

A Day Like Purim

Yom Kippur 5770

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The Zohar teaches us that the reason this day is called *Yom Ha-Kippurim* is that it is *Yom K'Purim*, a day like Purim. What an odd statement! No two days in the Jewish calendar could be more different from each other. Purim is a raucous Mardi-Gras-like festival, complete with drinking and feasting. We sing, dance and dress in costumes. Yom Kippur is a somber and serious day on which we refrain from eating and drinking so we can immerse ourselves in self reflection. Far from a day of celebration, it is a day of anxious anticipation as we seek God's forgiveness for our sins and nervously anticipate what the new year will bring. How can the Zohar make such a comparison?

And yet, upon reflection, there is a strange symmetry in these two days. Rav Soloveitchik taught that "Purim is a call for Divine compassion and intercession, a mood of petition arising out of great distress." Similarly, "the prayerful mood of Yom Kippur emerges out of a sense of spiritual anxiety and the desperate need for reconciliation with God." Both holidays at their core are about the Jewish people calling out to God in time of trouble - one national trouble and one personal - and asking God to redeem us. We can perhaps especially relate to this Purim like theme this year as we look back on the many hardships we have endured and pray that God will forgive us and grant us a better year. As the saying in Israel goes, May the old year and its curses end and the new year and its blessings begin.

There are other similarities as well. Both holidays are about the casting of lots. In the Purim story Haman casts lots to decide the day he will destroy the Jewish people. On Yom Kippur the high priest cast lots to determine which goat would be sacrificed to God and which goat would carry the sins of the children of Israel off into the wilderness where it would die. The lots themselves are a reminder of the randomness of life, that there are factors which are beyond our control and that we are ultimately dependent upon God.

Finally, both holidays are about masks. On Purim we put on masks, masquerading as others. On Yom Kippur the challenge is just the opposite: to remove the many masks behind which we hide and to uncover our true selves.

But this year there is one more aspect of Purim that colors my Yom Kippur. We read at the end of the Megillah, after Haman's plot is spoiled, that in the day the enemies of the Jews hoped to rule over them, *v'nahafoch hu* - everything was turned upside down - and the Jews ruled over those that hated them.

V'nahafoch hu - everything was turned upside down. In the Megillah that phrase is used to indicate that Haman's plot was spoiled. Today, however, as I read those

words, I see a world turned upside down in ways which pose serious peril not only to the Jews, to the free world.

V'nahafoch hu - everything turned upside down - That's what it felt like as five days before Yom Kippur - Yom K'Purim - a Day like Purim - when the current leader of Persia stood before the world to speak about the evil of the Jews.

You remember the words of that other Persian leader, the one we read on Purim: He told Ahashverosh that "There is a certain people scattered amongst us that keeps themselves separate. They have their own different laws and they do not keep the king's laws; it is not in the King's interest to tolerate them."

And this week the leader of Persia warned assembled world leaders that "the dignity, integrity and rights of the American and European people are being played with by a small but deceitful number of people called Zionists. Although they are a minuscule minority, they have been dominating an important portion of the financial and monetary centers as well as the political decision-making centers of some European countries and the US in a deceitful, complex and furtive manner." He went on to decry how Western leaders are forced to "obey the demands and wishes of" this "small number of acquisitive and invasive people. That is, you and me.

Extending his lies beyond his despicable denial of the Holocaust, he painted the Jews in Israel as foreign colonial invaders, he charged that the "criminal and occupying Zionists" forged a regime "through collecting people from various parts of the world and bringing them to other people's land by displacing, detaining and killing the true owners of the land."

How uncannily like the words of the Megillah. A people in our midst who keep separate and have their own agenda and manipulate us to their own ends. In the spirit of the most egregious Nazi propaganda, the Iranian president essentially laid out his case for the justification of the destruction of a parasite race that is infesting humanity. A handful of nations walked out on Ahmedinejad in protest. But the overwhelming majority of world leaders stayed and listened to his verbal filth, dignifying it in the end by polite applause.

The man who represents the greatest threat to the nations of the world paints the victims of his hatred as the source of evil. *V'nahafoch hu*. The world is upside down.

The next day, Prime Minister Netanyahu took the podium. Addressing the world's leaders he held up the minutes of the Wannsee Conference at which the Final Solution was created and asked, "Is this a lie?" He held up the blueprints to Auschwitz-Birkenau and asked again "Is this a lie?" And the numbers tattooed on survivors' arms, "is that a lie too?" Scolding world leaders he asked, "Have you no shame?"

No, Mr. Prime Minister, they have no shame. The world leaders were silent during your speech, applauding only once, when you mentioned Israel desiring to see a Palestinian state, and then offering polite applause at the end, just as they did for the leader of Iran.

There was no indication of support for your statement that we are not foreign invaders, that Israel is our historic ancestral homeland. No acknowledgment when you pointed out that in eight years of rockets not one UN resolution condemned them as war crimes. No recognition that the use of human shields by Palestinians was also a war crime. No acknowledgment of this sovereign nation's right to defend itself and protect its citizens. No applause when you described the extraordinary steps Israel took to minimize loss of civilian life in Operation Cast Lead. Silence as you reminded them that the UN itself had authorized the creation of Israel and that for over six decades the Arabs have rejected it. Deafening silence as you called upon the Palestinians to take the most basic and necessary step - the one at the core of the conflict -- recognizing Israel's right to exist as a Jewish State.

Silence. *V'nahafoch hu*. The world is upside down.

Earlier, President Obama had spoken, eloquently calling for an end to tyranny and, to his credit, calling for recognition of Israel specifically as a Jewish state. But I was profoundly disturbed by the president's remarks. Mr. Obama devoted 32 lines of his speech to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Afghanistan and Pakistan, discussed together, got a total of 5 lines; Iraq, 4; and Iran and North Korea, discussed together, a total of 9. Darfur got 2 lines, with no mention of the mass murders.

That's almost *six times* as much space for Israel and the Palestinians as for Iran, which will soon threaten Israel with nuclear weapons. The President's emphasis on Israel in his speech gave credence to the completely distorted outlook that pervades the United Nations, indeed to the very lie spewed by the leader of Iran: that it is Israel that is at the root of the world's problems and is the biggest obstacle to world peace. *V'nahafoch hu*. *The world is upside down*.

Such twisted thinking was behind the recently released Goldstone Report, a report whose forgone conclusions were already included in its mandate, and which was based entirely upon recycled Palestinian estimates of the number of civilian deaths which have already been documented to be false. The commission was so biased from its outset that even Mary Robbins - the former UN Human Rights Commissioner during the infamous Durban conference - refused to participate. Now the International Criminal Court is talking about trying Israelis for alleged war crimes; while it remains silent about actual documented Palestinian war crimes which seem of no concern to them. *V'nahafoch hu*. *The world is upside down*.

In his remarks, Mr. Netanyahu warned those assembled: "Perhaps some of you think that this man" - meaning Ahmedinejad - "and his odious regime threaten only the Jews. You're wrong. History has shown us time and again that what starts with attacks on the Jews eventually ends up engulfing many others."

Netanyahu's words took me back to another time when the world was upside down. In 1938, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise warned the West that it was not just the Jews stood in mortal peril: "The democracies," he said, "may yet conclude that they will either stay the power of Nazism and Fascism or be destroyed."

That same year, Pastor Reinhold Niebuhr said: "Nazi tyranny never could have reached such proportions as to be able to place the whole of Europe under its ban, if

sentimental illusions about the character of the evil which Europe was facing had not been combined with less noble motives for tolerating Nazi aggression...."

Seventy years later the world seems once again much too ready to tolerate aggression against the Jews, assuming that it somehow will escape the Jews' fate. President Obama has pledged to stand with Israel and to assure her security, but the question is how will he respond to Iran? Will he put in place the kind of tough sanctions that will force Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions? And if it comes down to it, if there is no other choice, will he aid and abet an Israeli attack and then defend her from the inevitable international criticism? Or will the US and the west show ambivalence to Israel's plight, much as Roosevelt and Churchill showed ambivalence to reports they heard of the Nazi's murderous plans?

For us, as Jews, the stakes are high. Israel is a small country. One nuclear missile is all it would take to - using Ahmedinejad's words - wipe Israel off the map. There are approximately 13 million Jews in the world today. Just under six million live in Israel. The Nazis wiped out one third of all the Jews living in their time. A single missile today could easily wipe out half the Jews who remain.

Hassan Nasrallah, the Iranian backed Shi-ite leader of Hezbollah, said in 2002: "If they (Jews) all gather in Israel, it will save us the trouble of going after them worldwide." There are those who would say that such statements are merely saber-rattling, empty rhetoric. The same was said of Hitler's Mein Kampf. Like Haman of old our enemy has laid bare his plan for all to see. We dare not ignore it.

What's more, even if that weapon is never fired, the shadow of such a nuclear weapon would embolden terrorists while tying Israel's hands when it comes to deterrence. That long shadow would also chase away international business, undermine the economy and lead to mass emigration. But the threat is not just to Israel. a nuclear Iran would dominate the region and quickly set its sites on the west.

V'nahafoch hu - sixty years ago we saw our world turned upside down. We cannot risk it happening again. Today marks the 36th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War. The records indicate that the Israeli High Command was concerned in advance about the Syrian and Egyptian buildups. There was talk of a pre-emptive strike; but Golda Meir and others were concerned about American and international criticism. The result: thousands of Israeli deaths. The lesson is clear - we cannot afford to ignore the writing on the wall.

French President Sarkozy has called for a December deadline to any talks. Important legislation called the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act is working its way through Congress. It calls for crippling sanctions that would make it illegal for any company to sell refined petroleum or refining equipment to Iran. Forty percent of Iran's refined petroleum is imported, so this would hit them very hard. The Act also makes it illegal for American ports to dock any ship that docks in Iran, illegal for to do business with any company that insures their ships, and illegal for American banks to pass a single dollar through their system that originates or ends up in Iran. These sanctions have the ability to create the unrest and dissatisfaction in Iran that can help fuel the opposition and force the government to choose between its diabolical plans and the ability to stay in power. Only such a choice can bring an end to Iran's nuclear weapons program.

Tomorrow we will recite the martyrology prayers in which we retell the tortuous murder of ten of our holiest sages at the hands of the Romans. We will recount the centuries of persecution - crusades, inquisition, pogroms, Holocaust, We will pray that God should remember those who died *al kiddush hashem*, for the sanctification of God's name, and that for their sake God should be forgiving of us, spare us hardship in the coming year and grant us blessing. But the Martyrology is not just about the past. It is a call to action, a reminder that we must be ever vigilant against the forces of hatred, tyranny and persecution, ever ready to stand in defense of our people.

The Vilna Gaon taught that the lesson of the link between Yom Kippur and Purim - of the idea that Yom Ha-Kippurim is Yom K'Purim - A Day Like Purim - is that spiritual redemption is not complete without physical redemption. So as we pray this Yom Kippur for spiritual redemption - for forgiveness and for blessing, let us commit ourselves to ensuring the physical redemption of our people and our world.

Let us cry out with all our might: *v'nahafoch hu* - the world is upside down! Let us urge the world to recognize where the true danger lies. Let us demand recognition of Israel's right to defend herself. Let us draw attention to the reality that it is not Israel alone that is threatened. Let us call the world to conscience and to action, so that the mistakes and the tragedy of the Shoah and World War II are not repeated. Most of all let us pray that we will see the day when hatred and evil will be vanquished from this earth, the day on which the words of the Megillah will be fulfilled: *La-yehudim haytah orah vesimcha ve-sasson vikar* - that there will be light and joy and honor - for Israel and for all nations. Only on such a day - on a Yom K'Purim - on a day like Purim - will our Yom Kippur prayers have truly been answered.