

A Jewish Voice - Because Every Jew is Obligated to Love His/Her Fellow Human Beings

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The Jewish Voice coalition includes religious and secular organizations. Two days before Passover, we went out to erase racist graffiti. Rabbi Michael Melchior, Rabbi Ehud Bandel and Rabbi Amy Klein stood by the wall surrounding the Jeshurun Synagogue on King George St. in Jerusalem, where someone had written in giant letters “The Supreme Court – A Danger to Jews” – a slogan that embodies fierce hatred for the supreme legal institution of the State of Israel. After erasing this slogan, we moved on to the Machaneh Yehudah market. On one road, the same group of rabbis began to erase the ugly racist slogan “Death to Arabs.” Further down the same road we found another slogan. As we began to erase it, a young man wearing a kippa and armed with an M-16 rifle came up and tried to stop us. When he realized that he was unable to do so, a verbal confrontation began. He accused us of being Jew-haters and of murdering Jews in cold blood. When he saw that his comments were not having any effect on us, he began to walk away, telling us that he was going before he lost his patience and used the gun he was carrying. A few seconds later he turned round and shouted at us that when “they” came to power, they would settle their accounts with us.

A Jerusalem Municipality inspector who was standing close by during this incident and did not intervene came over to us and commented that using paint to erase graffiti is

also an offense, but since we were doing holy work, he would let it pass and would not fine us.

This low-key operation was widely reported in the Mabat news program on Channel 1 of Israel television.

At the same time, we published alternative reading passages on the Panim website. Intended to supplement the Passover Haggadah, the passages included excerpts from the writings of Berl Katznelson and Tovah Ilan, as well as sections from the Worms Haggadah and other ancient versions. In order to bring this material to the public, we published banners on the websites of Ha'aretz and MSN. The statistics showed that approximately 50,000 Israelis viewed the material; I hope that some of them used the reading passages.

On the evening of Tisha B'Av, encouraged by our successes, we went to Zion Square in downtown Jerusalem, under the slogan "Putting Out the Fire of Extremism." We recruited a street theater group called Asphalt to help us. They dramatized and read one of the legends relating to the destruction of the Temple from the tractate *Gittin* (56a):

"The emperor) then sent against them Vespasian the Caesar who came and besieged Jerusalem for three years. There were in it three men of great wealth: Nakdimon b. Gorion, Ben Kalba Sabuah and Ben Tzitzit Hakeset. Nakdimon ben Gorion was so called because the sun continued shining for his sake. Ben Kalba Sabuah was so called because one would go into his house hungry as a dog [keleb] and come out full [saba]. Ben Tzitzit Hakeset was so called because his fringes used to trail on cushions [keset]. Others say he derived the name from the fact that his seat [kisai] was among those of the nobility of Rome.

One of these said to the people of Jerusalem, I will keep them in wheat and barley. A

second said, I will keep them in wine, oil, and salt. The third said, I will keep them in wood.

These men were in a position to keep the city for 21 years.

The rebels were then in the city. The rabbis said to them: Let us go out and make peace with the Romans. They would not let them, but on the contrary said, Let us go out and fight them. The rabbis said: You will not succeed. They then rose up and burned the stores of wheat and barley so that a famine ensued."

Rabbi Ehud Bandel, President of the Masorti movement; Mrs. Tovah Ilan, President of the Herzog Institute; and Mr. Meir Yoffe, director of Panim, extinguished the fire that was lit on the scene while the legend was read, symbolizing the desire to extinguish the fire of fanaticism. Rabbi Ehud Bandel made a speech, at the end of which a candle was lit, symbolizing a positive type of fire.

"Tisha B'Av is the day of destruction. Tisha B'Av is also the day of hope and redemption. On Tisha B'Av the Temple was destroyed, and on Tisha B'Av the Messiah was born. Tomorrow, at this hour of the Mincha prayer, we will stand with our Tefillin on and read the *Nachem* prayer – the special prayer for the Mincha of Tisha B'Av. The prayer includes the following words: "For you, o Lord, destroyed it by fire, and by fire you will rebuild it, as it is written:

"And I shall be for it, said the Lord, a wall of fire around and for its honor I shall be within' (Zechariah 2:9)."

Destroyed by fire and rebuilt by fire! Fire is ambivalent. The same fire can be one of destruction, demolition and annihilation, and at the same time the fire of construction, creativity and revival.

The fire of fanaticism, extremism and brutality, the fire that is the goal of the vacuous thugs, those who seek to foster strife on the supposed pretext of nationalism and maintaining Jewish tradition, is the "alien fire" – the fire of destruction and demolition that we have come to extinguish. But there is another fire – the fire of enthusiasm, purpose and devotion. The fire of 'Happy is the match that was struck and lit flames.' This fire must never fade. This is the fire we seek to encourage and to fan within people's hearts.

The same is true of the Fire of Torah, and of Torah itself. "For the ways of the Lord are straight, and the upright will go in them, but sinners will be falling in them" (Hosea 14:10). The Torah can be the elixir of life, but the same Torah can also, God forbid, come to be used as a lethal drug. It is up to us to decide how we will read it and how we will interpret its message for our lives.

As those who sustain and disseminate the true Jewish voice, we must transform the fire from a fire of consumption and destruction to a fire of creativity and construction. We will now light this positive fire, the fire of love, symbolizing our undying hopes and prayers.

[Kina]

This event was also widely reported in the press and on Channel 1 news. I read the Kina before those who gathered to read Eicha at Rabin's grave, and it left a strong impression on all those present.

The next event of the Jewish Voice coalition took place at Sukkot, as part of the Hakhel event at the Efal Seminar. In one of the Sukkot established on the site, Mrs. Tovah Ilan, President of the Ya'akov Herzog Institute; Mr. Gilad Kariv of the Israel Religious Action Center; and Mr. Shuli Dichter, joint executive director of Sikkuy, came together for a panel discussion entitled

Spread over us the Sukkah of equality....

**The Jewish imperative to ensure civil equality with the Arab minority in the State of
Israel**

The mirror of reality and the well of the sources

Tovah Ilan and Gilad of the Jewish Voice with Shuli Dichter from Sikkuy

An encounter and dialogue program in the Sukkah with the Jewish Voice coalition

The discussion began with Mrs. Tovah Ilan, who discussed the subject of human rights in the Jewish sources. She shared with the audience her memories of a visit to a school for Bedouin children in the Negev. 1,200 students attend a school without running water. The classrooms are housed in boiling hot caravans without air-conditioning. There are just two toilets in the entire school. The visit raised several questions for Tovah: "I asked myself, is this a Jewish state? How can we, who experience the story of our enslavement in Egypt in our tradition, and the experience of alienation, humiliation and enslavement; who are aware of the history of our people, when we lived as a persecuted minority in every corner of the globe --- how can we, as we rise up, shake off the dust and stand up straight in this place, do to others what they have done to us?"

Tovah continued by emphasizing the gap between our fundamental Jewish experience and the reality in which she finds herself. She talked of a different kind of Jew; again, I quote: "I would like to tell you about one Jew who lived during the time of the Holocaust and survived. He was considered an ultra-Orthodox authority, an important scholar and a man with a great soul. I am talking of Rabbi Jacob Yechiel Weinberg, known as the author of the book *Sridei Esh*. Weinberg gained fame in the Warsaw Ghetto when, on one Shabbat in 5761 (1941) he saw people collapsing from weakness in the streets while no-one paid any attention. He ran home and returned with a bundle of banknotes and stood in the street, shouting, weeping and

crying out: 'Stop, stand still, pick up this Jew who is lying at your feet and call for the doctor – I will pay.'

The sight of a famous rabbi standing on the road on Shabbat with money in his hand, weeping tears, had the desired effect. But I would like to read you some comments that Weinberg wrote after the Holocaust, in an article on the redemption of Israel and the redemption of humanity in the context of the well-known Midrash 'My creations are drowning in the sea and you are singing?' I shall quote his comments, with some omissions:

'For four hundred years, the iron hand of Egypt bore down on the backs of Israel, burdening them like the load of unending hills. Now, as Pharaoh's horses and chariots sank before them, their distress lifted. Like a cry rising from a pierced heart, a song of redemption suddenly erupted from the mouths of the hundreds of thousands of people who had been released from the shackles of slavery. The song rose like a storm. The angels on high joined in, opening their mouths in song opposite the multitude.

Suddenly, though, the sound of singing died down, and the enthusiastic joy vanished. In the midst of the noise and tumult, a voice cried out: 'My creations are drowning in the sea, and you wish to sing songs of victory? You wish to surrender yourselves to an unbridled joy and celebrate in splendor? How dare you do such a thing?'

The singing stops and the joy falls silent. And this silence has been Israel's joy ever since... These words of God set the fate of Israel. For all generations and all eternity, they left their mark on our conscience. From now on, Israel would have no share in joy while God's creations drowned. Its fate is bound with the fate of all humanity. And only when full redemption comes to all humanity will Israel have its day of celebration – until then, Israel cannot break out in joyful song...

My creatures are drowning in the sea and you wish to burst out in songs of praise and glory? You witness thousands of My creations drowning in the sea of poverty and sorrow – how can you rejoice, how can you sit in ease at the sight of untold poverty that eats away at humans?”

“These words are a clarion call to us – a call to the human conscience to recognize the suffering and poverty of humans. This Divine clarion call is embedded in the soul of Israel, and has become its greatest and most dynamic motivating force. This sound reverberates constantly in the soul of every Jew – the echo of the ancient voice. This voice of sympathy and mercy has become the second nature of the Jewish conscience. Israel cannot be composed and indifferent in the face of human poverty. Wherever poverty, injustice and disharmony are felt, wherever justice and freedom are impaired – this inner voice always calls out – “My creations are drowning in the sea...”

“My creations are drowning in the sea” – this is the message that set Jewish fate for all eternity, and left a mark on every Jew. Are not Jewish fate and the Jewish conscience one and the same thing? Sympathy is a fundamental strand of the Jewish character, and a clear test of the true Jew, as our Sages said (Yevamot 79a): “Three signs identify a Jewish person: mercy, modesty and acts of kindness.” Indeed, they took this idea so far as to claim that a person who does not show these signs is not of Jewish origin or blood.

Jewish compassion is all-embracing, extending – as the Prophet Isaiah said – to include even inanimate objects: “Every vale will be raised and every mountain and hill lowered.”

Tovah Ilan continued her comments: “In a recent article published in English, Mark Shapiro quotes an extraordinary exchange of correspondence between Rabbi Yechiel Weinberg and a Reform professor by the name of Shmuel Atlas, who lived in England. A profound friendship developed between the two men, and Rabbi Weinberg shared

his personal and ideological dilemmas with his friend. At one point, the author of *Sridei Esh* pondered whether we Jews may ourselves have contributed to the hatred directed against us. He mentions Halachic sources that disenfranchise Gentiles or describe their deception. While we may understand the need for Jews to defend themselves, I would draw your attention to the moral courage Rabbi Weinberg showed in raising incisive questions and dilemmas...

In a world that emphasizes the value of autonomy, we must respond to the Jewish voice that urges us to "choose good," and that emphasizes the human and civil equality of humanity. We must laud and enhance feelings of compassion and pity.

The horror we feel at the brutality of terror must not lead us into nihilism, David Hartman writes, not into denying the value of human efforts to build a world based on justice and peace. We will not abandon our history, but we will not define our identity solely on the basis of our memories of suffering. Rather, we will use suffering to build the spiritual and moral quality of our present lives... Belief in life and in the potential for moral renewal, despite the uncertainty of the human condition, manifests the power of Exodus and the Revelation at Sinai as the fundamental memories of our existence."

Tovah was followed by Shuli Dichter of Sikkuy, whose lecture focused on the creation of two classes of citizens in Israel, emphasizing the discrimination the Arab population in Israel has suffered at the hands of all the Israeli governments. Shuli argues that the outbreak of rioting in October 2000 in the Palestinian community in Israel was the result of many years of discrimination, neglect and the unjust allocation of resources. The killing of Palestinian citizens of Israel was due to the fact that the demonstrators were not Jews. No police officer would have authorized the use of live fire against Jewish demonstrators.

Gilad Kariv of the Israel Religious Action Center also spoke, focusing on the sense of affiliation of Palestinians who live in Israel to the State of Israel. He noted the problematic character of the Israeli national anthem for the Palestinian population in Israel. Perhaps we need an additional anthem that will draw them nearer to the state in which they live as a minority. Gilad also suggested the need to recognize the results of the War of Independence, for example by erecting a sign in Park Canada mentioning the Palestinian villages that existed in the area prior to the Six Day War.

Another development that cannot be ignored was the response issued by the Jewish Voice coalition in response to the theft of olives and destruction of olive trees in the Occupied Territories by settlers who live in these areas:

"The Jewish Voice coalition and Rabbis for Human rights condemn recent instances of the theft of olives and damage to olive trees in the southern Hebron Mountain area by Jews. On the program *Hakol Dibburim* (October 19, 2003), we heard an attempt by a resident of the settlement of Tapuach to justify these actions as a legitimate religious Jewish response – an attempt that recalls the position expressed by Rabbi Mordechai Eliahu in an article he published last year (and which he later retracted). Such actions, ostensibly committed with Halachic justification or with the agreement of rabbinical authorities, are evidence of a tragic misunderstanding of the essence of the Torah as "a tree of life to those who hold fast to it, and all its paths are peace." People who steal and damage olive trees desecrate God's name through their erroneous actions, and damage our right to a land that was given to us conditionally.

Our Torah says:

"And if a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not oppress him. But the stranger that dwells with you shall be for you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 19:33-34).

There can be no excuse for the Jewish people to shirk its responsibility to act toward the Palestinians who live under our control as resident strangers (see, in particular, *Yoreh De'ah* 146 and *Beit Yosef*, *ibid.*, "*umikan*"). This responsibility includes, *inter alia*, maintaining them as we are commanded to maintain any Jew; accordingly, we must not prevent their making a livelihood. Those who live with us as resident strangers may expect the Jewish people to act courteously and charitably toward them; we must not oppress them (see the entry "*ger toshav*" in the Talmudic Encyclopedia for a good summary of this subject). Preventing Palestinians from harvesting olives in groves they have harvested for many years causes the "Tree of Life" to wither and damages and extinguishes the divine spark that lies within every person created in God's image – Jew and non-Jew.

Sukkot is not yet over, yet some have already forgotten the words we read in the Yom Kippur prayers: "Please forgive the offenses and crimes of your nation... Please forgive their distortion and protect them in the Sukkah of your peace." Stealing branches from olive groves in order to build a Sukkah desecrates the sanctity of the festival. How terrible is such an act:

Hameiri states (*Beit Habechira*, 113b) that "it is even forbidden to usurp idol-worshippers and those who are not confined by the ways of religions" – and all the more so "anyone who is from those peoples that are confined by the ways of religion, even though their belief is far from ours... They are like a true Jew without any distinction" regarding such matters as usurpation and restituting a stolen article. Usurping a Jew is forbidden, and usurping a non-Jew is even worse, since usurping a non-Jew includes an element of desecrating God's name (*Tosefta*). Instead of desecrating God's name by stealing olives, we should sanctify God's name, as Moses explains:

“See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws...” (Deuteronomy 4:5-8).

Today, when there are those who try to justify stealing olives and damaging olive trees, we do not hear the nations praising our torah. On the contrary, we here only condemnation of our Torah – proof that we have desecrated God’s name instead of sanctifying it.

We must not forget that the Land of Israel is not a land that was given to the people of Israel for eternity. It was given on condition that the people of Israel act lawfully and justly. The Jewish Voice coalition and Rabbis for Human Rights therefore condemn the theft and damage that has taken place in the olive groves of the south Hebron Mountain region as an affront to the Jewish people.”

We pray that the people and government of Israel will listen to the other Jewish voice expressed by the organizations that belong to the Jewish Voice coalition. “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they study war any more.”

Then And Now: A Midrash of Lamentation

How	does the city sit solitary that was full of people! How do her children carry the sorrow of their exile and the destruction of their sovereignty.
Tears	have fallen down the cheeks of the Jewish people for thousands of years as they remember the destruction of their home of life, for
Judah	was exiled among the nations, and found no rest from all her persecutors who overtook her between the straits.
Has	morality verily vanished from the land? Have her sons and daughters, her sages, rabbis and ministers not seen the collapse of its moral edifice; not realized their impending destruction?
Ignoring	the cry of the poor and abandoning moderation in law, they have magnified groundless hatred rather than solving social and political problems.
The Lord	has abandoned His offering, for they have abandoned the Torah of justice, mercy and peace, and this has been the root of their destruction.
Jerusalem	sinned greatly by permitting her zealots to kindle an alien fire of fanaticism during the days of war and siege. There would be no second destruction, they believed.
Zealots	and fanatics of Jerusalem drowned her treasures and burnt the precious storerooms of food.
No hand	did they offer to the hungry, the stranger, the orphan and the widow; they ignored the tears of the downtrodden, the poor, the single parents and the weary.
Then	as now, her entire people asked for bread. They gave no dignity to their neighbors who live in their land, to their foreign workers – for they remembered not the commandment “you shall not deceive the convert,” nor did they remember “their life as strangers in Egypt.” They forgot their origins and the memory of their past.

Kings of the Land and residents of Earth did not believe that the enemy would come to the gates of Jerusalem, but the unbelievable happened, because they failed to listen to the warnings of Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai and other moderate leaders, and brought upon themselves this terrible evil.

How terrible this story we have carried for thousands of years; how difficult its lessons. Have we really learned nothing? Some have forgotten the story; others have forgotten its lessons – both would do well to come to their senses, before it is too late!

Let us search and seek our path. Let us open our hearts, some to God in heaven and some to the voice of their heart and conscience. Let us speak truth to one another and magnify groundless love.

The suffering of the “other” – any “other” – is our suffering. We shall not permit the fanatics to take control of our loves, nor shall we heed those who claim to hear “God’s voice” as they seek to impose their political will on the majority, nor the followers of the god of silver and gold, who seek to impose their economic plan in the false name of the “free” economy. Let us avoid extremism and the urge of self-destruction.

For all these, for all these I weep and my eyes shed water, for comfort is far from me.

Streams of tears my eyes shall shed as I remember our national destruction, on the Ninth of Av in this year, 5763, as I recall the past and the present. Though we thank God for our resurrection, the achievements of our state, and the ingathering of our exiles, peace with our neighbors is still far off, and

Enemy and foe and terrorist still attack us and the entire free world. Each day brings new troubles for us, from inside and without.

I have called on my lovers but they save me not. My priests and elders do not stand at the gate of my people’s daughter, and do not shout the lament of the Daughter of Zion, weeping and hands outstretched –

whether because their souls have wearied, or because of their limited understanding.

See O Lord what has become of us; I have seen mountains tremble and hills shake.

We seek paths in this world, and a way we might follow to find respite for our soul. Wake up, Daughter of Zion! Raise your voice high! Is there yet

Hope for our latter days? This depends on us. If we remember that there is nothing new under the sun, then as now, let us not allow the fanatics to take control of our lives.