

Power or Victimhood, Which?

RHM Sermon CBSW

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A few months ago, in the primary election for New York representative of the sixteenth district in Congress, Jamal Bowman lost in a landslide to George Latimer. It was the most expensive congressional primary in history, what with the advertising rates in NYC. The American Israel lobby, AIPAC, spent 14 million dollars making sure Bowman lost. Bowman has been anti-Israel and I would argue antisemitic.

After the election the following question arose among Israel supporters: Should Jews say the Israel lobby won or keep it quiet, lest there be backlash against supposed Jewish power?

To put it bluntly: Should Jews keep the win quiet or should they say to those who would attack Israel and Jews: "Look what we can do!"

The same question arose in August with the primary defeat of Cori Bush in Missouri. It should be noted that AIPAC did not publicly attack her because of Israel policies but basic incompetence as a lawmaker, failing to show up for more than 200 votes. That doesn't mean her antisemitism wasn't at the core of the opposition. It just wasn't highlighted.

So the question remains:

Do we celebrate Jewish power or downplay it?

These recent days especially push us out of the political power mode and into actual physical power. Weapons of war. Look what Israel has done in the last few weeks to Hezbollah.

The question these events pose is this: Should those of us who support Israel tout its strength or underplay it so as not to be seen as the mean Goliath to the Davids out there in the world?

Are we more comfortable speaking about Israel vs Iran than Israel versus fellow victims of radical Islamic terror, when such victims live in Lebanon, Gaza, or the West Bank?

In short, how comfortable are we Jews with power?

It wasn't that long ago when such a question was absurd. Jews have power? When Israel was still new there was a joke that the first Jewish army is practicing firing guns. The commander shouts, "Ready" and they get ready. The commander shouts "aim" and they aim. The commander shouts "fire" and nothing happens. The commander asks why and the soldiers say, "We don't want to hurt anyone."

Lately, since October 7, I keep thinking about a poem entitled "In the City of Slaughter," written in 1903 in what was then the Russian Empire. It has been called the single most influential Hebrew poem—perhaps the single most influential Jewish literary text—of the twentieth century. It's commonly understood to have had an outsized and lasting effect on how people in the once vast communities of East European Jewry, and later in the new Jewish community of Palestine and the State of Israel, understood their collective political situation and what they ought to do about it, the nature of Diaspora and the claims of Zionism, and the political and moral wages of powerlessness.

American readers might compare "In the City of Slaughter" to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or indeed Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the sense that their searing moral and political claims about burning political problems had an immediate and lasting impact.

In the poem the poet Haim Nahman Bialik's speaks of the community that was attacked over the course of three days by crowds of their Gentile neighbors. Although popular images of the life of Russia's Jews, who numbered nearly six million at the turn of the twentieth century, sometimes treat such anti-Jewish violence as routine, in fact there had been nothing like the Kishinev pogrom before it happened. At the time, Bialik was a young and rising star in the burgeoning world of modern Hebrew literature. In the immediate aftermath of the pogrom, Bialik and his

associates spent several weeks in Kishinev taking copious, careful, and sympathetic testimonies from eyewitnesses, from terribly wounded survivors of violence and rape, and from the bereaved. This poem was one of Bialik's responses to the horrors he learned about through this work. The poem itself is a long epic, drawing masterfully from Biblical and Talmudic writings, and, from the perspective of God, describes gruesome image after gruesome image—a Jew and his dog, both headless, lying on a mound; a baby unable to suckle from the breast of his dead mother; a mother and daughter both raped by multiple men—that appear in the unnamed “city of slaughter.” It is not, however, the gruesome imagery that makes the poem stand out. Instead, it is Bialik's unsympathetic depiction of Jewish men who, rather than protect their wives, daughters, and sisters, watched and prayed for their own lives as their women were raped and humiliated. He laments that the “sons of the Maccabees,” a militarily powerful sect of ancient Jews, were so unaffected by the violence committed upon their loved ones, that their only reaction was to visit the Rabbi the next day to ask if they were still permitted to have sex with their raped wives. Bialik's anger at the perceived cowardice of Jewish men and his call for them to stand up and fight for themselves and their women has made “In the City of Slaughter” the “most famous and influential modern Hebrew poem,” as well as “inspired the creation of Jewish defense groups in Russia” whose members would later form the Haganah, a precursor to the modern Israeli army.

As we approach the anniversary of one of the worst days in Jewish history, October 7, 2023, this poem haunts me.

On the one hand, I hate seeing the destruction that Israel is wreaking on Gaza and Lebanon even though I blame Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran completely for the tragedy. We Jews had the limited luxury of not worrying about power for two thousand years. Being victims of the world was awful, but it had its benefits too. Power means making difficult choices.

As philosopher Micah Goodman suggests, while the Jewish people want to be respected for our morality we also need to be feared by those who would do us harm. We seek legitimacy as serious in governance but also deterrence if Israel is to survive. In short, we need the West to love us and the Middle East to fear us. Not an easy needle to thread!

The philosopher and peace activist Martin Buber lived in the State of Israel in the 1950s. He would study with the prime minister, David Ben Gurion. One day, Ben Gurion asked Buber what the business with the Brith Shalom was all about. They were arguing for a single state, led by Jews and Arabs. When Buber explained why this was the ideal solution, Ben Gurion patted him on the head and said, “Martin you do your thing and leave the politics to me!”

In this short tale we see the passing of the torch from abstract governance to concrete realpolitik. From kumbaya to speak softly and carry a big stick.

To fully grasp the challenge before the Jewish people today, consider this true story that never happened by the late Label Fein:

It was 1860, or maybe 1861, in Minsk, or possibly in Pinsk. Wherever, whenever, there were a dozen Jews who used to get together every Tuesday evening for some good talk.

What did Jews talk about? Why, about what it would be like one day — what, that is, Jerusalem would be like. In exquisite detail, they would imagine Jerusalem, its climate, cuisine and culture.

Their elaborate, continuing conversation had long since developed a near ritual character, including its periodic interruption by the one skeptic in the group, a fellow named Berl.

Every few months, Berl would say: “Can’t we please, just this once, change the topic of conversation? Really, it’s quite tedious by now. I mean, if we’re really that interested in what it’s like in Jerusalem, why don’t we pack up and go? If we like it, we’ll stay. And if we don’t like it, we’ll also stay, and make it into something we like.”

To which the others would inevitably respond, “Berl, Berl — don’t be so naive. Don’t you realize how much easier, and how very much safer, it is to sit in Minsk or Pinsk and talk about what it might be like than to go and confront the reality?”

And Berl, because he was a sociable fellow, would again drop his complaint and join in the talk. This was, for those times and places, a rather sophisticated group; indeed, they had some non Jewish friends. Once upon a Tuesday, they invited one of their non Jewish friends to join with them, and together they talked until the wee hours of the morning, until, in fact, their guest stood and said: “Fellows, I’ve enjoyed the evening enormously, but I really must get going. Thanks so much for inviting me, and goodnight.”

“Thank you for coming,” they replied. “But before you go, we do have one question we’d like to ask.” “Please, anything at all,” their guest said.

“Our question is...” — here there was an awkward pause, and much clearing of throats — “what we’d like to know is, what do — oh, dear, how shall we ask it? What do people like you — if you know what we mean — think of people like us — if you know what we mean?”

“Oh,” their guest said, “you want to know how we feel about Jews.”

“Yes, that’s right, you have it. You see, we are usually so isolated, and we have so little opportunity for feedback. You don’t mind telling us?”

“No, not at all. I think you’re a wonderful people — passionate, generous, literate. I have only one problem with you.” “A problem? What kind of problem?”

“Well,” the guest replied, “there is one aspect of Jewish behavior that really annoys me. You people seem to believe — why, I can’t imagine — that you’re morally superior to everyone else. Don’t get me wrong — I don’t think you’re any worse than average. But I can’t understand your moral conceit, and I find it frightfully annoying.”

To their credit — for they knew it was so — his hosts did not deny the accusation, but sought instead to explain their “conceit.”

“As you yourself observed, it’s very late, so we can’t give you the whole etiology of our sense of moral superiority. We’ll explain it instead by way of an example, — a metaphor, if you will: We do indeed think we are your moral betters, and the reason we do is that we don’t hunt. You people hunt, and we don’t hunt, and that makes us better than you.”

Their guest guffawed, and then stormed at them: “You silly, trivial people; of course you don’t hunt! We don’t permit you to own guns!”

The very next morning, the men came to Berl, the skeptic, and said to him, “Berl, pack up. We are leaving to go up to the land, to set out to prove that even with guns, we will not become hunters.”

And what happened next? They did go up to the land, and what happened is still happening. We Jews have become hunters. Out of necessity. We have power. We Jews in America are not Israeli soldiers or citizens on patrol, but we are identified with Jews with power. Some of our youngsters in the campuses and streets may not understand why Jews need power. Need guns. Their naivety is annoying but also ironic. They don’t understand evil. They should be condemning Hamas.

What can we do? Keep speaking the truth. Educate ourselves. Support Israel. Buy Israel bonds. Donate to Federation campaign.

One final thought —the new US Embassy is built across from the home of Nobel Laureate Shai Agnon. When I took a walk to the Embassy and discovered its location I was blown away. S.Y. Agnon’s short story “From Foe to Friend” is one of the author’s most loved and well-known stories. In the story, the narrator tries to settle in the outskirts of Jerusalem, in pre-civilized

Talpiyot, where he encounters the King of Winds who rules that land and thwarts the protagonist's attempts to build his dwelling.

In the end, like the fable of the three little pigs, we see a strong narrator who can hold his own against his foe and even wins the respect of the king of winds.

His story, From Foe to friend, has a message that has never been truer. Our enemies can only stop being enemies when they understand and accept our strength. Physical but also moral strength. And know this: the Jewish State is enmeshed with our Jewish identity and its fate is our fate.

Because Israel exists we are not in exile. We are part of history. We have a destiny. A shared destiny.

And we are at war. The war is not Israel vs Palestinians. It is not a war with Iran alone, although it is that. At heart it is a war between Jews and those who hate us.

And we may not be interested in this war, but this war is interested in us.

Do we fight with power and with morality? Do we defend our people? Do we show up for each other?

Such tough questions and my friends we have to answer them. The world is waiting.