



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Netzavim-Vayeilech

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 23, 2011

Netzavim-Vayeilech

Israel: A Nation Apart



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Isolation is the threatening word used today, both by Israel’s foes and friends, to emphasize the need for concessions. Please Israel, so many are imploring, if you don’t compromise and give the Arabs what they demand, you risk becoming isolated and left all alone in this world.

Thomas Friedman, who cannot control his antipathy toward Israel’s right, and never misses an opportunity to jab the settlers, writes in his column under the heading, *Israel: Adrift at Sea Alone*, that he has “never been more worried about Israel’s future” due to the latest events which threaten to plunge “Israel into deeper global isolation and drag America along with it.”

Isolation – really?! Is that what we should be afraid of?! As if Israel was not isolated until now? And is it a bad thing? In fact, isolation is actually considered Israel’s virtue and blessing, as expressed by the evil prophet Balaam, one of Israel’s greatest enemies, of all people.

So perhaps we should welcome this week’s lynching at the UN – it demonstrates the true nature of Israel – a singular, isolated nation that dwells alone.

Isn’t it amazing providence that in the week when the world’s nations (let’s not call them “United” Nations) stand ready to demonize and isolate Israel, we prepare for the New Year, and we read in this week’s Torah portion: “You (Israel) stand upright this day, all of you, before the Lord your God.” And that: “God will gather you from among all the nations where He scattered you... and He will bring you to the land that your ancestors occupied, and you too will occupy it.

Let us return to our divine covenant and all together “stand upright this day,” all of us, before the Lord our God, as we read in the Torah. And let us be a singular light unto nations.

This is a two part sermon:

PART I: Should We Fear Isolation?

PART II: How To Mount an Offense

Note: You can easily incorporate into this sermon any breaking developments regarding the present confrontation with Israel at the UN.

A NATION APART: IS ISRAEL’S ISOLATION A BAD THING?

PART I: Should We Fear Isolation?

1. Oy, Isolation...

A man who had spent his whole life isolated in a desert visited a friend. He’d never seen a train or the tracks they run on. While standing in the middle of the railroad tracks, he heard a whistle, but didn’t know what it was. Predictably, he was hit and thrown to the side of the tracks, with some internal injuries, a few broken bones, and some serious bruises.

After months in the hospital recovering, he was at his friend’s house attending a party. While in the kitchen, he suddenly heard the tea kettle whistling. He grabbed a baseball bat from the nearby closet and bashed the tea kettle into an unrecognizable lump of metal. His friend, hearing the ruckus, rushed into the kitchen, saw what had happened, and demanded, “Why’d you ruin my good tea kettle?”

The man from the desert replied, “Man, you gotta kill these things when they’re small.”

Isolation is the threatening word used today, both by Israel's foes and friends, to emphasize the need for concessions. Please Israel, so many are imploring, if you don't compromise and give the Arabs what they demand, you risk becoming isolated and left all alone in this world.

Thomas Friedman, who cannot control his antipathy toward Israel's right, and never misses an opportunity to jab the settlers, writes in his column under the heading, *Israel: Adrift at Sea Alone*, that he has "never been more worried about Israel's future" due to the latest events which threaten to plunge "Israel into deeper global isolation and drag America along with it."

Should we be frightened by isolation? And how should we react to the current situation, as Israel is, once again, put on trial?

These are the questions I would like to address today.

2. To React or Not React?

My gut reaction is to say that we should not even respond to this latest onslaught. After all, Israel – the land and the nation – have been isolated throughout all of history. And we've turned out just fine!

From the beginning of time we are, and have always been, a single sheep surrounded by seventy wolves. Isolated and alone.

We don't need to go very far back in history. Just 60 years ago the Jewish people were singled out for extermination and the world (with a few exceptions) looked on in silence. We were completely isolated. And we had no one to turn to but our own faith in God.

The story has been repeated countless times: They have accused us of killing Jesus. They have accused us of poisoning wells and drinking Christian blood. They have accused us of the world's economic woes and of conspiracies to conquer the world. In fact, there is not ill in the universe that Jews have not been blamed for. It's completely irrational – but it is one of the most enduring facts of history.

Just as then, so now. They have spread blood libels about us, and we are left defending ourselves in a no-win situation. (We are in the position of the fellow who is asked, "When will you stop beating your wife?" How does he even begin to respond when his guilt is a given?) So it is pointless for us to even argue the issue.

Our role has always been to spread light and not engage in debates. *Po'ola yemoma anan*, "we are day-workers," our Rebbes tell us. "Our job is not to fight darkness but to radiate light."

So, from that point of view, we have no need to fear isolation. It's the story of our lives. Of our history. As such, it seems to make sense that we should ignore the latest attempt to lynch Israel at the UN. How many false accusations and condemnations have come out of this "house of lies" as Prime Minister Netanyahu has called it, citing the Lubavitcher Rebbe? Why should we care about this latest one?

We have survived and thrived through all these millennia - while our enemies and far greater nations have fallen - so we shall surely survive this.

A Catholic, a Protestant, a Muslim and a Jew were in a discussion during a dinner.

Catholic: "I have a large fortune ... I am going to buy Citibank!"

Protestant: "I am very wealthy and will buy General Motors!"

Muslim: "I am a fabulously rich prince ... I intend to purchase Microsoft!"

They then all wait for the Jew to speak....

The Jew stirs his coffee, places the spoon neatly on the table, takes a sip of his coffee, looks at them and casually says:

"I'm not selling."

Yes, indeed. Jews have always been great survivors. We have mastered the art of defense. So one can argue that we should not fear isolation. We should just ride through this latest crisis, and not worry.

But there is something more - far more.

3. A Light Unto Nations

As tempting as it may be to ignore the UN confrontation, Israel and the Jewish people have responsibility to do more than that. We cannot be satisfied by doing nothing, or by playing defense. We must mount an offense by being a light unto the nations. (As they say, the greatest defense is a good offense.)

We have much to give to the world, and one of the most powerful things we can give is a response to this latest threat of isolation.

Everything is Divine Providence. The fact that this current uproar and confrontation at the UN is threatening to isolate Israel, is perhaps meant to help us focus in on certain vital truths.

What is even more remarkable is that this challenge to Israel is taking place at the threshold of the New Year. Isn't it ironic that as we enter the High Holiday season, which demonstrates the great contributions of Israel to civilization, nations of the world are gathering to condemn us!

The Palestinians could not have chosen a better month than this one to put the Jews on trial.

4. The Blessing of Isolation

What do I mean? Allow me to explain.

When I first heard all the warnings, from friend and foe alike, that Israel's rejection of the Palestinian call for a state stands to isolate Israel (and the US, should it go along) from the entire world – I was concerned, as I am sure all of you were.

But then the "isolation" word began to gnaw at me. I had heard it before, in a different context ... I just couldn't put my finger on it.

Then it hit me. In the Book of Numbers, this was uttered by none other than one of Israel's great enemies – the evil prophet Balaam who was commissioned by Balak, King of Moab, to curse the Jews.

But instead of a curse, what came out of Balaam's lips was a blessing – the blessed words that God placed into his mouth: “It is a people that dwells alone, and is not reckoned among the nations.”

Here is the complete text of what Balaam said:

From Aram does Balak the king of Moab bring me
From the mountains of the east, saying:
Come, curse me Jacob
And come, provoke wrath upon Israel

How shall I curse, whom God has not cursed?
How shall I evoke wrath, against whom God has not raged?

For from the top of mountains I see him [Israel]
from the hills I behold him
It is a people that dwells alone
And is not reckoned among the nations.

Who can count the dust of Jacob
And number of the seed of Israel?
Let me die the death of the righteous
And let my last end be like his!¹

Of all people in the world it was our arch enemy, Balaam, that revealed the great secret strength of Israel: It is an isolated people, who dwell alone. Moses would later bless Israel using a similar expression: “[May] Israel dwelled safely and alone.”²

Close to 1,000 years later, another arch enemy of the Jewish people echoed Balaam's identification of Jews as a nation apart. In his incitement against the Jews, Haman describes them to Achashverosh, the Persian King:

There is one singular nation, scattered and dispersed among the nations... whose faith/laws are unlike those of any other nation and who do not obey the laws of the king. It is not in the king's interest to tolerate them.³

¹ Numbers 23:7-10.

² Deuteronomy 33:28.

³ Esther 3:8.

“My enemies make me wise,” says the psalmist. Balaam and Haman both captured the essence of Israel’s virtue and power. A nation that stands alone and apart from all others.

In one word: Isolation!

5. The Uniqueness of Israel

And what makes Israel stand so isolated? What is its uniqueness?

Mi K’amcho Yisroel, goy echod b’aretz, “Who is like Your people Israel, one nation in the world, whom God redeemed for Himself [as] a people.”⁴

Israel is a nation that from the beginning of time – starting from Abraham – resisted the temptation to conform to the mores and norms of a self-interest society, and instead embraced God and a higher calling.

The great 18th century Chassidic Rebbe, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, once led the High Holiday prayer service. Before he began *Kaddish*, he declared: ‘The Prussians say that their Kaiser is the greatest. The Russians say that their Czar is the greatest. The French say that their Emperor is the greatest. And I, Levi Yitzchak ben Sarah Sosha say... *Yisgadal v’Yiskadash Shemei Rabba* (“Exalted and hallowed be His Great Name.”

Is Israel isolated and alone? Absolutely.

When the entire world and all its nations were pursuing their own needs and interests, Israel alone embraced the mission to reveal divine unity in this material universe, by living up to the highest standards of morality, justice and compassion.

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⁴Chronicles I 17:21.

When the nations of the world were still in the throes of paganism and cannibalism, Israel alone was standing at Sinai committing to a life of virtue and charity, a life driven by the respect for each person's sacred rights - a principle that was ahead of its time by over 3,000 years!

You bet we were alone. It would take three millennia for the United States to be the first country that would embrace the concept that all people are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights!

Is Israel isolated and alone? Absolutely.

While others worshipped other men and man-made creations, Israel worshipped the Creator of all existence. When others took the material world seriously, Israel understood that materialism is a fleeting, superficial reality, and the only true reality is God. By recognizing what is truly real, we stopped feeding the illusion that people and materialism have power over us.

Indeed, that is what irked Haman when he said that "there is one singular nation, scattered and dispersed among the nations... whose faith/laws are unlike those of any other nation and who do not obey the laws of the king:"

Among all the king's subjects, Mordechai stood out alone and refused to bow to Haman. Israel does not bow to men and to man-made creation. Israel bows only to God.

This infuriated Haman and the Persians, just as it disturbed the Egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians before, and just as it would agitate the Romans, the Christians, the Muslims, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the English, French and Germans in the generations to come. Nothing new.

Is Israel isolated and alone? Absolutely. And the world should thank us for it! It is due to Israel's aloneness, its singular commitment to God, that we have the values that we cherish today.

A particularly cruel Nazi commander was torturing a Jew, and then pointed a gun to his head. Just as he about to pull the trigger, the Jews asked the Nazi if he could say something. The Nazi granted him his request. The Jew began to whisper a prayer. The Nazi yelled at the Jew: "What are you saying, dirty Jew?" The Jew replied: "I am thanking God."

This infuriated the Nazi. "What are you thanking God for?! You are lying here miserable and wretched, at my mercy. Your God has forsaken you."

The Jew answered: I am thanking God that he did not create me like you...

So the next time that our friends or foes worry that Israel will be isolated, we say:

You couldn't give us a stronger wake-up call and compliment. Isolation is the story of our lives – it is the spine of our endurance. It is the very purpose of our existence – to be the sole voice of sanity in a crazy world. To stand up alone against all destructive forces. Alone, we stand upright and proud – together as one. And one day we hope you will join us in this singular and unique mission.

[Amen.]

PART II: HOW TO MOUNT AN OFFENSE

6. Israel's Calling Today

With the pressure on Israel mounting and Israel fearful of what it will do their economy, the Knesset holds a special session to come up with a solution. After several hours of talk without progress one member, Yitzhak, stands up and says "Quiet everyone, I've got it, I've got the solution to all our problems. Instead of fighting with the Arabs, we'll declare war on the United States."

Everyone starts shouting at once. “You’re nuts! That’s crazy!”

“Hear me out!” says Yitzhak. “We declare war. We lose. The United States does what she always does when she defeats a country, as she did with Japan and Germany after WWII. She rebuilds everything; our highways, airports, shipping ports, schools, hospitals, factories, loans us money, and sends us food aid. Our problems would be over.

Suddenly, an old Jewish minister in the back of the Knesset gets up and says: “That’s a very nice idea. But vot happens if vi vin?”

Yes, my friends, our challenge today is knowing how to be on the offense. We have been on the defense long enough. Now we need to declare for all to hear the beauty and uniqueness of Israel and its contribution to the world.

We need to tell the nations who seek to isolate us that they are doing us a favor. Our isolation is the source of our strength. Trying to be like others is our undoing!

Furthermore, the nations of the world should be dancing and celebrating over that fact that we are a nation that stands alone and apart, because if it weren’t for that fact there would be no civilization in the world today.

If the Jewish people – beginning with Abraham – did not stand alone and isolated in their faith ... if they did not resist the temptation to conform and be like everyone else ... we would today not have the path of justice and service. If Israel was not a unique holy land, the entire world would still be groping for direction.

Our sages tell us: Had the nations of the world known how much they benefit and are blessed by the Holy Temple they would have surrounded it with legions of armies to protect it from any harm.⁵

Yet, they did not know. And they ended up destroying the very spiritual engine that sustained them!

History repeats itself again and again. Today, too, the attempt to destroy Israel is in effect hurting the very nations that are on the attack.

⁵ *Bamidbar Rabba* 1:3. *Tanchuma Bechukosei* 2. See Talmud, *Sukkah* 55b.

7. Amazing Timing

Isn't it amazing providence that in the week when the world's nations (let's not call them "United" Nations) stand ready to demonize and isolate Israel we are preparing to enter into the New Year, when we renew our contract and commitment to the divine mandate – fulfilling our unique and singular, and yes, isolated, mission?

Isn't it interesting that the opening words that we read in the Torah this week state that we stand upright and proud as one nation:

“You (the nation of Israel) stand upright this day, all of you, before the Lord your God: your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, and all the men of Israel; your little ones, your wives, and the strangers that are in your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water.”

The Torah continues: “[If you return to your divine covenant], “God will then bring back your remnants and have mercy on you ... God will gather you from among all the nations where He scattered you, even if your diaspora is at the ends of the heavens ... and He will bring you to the land that your ancestors occupied, and you too will occupy it.”⁶

Indeed, this makes you rethink the very definition of isolation. Who is really isolated – the multitudes that bow to materialism, or those that bow to God?

What is the height of isolation?

Two persons sitting side by side using emails to communicate with each other.

⁶Deuteronomy 30:2-5.

8. Our Response

So what should be our response to today's lynching attempt at the UN?

Our response is that we are not on trial; the nations of the world are the ones on trial. It is they who have slaughtered millions of Jews; it is they who have betrayed the teachings of their own teachers; and it is they who must figure out why they demonize Israel in order to thrive.

We Jews have no need to apologize to anyone. We introduced civilization to the world. The basic teachings of Christianity and Islam (and the rest of the world) stems from Judaism. They have only profound thanks to give to the Jews for their contributions. That is why I find it ludicrous that we have to engage in apologizing to those that have to thank us.

We stand upright, proud of the fact that 3,323 years we gathered at Sinai and received God's blueprint for life – a universal mandate for all human beings. Even when others (the children of Esau and Ishmael) rejected this mandate, the Jewish people embraced it outright, with the knowledge that the day would come when all the nations of the world would ultimately accept it.

As God's words rang out from Sinai, they were heard across the universe, and everyone was left trembling. It would take centuries before the message would begin to be absorbed into the fibers of the pagan world. But the Jews always knew that it was a process – a process that would take time, patience, hard work, and yes, much suffering.

9. Rosh Hashana

Rosh Hashana and this holiday season tells us that our identity is to be a "light unto nations" – to introduce light even in the darkest places.

As the world goes about its merry way – living in the here and now, always having the Jews and Israel available as a convenient scapegoat – we do today what we have done for the past 4000 years: We stand

alone crowning God as King, and praying for peace in the world. We pray that the nations of the world should open their eyes and embrace the morals and principles that God gave us all to live by.

This is the posture that the Jews always took in face of persecution. Our great teachers – Rashi, Rambam, Ramban and thousands of others – all lived in terrible times. At any minute another pogrom could break out. At any minute they could be expelled from their land. Yet, they never allowed their enemies to define them. While blood was spilling in the streets outside, generations of Torah scholars were writing their commentaries for eternity. Not like writers today whose dysfunctionality is expressed in their words, these greats rose above their predicament and held on to the vision of Abraham and Moses – the vision of Sinai – that despite all the darkness God’s message will ultimately prevail.

The true Jewish response to all this controversy has always remained the same. Whenever Jews were attacked, we always felt the deep pain not just for ourselves but also for those causing us so much anguish, who were so far away from recognizing the Divine Image in which they were created. We always knew that the divine plan for creation will one day be realized – that the day will come when all nations of the world will serve one God, and their primary preoccupation will be to know God. But how long would it take? And how much would we have to suffer in the process?

When under attack Jews would simply pull back into the shelter of their souls. They would rely on their deep faith and hold on dearly to God’s promise that when the time is right the world would change.

10. Many Stages

World history has moved through many stages. Nations have worshipped many kings and leaders, and bowed to many idols. Slowly, slowly they have come to understand that it’s not humans they should be worshipping.

Today, the world is embracing Mordechai’s example – a Jewish example – by refusing to bow to any man or man-made object.

Soon – not yet, but soon – the world will realize that Israel is right by refusing to be defined by the hatred hurled at us ... by refusing to apologize for bringing civilization to the world and giving others direction to live a meaningful and divine life.

We will not be defined not by anti-Semitism and not by Gentile endorsements and apologies. We will not be seduced when a gentile accepts us or approves of us. (“Yankel, you hear the good news: The Vatican has acknowledged that Judaism is legitimate...” *A glik hot unz batrasket.*) We need their approval?! We who taught them what God wants of the human race?!

11. The World, Not Israel, is On Trial

Yes, there is a trial going on this month. But we are not on trial as much as the human race is on trial. Will they embrace the divine mandate given at Sinai for all peoples, will they finally come to realize their own calling – to cherish the seven universal (Noachide) laws upon which all of civilization is based?

And Jews? Will the Jews get out of the “*galut* mentality” and rise to the occasion?

We have been blessed with carrying the divine mandate for the human race, and we must live up to our destiny. We must stand together as one before God. Because when we stand together, we are indestructible. (The Midrash⁷ on this verse compares us to tree stalks: A single stalk can be broken even by a child, but a bundle of branches is very difficult to break.)

The stage is set. We have today unprecedented opportunities to utilize our freedoms to inspire and teach the world the divine principles of civilization.

⁷ *Tanchuma.*

As the curtain of this Hebrew year 5771 comes down and 5772 begins, Jews have the gift and responsibility to demonstrate to the world – as a light unto nations – our singular uniqueness in living up to the highest moral and ethical standards.

And in so doing, in our isolation we become one – with each other and with God. [Amen.]

12. For Zion's Sake (Optional)

And we are also comforted by this week's Haftarah⁸ – the final one of the seven Haftarahs of consolation which began seven weeks ago on the Shabbat after *Tisha B'Av* (when the Temple in Jerusalem was twice destroyed and many other calamities befell the Jewish people):

I will greatly rejoice in God ... for as the earth brings forth her growth, and as the garden causes its seeds to grow, so God will cause justice and glory to spring forth before all the nations.

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be still, until her justice shines forth like radiance, and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations will see your justice and all the kings your glory. You will be called by a new name, which God's mouth will give. You will also be a crown of beauty in God's hand, and a royal jewel in God's palm. You will no longer be called "forsaken" and your land will no longer be called "desolate" ...

Go through, go through the gates, clear the way of the people, build up, build up the highway, clear the stones, lift up a standard over the peoples. God has proclaimed to the end of the earth: "Say to the daughter of Zion: 'Behold, your salvation comes.'" Amen.

⁸ Isaiah 61:10-63:9.