

A civility elegy for Tisha Be'Av

written by David M. Weinberg | 13.08.2024

At ten months distance from this country's contemporary national catastrophe of Tisha Be'Av magnitude, the Hamas invasion of Simchat Torah 5784 (also known as the "Black Sabbath" of October 7), and as Jews commemorate the ancient Tisha Be'Av disasters (destruction of the First and Second Jewish Commonwealths in 586 BCE and 70 CE) – it is time for introspection.

This soul-searching is compounded by the current moment of vulnerability and unpredictability, as the country waits for an Iranian attack. Israelis question their own resilience and point wagging fingers at their political antagonists.

But has not this heightened capacity for self-criticism gone too far? Is it not time to reenergize Israeli national spirit with a little historical perspective? Might Israelis allow themselves the grace of recognizing the elemental goodness of their society, the essential morality of the Jewish return to Zion, their still-overwhelming successes, and yes, their still-overwhelming strengths?

What better moment than Tisha Be'Av to remind oneself of the Biblical warnings against the politics of defamation? Such politics have been tried before in this country with disastrous and tragic results.

What better moment than Tisha Be'Av to remind yourself of the manifold good works done by Israelis of all stripes and classes? These are acts of loving kindness and boundless generosity that range from everyday cancer care for kids to high philanthropy for the arts, from immigrant absorption to roadside assistance, from aid to war widows and orphans to support for displaced pioneers of northern and southern Israel.

And there are the enormous heroic sacrifices of IDF soldiers and their families, including tens of thousands of wounded and recovering young men and women.

There is great heart in Israel. The challenge is to maximize heart and minimize hatred.

Doing so requires a capacity for self-criticism and a hefty dose of humility.

Alas, in Israel these days humility is in short supply. The rich and the successful,

the politically powerful and the ideologically super-charged, exude overbearing self-confidence that leaves no room for self-doubt, change, or compromise. Israelis are, as a rule, unrepentantly certain that their individual viewpoint is categorically correct, barring all others.

Moderation, nuance, restraint, and reasonableness have become orphan concepts in this country's political landscape. The prevailing culture is *kasach* — unbridled, untamed confrontation. It is no wonder that there are no exact Hebrew translations for the words 'civility' and 'subtlety.' Israelis do not fully grasp the words or know how to apply them.

Yes, Israelis are divided by genuine ideological fault lines. But it should be possible to draw a line between policy disagreement and verbal political violence; between a legitimate argument and illegitimate character assassination; between legislation that is meant for the greater good and lawmaking meant to punish, demean, and crush the rival camp.

This is especially true at wartime. There is a specific Biblical commandment (Deuteronomy 23:10) to eschew "every evil thing" when going to war, and many sages interpret this mean avoidance of evil tongue, malicious gossip, treacherous mud-slinging, and debilitating demagoguery. The midrash (Vayikra Raba 26:2) warns that *deletorin* (informers, weasels, or slanderers) in wartime lead to defeat.

Nachmanides asserts that national unity at wartime and purity on the battlefield not only draws-down Divine powers from the heavens but even turns the entire "camp" (the nation or the army) into a holy vessel, into "God's temple" - no less. Conversely, he cautions, evil speech "causes the Divine Presence to flee the camp," to melt away from the Jewish People's frontlines.

The famous spade that Jewish soldiers are supposed to carry into war with them to shovel away and cover up their feces (Deuteronomy 23:14) is said to be a metaphor for fingers in the ear used to prevent oneself from hearing rotten, backstabbing talk that undermines the war effort. (See Talmud Tractate Ketubot 5a and Midrash Sifrei 119.)

"For the Lord your God walks in the midst of your (war) camp to deliver (victory to) you and defeat your enemies; therefore your camp must be holy so that He sees no unclean thing and turn away from you" (ibid., verse 15).

Part of Israel's post-October 7 national rehabilitation (which must begin now, even though the war is far from over) involves, as I say, some self-effacement and restraint.

It also requires rejection of despair and negativity, and the counting instead of personal and national blessings. After all, the Israeli economy is challenged but stout, families are large and supportive, and democratic freedoms remain strong. Indeed, in every survey, Israelis say that they are fortunate.

In my view, the happy Israeli mind also derives from a sense of historic purpose that still courses through the soul of the national community. And this purposefulness explains the sacrifice and commitment of Israelis. It is the crucial ingredient that make life in Israel tolerable and even exciting, especially for a people that has waited so long for its return to Zion.

So, on the eve of Tisha Be'Av, Israelis ought to recommit themselves to a vision of the common good; to just a little less hacking at each other politically; to a touch more tolerance in education, more honesty in business, and increased philanthropy; to more concern for the widow, orphan and unemployed; to more reverence for heritage and Zionist achievement; to shared destiny.

Israelis, especially their politicians, ought to make this vow for the coming year: "I undertake to restrain my tongue, because over-heated rhetoric can lead to tragedy. I commit myself to the patience necessary to withhold too-harsh judgment of friends, adversaries, and of the country itself. I recommit myself to Zionist and Jewish values, out of an overriding concern for Jewish Peoplehood - davka (specifically) at a time of vulnerability."

"I pledge to emphasize the positive and play down the negative. I promise to highlight all aspects of Israeli buoyancy and act to reinforce Israeli resilience. I choose Zionist optimism over enfeebling elegy. We shall overcome!"

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