

PESACH SERMON
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Israel and the Recession: Where Do We Go From Here?

This is the year the Grinch tried to steal Pesach! This is the Pesach when we didn't have to be concerned: our dough definitely did not rise! We usually have a heavy feeling *after* Pesach, but this year as American Jews we've all been walking around with a heavy feeling. For some this is the year that they could not go away to a hotel for Pesach ... it just costs too much. Others, because of the economy, might have been forced to go as far as a recommendation in the New York Times that one make their Pesach Seder dairy. Whether one can, in fact, use a cheese stick instead of a shank bone is a question that I don't want to get into! This feeling of heaviness is not only because of events in America, but in Israel as well.

Israel found itself at war once again, this time with Hamas, while Iran moved closer and closer to becoming a nuclear power. Israel's dreams for peace seem further and further away ... and the American dream for prosperity and economic security has collapsed before our very eyes. Two countries that have long been noted for their vibrancy and "can do" spirit now find themselves engulfed with a heavy feeling of unease. Peggy Noonan, in describing the mood in America today quotes a friend who says there is "a pervasive sense of anxiety, as though everyone feels they are on thin ice." Daniel Gordis, in his recent writing about Israel, titles it: "Why Would You Live Here? In both countries there is a feeling that we've lost control of our future, that we are being swallowed up by forces beyond our control.

As different as the challenge America is confronting from the challenge that Israel is confronting ... for many people they both find their root cause right at the beginning of our Egyptian bondage and their ultimate solution right at the end of our Egyptian bondage.

What caused the enslavement in Egypt? Why did the Egyptians turn on the Jews? From Joseph's time, we had made contributions to Egyptian society. What changed? If you look in the Torah the answer is: nothing really. We are simply told that the children of Israel increased and grew strong. And then, Pharaoh said to his people: "Let us outsmart them lest it become numerous and it may be that if a war will occur, they may join our enemies." The Jews had not done anything wrong! And nothing had gone wrong in Egypt! What did Pharaoh say? "*V'haya ki tikrenu milchamah*" – *maybe* a war will break out, and if things go bad you know who is to blame? ... Blame it on the Jews.

It started then, but it goes on to this very day: blame it on the Jews. Israel pulls out of Gaza and gives the Palestinians their first opportunity to start the creation of a Palestinian state and asks nothing in return. But Hamas, committed to Israel's destruction, uses Gaza as a launching pad for 8000 rockets to be fired into Israel ... the same Hamas that kidnaps Israeli soldiers and uses its own people as human shields. Israel retaliates and it gets blamed! Richard Cohen, writing in the Washington Post, spoke the painful truth when he said: "The world has grown weary of Israel." While the world pledges \$4 billion for the Palestinians to rebuild Gaza, the New York Times headlines: "After Gaza, Israel Grapples with Crisis of Isolation."

And here in America a diplomat named Charles Freeman, the former Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, is chosen to be Chairman of the National Intelligence Council, responsible for being the one to prepare the President's daily intelligence briefing. An outcry breaks out because of the appointment. Supporters of Israel are upset. To him, there is no peace in the Middle East because of Israel! 9/11? Blame it on Israel! But it wasn't just supporters of Israel who were upset by this appointment ... Mr. Freeman has a long time bias and financial connections to Saudi Arabia and the Chinese government who he criticized for not crushing the Tiananmen Square democracy protest sooner. This led Democratic House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, who is a strong supporter of the democracy movement in China, and who, by the way, is not Jewish, to personally appeal to President Obama to withdraw Freeman's appointment. And when it was, the Washington Post editorial wrote: "The real question is why an administration that says it aims to depoliticize U.S. intelligence estimates would have chosen such a man to oversee them." But who is to blame? The New York Times, on its front page headlined: "Effort to hire critic of Israel set off outcry" and on its webpage headlined: "Israel stand was undoing of nominee intelligence post." Human Rights Watch – no friend of Israel – came out against the nomination, but: blame it on the Jews!

And while you're at it, you can blame America's entire economic mess on the Jews as well. That's what many people have been doing. According to the Anti-Defamation League, a survey of 500 people in seven European countries found that nearly 1/3 blame Jews for the global financial crisis. Bernie Madoff has become the face to hate in the financial crisis. This despite the fact that much of the money he robbed was from Jews! Time Magazine featured an article, "25 People to Blame for America's Economic Crisis," and six of them are Jews. We are 2% of the population but 25% of the problem!

The Jews of Egypt suffered 210 years of slavery for this mindset. But ultimately they survived. And so will we! And part of the solution will come from an understanding of a word found at the time of our exodus from Egypt that has perplexed commentators ever since, where we are told: "*V'chamushim ollu b'nei Yisroel m'ereetz mitzrayim* – and *chamushim* were the children of Israel when they went out of Egypt." What does this word "*chamushim*" mean? On a simple level, it is translated as "being armed;" that the Jews left Egypt armed. Interesting, but why did the Torah have to tell us that? But our sages in the Midrash give us a completely different and even stranger way of reading this word. They read the word "*chamushim*" as being derived from the root "*chamesh*" – the number 5 – which leads them to say that only one out of every five Jews experienced the exodus from Egypt. The others died during the plague of darkness.

What a strange interpretation. Many don't think it is to be taken literally, indeed, the famous Biblical commentator, Ibn Ezra, writes, "The whole thing is an interpretation: don't rely on it. Maybe the one who said it at the outset had a hidden secret reason."

But let me tell you how I see it: "most of the Jews died during the darkness" metaphorically means that most of the Jews became blinded by despair. They came to believe that the enslavement would never end. They lost all hope and were just engulfed in darkness. But there were other Jews ... other Jews who never gave in to despair, who knew that at some point things had to get better, who used the Egyptian experience to make them stronger. And it was with this strength that they left Egypt "armed" ... armed to confront any challenges that might confront them in the future. In the book of Deuteronomy we are told that God took us "*mikoor habarzel mimitsrayim* – and God withdrew us from the iron crucible from Egypt." Rashi tells us that "*koor*" is a vessel which refines gold; the crucible of Egypt made us as strong as iron to shine forth as gold.

So which kind of a person are you, as an American and as a Jew? Which kind of the “*chamushim?*” – those who are confronting adversity today and are enveloped by darkness ... or those who see this experience our countries are going through as an opportunity to bring out the best in us?

There are some in America who have given in to despair; they are putting all their money under their mattresses, angry at everyone; the President, Congress, AIG ... you can't trust anyone; things are only going to get worse. But I prefer to follow Warren Buffet, who knows a bit about these things and who writes, “Amid this bad news, however, never forget that our country has faced far worse travails in the past. In the 20th century alone we dealt with two great wars ... a dozen or so panics and recessions ... virulent inflation and the Great Depression ... Though the path has not been smooth, our economic system has worked extraordinarily well over time. It has unleashed human potential as no other system has and it will continue to do so. America's best days lie ahead.”

And the same is true in terms of Israel. Yes, the world is growing weary of Israel, but Israel is not growing weary. I think back to a speech delivered in 1991 by Avrum Harman, former Ambassador to the United Nations and President of the Hebrew University, a distinguished and eloquent spokesman for our people. Dr. Harman said, “If I have one regret in all that I have done for this country, it is the many times over the years that I addressed Jews and said to them: this is the most challenging time in Israel's history. This is the most dangerous time in Israel's history. This is the most exciting time in Israel's history. I've said that so many times over the years, in '48 and in '67, with the PLO and Lebanon and the Intifada, I regret having ever said it. Because the truth is, right now is the most difficult, exciting and challenging time in the history of the State of Israel.” That was in 1991! That's the way it is with our people! We always think that today is the worst when compared to the past. So let me remind you: Israel survived its war of liberation where it lost 6000 people; one percent of its population – comparable to America today losing 3 million people in a war. We survived a Yom Kippur War where we lost 2522 of our best and finest. We survived terrorist attacks in Munich and Maalot and in Kiryat Shemona and countless other places. We survived Scud missiles, Qassam rockets, bus bombings and suicide bombers. The Jewish Telegraph Agency reported this week that at this time of year, in April 1944, their headline stories were:

*Hungary bars Jews from travelling on railroads; Budapest made “Judenrien.”

*American Jewish servicemen mark Passover at Seders in four corners of the world.

*Palestine clam broken; guman battles police on main street in Tel Aviv.

That was in the year I was born. That was in the good old days! Today we are stronger than ever.

And we ARE strong! Take my word for it ... better yet, don't take my word for it. Listen to Newsweek Magazine ... listen to The Economist Magazine, both of which several weeks ago had articles about Israel. The article in Newsweek started with the words: “Despite Wall Street's doom and gloom of late, at least one category of the market is still going strong ... Stocks from companies based in Israel have grown by nearly 9% since the beginning of 2009 ... That's at a time when European and U.S. stocks fell by around 18%.” Similarly, The Economist reports that Israel developed the Pentium chip, voice mail, instant messaging, firewalls and the video pill. And The Economist attributes all this to the fact that all Israelis have to serve in the army where they are taught the virtues of teamwork and improvisation. And, in the magazine's words, “Add to that a high tolerance of risk, born of a long history and an ever-present danger of attack, and you have the makings of an entrepreneurial firecracker.” So Israel

is what it is today not only in *spite* of the threats it faces, but in some ways, *because* of them as well!

According to our tradition, the experience of the Jews in Egypt was inevitable. It had been told of to Abraham, and I guess it was inevitable that the Jews would be blamed. But it was through the Egyptian experience that the Jews became the nation that we are. Some couldn't handle it, as some can't today – as Americans and as Jews. But those of us who don't give in to despair, those of us who realize that there are cycles in life – both in finances of individuals and in the lives of nations – will remember the line: “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”

Let us all learn a lesson from the women who left Egypt. In the Torah we are told that after Moses and the children of Israel sang the magnificent song at the Sea, then the Torah says, “Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took her tambourine in her hand and all the women went forth after her with tambourines and with dances.” Yes, the women also had a song to sing. But let me ask a question: where did they get the tambourines from? The Jews had to leave Egypt so quickly that they didn't have time for the bread to rise ... but the women had time to pack tambourines? Answer the commentators: Yes, the women took the time to pack their tambourines because they had faith that someday they would be singing. May we all keep this in mind, and then for all of us as Americans and as Jews, the words of the Hagaddah will ring true: “*Hotzianu mavdus l'cherus m'yagon l'simcha u'mavel l'yomtov u'mafailah l'ohr gadol* – God will lead us from slavery to freedom, from bondage to redemption, from misery to joy, from mourning to a holiday and from deep darkness to great light.” Amen.

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