

Shabbat Vayakhel-Pekudei 5786
The Lowest Point and the Highest Point
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

Raise your hand if you've been to Ben Yehuda Street in Jerusalem. Now raise your hand if you've wandered into any one of the Judaica/T-shirt shops on Ben Yehuda. I've been many times over the years, first in the 1990's, and I remember certain T-shirts that even *then* seemed outdated. You know, the ones that said "New York Yankees" in Hebrew, or "Guns and Moses." I went back in the 2000's and saw the same shirts for sale. I'm convinced the exact same pieces of fabric were still hanging there!

There was one shirt in particular that always made me laugh. It was a white T-shirt with a jet fighter. It said "America, don't worry. Israel is behind you." Remember that? It was cute. Almost like a child telling their parents during a storm, "Don't worry. I will always keep *you* safe."

That image suddenly feels much less like a joke. That's really the picture of what's happening in the skies over Iran now, Israeli and American jet planes working together as close allies. As equal partners. Each contributing its own valuable capabilities to the mission at hand of destroying Iran's stash of weapons and weapon-making facilities, as well as eliminating the Iranian leadership.

In this war, anything can change at a moment's notice. Whereas Israel and America's leadership and militaries are working in perfect sync now, it's very possible differences will emerge, possibly large ones and possibly very soon. But the closeness of this US-Israel partnership over the past two weeks is unprecedented. This is quite a moment.

I was listening to a Times of Israel podcast featuring an interview with Micah Goodman, of the Hartman Institute. He is one of Israel's most thoughtful public intellectuals. He juxtaposed two recent developments. The first is the war in Iran and the very close partnership between Israel and America. And the second is a recent Gallup poll that determined that American sympathies have swung away from longtime overwhelming support for Israelis towards the Palestinians. To paraphrase and quote an AP article:

"[Three years ago, Americans sympathized far more with Israelis than Palestinians. Today those numbers are essentially even]. 41% say their sympathies lie more with the Palestinians, and only 36% saying the same about the Israelis. Gallup's data indicates that the shift was already happening *before* Hamas attacked Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, then

increased during the Gaza War. Benedict Vigers, a senior global news writer at Gallup, said, 'In not many years, that very significant gap in public opinion [that had lasted decades] has now completely closed.'" This is quite a moment as well.

Last week, Micah Goodman put this poll result next to what's happening in Iran and observed the following: "[Based on those poll results] this is the *lowest* point in the Israeli-American relationship." That's because it raises the question of whether America will back Israel in the future. And at the very same time, "America and Israel go to war fighting shoulder to shoulder as allies and partners. So this is the strongest point in the relationship between Israel and America. This is an incredible paradox: the lowest point is the highest point, and the highest point is the lowest point."

So what do we do with this paradox? I believe we have to acknowledge both aspects of this moment. It's insufficient to highlight the good news and ignore the bad, or the reverse. I do think that the Israeli and American governments and militaries working so closely together in this war is a very good thing. Not simply because Israel's prime minister supports it; I agree with some of his decisions and disagree with others. But because for a very long time the Iranian leadership has spoken openly of eliminating Israel. And because they are obsessively doing their utmost to develop a nuclear bomb in this pursuit. And because they have funded a host of terrorist proxies as well - like Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis - to destroy Israel. Eliminating - or even degrading - their weapons capacity makes Israel safer, America too, and even the region as a whole.

Furthermore, 93% of Israelis support this war against Iran because they feel its existential danger firsthand. 93%! So when Israelis find such support from the American government and military, that's a very good thing.

Of course I recognize that the war is not over. Things may go south, and I'm very concerned about that. But as Micah Goodman points out, things may also end up *succeeding*. So much hangs in the balance of what happens next.

I feel conflicting emotions: I am so heartened to know that Israel is in the process of eliminating a longstanding threat to its survival. And I'm also nervous that the mission may fail, and there could be devastating consequences if that happens. Polling suggests that many American Jews feel similarly - but not everybody.

JTA reports that a poll last week by Israel's Jewish People Policy Institute found that "about two-thirds of 'connected' American Jews support the U.S.-Israel war against Iran, even as they are concerned that it could exacerbate antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment in the United States. Multiple surveys last week found that about 60% of

[general] American voters *opposed* the military action.” That discrepancy presents yet another challenge for this moment.

This is a moment of both strength and weakness in the America-Israel relationship. And it's a moment when I feel both energized and nervous about the war efforts. It's difficult to hold on to two conflicting ideas. But the Jewish tradition prepares us for exactly this and acknowledges that two truths can stand at the same time.

Our Torah readings today offer another paradox about Passover:

While the Israelites were still in Egypt, they were not completely enslaved. And right after the Israelites had left Egypt, they were not yet completely free.

Here's what I mean:

We read in the Maftir a passage known as Parashat HaHodesh. Exodus chapter 12 gives instructions for Moses to mark the beginning of each month by the sight of the moon. This is no small thing. This is the foundation for the Jewish calendar, which enables all the Jewish holidays to exist later on. This is Jewish time. Even before the Israelites crossed the sea, G-d was telling them “You are no longer on Egypt time, but Jewish time.” This was a partial spiritual liberation before the physical liberation.

Here's Ramban on our verse: “The purpose of this statement is to establish the first of Nissan as the new year for the Jewish people.” This is to remember the Exodus every single year, as it's the starting point of the whole calendar. “This is also why the Torah never uses specific *names* for the months, but only their numbers [first month, seventh month, etc.]”

Rosh Hodesh, the new moon, was so vital because it became the foundation for all the Jewish holidays, for all time. For most of our people's history, our ancestors were exiled all across the world. Jews across continents could not have a conversation with each other. But what held our people together for 2000 years was that we all ate matzah and had a Seder the very same night. That's all because of Rosh Hodesh. And that was given to us *even before* we left Egypt.

Nor was the task of total liberation complete *even after* the Israelites walked across the sea. In our first Torah reading, we read about the construction of the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary dedicated to G-d. G-d freed the Israelites not to be wandering spiritual free agents in the desert, but to enter into a covenant with the true G-d. To cast off the yoke of wicked pharaoh and commit to a new master, Hashem. Receiving the

Ten Commandments was instrumental to this process. And completing the Mishkan was the final step. When all the Israelites contributed their precious materials willingly, they demonstrated their commitment to the covenant with G-d, and made G-d's presence on Earth more tangible and tactile. Only *this* completed their spiritual liberation. Now we can better understand the paradox of Israelite freedom I shared earlier: While the Israelites were still in Egypt, they were not completely enslaved. And right after the Israelites had left Egypt, they were not yet completely free.

The Passover story reminds us that reality can hold more than one truth at the same time. And perhaps that wisdom can help guide us through complicated moments like the one we are living through today.

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