

Our Hope is Not Lost

Rabbi Daniel Mehlman | Temple Ner Tamid



As the war in Israel raged for two weeks, we felt a sickening sense of despair and hopelessness. Around 2,600 years ago in the Babylonian exile, the prophet Ezekiel also felt that anguish. He wrote, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost.

So the bones of the Jews are dry and “*Avdah Tikvatenu*” – our hope is lost. There was the feeling of dry bones that were not filling the body with life, and there was that feeling of hopelessness. Later, 2,500 years after the words of Ezekiel, Naftali Zvi Inber dared to say: “*Od lo Avdah Tikvatenu.*” Our hope is not lost.

He wrote those words in a poem that became the Israeli national anthem. Hope is at the center of who we are, throughout the millennia. During times of terrible tragedy and despair we were able to come back to life, again and again. We were hopeful under the most horrible of circumstances.

The Declaration of Independence of Israel states that the Jewish state will be a democratic one. Here we see the three elements that are at the heart of Israel’s identity. Starting with the land, Israel accepts the United Nations’ borders. The Declaration invokes the U.N.’s decision in favor of the partition of Palestine, which includes a smaller territory than the one Israel controlled after Israel’s War of Independence and before the 1967 Six Day War. In addition to the land itself, both the Jewish nature and the democratic nature of the nascent country are essential elements in the establishment of Israel.

These days, and for quite a while, there have been strong disagreements on the Israeli side regarding the boundaries of the land. One view is that all the territories under Israeli control belong to Israel, and no part of them can belong to anybody else.

When we look at the three elements that define Israel – the land itself with its defined borders, its democratic nature and its Jewish nature – we see that today only two of the three principles can be fulfilled. In other words, if Israel controls the entire territory, it will either be not democratic, or within a short time it will lose a clear Jewish majority. If Israel wants to be both Jewish and democratic, it must then relinquish at least some of the land it now controls. A Jewish state, a democracy, all the land – pick two.

We can assert that a majority of people favor the two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Any other possibility will relegate the state to being a non-democracy, or force it to give up its Jewish majority and possibly its identity.

When Abraham’s and Lot’s shepherds fought over water wells, Abraham offered to go right if Lot wanted to go left, or go left if Lot wanted to go right. Compromise was what Abraham proposed for the sake of peace, because, as he told his nephew, “Persons, brothers we are.” If we look at the different equations, it seems that the messianic pretenses for Israeli control of the whole land does see democracy as a principle we can abandon. That is, in my opinion, not Jewish. It goes against the foundational principles of equality stated in the Declaration of Independence at the establishment of Israel in 1948.

The cynic in me predicted that there was going to be a truce, a ceasefire, when the terrorists of Hamas and Islamic Jihad run out of ammunition. The ceasefire would be a very temporary event, lasting only until they could restock their deficit of rockets. It might take a few months or years, but then the next excuse will justify more attacks in the eyes of those in power.

War keeps people busy. Surviving is what’s most important. The urgency of war postpones everything else; war is no time to talk about peace. Talking about peace can be kicked down the road indefinitely. For far too long, maintaining the unstable status quo has



Jerusalem peace demonstrations, May 22, 2021.
Photo: @Standing Together

been the way everyone deals with the conflict. We’ll talk about it when we can agree, when the conditions are better for negotiations. But expecting the problems to diminish so we can advance talks about peace is an illusion. Maintaining the status quo is not an answer— it’s probably a delusion. It cannot be maintained for much longer. Doing nothing is not going to fix a problem. Even letting it remain the same may actually make it worse.

In the Babylonian Talmud we read that Hillel and Shammai received the tradition from Shmaya and Avtalyon. Hillel says, “Be from among the students of Aharon; one who loves peace, one who pursues peace, one who loves others and brings them closer to Torah.”

It is interesting how this quote brings together Talmudic forefathers who usually disagree with one another. They agree on the love of peace and the worthiness of its active pursuit. Peace is not just the absence of conflict, it is a value to be constantly pursued. This positive mitzvah must be fulfilled in an unlimited manner, without taking a break. Torah is at its essence an intellectual exercise, wherein we try to reason together. We can arrive at conclusions that will work for both sides of the discussion.

One of the most disturbing things about the events of this latest outburst of violence was the beating of Jews in

the hands of their Arab neighbors, and the beating of Arabs in the hands of their Jewish neighbors. Immediately after the ceasefire, thousands of Arabs and Jews around Israel gathered together to affirm love and peace, and reject hatred and violence. This reminds me of the times after President Sadat of Egypt came to Israel. Up until then, there was an understanding on both sides of the conflict: “There is nobody on their side to talk to.” Until Sadat arrived that fateful Saturday night, that is what we all believed. In the subsequent months, Prime Minister Begin was reluctant to return land for peace. Land is tangible and real, but “peace” would be just a piece of paper. Many Israelis marched on the streets, hundreds of thousands, with just two simple words: *Shalom Achshav* — Peace Now.

And as it sometimes happens, the masses, the marches, bore fruit. For more than four decades we have had peace with Egypt (who brokered the current ceasefire with the terrorists in Gaza).

Years ago, when a colleague and friend’s mother passed away, he quoted her, a divorce lawyer, during her eulogy. “We know we have a good, fair divorce settlement,” she said, “when nobody is happy.” In this conflict, both sides have lines that cannot be crossed, compromises that cannot take place. For the sake of peace, they need to be done!

If or when Arabs and Jews, Israelis and Palestinians start marching in the tens of thousands with those precious words in their mouths – *Salaam! Shalom!* – it may happen. If both sides make enormous sacrifices, their legacy to future generations will be an awesome one: peace, prosperity, cooperation, good neighborly existence. When history looks back, the sacrifices will be recognized as worthy.

Abraham, the first among all of us (Arabs and Jews) compromised for the sake of peace. Reconciliation means not just restoring friendly relations, but also making one view compatible with another. Our tradition teaches us to reconcile ideals with reality. Reconciliation happens when we recognize our neighbor as our fellow human being. As we learn from the story of creation in Genesis, chapter 1, we were all created to God’s likeness and image. We must stop the dehumanization of one another.

As both sides disingenuously declare victory, we see clearly that neither side won. Both sides lost terribly, at an abominable human cost. Instead of a contest, we need cooperation. The *Hatikvah* is a prayer, and the Declaration of Independence of Israel is a statement of fundamental principles. *Od lo Avdah Tikvatenu*, our hope is not lost. We must pursue that hope for peace, now more than ever. 🕊️



KAISER LAW GROUP
Estate & Legacy Planning
Purposeful Estate Planning for the Millionaire Next Door®

Board Certified Specialist in Estate Planning, Trust & Probate Law

Legacy Program

- ▶ Ongoing Relationship
- ▶ Asset Alignment
- ▶ Proactively Addressing Change
- ▶ Comprehensive & Inclusive

www.kaiserlg.com
(562) 343-2843

GUIDING CLIENTS THROUGH THEIR LIVES AND CHANGES IN THEIR PLAN