyahu's party and the second-highest leader in the country, spoke out against these proposals.

He stated that Israel was now in danger since military reservists, including Israel's pilots, who are central to Israel's defense, were protesting and not showing up for duty. They did not want to serve in an army that could be taking orders from racist and extremist government ministers, especially with no court to protect their right to refuse unethical orders, a right which, by the way, is part of Israel's post-Holocaust code of conduct for all soldiers (You must not obey an unethical command).

The reservists stood up and said this country is heading in a dangerous direction.

On Sunday, the Prime Minister fired Gallant in a 2-sentence letter, and the rallies grew much, much larger, with strikes shutting down major parts of the country, including part of Ben Gurion Airport. And the universities. And more.

800,000 Israelis rallied against the government last weekend. Some 10% of the population - it's like a rally of 30 MILLION people in the US!

Unheard of.

And finally, the Prime Minister caved or sort of caved. He announced that he was delaying these reforms and would enter a dialogue with the opposition to reach a compromise.

As you can imagine, his extreme right coalition was not happy, and it remains to be seen what will happen.

[The newest horrific development is the Ben-Gvir, the extremist minister who has been given money for his right-wing private militia. This is the most dangerous development.](#)

Will there be a sincere dialogue? Or is this just a delay tactic that helps Netanyahu continue the judicial reform, potentially allowing him to pick out his own judges to sit on his own case since he is also under indictment?

Will extremism win the day?

I am not a political prognosticator, nor can anyone tell the future, but I think Israel remains in a very vulnerable place.

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Now, we gather this Shabbat - just days before *Pesah* - our feast of freedom, when our ancient ancestors were freed from slavery, becoming a people.

This Shabbat is called *Shabbat Hagadol* - the Great Shabbat right before Pesah, which contains a unique *haftarah*.

It concludes with hopeful verses: "*Hinei Anokhi sholeih lakhem et-Eliyah HaNavi lifnei bo Yom Adonai Hagadol V'haNora*. Behold, I will send you Elijah the Prophet before the great and awesome day of God. *V'heishev lev avot al banim v'lev banim al-avotam*. And he will turn the hearts of parents towards their children, and the hearts of children to their parents." (Malachi 3:23-24)

Why does Malachi choose Elijah to be the prophet who will herald a future redemption, a time of peace?

It's an interesting choice.

He could have gone with Amos with his "justice that flows like a mighty river" or Isaiah, who imagines a time when we will beat our swords into plowshares.

Those would have been my go-tos.

But he chooses Elijah? Why?
What is Elijah known for?

His most famous act is to lead a “grassroots rebellion fighting the introduction of foreign gods and their values as a state religion, or a state culture, in the Israelite community. Jezebel, a Phoenician princess and wife of king Ahab represents those values during Elijah’s time, seeing the monarch as being above the law. In such a milieu, there is not enough space for Israel’s God nor for the weak elements of society. People see mainly their own interests. That is Elijah’s battle.”



So, Elijah teaches us to look beyond ourselves. And warns us of the danger of a leader who seeks too much power.

Author and teacher Vered Hollander-Goldfarb points out that Malachi wants us also to understand that danger comes not only from external threats but from ourselves.

Malachi is reflecting a yearning for an Elijah who will come to save us from ourselves. Writing only 75 years after the tragedy of the destruction of the Temple, Malachi wants to warn us that there can be a day of utter destruction, as he calls it. If we do not get our act together, then things can be even worse than when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem.

So he calls upon Elijah not to fight but to deliver a different message - a message of reconciliation. Elijah will help reconcile parents and children. Rabbi Shimon in the Mishnah explains this can refer to reconciling disputes, rifts in the larger community.

People who should be close or who had been close, who now find themselves in conflict. This internal hate is most dangerous and according to the rabbis, it was our own infighting that destroyed the Second Temple.

Elijah will *heishev ev-avot v'lev banim* - bring us back together, remind us to turn back to one another. It's about opening our hearts to the other. Listen to one another, particularly to those who do not feel heard.

In Israel, as in many places of the world, we see people who do not feel that they do not belong. They feel threatened and alienated. That goes for those in Israel who voted for this government and for those protesting against it.

But we are left with a message of hope - if we can actually use our abilities to turn to each other we can step back from the brink.

There are hopeful signs in Israel - these massive protests went off with almost no violence, no guns, even when shutting down a highway, everyone made way for an ambulance as author Danny Gordis reported.

There were brave statements like Defense Minister Yoav Gallant's words, and the virtually unknown Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara, who stood up to the Prime Minister and did her job. There was the Consul General to NY who resigned in protest of Gallant's firing.

All of this gives us some hope - the *lev avot and banim* - the hearts of Israelis may find a way to come together.

Because if not, Malachi warns us things might not go well - there may be no reservists to come in and save the day.

May that not come to pass.