

Jerusalem, We Have A Problem

Remember Apollo 13, the 1970 space mission made famous by its eponymous film released in 1995. It was a mission designed to land on the moon, but an oxygen tank exploded on the second day, crippling the spacecraft. They didn't make it to the moon; however, against all odds, the crew returned safely to Earth.

Tom Hanks' famous line to the command center in Houston was, "Houston, we have a problem."

So, this Shabbat, let me declare "Jerusalem, we have a problem."



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"Jerusalem, we have a problem."

What do I mean by this?

Israel is in a tough situation and, while much of it is not of its own doing, some of it is and it is causing real problems for Israel and for American Jews.

"Jerusalem, we have a problem."

Let me start with what I do not mean. I do not mean that Israel is not a democracy.

Israel *is* a democracy and three quarters of its citizens who were eligible to vote, voted

last Tuesday. Not bad. From what I have read, all Arab voters were able to vote without incident, something that has recently become more difficult for some minority voters in our own country.

Israeli voters chose the party and leader that they wanted. While I personally, had thought, and still believe, it would be better for Israel to have a new leader, they made their choice in a fair and democratic manner. Just as there are disagreements in Israel, I know that some of us support the Prime Minister and are pleased by the outcome. I understand that – it's an honest disagreement.

It should be noted, however, that while the Likud and Netanyahu will almost definitely form the next government, the overall numbers of right vs. left wing voters in Israel may have actually shifted slightly to the left. Although that will not help the Zionist Union, formerly the Labor and Hatnua parties today, it may help them as they plan for the future.



But, “Jerusalem, we have a problem” is about the election itself. While there is occasionally subtle race-baiting that goes on in American elections, it is not acceptable. On Tuesday, as Israel held its elections, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated: “The right-wing government is in danger. Arab voters are going *en masse* to the polls.”



The Rabbinical Assembly, the association of Conservative/Masorti rabbis, condemned this statement and called on the Prime Minister to unite, rather than divide, the people of Israel.

I am proud that the leaders of the RA (Rabbi William Gershon and Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, president and executive vice president, respectively), wrote:

“The Jewish people have been subject to political persecution and vilification for over 2,000 years. It is for this reason, among others, that when the State of Israel was founded, it committed itself to the equality of all of its citizens. [...]

“On Election Day, March 17, 2015, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu indicated that Israel was endangered by Israeli Arabs exercising their right to vote. [...] (This) [The Prime Minister’s] statement, which indefensibly singled out the Arab citizens of Israel, is unacceptable and undermines the principles upon which the State of Israel was founded. Because we proudly and unreservedly continue our unflagging support for the State of Israel, its citizens and its values, we must condemn the Prime Minister’s statement, singling out Arab citizens for exercising their legitimate right to vote. [...]”



“Jerusalem, we have a problem.”

The Prime Minister reversed a central tenet of Israeli policy just before the election. When Netanyahu said he no longer supports a two-state solution, he changed the entire dynamic. And yes, I know that he has backtracked somewhat, leaving us confused as to what he really believes.

Whatever he really believes, he has done damage to the peace process

and to the vital area of agreement between the U.S. and Israel. Further, a two-state solution is the bedrock idea that is embedded within the approaches of almost all American Jewish organizations from left to right, from AIPAC to the entire Federation movement. When he threw that under the bus, that was destructive.

What kind of leadership does Netanyahu offer? More of the same. Unless something unforeseen happens, he will continue to support expanded settlement activity and not building merely in the areas along the Green Line. He does not heal wounds, but seems to prefer to open new ones.



“Jerusalem, we have a problem” is mostly about the American Jewish community. Increasingly, American Jews are drifting away from Israel. They feel that its policies towards the Palestinians are antithetical to their values as liberals and as Jews. I see this throughout the country as apathy has become the primary emotion of American Jews towards Israel. And I

even see it in our own community, which has been quite passionate and

involved in Israel. This problem is becoming particularly apparent among younger Jews.

And if the new Israeli government continues on its expected track, or even, God forbid, further aggravates the current situation with policy changes, this process of disaffection will intensify.

That will have three consequences. First, Jewish support for Israel will become increasingly drawn from the right-wing sector, identified largely with one American political party. In other words, support for Israel will become less bipartisan, challenging the virtual unanimity of sympathy for Israel. This, in turn, endangers Israel's security.

Second, non-Orthodox American Jews could drift away from Israel and even from Judaism, as Jewish identity is so interwoven with Israel today. This will be destructive to our approach to the tradition and will hurt our ability to do the holy work in which we engage.

Third, with the new government's drift to the religious right, with the re-entry of the *Haredi* (Ultra-Orthodox) into the government coalition, their parties will strengthen their hold on the country's official religious life, rendering it even less pluralistic than it is today.

But "Jerusalem, we have a problem" is also about the ambivalence American Jewish leaders are feeling. More and more Jewish leaders – not just those on the far left, but mainstream leaders – are expressing their dismay. Those who work in interfaith circles are asked to explain how they can continue to support Israel as it continues to engage in illegal settlement activity, denying Palestinians their rights, and seems to be

moving away from the only real solution to this conflict: the two-state solution.

I myself have been asked this. And I have to say for the first time in my life, I am not sure how to respond. I feel that I have been put in a terrible position: I have to choose between my love of Israel on the one hand and my moral sense on the other.

“Jerusalem, we have a problem” and, honestly, “we” more and more, includes me. Some of my friends, many strong supporters of Israel over the years, have had enough. They have declared their intention to distance themselves from Israel and its government. They feel that they cannot, in good conscience, support a government that engages in unethical policies and seems to offer no better vision for the future.



My mother says it well: “Ask each leader in Israel: following your policies, what does Israel look like in 25 years? What does it look like in 50 years? Will it be in control of Palestine then? Will it be an ultra-Orthodox country? Will it survive? Will outside enemies overwhelm her? Will internal pressures destroy her from within?”

Leadership is about understanding the complexities of the feelings many of us have and choosing to act in a manner that is just and Jewish.

Even if I disagreed with Bibi on certain issues before, I knew he claimed to stand for the same two-state solution I believed in. Now...now, I don't know what to think....

I stand before you today, along with many other Jewish leaders like me, who go all out in our support of Israel – who lead trips to Israel, who go to AIPAC conferences, who lobby our elected officials, who plan and attend rallies, who work tirelessly on behalf of Israel – to say that I feel conflicted.

Racist statements in an election, the rejection of the two-state solution and the continued taking of land, do not speak for me. In the center, I feel abandoned.

This is a win for the far right and the far left, as they will be encouraged and pushed to more extreme positions.

For those of us in the center – those of us who fear Iran, but believe



in trying to find a negotiated settlement; those of us who want a secure Israel, but also believe in protecting the rights of the Palestinians; those of us who want a Jewish country that treats its minorities justly; those of us who

believe that Israel should be both a Jewish homeland and a democracy for all its citizens, it is hard to be in the center....

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A word of Torah – as you have seen, today is an awesome Shabbat, one with three *sifrei* Torah. There is a fascinating shift that occurs from the third Torah to the *haftarah* that Seth just read so nicely. The Torah speaks of the *Pesah* sacrifice and how each family or extended family

offered the sacrifice, placing the blood on their doorposts so that the tenth plague skipped over their homes.

Ezekiel, in our special *haftarah* for Shabbat *Hahodesh*, discusses this ritual in terms of the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. He has the *Kohein*, the spiritual leader, apply the blood on the doorposts of the Temple. This subtle shift speaks to the importance of the community – that it needs to be protected and girded.

Rabbi Fel and I and our Israel Action committee all work hard to embrace the wide diversity of perspectives about Israel. I know that there are some in our community who love Bibi and are celebrating his victory and there are others who are troubled by his win. They feel distressed by Israel's policies in the West Bank and now, they see no path to move forward toward peace, toward a more just solution to the current situation.

How we hold our community together and how we speak to each other will be the test of our shul. Can we understand the fear that many of us have about the looming Iranian threat when, at the same time, we want Israel to do more, not less, for peace? Can we respect others with conflicting views of Israel's policies?

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That said, I refuse to let the challenges of this moment overwhelm me. Amidst all the Israel emails this week, I received an email from Nigel Savage, the head of Hazon, which is one of the organizations for which we raise money on the Israel bike ride that I almost went on last year!

He wrote about wonderful new environmental work that is taking place in Israel and then he shared how two days after the election he

heard Sahar Amoun speak. She is a 22 year-old Israeli Arab; a Palestinian; a Muslim; a social activist. She was speaking to an audience of Jewish funders about finishing her studies to be a social worker, and working for *Mifalot Hinukh B'hevra* – a non-profit that utilizes sport to strengthen disadvantaged populations, and to help promote understanding and coexistence amongst different groups in Israel and in the region.

She was, in his words, “Very inspiring. She helped lead a peace mission of Arabs and Jews to Germany. Very cool.”

And then he offered a bottom line: “There was an election this week in Israel, and its consequences – like that of all elections – will be fateful, for good or ill. But the election, and the headline politics, important as they are, are only a part of the story. This country and this region has many problems. But Israel also has more idealists per square foot than any place I’ve been in my life. Non-profits in Israel are doing extraordinary work. They need our help, but they also have much to teach us. I wish that a fifth of all US households composted their organic waste [as they do in Israel]. I wish our shopping malls had sustainability directors, and grew food on their roofs. I can imagine how much better America’s bad neighborhoods would be if they had intentional communities sprouting in them with the idealism and determination I see here. [...]”

Israel remains a place of inspiring natural and human beauty, even as it charts these challenging waters.

While, “Jerusalem, we have a problem” – may have been my opening words, we can feel and pray that we finish like the Apollo 13 crew: safely back on the ground.

As we celebrate this month the birth of the Jewish people, with three *sifrei* Torah no less, let us hope that Israel continues to be inspired by the words that close every Jewish service: *Oseh Shalom Bimromav Hu Ya’ase Shalom Aleinu V’al Kol Yisrael* – May God who makes peace in the heavens, make peace for us and all Israel.