

VISIT TO ISRAEL: January 2023

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Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, a man who knew much about suffering, had one message he considered more vital and urgent than all. "Never give up!" he said. "There is no such thing as despair at all!" Since we have all seen cases of despair in the world, I read this to mean "Despair is not a possibility at all!"

We lovers of Israel (the people and the state) need this message right now more than ever before. The shudders created by the results of Israel's election have not ceased. Forces and attitudes that we knew were present within the Jewish people, but were ashamed to show their faces, now run the government of the Jewish State, the one that is supposed to represent all of us, the entire Jewish people, before the world. Their followers parade proudly through the streets of Israel's cities, including Arab-populated areas like Jerusalem's Old City. Their chants of "Death to Terrorists!" are well understood to be only a formally muted version of "Death to Arabs!" and "Death to Traitors!" meaning people like Yitzhak Rabin. And you and me.

How did we get here? All the explanations offered are partly right. Fears caused by the second Intifada. Leftover trauma from the Holocaust, still echoing loudly in Israeli ears. Collapse of the socialist dreams of the left. Political exhaustion by all but the most extreme. Yes, they are all true.

But the demons who have been let out of the closet in this election are more dangerous than all of those, because they are *Jewish demons*. That means that they claim to stand as bearers of all the great power of tradition and the authority that comes with it. The damage these people threaten is not only to the State of Israel and its democratic institutions, but to Judaism itself and its place as one of the world's great spiritual traditions.

We are engaged today in a great struggle for the soul of Judaism. Those who read it in an exclusivist and xenophobic way have taken center stage. Many who understand that this is an ugly distortion, created in response to generations of bitter persecution, have retreated from the battle, either ashamed of their own lack of Jewish knowledge or simply having lost interest in the struggle. But this is about a legacy that we all share, one in which we want to take great pride. Do we really want to give it away to the racists among us? We need to assert a strong alternative vision to theirs. We need a Judaism that follows in the footsteps of the Talmud when it asks: "**Why was Adam created singly?**" and answers "**So that no one ever be able to say 'My father was greater than yours'.**" We are all children of Adam and Eve. Each human life is of equal value, including those of Israelis and Palestinians.

Recent statistics show that more Palestinians have been killed in this past year by Israeli forces than in any since 2004. Why? Has violence gotten all that worse? Surely not worse than the

previous year, with its bloody riots in cities across Israel! But the trigger-fingers of Israeli soldiers and police seem to have gotten a little looser. Under the leadership of Ministers Ben Gvir and Smotrich, who have already promised to loosen the standards of responsibility, things promise to get much worse.

But we cannot give up. Despair is not an option. We who love Israel, both from within and without, and cherish its Declaration of Independence as the foundation on which it stands, must work harder than ever, and on two different levels. The first is the short term, confronting every wrong done or threatened by this administration with every tool in our hands: legal action, demonstrations, statements, and in extreme cases even civil disobedience. In situations where the equal status of Palestinian citizens of Israel is threatened, joint Jewish-Arab civil disobedience will be an especially effective tool.

But we need to work on the long-term track as well. Where are we going? Toward what resolution of the conflict are we heading? The settlement movement has killed the possibility of two completely separate states. That is now a geographical impossibility. But in its ever more deeply wounding Palestinian pride, and doing so on a daily basis, it has only increased the urgency for Palestinian self-government in an independent entity. The only plan that seems to make sense any more is Confederation, the creation of two linked states with cross-border residential and employment rights. This is a complex proposal that seems far off in fulfillment, but it is the only realistic option for the long term future. That is why I have become active in **ACIP**, Americans for a Confederation of Israel and Palestine, supporting the work of **Erets le-Khulam, A Land for All**, an Israeli-Palestinian group on the ground.

The gulf between Israelis and Palestinians is deep and wide on many fronts. Mutual distrust is the rule, with rare exceptions. Economic, religious, and social differences will take many years to overcome. But we must begin to make progress. The years of stagnation continue to make things only worse. Look at the choices the Israeli voter has made!

Meanwhile, we “hang in.” We do not turn our backs on the idea of a Jewish State, or upon Israel as it exists, the great creation of the Jewish people over the past century. Yes, a particular Israeli government is created by its voters, badly misguided ones in this case. Our work is therefore educational, the transforming of hearts and minds. As every good educator knows, that happens first and foremost by example.

I have just returned from a visit to **Shorashim** in Alon Shvut, an example of living cooperation between Jewish and Arab neighbors. There are many other such projects on the ground, both rural and urban. These are the examples we need to support and upon which we need to build. The dissipation of hatred and mistrust between the two groups who inhabit this small territory must begin from the ground up. They need to be increased a hundredfold.

Become involved! We cannot afford either detachment or despair.