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## Israel, the Eternal Nation

by Daniel Gordis

Sometimes a simple drive on a highway in the Jewish state is all that it takes to restore perspective, to revive hope. A road, its exits and the places they recall serve as markers to our history, and remind us that we've been here before and that we've prevailed.

If only all of us could take those drives. For especially in these weeks of sadness, of disappointment, of worry, what we need is perspective, a reminder of where we've been and how far we've come.

I remember the feelings of Israelis a month into the war in Lebanon. We didn't know what to call this new and unanticipated conflict. Lebanon II? The Hezbollah War? Whatever it was called, it was consuming us. History, it seemed, had turned on us. Unilateralism had failed. Our worst fears about Gaza and the disengagement had come true. Even the departure from Lebanon suddenly seemed like a major mistake. Hope gave way to despair. Confidence eroded and worry deepened. Were we really in a war that we couldn't win? What would become of us if we lost this war? Would we lose the next one, too? And what then?

Everything had changed so quickly that we weren't even sure what had happened. How, we wondered, had we gone from a peaceful (though painful) disengagement in August 2005, to the election of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his promise of yet another major move toward peace, to suddenly finding ourselves at war? How did we go from the confidence of the first days of Lebanon II, when Olmert promised to dismember Hezbollah, to the messy, unrelenting and costly battles that dragged on for weeks and filled cemeteries with funerals and grieving parents at the gravesides of their fallen sons?

We feared for our soldiers at war, for the fathers who still couldn't come home at night. We longed for our captured soldiers and prayed they were at least being treated humanely. We wondered when the next missile would hit and what damage it would do. We struggled to understand how

it was that the mightiest army in the region could have been fighting for weeks and was still unable to put a stop to the barrage of rockets. And, perhaps most importantly, we worried about the future, about what kind of lives this new war would leave for the citizens of the Jewish state.

Would we become a fortress state, eternally vulnerable to missile attacks on our homes and villages? Had Israel lost its deterrent strength? Was power in the Middle East now more evenly divided than we'd allowed ourselves to believe? Would bomb shelters once again be part of the fabric of our children's and grandchildren's lives, as they were for Israelis a generation ago? Were we no longer moving forward but instead sliding back into a past we'd thought we'd finally escaped?

My home, Jerusalem, fared much better than the north of the country, but even there, you could feel a heaviness in the air. Its citizens, too, became consumed with despondency, as their hearts and minds traveled far north, to our brothers and sisters making their homes in bomb shelters.

And then, one day in the middle of the war, I was driving the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway. This time, staring aimlessly at the roadside, I found myself looking at the metal remains scattered in the distance. I drive the road so often that I hardly even notice them anymore, but this time I did. Immobile, but carefully painted so as to preserve them, lay the shells of the trucks that were destroyed as Jews tried to break the Jordanian siege of Jerusalem in 1948. The carcasses of these trucks are a reminder, metal machines that provide us with perspective. If you had told someone in 1948, when Jews in Jerusalem were besieged—out of food, water and medicine—that someday they'd be okay, they'd have told you that you were a dreamer.

That's what perspective does. It shows us that Jews have always figured out how to survive. That there is something eternal about our people that defies explanation, but that is nonetheless real, no less real than any of the challenges we face.

The highway reminds us of that. The road from Tel Aviv to the capital still snakes its way up through the hills of Jerusalem. And Israel is still surrounded by enemies. But the difference? Jerusalem is rebuilt and thriving. And the biggest problem we face today on that road is traffic. Sixty years after the siege, our problem is too many Jews in Jerusalem. Jerusalem overflowing with Jews; living in the capital of their ancestors, welcoming Jews from abroad for a visit. It's a good problem to have—and

not one that the soldiers in the War of Independence thought we'd have back in 1948.

Further on down the road, I passed the exit for Latrun, the site of devastating battles in the War of Independence—the same Latrun where Ariel Sharon fought for high ground when he was a young commander. He failed. His troops, literally dying of thirst in the sun-scorched battlefield, had to withdraw. And today? There's a tank museum there. And at the amphitheater in that location, Israeli soldiers are inducted into their army units in ceremonies overflowing with pride and confidence, a reality wholly other than what Sharon and his soldiers had any reason to imagine.

Off the road is also Beit Horon, the site of Maccabee battles during their revolt against the Greeks. I imagine that things looked bleak during that period, too. The Greeks were determined to break the backbone of our people. And the thought of withstanding their enormous strength and reserves probably seemed absurd. A small band of determined priests were going to defeat the Seleucid Empire and recapture Jerusalem? I'm sure the idea seemed beyond the realm of possibility— and then it happened. Strength, our tradition reminds us, can be measured in a multiplicity of ways. And one of those ways is fortitude and a belief in something larger than ourselves, a will to live and a determination to survive.

And even further down the road, had I continued driving that far, I'd have hit the turnoff to Yavneh, the seat of rabbinic learning during the Roman period. By all accounts, Judaism should have died under Rome. A religion centered on Jerusalem saw its sacred city destroyed and its citizens exiled. A nation for whom the Temple was the very center of its identity saw the Temple Mount obliterated—for the second time. A people whose Torah taught them that sacrifices were key to their relationship with God could no longer perform that rite. The Roman conquest could have, indeed should have, been the end of us. But the Jewish story wasn't finished.

Over the course of time, we found a replacement for the sacrificial rites of the Temple. The synagogue became the center of our communities and prayer substituted for sacrifice. We learned to survive in exile. We yearned for Zion, yet we developed a civilization to thrive in the Diaspora.

And now we have Zion, too. Not without travail, not without cost. The price we pay for staying, and the toll we exact from our children, is huge. The pain is sometimes unbearable. And it seems that just when we've

solved one challenge, another arises.

Did we lose this war? Even if we did, it's only one battle in the long campaign of Jewish survival. That's why perspective is so important and why significant portions of our tradition require us to recall our history when we need it most. As the Jewish New Year approaches and Jews across the globe prepare to celebrate Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it is perspective, I believe, that is the order of the day.

We have been bruised this year and badly so. It will take a very long time to rebuild Israel's deterrent capability and strong image, but we will go to work. And as we begin our work, lest the challenge seem too overwhelming, we should remember the sound of the shofar. As in all years, when the shofar blasts, those of us in synagogues will recite *ha-yom harat olam*, "today is the birth of the world." Today is pregnant with possibilities. Today, we remind ourselves, anything is possible. Dedicated, wiser, stronger, better equipped to face the future. This year, particularly in our dark hours, the shofar reminds us that rebirth is not beyond our reach.

And 10 days later, when we commemorate Yom Kippur, we can remind ourselves that the miracle of this day, according to our tradition, is that if we are sincere about our self-examination, forgiveness is guaranteed. We have a great deal to wonder about. Did Israel do enough to maintain its vigilance? Did the government care for the poor, sick and frightened citizens languishing in bomb shelters day after day, week after week, the way it needed to? The way that a Jewish state ought to care for those who bear the brunt of a vicious attack on Jewish sovereignty? Did those of us who live in the Diaspora give enough, speak out enough, care enough, visit enough? If Israel's survival were dependent on *our* level of commitment, would Israel be here for the next generation?

We have a great deal to be introspective about, but we also have a guarantee. If the introspection is sincere, if the repentance is real, we start the New Year with a clean slate and a promise of a future reborn.

We Jews celebrate Rosh Hashanah in strikingly different ways. We are religious and secular, Jews of all religious stripes. We are Jews of unwavering faith and Jews of doubt. Jews who will make the synagogue their home during Rosh Hashanah and Jews who will celebrate otherwise.

But we have much in common. We have our history. We have our ancestry. We have Israel. And we share a dream, recited so often during

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: *ten kavod le-amekha ... ve-tikvah tovah le-dorshekhah ... simcha leartzekhah, ve-sason le-irekhah*. "Grant honor to Your people ... good hope to those who seek You, joy in Your land, and rejoicing for Your city." Grant us, we pray, a glimpse of time perfected, of peace and of a Jewish people gazing proudly and confidently into the future.

That is our challenge for this High Holiday season, even if we've been bruised or beaten, even if Hezbollah is not defeated, even if Syria and Iran still menace. The challenge is to work to remove them and to remind ourselves that we've been through dark days before, and each time we've emerged into the light.

That same passage from the *machzor*, quoted above, continues: "Wickedness will evaporate like smoke, when You remove evil's domination from the earth." We've faced evil in the past, and we've seen it vanquished: Egyptian slavery, the Babylonian exile, the Roman conquest, the Crusader slaughterers, the murderous Nazis. They're all gone, and we're still here. We've suffered extraordinary losses in the past, and we've regrouped to rebuild. We've known despondency in the past, but we have always found our way back to hope.

This time, and this year, this Rosh Hashanah, may it be no different.

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