

Finding Comfort at a Troubling Time in Israel

Shabbat Nachamu 5783

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Rabbi Barry H. Block

Last Friday night, I worshiped with our friends at the Reform congregation in Rosh HaAyin, Israel. When a group of us traveled to Israel in 2016, we were paired with this warm community because of our similarities. While we are a progressive Jewish congregation in an overwhelmingly Christian community, they are a Reform synagogue in a city dominated by Orthodox Judaism. My friend, Rabbi Ayala Miron Shashoua, leads with warmth and depth of spirit. As I have returned repeatedly in the years since we were first connected, I have come to know Ayala's family and several others in the congregation, and I very much enjoyed my evening with them, at the synagogue and at home for dinner.

The conversation revolved around what everybody planned to do the next day. Would they go, for the thirtieth Saturday night in a row, to a mass demonstration in Tel Aviv? Or would they join the tens of thousands who were marching on Jerusalem? The demonstrations oppose a judicial upheaval that would destroy Israeli democracy—and, that week, against a bill to limit the power of the Supreme Court, a bill that became law on Monday.

Democracy necessitates a delicate balance. Majority rule is key, as is protecting minorities from the tyranny of the majority. Under the new law, minority rights are threatened. Our friends at Bavat Ayin, and hundreds of thousands like them, are determined to preserve their Jewish and democratic state. They have upended their lives—now, for more than half a year, since January, with no end in sight. Every week—and, in recent weeks, virtually every day—they have taken to the streets, to train stations, to the airport, and to the grounds of the Knesset in Jerusalem, to protect their democracy. The symbol wielded most prominently at these demonstrations is the Israeli flag, emblematic of the patriotism of those who will not rest until the Jewish State's democracy is secured.

I have been privileged to join the protests four times—the first, when I was in Israel with my rabbinical colleagues in February, and three more times during my visit to Israel this month. When a speaker on the stage denounces the proposed destruction of the Israeli judiciary, the assembly cries out, "*Democratia!*" ("Democracy!") When a speaker decries the government's intention to increase the size and number of settlements in the occupied West Bank, sanction one illegal settlement after the next, incite settler pogroms, and endanger the lives of innocent Palestinians, the assembled crowd shouts "*Bushah!*" ("Shame!")

Yesterday was *Tisha B'Av*, Judaism's annual remembrance of the destruction of Jerusalem's Temples. The classic reason given for the destruction of the Second Temple is groundless hatred among the people of Judea.¹ The sages often repeat a story about two men who so despised one another that their contempt led to public embarrassment and retribution, ultimately involving the Romans in a way that led the emperor to decide the time had come to burn the Temple to the ground.

Even though that tale gained traction, it is far from the only cause our sages offered to explain Jewish history's greatest tragedy. Another Talmudic passage argues instead that "Jerusalem was destroyed only because the people did not rebuke one another."² While we all know that our "stiff-necked people" is not typically slow to protest, history has taught us that, at times, vocal disagreement with the government can be deadly dangerous. An oft-repeated maxim we know to be true is, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing."³ Our Talmudic sages claim that, as wrongdoing multiplied in ancient Israel, good people failed to raise their voices in *tochechah*, criticism, against destructive forces among their own people.

Their point: Criticism didn't destroy our ancient Temples. Instead, ancient Jerusalem was laid to waste because of a failure to protest wrongdoing.

In 2023, the future of Israel as a Jewish democracy is under assault from an extremist government intent on destroying the State's democratic institutions and civil society. Meanwhile, our Israeli friends and partners are determined not to repeat the mistakes of history. If, God forbid, Jerusalem is destroyed again, a lack of *tochechah*, rebuke, will not be the cause of that catastrophe.

This Israeli moment is one of great crisis, but also one that inspires hope.

The crisis is plain to see. I was present to hear my colleague, Rabbi Gilad Kariv, a Member of Knesset, proclaim that democracy-loving Israelis must continue to raise the "price tag" on the government's antidemocratic efforts. What he meant by that was that protests must persist and increase. The cost to average Israelis is enormous. Hundreds of thousands willingly transformed their lives, committing a huge percentage of their free time to retaining their democracy. Hundreds of military reservists, including high ranking pilots and intelligence officers, have refused to report for non-emergency reserve duty. Immigration to Israel has decreased markedly. The economy suffers terribly. Israel's extraordinary

¹T.B. Gittin 55b-56a.

² T.B. Shabbat 119b.

³ Often attributed to Edmund Burke, but source unknown.

high-tech sector threatens to leave “Start-Up Nation” if Israel is no longer a democracy.

This Shabbat is known in our tradition as *Shabbat Nachamu*, the Shabbat to offer comfort after the destruction of the Temple. The Haftarah we will read tomorrow morning begins, *Nachamu, nachamu ami*, “Comfort, comfort my people.” Despite the crisis, we may find comfort in this Israeli moment. I find tremendous hope in the humongous turnout of protestors, showing up consistently, week after week, blue and white flags in hand, increasingly determined. More importantly, the protestors themselves draw strength and resilience from one another. Nobody feels alone. They know that they are part of something great and significant. And increasingly, they are not alone, with support coming from Israel’s most important ally, the President of the United States, and from significant swaths of the North American Jewish community, led by the major institutions of Reform and Conservative Judaism—and most recently, Jewish Federations, too.

We know that Israel is not the only democratic country where the rights of minorities are imperiled. When I was in Israel, a colleague from Chicago, said, “In America, too, our rights have been taken away.” I gently corrected my friend, pointing out that, although she’s a woman, her bodily autonomy is no more threatened than mine, since she lives in what we may, once again in 2023, call a “free state.” Here, in Arkansas, anyone who can get pregnant is endangered, as are all LGBTQ folks, particularly trans kids, and even librarians. Supreme Court rulings and state laws that roll back rights we have taken for granted have awakened some Americans who had previously been apathetic. Voter turnout in 2022 told that tale.

Still, I draw greater inspiration—greater comfort, greater hope—from the Israeli public. Imagine if we in America could arouse and sustain the level of peaceful protest and civil disobedience that Israelis have demonstrated in 2023. Imagine if we reclaimed the American flag as our inspiration for patriotic protest, to safeguard American freedom. The equivalent would be tens of millions of Americans, gathering in cities and towns across the land, standing up for human rights, demanding that the promise of America be delivered to every person within these borders.

Let that be our dream. Let that be our demand. Let that be our source of comfort. For Israel. For America. For all the human family.

Amen.