

Shacharit Rosh Hashanah - 5772
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**Beyond Crisis:
The Case for Aspirational Zionism**

“Everything depends on how we live in our land and how we behave here. Our brethren in the Diaspora want to see here what is missing there in the cultural and spiritual and moral life of *Galut*; ... If they do not feel that our values here are unwavering we will not find a path to their hearts ... *Eretz Yisrael* must give the Diaspora something more than Jews of any other country can give: something with a spirit of holiness, above and beyond the usual and commonplace.”

Chaim Nachman Bialik, Tel Aviv, January 1926
(Cited by Stuart Schoffman in “Bialik on the Lecture circuit,”
Havruta: A Journal of Jewish Conversation, Summer 2011, p. 65)

So said Chaim Nachman Bialik (who would become known as the Hebrew national poet) in Tel Aviv in January, 1926 as he prepared to tour the United States and raise money for the Jewish settlement in Palestine.

Much has changed in American Jewish and Israeli life since those early years. We American Jews are no longer a besieged minority. Anti-Semitism, rampant then in this country, is essentially irrelevant in today's America. We are among the most politically and economically successful and powerful Jewish communities in 3500 years of Jewish history. American Jewish scholarship is prolific. Religious communities are thriving. Jewish schools, Jewish studies departments in universities and serious adult learning is everywhere. And as a result there's more parity between the Israeli and American Jewish communities of today than there once was. In light of this we have to ask, has Israel lived up to Bialik's and the founders of the Jewish State's expectations and dreams?

In many ways – yes - Israel is a thriving democracy. It has absorbed millions of Jews from around the world, built great universities and a thriving modern culture. It has the most powerful military in the Middle East, is a world center of innovation in medical, communications and environmental technologies, pharmaceuticals, computer software development, and start-up companies of every kind. Israel claims more PhDs per capita than any other country in the world, and despite the political instability of the region, Israel's economy is healthy and attracts major international companies and businesses to invest there.

But – and this is a regrettable and disturbing but, Israel today is NOT the source of pride and inspiration for a large portion of the younger generation of American Jews as it was for my generation of boomers and for my parents' and grandparents' generations. Why? What has happened?

Part of the answer has to do with what America has become for Jews. Here we are the beneficiaries of a vibrant, safe, multicultural society that respects religious and minority rights. Consequently, many younger Jews no longer feel they need Israel as a safe-haven against anti-Semitism and persecution or even as an anchor for their Jewish

identity. Many also feel that Israel has taken them for granted, that their loyalty is to be expected, and that their voice and concerns aren't heard by Israel or by the leadership of the American Jewish community.

I was born a year after the State was established, and I was raised on "the crisis narrative" of Jewish history. The Holocaust hovered as a dark shadow over my childhood and has been a defining existential experience that taught Jews that when we're powerless we're vulnerable to destruction. The Soviet Jewry movement of the '60s in which I was an activist warned us not to make the same mistake my parents' generation made relative to the threats against the lives of the Jews of Europe in the '30s and '40s.

By the time I was 17 Israel had already fought 3 wars of self-defense. When I was 23 and living in Israel, the Jewish state was almost overtaken in the Yom Kippur War.

I was raised with the clear understanding that Israel could not lose a single war, that it had to fight for its existence over and over again, and it had to have the strongest military and be the smartest nation in the Middle East maintaining always its qualitative military and technological edge over every other Middle East nation.

For the past 63 years the Jewish State's survival has been the number one priority for Israelis and world Jewry alike. Three words have driven our politics, concerns and fears: security – security – and security!

We come to this crisis mode honestly. After all, we Jews are a traumatized people from experiences both ancient and modern. Our wounds are deep and our memories are long. Our closets are filled with ghosts of anti-Semites past. Our enemies today are real. Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah are foes committed to Israel's destruction. Turkey, once a friend, has turned increasingly hostile, and the Egyptian-Israeli peace accord for more than 30 years is threatened because of the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and the ongoing hostility of the Egyptian people against Israel. The international delegitimization movement led by Palestinian rejectionists of a two-state for two peoples resolution of the conflict are also real. And it is unclear what the meaning of the recent UN application for Palestinian Statehood really means. Will it be a threat or an opportunity? Time will tell.

To ignore any of these real threats is irresponsible. There should be no surprise that "security" remains the number one issue for the Jewish world and is the defining issue in Israeli politics and life.

At the same time, we Jews are also an eternally hopeful people. Optimism is built into our DNA, for the alternative is too dark to contemplate. Despite our dangerous foes, the Jewish people yearns for normality, to live peacefully and securely among the nations of the world, and not to have to argue constantly why our people has a right to exist when there's no such expectation of other nations in the world.

The crisis narrative is not a false model. It's based in reality and it has served to unify world Jewry and to propel us to activism on Israel's behalf. But, despite its truth the crisis model is no longer adequate by itself to assure the under thirty American Jewish generation's loyalty and commitment to the Jewish state.

Young American Jews, according to sociologist Steven M. Cohen, do not respond well to traditional, aggressive Israel advocacy. They're less worried, rightly or wrongly, about overt military threats and delegitimization, and are more concerned with social justice issues and the treatment of those on the periphery of Israeli society: the poor, Arabs, women, immigrant workers, and even in some cases, the non-Orthodox. For this younger generation, and for many older Jews as well, the crisis model fails to provide a

compelling narrative as to WHY Israel ought to be central and meaningful in our lives as Jews beyond survival itself.

For this generation, Dr. Cohen's research shows, "Israel is to be supported so long as Israel embodies higher Jewish values."

What is striking is that many Israelis are no different. Over the Labor Day weekend, 450,000 mostly young Israelis took to the streets and pitched tents to demand that their government be more egalitarian and attuned to the needs of ordinary middle-class Israelis than it has been to those of the ultra-Orthodox and the super-rich. In other words, young Israelis also are demanding that their government and policies embody higher Jewish values.

Specifically, they're protesting a long-standing government policy that channels huge sums of money into West Bank settlements and ultra-Orthodox yeshivas, and caters to a slender cadre of ultra-rich Israelis while cutting support for education, health care and social services. These young Israelis are disheartened by the occupation for both moral and economic reasons, and they are protesting a political system that grants a ridiculous amount of power to religious parties that represent only a fraction of Israeli society. Israelis want social justice, just as American Jews want and have always wanted social justice.

That being said, we Jews living here must continue to be concerned about Israel's security, but our concerns and advocacy for Israel cannot end there. We also have to concern ourselves with the nature of the society that Zionism has spawned.

Dr. Tal Becker, an associate at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, has written eloquently of this challenge. He said that the

"...conventional [crisis based] narrative is both narrow and shallow. Narrow, in that its focus is on the physical existence of the Jewish people in their homeland, not on the breadth of what this sovereign project might offer for the collective Jewish experience. Shallow, in that it pursues Jewish survival for its own sake but tells no deeper story as to why that survival is important and worth fighting for."

"Beyond Survival: Jewish Values and Aspirational Zionism"

Havruta: A Journal of Jewish Conversation, summer, 2011, pages 56-63

Dr. Becker has argued for a values-based conversation about Israel that differs in four important ways from the crisis narrative that has dominated the past six plus decades.

A values-based conversation asks what it will take to address Israel's challenges and build a moral and just society that reflects in policies those values and our tradition and experience as a people. This conversation is about us as Jews and requires Israelis and American Jews together to be partners in the building of the future of the Jewish people.

In a crisis-driven narrative, how minorities such as Arabs, foreign workers, women, Ethiopians, and the poor are treated is unlikely to even be addressed unless these minorities are seen as a threat to Israel's survival or as a propaganda weapon for Israel's opponents. But in a values-based conversation the way a Jewish society relates to these minorities is an independent question that commands our attention.

The second way a values-based conversation is different is that in the crisis-model the conversation always turns on the measures the Israeli government and military need to repel the dangers Israel faces and the concrete responses Israel takes to any given threat. It's concerned, for example, with Iron Dome, smart bombs, blockades, targeted assassinations, and the International Criminal Court.

The values-driven conversation asks what should be done after it asks what means of self-defense a morally responsible Jewish nation should use.

Let me not be misunderstood. I know that many people in Israel take seriously the tension between Israel's humanitarian concerns on the one hand and its security responsibilities on the other. There are no easy answers in navigating through these often conflicting concerns and we sitting here need to understand this challenge and not presume that we know best and that somehow Israel has sacrificed its morality.

It's important as well for us to remember that we are not diplomats, politicians or analysts, we are a synagogue. Synagogues deal in values, and hence I want us to focus on values. This is our vocation and this is what we're good at. I know that every question about Israel's security has competing and legitimate perspectives, but we need to be firm on values even as we worry about Israel's security.

Having said this, I do worry that far too many Israelis and American Jews put humanitarian concerns far behind what they consider Israel's black and white security needs and then judge harshly those Israelis and Jews living abroad who disagree with them on their conclusions and actions.

In a values-driven conversation, to the contrary, we have to be able to accept the Jew who questions the propriety of Israel's forceful response in, for example, the Flotilla incident, the Gaza war, West Bank settlement policy, or even their support of a West Bank settlement boycott and not presume that such a person is committing an act of betrayal and treason against the Jewish people any more than the Jew who supports these policies without a second thought is guilty of moral bankruptcy.

We have to start from the position that if both sides to an issue are trying sincerely to strike an appropriate balance between legitimate ethical objectives, each will necessarily fulfill the responsibility to meet this challenge with a Jewish moral response. We may not agree on what that response should be, but we have to respect it as legitimate and morally based.

A Jew's intent is a critical element here. Criticism of the Israeli government and Israeli policies from love is far different than criticism from hate. Those who criticize from love must be given the benefit of the doubt before anyone accuses them of treason.

The third way a values-based conversation differs from the crisis narrative is in the meaning of one's criticism of Israel. In a crisis model, *any* criticism of Israel and its policies is problematic. If the only focus of Israel's policies is on confronting the external dangers to Israel, public Jewish criticism is seen as demoralizing to the Jewish people and as providing ammunition to Israel's enemies.

In the crisis model the unity of the message becomes critical and those who are convinced of the moral rightness of their position see the plurality of Jewish voices around Israel and in America as a mortal danger to the survival of Israel and the Jewish people.

A values conversation, to the contrary, supports a plurality of voices provided, of course, as I said a moment ago, that they criticize Israel from love and not hate.

This kind of love-based argument is nothing new to the Zionist enterprise or to Judaism itself. In Israel spirited debate takes place on every issue and can be heard in cafes, on buses and street corners in every town and village from Kiryat Shemona in the north to Sderot on the border of Gaza to Eilat in the south.

However, in the last two years intolerance of diverse opinions has grown dramatically within Israel itself, led by the current Israeli government, arguably the most extremist right-wing government in the history of the Jewish State. The ruling coalition has sponsored law after law in the Knesset (most of which, thankfully, have not yet passed) that would criminalize free speech based on the need for unity against external threats.

The government's desperate attempt to unify Israel through exclusionary nationalist legislation is countered by hundreds of thousands of Israelis who are advocating for a functioning social democracy. The *Haaretz* columnist Carlo Strenger rightly has noted that "Social justice, not nationalism, is what best unites Israel."

Put in a different way, for those constantly operating out of the crisis-mindset, Jewish unity is defined narrowly by the common threats we face. A values-narrative sees Jewish unity in terms of a common moral engagement that unites our people not because we agree with each other or because the one overriding issue is survival alone, but based on a shared commitment as Jews and as supporters of Israel to engage together in a complicated, divisive, agonizing, and exhilarating process of writing the next chapter of Jewish history in a way that's worthy of our tradition and experience.

The fourth and final way a values-based conversation differs from the crisis narrative is that the moral imperative in a crisis mode is survival. The imperative of the values narrative is *K'doshim tihiyu* – holiness.

If the conversation shifted out of crisis mode to a values mode a new Zionist paradigm reflecting a new stage in Zionist, Israeli and Jewish history would emerge. We've had Herzl's political Zionism, Ahad Ha-am's cultural Zionism, Rav Kook's religious Zionism, Jabotinsky's and Begin's revisionist Zionism, and Avigdor Lieberman's proto-fascist nationalist Zionism. This new stage could be called, per Dr. Becker, "Aspirational Zionism."

Aspirational Zionism asks these questions: How do Jewish values augment Israel's democratic and pluralistic society? How do the moral aspirations of the Biblical prophet and the compassionate impulse of the rabbinic sages interface with contemporary ethical challenges? How do we Jews here, in Israel and around the world, fight the sinister intentions of our enemies bent on our destruction without sacrificing our moral sensibilities? How do we as a people genuinely pursue peace as a moral and quintessentially Jewish obligation in spite of the threat of war? And how do we support our Israeli brothers and sisters while also advocating on behalf of the equal rights and dignity of Israel's minorities?

It's distressing that inside Israel many pressing moral issues have been set aside by successive governments operating in the crisis mode. When pressed about the urgency of addressing these other issues, they argue that the current crisis, whatever it is, necessarily dictates the choices the government and security forces make. When the crisis subsides, they say, Israel will be able to deal with the dramatic growth in poverty in Israel, a rampant sex trade industry operating out of Tel Aviv, the second class treatment of Israeli Arab citizens, the abuse of Palestinians living in the West Bank caused by the

occupation, and the neglect of hundreds of thousands of foreign workers from Eastern Europe and Asia who have no protections and no health care.

Ironically, it seems that the Jewish world's obsession with a crisis-based approach is creating its own crisis. The lack of sufficient attention to values is alienating too many Jews (young and old alike) and is harming Israel's image and legitimacy on the world stage. So often Israel's supporters say, if only people knew the truth about Israel's human rights record, its vibrant democracy, its commitment to the developing nations, and so forth, then people would understand, be less critical, more supportive and proud.

Yes, Israel is an extraordinary society and deserves credit for its remarkable accomplishments and the pride of the Jewish world for those successes, but the problems Israel faces are not solved by better *hasbara*, public relations, or by better Zionist education of American Jews. Of course, Israel can always do a better job explaining itself than it does, and we in the American Jewish community can certainly do a better job educating ourselves and the coming generations about Israel, but we can't explain away the truth about what's really happening in Israel vis a vis its policies, its neglect of minorities, its demoralizing occupation of the West Bank, and it's catering to the ultra-Orthodox and extreme right.

Many believe that it's not our place as American Jews to criticize Israel unless we are going to live there, pay taxes and put our own bodies and the bodies of our children on the line. Yes, Israelis are the ones who will have to live directly with the consequences of their government decisions. However, everything Israel does affects us here for better and worse. Israel's values influence our values. Its communal standing affects our safety and security. We ARE involved and to suggest that we remain quiet is not only contrary to our own self-interests, but to our role as *ohavei am Yisrael u-M'dinat Yisrael*, lovers of the Jewish people and the State of Israel.

In reading the words of Bialik I'm struck by how true a statement his was when he uttered it 85 years ago. Again:

"Everything depends on how we live in our land and how we behave here. Our brethren in the Diaspora want to see here what is missing there in the cultural and spiritual and moral life of *Galut*; ... If they do not feel that our values here are unwavering we will not find a path to their hearts ... *Eretz Yisrael* must give the Diaspora something more than Jews of any other country can give: something with a spirit of holiness, above and beyond the usual and commonplace."

Bialik was right; his words still ring true. We need a new focus in Jewish life relative to Israel, a new kind of Zionism, "Aspirational Zionism," that emphasizes Jewish values beyond crisis, beyond the vagaries of war, beyond the exigencies of the moment, that fulfills the *raison d'être* of the Jew in history, to be a just and compassionate society, an *or lagoyim*, a light unto the nations.

Ken yehi ratzon – May it be God's will, but more importantly, the will of the Jewish people. Amen!