

THE CURRENT SQUEEZE ON ISRAEL

A sermon for Rosh Hashanah, 5738-1977
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Last year at this time, the world was in love with Israel - that is, all the world except the Arabs and Idi Amin. Last Rosh Hashanah, Israel was still coasting on the momentum of the Entebbe rescue. All but the most prejudiced nations had to admit that this was a gallant country, this Israel, unafraid to look would-be murderers straight in the face and to beat them at their own game. That was last year. The world has a short memory. Some Americans have a short memory.

At the present time, the new administration in Washington seems to be maneuvering Israel into a corner. Washington seems to have made a decision about how it is going to solve America's energy problem. Instead of developing a crash program to take advantage of our huge coal reserves, Washington is moving towards increased dependence on the Arabs by importing more and more oil. Consider the statistics. In 1970, America imported 40,000 barrels of oil a day from Saudi Arabia. In 1972, two years later, it imported over four times as much; in 1974, over ten times as much. In the last seven years, we have increased our oil imports from Saudi Arabia not seven fold, but by 3500%.

It does not take a great deal of imagination for us to see that America and Saudi Arabia have established a very powerful de facto alliance which is mutually beneficial. America gets the oil it needs, and Saudi Arabia gets all the military equipment it wants, all the industrial know-how it requires, and American pressure on Israel. We Jews had better face the harsh reality. The more America becomes dependent on Arab oil, the less sympathetic America will be to Israel.

You can already observe the shift that is taking place in the media and in the mood of some Americans. The media speaks more and more of Israeli intransigence, of its refusal to compromise. The emphasis increasingly is on the question - What is Israel going to give up? You hear commentators who profess to be friends of Israel saying, "Israel is going to have to take some risks." All well and good, but shouldn't the Arabs also take some risks? What kind of a risk is it for the Arabs to say to Israel, "If you only let us come as close as we were when we first attacked you, we will declare ourselves to be at peace, but even so, we won't accept diplomatic relations with you. What kind of a risk is that? What have the Arabs done to earn this kind of childlike trust?"

As a Rabbi in the American community, I find myself increasingly in the kind of position I used to be in as a boy when I lived in a small southern city which was not noted for its good interfaith relations. Then, it seemed to me, I was always on the defensive. Non-Jews were always asking me questions, and I felt that I had to find answers to them. I never asked them questions. The minority member is usually so intimidated that he doesn't think he has the right to return the compliment by asking the majority member questions. As a result, the minority member scurries around trying to field the barrage of questions thrown from many different directions. "Tell me", my interrogators would ask, "What did the pig ever do to you that you won't eat pig?" Or they would ask, "Why are all the Jews rich? Is it true that Jews go to Hell when they die?" Always there were questions, and always I felt that I had to field the answers. Of course, no matter what the answer, you couldn't win. The odds were overwhelmingly against you. As a young Jew, I was trained to be on the defensive and to lose.

But that was thirty or forty years ago. Over the last few decades, especially since World War II, we Jews have had it pretty good in America. In many ways, we have assimilated with an unusual rapidity into the white majority. Today, when the government drafts legislation to help the minorities, it is not thinking of the Jews. The Jewish duck has taken to American waters with amazing ease. The waters have been friendly of late, but they are not without their potential dangers. The Arabs are busy stirring up the waters. Just a few days ago, on the occasion of Dayan's visit to Washington, the American Palestine Organization, a pro-Arab group, took a full page ad in the New York Times to announce that General Dayan had deliberately ordered Israeli planes to attack an American observation ship in the 1967 war. The Arab propaganda machine grinds out the accusations and

gradually these accusations appear as questions that crop up all around America, in business councils, in Congress, on TV talk shows, in the churches. The questions go like this: Why did the Israelis take the land away from the Arabs? Why don't the Israelis have pity on those poor Arab refugees? Why don't the Israelis let the refugees come back; after all, the refugees merely want what belongs to them? The questions are all phrased with certain assumptions. The basic assumption is that the Arabs are innocent victims of Israeli greed and inhumanity.

Since we do not gather together in such large numbers very often, I thought it would be wise if we would use this assembly today to learn how to answer some of these questions, because we're going to need this information many times during the coming year, and, I am afraid, for years to come. Let me begin by suggesting that instead of being merely defensive, we state Israel's case affirmatively. Instead of limiting ourselves to answering questions, let us plan on asking a few questions ourselves. For example, if you are asked, "Why did the Israelis drive the Arabs out of their land?", you could answer with a question, "Do you know who started the war in 1948? Do you know who tried to drive whom out in the first place?" This counter question would put you in a position to reveal some facts. Had the Arabs not attempted to drive Israel out of its small partitioned land, granted to it by the United Nations,[#] the Palestinian Arabs would still be in their land. In other words, the Arabs started a bloody fight against an unarmed and terribly outnumbered people, and in the course of their defensive battle, the Israelis lost some land and gained some land, but all changes in the original partition lines were the direct result of the Arab invasion. Assure your questioner that the facts of the invasion were in all the newspapers of the world in 1948.

The Refugees

When the question is asked of you, as it surely will be, "Why don't the Israelis have pity on those poor Arab refugees?", you can answer with a question, "Do you know how many Jewish refugees were created by the Arab invasion of Israel?" If your questioner doesn't know the answer, you can give him some of the facts. When a war erupts, there are always refugees. The Arabs expected as much, since their object was to drive the Israelis into the sea, but the Arabs did not anticipate that there might also be some Arab refugees. As a result of the Arab invasion in 1948, over 600,000 Jewish refugees were forced to flee from Arab lands. Many of these Jewish refugees had lived in Syria, and in Egypt, and in Yemen, far longer than the Palestinian Arabs had lived in Palestine! This is what many people do not understand at all. Large Jewish communities lived in Egypt and in Syria before the Arabs ever got there. The Book of Jeremiah in the Bible tells us of a large group of Jews going to live in Egypt. This was about 585 B.C.E. The Arabs did not get to Egypt until the seventh century of this Era, or about 1300 years later! The Arab historian, Hitti, who described the Arab invasion of Byzantine or Christian Egypt in 640 A.D., quotes the Arab commander as recording, "I found in the city of Alexandria, Egypt, 40,000 tax paying Jews.## That same city of Alexandria, which was the jewel of the Greek Empire in earlier days, had over a million Jews six hundred years before the Arab invasion of Egypt! Now the Palestinian Arabs who fled Palestine after they tried to destroy Israel in 1948 could trace their roots in Palestine back only a few generations at most, because all historical records of Palestine are quite clear. There was nothing there but sand and stones until the Jews began to settle in large numbers in the last century, bringing prosperity to that land and attracting Arabs and other peoples as settlers. ###

On the other hand, the Egyptian Jews, who had to flee Egypt as the result of the discord created by the 1948 war, were leaving a land that their Jewish ancestors had inhabited on a continuous basis since the time of Jeremiah, which would be 2500 years, or, at the least, from the time of the Greek Empire, which would be 2,000 years. Which group of refugees were then the most wronged, the Egyptian Jewish refugees or the Palestinian Arab refugees?

Before the U.N. was controlled by a Soviet-Arab bloc.

P. 164, "History of the Arabs", Philip K. Hitti, the Macmillian Co., N.Y. 1951

Christians and Armenians have settled in larger numbers as the Jews developed the area.

In dealing with the question of refugees, always a tragic matter, we will have to remind our questioner, first, that there were as many Jewish refugees as there were Arab refugees, and, secondly, that all of the refugees, well over a million altogether, were the victims of the Arab invasion of partitioned Palestine. It is a well ingrained rule of law that the person who commits an armed felony becomes responsible for any death or loss that is incidental to that felony. The Arabs started a war with smoking guns. They must face up to the responsibility of the whole train of events that followed that invasion. But it is precisely this responsibility that the Arabs do not wish to accept and will not accept. They want the nation that was the initial victim of the attack to take the blame for the consequences of the attack. We Jews have been through this kind of reversal of guilt many times before. (First Pontius Pilate, the Roman ruler of Judea 2,000 years ago, crucifies a Jewish teacher and, then when the crucifixion turns out to be unpopular, Pilate blames the victim's family for forcing him to kill their relative. In spite of the obvious twisting of blame here, the world has accepted the Roman version of the story for two thousand years, and millions of Jews have been slain because of it. Now, we have a modern story with the same old twist. Let us not be afraid to label this procedure for what it is.)

In recent weeks, Sadat has announced that the Jews who fled from Egypt are now invited to return and be recompensed in some way for the loss of their business and their land. Of course, he knows no Jew in his right mind would to go live in Egypt at this time. Even Assad of Syria, who has kept his few remaining Jews under virtual house arrest, is now making sounds of giving Jews all rights enjoyed by Syrians. The move is part of an Arab maneuver to make Israel seem to be cruel by not accepting back into its midst the Arabs who formerly lived in Palestine. The question you and I are going to be hearing in the future, as the oil flow to America increases, is, "Why won't Israel let the poor refugees come back?" We can begin to answer this question with another question. The question is, "Do you know what these refugees did when they lived in the midst of Jordan, and do you know what these refugees did in recent months to Lebanon?" If our questioner does not remember, you can refresh his memory. Palestinian refugees taken in by Jordan caused a bloody civil war within a few years of their entry which embarrassed foreign journalists who reported it as one of the most barbarous wars they had ever witnessed. In recent months, the Palestinians were a major cause of a civil war in Lebanon that resulted in 50,000 dead and 200,000 wounded, many of these being innocent women and children. We might then press the question, "If the Palestinian Arabs cannot live at peace with their fellow Arabs, do you think it would be wise for Israel, the nation the Palestinians have sworn to destroy, to take them in?"

The Buffer Zones

Last but not least, there is always the question, "If Israel will not take back the refugees, why doesn't Israel, at the very least, give back the conquered lands?" The question includes a reference to those buffer zones which Israel has established between itself and Syria, Jordan and Egypt, those peace-seeking nations that have three times in the last thirty years tried to push Israel into the sea. To this question - why doesn't Israel give back the "conquered lands" - we might counter with a question like this, "Why doesn't America give Texas back to Mexico?" We Americans took that territory, you know, by force of arms, not because Mexico invaded America, but because the Americans who settled in Mexican Texas did not want to leave when the Mexicans asked them to. Since Mexico was not the aggressor in that war, Mexico is in a much better position to demand Texas than the Arabs are to demand the buffer zones, created by Israel to hold off Arab attacks.

Or consider, for example, the thirteen American colonies themselves. The colonies were the property of Great Britain, having been purchased and settled by that nation, but the people who settled in these British colonies were not averse, for cause, to stealing those colonies for themselves. Now, if Britain were to demand her thirteen states back, do you think America would return them for the sake of peace or anything else?

The Soviet Union has spoken louder than anyone else in demanding that "Nazi-like" Israel return the buffer zones to the Arabs. We might well ask the Soviet Union, "Are you prepared to give Poland back to the Poles? Are you prepared to give

Czechoslovakia back to its own people? Are you prepared to return Hungary and Romania? Why does tiny Israel have to be the only nation in the world that is forced to return a few miles of land which enables it to defend itself against a number of nations dedicated to its destruction?

It should be easy for any objective person to see that none of these questions put to Israel and to Jews around the world are really just questions. They are actually accusations based on judgments that circumvent the facts. We can depend on the Arabs to increase the pressure of their propaganda in this direction as America becomes the more dependent on Arab oil. We can depend upon American politicians and diplomats to increase the pressure on Israel and on American Jews to give in to the Arabs, so that America can receive all the oil it needs. Already, I have had Jews come up to me and say, "Rabbi, can't you influence Israel to do what Carter wants, so that Americans won't be angry at the Jews?" I answer this question with a question. I ask, "Are you, Mr. Comfortable American, prepared to go to Israel to fight when the PLO crosses the few miles from the West Bank to the Mediterranean Sea?" Anyone who has been to Israel knows that Israel, including the West Bank, the buffer zone between Israel and Jordan, is just a few miles wide and can be crossed by car in an hour or so. Only this morning, the PLO bombed the city of Safed from Lebanon to well within the Israeli border. We, sitting here in our armchairs, can hardly imagine what we are asking the Israelis to do in considering the return of the West Bank. I, for one, would not return the West Bank if I were the Israelis, not if I wanted my children to sleep peacefully at night.

We Jews in America are going to endure some discomfiture in the years ahead because of the problem between Israel and the Arabs, but our problems are as nothing compared to theirs. We don't have to face the reality of Arab bombs, tanks, and terrorists.

Israel is going to make some mistakes along the way. She has made some mistakes in the past, and I have not been afraid to criticize her on those occasions from this pulpit.

Frankly, I would not have voted for Begin had I been an Israeli, but I would not have voted for Nixon either, yet I was loyal to the American cause through the Nixon years. We American Jews are going to have to learn to bear with Israel through her mistakes and her groping, for her task is excruciatingly difficult, and it would be impossible for her always to act with perfect judgment. I could make a list for you of things I don't like about Israel, but there are also things I don't like about America. My loyalty to these lands is not alone determined by the absolute correctness of their policies. My loyalty is based on the deep rooted conviction that both America and Israel have a foundation and a goal which is good for the world and for mankind, and anything that weakens these countries is bad for the world and for mankind.

In the present disagreement between the Carter administration and Israel, I ask myself the question - which country is faced with the greatest danger? America is faced with an energy crisis which it can offset by turning to some other fuel than oil. Israel is faced with the prospect of total destruction. Israel must be able to defend itself - or die.

I am convinced that if I am to be a good American, I must not let my country sell Israel's birthright for a barrel of oil. In the end, that deal would wound the soul of America so badly that it would cease to be America.